



Art History as

SOCIAL JUSTICE

MC Student, Jade Cline-Stokes at a protest on Capitol Hill



Nike Davies-Okundaye, *Liberal Women Protest March I, 1995*

“Portraits *of* Power:

WOMEN LEADERS IN AFRICAN ART”

Last fall, students in Professor Cristin Cash's African Art class explored the power of visual representation in the context of gender equality and leadership in a project called "Portraits of Power: Women Leaders in African Art." The project was the product of Professor Cash's participation in Montgomery College's award-winning United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDG) Open Pedagogy Fellowship, which is designed to address stereotypes, misrepresentation, hypocrisy, and inaccuracies in marketing, media, and culture.

The UNSDG fellowship assists faculty in designing renewable assignments that empower students to become agents of change in their own communities, focusing on one or more of the United Nation's 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Based on an open pedagogical model, students are engaged as creators of information rather than simply consumers of it and demonstrate understanding through the act of creation.

Professor Cash's students began the project by studying female leadership in contemporary African society, focusing on how the representation of women impacts how we think about and empower women as leaders. Drawing on their knowledge of the history of African art, they discussed the ways images

communicate or miscommunicate messages about their subjects. Each student then chose an artwork depicting a historical African female leader and conducted research and visual analysis to determine whether the image accurately or inaccurately represented the role, symbolism, and context of its subject's culture, life, and achievements. Building on this interpretation, they imagined what their subject's experience would be if they were alive today. Through videos, Op-Eds, images, and digital storytelling, students considered what challenges their subjects would face, what actions they might take, and how they might contribute to a stronger and more equitable Africa.

MC student, Jade Cline-Stokes was no stranger to the strengths and challenges

of female leadership when she began the Portraits of Power project. A member of the Student Senate and outspoken social justice activist, she is deeply involved with the College's Institute for Race, Justice, and Civic Engagement (IRJC). Her participation in protests on Capitol Hill in support of a clean Dream Act have garnered attention from the *The Washington Post*, and her volunteer work with the Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault inspired her to create a feminist activism club on campus called Fourth Wave.

The Portraits of Power project could not have dovetailed more completely with Jade's experiences and interests, and she jumped into it with enthusiasm.

She chose to study a painting by the contemporary Nigerian artist Nike Davies-Okundaye titled *Liberal Women Protest March I* (1995). This image of women engaged in nonviolent protest against a backdrop of the historical textile art of adire inspired Jade to reconsider how she defines and envisions female leadership. In her analysis of the work, she wrote:

"Leaders come in all shapes and sizes.

A leader doesn't have to be the standard Google-search result of leadership. Leadership is colorful...These women have taken matters into their own hands. They have chosen to step out of their homes or everyday routines to peacefully protest for what they believe in. I chose this painting because nowadays if we view women leaders, we rarely see a group of strong powerful African women together. I love the unity of this piece. No one is fighting for the spotlight. They have come together to send the message that unity is power. I think the colors strongly communicate the empowerment of these women leaders. Additionally, all the women are in what seems to be



Batoul S'Himi, Untitled from *World Under Pressure*, 2011

matching attire. It sends the message that they are all on the same page... Women rebirthing the standard definition of leadership. Women rebirthing new chapters of history. Women rebirthing positive change. Women rebirthing..."

Jade is transferring to Spelman College this fall, where she will major in International Relations with a focus on African Diaspora Studies. After graduation, she plans to start a nonprofit organization that benefits women of color.

Jason Small also drew on his leadership experience in his Portraits of Power project. Before moving to the US, Jason earned a bachelor's degree and served as a police officer in Barbados. Having also worked in the hospitality, health,

and fitness industries, he thought about the ways effective leaders balance professionalism, empathy, diplomacy, and authority.

For his project, Jason chose an untitled 2011 work from the *World Under Pressure* series by Moroccan artist Batoul S'Himi. In this series, the artist transforms potentially hazardous cooking appliances (in this case, a pressure cooker) into works of art. Carving maps of the world from their surfaces, she situates "the most domestic and local of spaces—the kitchen or hearth...in a global setting." Jason's time as a chef drew him to the work, and made him think about the way women act as leaders in their everyday lives. While the work speaks to "the underwhelming representation of women and women's issues on a global

level" and the mounting pressure of competition for limited resources, Jason also perceived a more hopeful message in the sculpture. He wrote:

"The artwork...conveys the message that women who contribute to their homes make our world function... They don't necessarily have to be famous or doing something

unique, but they are leaders in all they do for their families and communities... Artworks like this are important because they help people...recognize the daily contributions of women everywhere... Work like this that can change the way we think so that we don't take women for granted..."

Jason is currently a Communications major and vice president of the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society. He considers his time at MC a "second chance" to better himself and set an example for his young son. For him, learning to interpret the symbolism and underlying messages in visual representation has deepened his appreciation and understanding of what he is studying in his communications and business classes. Mastering visual analysis, he says, gives him the ability to

decode how political and media imagery speaks to people's emotions and informs their actions.

Professor Cash plans to use the Portraits of Power project again in her African Art and other classes. Last fall's success has proved that the project not only provides rich context for the development of skills in visual and data literacy, critical thinking, effective communication and self-reflection, but can be adapted to any cultural context in order to empower women and help them envision themselves as leaders globally or in local communities.

To learn more about renewable assignments and open pedagogy at MC, visit the College's [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Open Pedagogy Fellowship website](#).



MC Student, Jason Small

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