



Fetish 6

Sulter, Maud

On display

Title/Description: Fetish 6

Artist/Maker: Sulter, Maud

Born: 1992

Measurements: h. 1016 x w. 1016 mm framed 1045 x 1045 x 65 mm

Accession Number: 50871

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Maud Sulter (1960-2008) was an artist, poet and activist of Ghanian-Scottish descent. *Fetish #6*, 1992 comes from a series six works by Sulter that consist of framed photographic prints and accompanying copper plaques. The series is a barbed comment on the appropriation and the decontextualization of objects in the colonial past as 'fetishes'. The *Fetish* series was first shown at Steinbaum-Krauss Gallery, New York in 1993. They were shown alongside a related series, called, *Abusua Kese* (1992) and *Six Proverbs for Kobena* (1992). [1] These series of works from the 1990s addressed African art objects and their position in western museums, collections and books. Sulter passionately believed in the intertwined histories of Africa and Europe and that such subjects required scrutiny and debate. [2]

The Steinbaum-Krauss Gallery exhibition leaflet also discusses the works in relation to genital mutilation.[3] The bronze plaque is inscribed with the word 'Blood'. This could be a comment about how European museums have acquired such objects from west Africa. It may also relate or be a comment on female genital mutilation or both of these subjects simultaneously.

Borrowing the word 'fetish' that had been adopted by early European collectors and artists who typically valued such objects not for their indigenous context or as important sacred objects, but as sexual and erotically charged curios. Her work questions the portrayal of African culture in European museums. Sulter work also addresses issues of feminism, both in west Africa, the diaspora and Europe more generally.

The Mende or Soweï mask illustrated by Sulter is typical of a type found in many European museums. [4] The mask was used exclusively by the female societies of the Sande (Mende) or Bondo/Bundu (Temne) from Sierra Leone. [5] Although carved by men, they are one of the few masks historically worn by woman. The mask is traditionally worn by a high-ranking officials of the society, whilst performing the dance known as the 'ndoli jowei' among the Mende or 'a-Nowo' among the Temne. [6] The fact that such masks are omnipresent in European and North American museums, combined with a mask worn exclusively by women, may have appealed to Sulter.

Calvin Winner, May 2023

[1] Deborah Cherry (Editor), Maud Sulter, *Passion*, (altitude editions, 2015), p.14

[2] Deborah Cherry, p15

[3] Deborah Cherry, p14

[4] <https://www.sierraleoneheritage.org/item/GLAMG%3AA.1949.101.d/sowei-mask>, accessed on 04/05/23

[5] <https://www.imodara.com/discover/sierra-leone-mende-ndoli-jowei-sande-sowei-helmet-mask/> ,
accessed on 04/05/23

[6] <http://objects.prm.ox.ac.uk/pages/PRMUID16571.html> , accessed on 04/05/23

Further Reading

Deborah Cherry (ed.), Maud Sulter, *Passion*, (altitude editions, 2015)
