

## SONYA CLARK

ANDERSON GALLERY

7 N. SAGINAW  
PONTIAC, 49770  
616/348-5079



### SONYA CLARK

*Ade Vodun*, 1996. Braided toyo, beads, and sequins.  
Photo by J. Nedresky.

Issues of African cultural ancestry, artistic memory, aesthetic distinctiveness, and ritual authority converge in the work of Sonya Clark. Her work in this exhibition reflects the presence and persistence of diasporic African culture through ritual adornment of the head. Clark employs techniques such as embroidery, weaving, dying, and crochet to combine a variety of materials—cloth, metal, glass beads, silk, wire, nails, pantyhose, hair, pins, copper. Her use of these materials and techniques connects her to a host of African artistic, scholarly, and spiritual traditions, and her background in psychology and African studies lend a scholar's attention which shapes the details in her work. Consequently, it resonates with a complexity far beyond the materials, methods, and formal strategies employed.

Clark theorizes about the multiple implications of the head as a hallowed space, and headdressing as a channel to ancestral memory and wholeness. While she is sensitive to the aesthetic conventions of the various cultures on which she draws, she adapts the materials and the philosophies in a personal manner to reveal connections between the ancestral, historical, and contemporary experiences of African people.

In *Freed Seed*, a lotus pod is used for the crown of an elongated skull cap made of embroidered dyed silk with pennies woven throughout. The lotus pod symbolizes spiritual freedom for Africans in the world, while at the same time, memories of American slavery are invoked through the

portraits of Abraham Lincoln on the copper pennies. The use of copper is informed by Clark's understanding of the material as a metaphysical, social, political, and medicinal element in traditional African cultures.

Clark is one of a number of African-American women artists, like Zenobia Bailey, Joyce Scott, and Renee Stout, who merge complex conceptual foundations in their work with compelling formal strategies. Clark's interdisciplinary approach and vision create highly individualized expression within this genre, and present the stabilizing role that ancestral memory, ritual, cultural identity, and art plays in the lives of African- and Caribbean-Americans.

BILL GASKINS