

Elsa Robinson: Sankofa Nomination, Foote Award 2022

Exhibition at Latitude 53, June 18–September 25 2021

A bird, its head turned backwards, carrying a precious egg in its mouth. In order to move forward, we always look backwards. “Sankofa”, from the Akan Twi and Fante languages of Ghana, means both this bird, and, to go back and get something.

Elsa Robinson’s *Sankofa* explores the theme of spirituality through the artist’s experiences and research. Robinson’s three installations reflect past and present through a combination of natural fibres and artificial materials, working in the tradition of Feminist art, and techniques handed down from her mother: sewing, crochet, and embroidery.

With a spirit of improvisation, Elsa Robinson places herself in dialogue with sources of liberation in traditional Jamaican and African spirituality, the traditions of women in her culture, and the joyful liberatory traditions of the African Diaspora.

Robinson fuses history and fantasy through material exploration, calling on the aesthetics of Afrofuturism to connect the Black diaspora to an African ancestry often forgotten while evoking possible futures. Robinson’s engagement with Feminist art and Afrosurrealism emphasizes a sense of joy and her connection to the women of her family. She brings to life an unseen history, putting Black culture and figures at the forefront, liberating and expanding an understanding of who they are. Robinson calls forth Black women’s spiritual connection to the earth, motherhood, sisterhood and divine femininity in paint, sequins, and fibre; sculptural figures serve as guides to her spaces.

Sankofa is centred around three installations, each of which creates an environment for the viewer to connect to a spiritual experience. A repetitive heartbeat with chiming nuances pulses on the edge of hearing in the first gallery with the viewer is greeted by a figure in an elaborate costume. The outfit of “Death and Life” is made to be worn by the artist in performance.

Further into the space, where the sound is more present, “We Are Here” features five elemental figures in different colours, at human scale in soft sculptural forms, posed in a circle reflecting a ceremonial gathering the visitor is invited to enter. In the second gallery, “Possibilities” is a sculptural wall piece that flows down to meet an intricately crocheted sculpture on the floor strewn with keys and small golden eggs. Alongside these works, *Sankofa* includes Robinson’s mixed-media paintings of divine femininity.

Latitude 53 was pleased to present *Sankofa*, Elsa Robinson’s first solo exhibition of this scale. Robinson is a self-taught artist who engages a variety of media and traditions of craft handed down through her family, and in the past several years has demonstrated a new commitment to her practice, pursuing further education, with an MFA in 2019. In the works that make up *Sankofa*, she also dives into new interdisciplinary practices that broaden her palate as an artist and unite the various strands of her work. The textile-centred installations bring to the gallery the warmth and generosity that mark her work, inviting audiences to literally enter into the work.

Alongside Elsa’s practice as an artist, she works as an educator. During the run of the show, we had the pleasure of hosting workshops led by the artist at Root 107, and Robinson also brought her own presence to the gallery, generously spending Saturdays in the space to engage with visitors. When

speaking about her work, Robinson often talks about the ways that different people find their own words to describe it, and she celebrates this polysemous engagement. The work itself combines bold and graphic elements with layers of detail and symbolism in paint, collage, textiles, and sculpture, rewarding close looking and repeated visits.

At the end of the exhibition, Robinson performed with “Death and Life” and entered a discussion with the gathered audience. Delving into the histories of shared and separate cultural practices of the Black diaspora that she draws on in the symbolism of the work, especially with audience members who had their own experiences with that material, the conversation was an encapsulation of the richness of the work itself. This dialogue with community experiences is something special to celebrate within the sphere of contemporary art practices, and thus Latitude 53 is pleased to submit *Sankofa* for consideration for the Foote prize this year.

Adam Waldron-Blain
Program Manager
Latitude 53

3 March 2022

List of works:

Left-hand gallery (clockwise from left):

- “And there are times...”, mixed media collage on birch, 36 × 24 inches, 2016
- “Death and Life”, mixed media installation, 2019.

“...if death is the absence of life then death’s death is life!” (Pure Solar World p. 262)

- “The Call”, mixed media collage on birch, 36 × 24 inches, 2017 “We Are Here”, five mixed media soft sculptures with sound by Mustafa Rafiq, 2019–2021
- “Moving Forward”, mixed media collage on birch, 30 × 36 inches, 2014

Right-hand gallery (clockwise from left):

- “Father and Daughter”, mixed media collage on birch, 36 × 24 inches, 2016
- “Still Standing”, mixed media on birch, 36 × 12 inches, 2016
- “Mother and Daughter—The Legacy”, mixed media collage on birch, 36 × 24 inches, 2016
- “Atman”, mixed media on birch, 36 × 24 inches, 2016
- “Possibilities”, mixed media installation, 2020

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- “Warrior Woman”, mixed media collage on birch, 36 × 24 inches, 2016

Photographs and video documentation of performance by Blaine Campbell