

ART

The smartest thing damali ayo may have done to further her career as an artist is avoid art school. Though she has a sterling silver education—13 years at Sidwell Friends in Washington, D.C., and a degree in American civilization from Brown University—as an artist she is self-taught. As a result, she feels free to take more creative chances and depend more on her gut instincts.

Her work is as unusual as her name, which means beautiful vision and joy. (She prefers the lowercase and dropped her father's name "because it felt like a slave relic," she says.) Her three-dimensional assemblages and installation pieces are as much about her intuitive process as they are about the end result.

"I work in partnership with each piece in the process of creation," ayo explains. "Together the art and I make what you see before you, each adapting my vision to its needs. This process is one of the most authentic experiences I have had."

In 1997, ayo moved to Portland—"It just called to me," she says. Since then she has moved gradually toward art and now plans to make it her full-time career. As she explains, she just woke up one day and felt compelled to create a work of art about her experience of racism. The real beauty of the art, ayo says, is that "I could stop telling the stories—I was done—I could let the pieces speak for me."

At the moment, ayo has two shows of her work on view. The first is in the lobby of the Reiersgaard Theatre, home to Artists Repertory Theatre, which is currently presenting *A Raisin in the Sun*, a powerful play about African American family life by the noted playwright Lorraine Hansberry.

The show is curated by local gallery owner Mark Woolley, who asked ayo to create works inspired by the play and its author. What evolved is "speak," an array of assemblages that engage the viewer from a distance by their mere freshness, then draw the viewer ever closer to examine the fine detail and the pieces of text incorporated into each piece.

As the artist says of this body of work: "It is both an intellectual examination of our society and an emotional examination of my identity as an individual in this world."

It's not easy work to view; these are not pretty pictures to glance at and pass by. Each piece is a strong statement about some aspect of ayo's experiences as a biracial woman who also identifies as a sexual minority. Each piece challenges viewers to examine their own attitudes, their own internalized prejudices.

One of the most dramatic works is *stripped*, a piece ayo did after venturing into the Egypt-



ian Club on a Tuesday night, where she was mistaken for one of the exotic dancers. The text reads:

*went to the dyke bar
it was strip night
all the women were white
except the ones
that were for sale.*

The objects and images that complete the 3-D collage speak to the objectification of women, as does the caging of most of it behind chicken wire. It is difficult to stare at without sensing the artist's visceral feelings.

Another powerful piece is *free*, which features text and images painted and sewn onto a woman's slip. Its text reads:

*if i could cover the holes you penetrate,
i could sleep,
dreaming of my own emancipation.*

Binary vision

As a bisexual, biracial, bicultural woman, damali ayo has a unique view of the world

BY ORIANA GREEN



The artist's second show this month, titled "i keep looking for myself," is at the Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center and is a series of five installation pieces—named *naive*, *acceptance*, *resistance*, *redefinition* and *internalization*—that explore the stages of racial identity development. As a bicultural woman who has lived in both the black and white worlds, ayo is uniquely suited to this subject.

"I believe that art should make its viewers think and feel," she writes in her artist's statement. "Racism, sexism, love, growth and searching are constant themes in my work. My work often depicts the intersection of body and spirit."

While this is undeniably cerebral work which demands that the viewer participate, it is also highly personal and emotional.

"I like to make seen and heard what is often avoided in daily conversation," ayo says unflinchingly.

She is also quick to point out that she considers herself a teacher, one who creates opportunities for dialogue and personal growth: "Instead of asking me 'What does that mean?' ask yourself 'How does that make me feel?' Therein lies the meaning of my work."

On the complex subject of how she describes herself, ayo is equally eloquent.

"I've been through every label in the book, and I'm over it," she says with a sigh. "On the East Coast I call myself a bi-dyke and everyone understands that."

However, in the African American community, which has historically struggled with acceptance of sexual minorities, she has been accused of selling out to the white community.

Listening to her impassioned words, one gets the impression that she'll be thrilled when she has a large body of work to do her explaining for her and she can dispense with all labels except the one that seems to matter most to her: artist.

Don't miss these opportunities to stretch your attitudes toward race and identity, to enter into the mind and glimpse the spirit of a talented new artist with volumes of hard-earned wisdom to share.

■ DAMALI AYO's pieces at the Reiersgaard Theatre, 1516 S.W. Alder St. in Portland, will be on view through Feb. 20. Her show at Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center, 5340 N. Interstate Ave. in Portland, runs through Feb. 26.

ORIANA GREEN is the Entertainment Editor of *Just Out* and also an artist. She spent many years deep inside the art world earning her living as a painter. Write to her at oriana@justout.com.

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