

Interiors and Interiority: Njideka Akunyili Crosby

When Njideka Akunyili Crosby's American husband first accompanied the artist on a family visit to her native Nigeria, he wondered why on earth they had a sink in their dining room. Sometimes, it's only when someone else points out the oddity of your cultural customs that you question where they've come from. Akunyili Crosby laughs heartily as she recounts the story of her husband's encounter with the dining room sink. For her family, she tells me, the sink was a symbol of pride and prosperity; a luxurious commodity in a country where you eat with your hands, and where many homes don't have access to clean running water. A cross-cultural experience gives plenty of opportunities to question the peculiar construction that is individual "culture": we cobble together personal and national histories, practical needs, and folklore to assemble a sense of self-identity.

Njideka Akunyili Crosby grew up in Enugu, Nigeria, and later moved to the U.S. More recently she resettled again, in Los Angeles, where she currently has her studio. She grew up in a family that was lower-middle class, though they would later become wealthy. As she has migrated, between cultures and between

economical classes, Akunyili Crosby has been a keen documenter of the objects, interiors and domestic scenes in the many places she has lived. This close-up study of her surroundings is evident in her large-scale, multimedia wall works (many of them as large as 11 feet). By using fragments of her family archives, her own photographs, and hand crafted elements such as Xerox and paint, her collages have a rare texture, that disrupts the idea that globalization brings cultural homogeneity.

The dining room sink makes an appearance in *Tea Time in New Haven, Enugu* (2013), a 7 x 9.25 foot dining room scene, consisting of painting, collage, pencil, charcoal and transfers on paper. As the work began to travel in the public sphere, *Enugu* (which refers to the town in which Akunyili Crosby grew up) was mistakenly dropped from its title; consequently, when the work circulated throughout the U.S., it was understood to be a scene of an interior in New Haven, Connecticut—where the artist did in fact study when she first moved to the U.S. The artist was naturally delighted with the misreading, since the work had proved its fundamental message during its migration: We approximate, and, in doing so, we inadvertently appropriate cultures. We look for the things that resonate with our own experiences, to use them to express our agency.

The ritual of taking tea in Nigeria is a vestige of British colonial

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times, but one that Nigerians have since made their own. Nigerian “tea time” is another way of referring to breakfast, and the table is set and left out all day. “I’m very interested in the habits and cultures we have in the country that are left over from when we were a colony, and in the ways they’ve been preserved and at the same time turned into something else: We’ve inherited a culture that has been pushed on to us, that we had to adopt, not by choice. Yet we’ve been able to find a way to co-opt that and make it our own, to change the inherited tradition to make it authentic to ourselves.”

Akunyili Crosby’s work relies on the recognizable, but its originality hinges on scrutinizing the familiar domestic world. Though Crosby culls from her own constantly growing catalogue of her quotidian (that with passing time become archives of social histories), she continually introduces fictional elements into the composition. The branded products on the table in *Tea Time in New Haven, Enugu* read like a puzzle: a set of clues to the time, the place, and the lives of the inhabitants who once animated them. “I want to put the viewer inside the scene, to activate the visual queues and open up a liminal space,” Akunyili Crosby explains.

Among the table’s contents in *Tea Time In New Haven, Enugu* is a wrapped loaf of bread, each side of the loaf treated in a different medium: One collaged, one painted, and one transferred. The loaf is wrapped in packaging that reads “Will of God.” I discover that it is a specific packaging that only a Nigerian viewer would recognize. Akunyili Crosby starts to laugh infectiously again as she describes the branding. “In Nigeria we have this kind of humor to religion, to this Pentecostal Nigerian Christianity, that is a mixture of

traditional and inherited religious practices. God comes into a lot of the names of products. We’ve taken this humor in the religion really far!”

Also on the table is Millo—a refreshment marketed as a sports drink in many countries in Africa. Each country had a unique packaging for Millo, with a different sport depicted on the label: In Nigeria, it’s soccer. There is also a St. Louis Sugar box—the most widely used sugar brand during the ’80s and ’90s in Nigeria—and a box of Weetabix (a popular, low-cost British version of Australian breakfast cereal Weet-Bix), and a jar of Cadbury’s Bournvita (a powdered hot chocolate drink, first manufactured in England in the 1920s). I grew up in the U.K., and both were common everyday products there, but in their Nigerian context, these items denote cultural status and wealth, signifying travel abroad and access to more expensive imported products. “I depict Nigeria as it existed when I left in late ’90s, which is not the same as Nigerian culture now. A lot of my work is looking at Nigeria then and now, and how things have changed and stayed the same. It is very specific to Nigeria as I understand it and see it: It doesn’t speak to all parts of Africa, or Nigeria. It is my life, my autobiography, my family—but these cultural, economic and geographic experiences talk about something that is bigger than just me: They are a confluence of disparate things.”

The artist’s intense visual mining of interior space is a kind of investigation into how material details define time, place, and people. Akunyili Crosby’s work reveals the way we instinctively identify the nationalities of tourists, walking in the street—especially if they’re from our own country. It’s a game I’ve often played too (the shoes are usually a real



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Njideka Akunyili Crosby, *Tea Time in New Haven Enugu* (2013). Acrylic, collage, colored pencils, charcoal, and transfers on paper. 84 x 111 inches. Collection of Olga Schloss. Image courtesy of the artist. Photo: Jason Wyche.

giveaway). Consciously or not, we're constantly placing ourselves in relation to the things around us. In *The Twain Shall Meet*, a work Akunyili Crosby completed last year, the central focus is a table again. The piece was painted from a series of photographs the artist took at her Grandmother's house in Nigeria, after she had passed away. Everything was left as it had been before her death: A thermos, a kerosene lamp, pictures in frames, cups, and bowls. The composition is an altar of everyday life in a Nigerian village. Again, the table is laden with objects: Some are familiar to the Western eye, but as ensemble they are not. Move out from the table, and the background too, looks discordant. You won't realize it at first, but the room the table is set in looks European—the interior architecture is too solemn and cold to come from the same place as the contents of that table. You can't say why, you can just feel it, (as instinctively as I know how to spot a fellow Brit abroad). When I ask the artist about it, she reveals that the background of the scene is a replica of a Danish painting (by Vilhelm Hammershøi).

The more time you spend with the works, the more they reveal. The carefully connected strands of fiction, fact, truth, memory and experience that the artist weaves so masterfully together in her work slowly unravel. (The references to the masters of European painting come from Akunyili Crosby's studies in North America, while the table represents her personal ancestry, for example.) With these gestural quotes Akunyili Crosby asserts her own dialogue with the history of painting, authorship and transnationality.

How do we locate a sense of self, after so many migrations, and with the weight of so many histories,

learnt, borrowed and lived? The layers of our lives are literally and fastidiously applied in Akunyili Crosby's works. Despite all of the exterior information they draw together, ultimately they give a very vivid sense of how interior identity construction is: We don't all attach to them same things. Back on the Skype video on my computer screen, the artist suddenly leaps up and exclaims as she finds a quote she's been trying to dig up by Brenda Cooper, from her book, *A New Generation of African Writers*: "...the massive weight of little things, the small solid possessions... are what embed one in one's time and place."¹ Akunyili Crosby's massive, magnanimous paintings are made up of these small solid things. But they embed her, like so many of us who are used to moving often, in many times, and many places, all at once.

1. Cooper, Brenda. *A New Generation of African Writers: Migration, Material Culture & Language*. Woodbridge, Suffolk: James Currey, 2008. Print.