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Senam Okudzeto



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## Senam Okudzeto



## Senam Okudzeto: Selections from the “Disarmament” Series

Globalization may be to early 21st century artists what Modernity was to those of the early 20th: a fundamental challenge, confronting them with questions about the *raison d'etre* of art, the role and form of artistic practice in a rapidly changing cultural and sociopolitical context, and the ramifications of these new conditions on their own work. Over the last 10-15 years artists around the world have found themselves grappling with such distinct but related issues as the westernization and Americanization of local and national cultures, the impact of new technologies and telecommunications, the internationalization of economic systems and exchange, cultural identity, difference and hybridity, and the intersection of personal history with events and narratives on a transnational and epochal scale. These artists are taking the measure of a new world on their own terms, effectively chronicling their experience of globalization through the (customized) vehicle of Western post-Modernist visual arts practice. Senam Okudzeto exemplifies this new transnational class.

*(Continued next page)*

## Senam Okudzeto

This would be an opportune place to offer a biographical thumbnail for Senam Okudzeto: Born in Chicago, brought up in Nigeria and Ghana, educated in London and New York, and currently a Fellow at Harvard. As that fly-by bio suggests, Senam Okudzeto has had a life experience that lends itself to interrogations about cultural memory and identity and the parts they play in the construction of a sense of self. Questions that are at the conceptual and emotional heart of an installation that the artist presented this past February at Harvard.

The installation was titled "Ghana Must Go," in remembrance of an early 80's case of trans-African ethnic cleansing that barely registered on the Western media radar at the time but was the cause of major personal dislocation for Senam and family and millions of other Africans, most of them of Ghanaian origin, living in Nigeria at the time. The installation incorporated drawings, photographs, video, and objects, notably a set of boxy multi-colored plastic carry-alls. "Ghana Must Go" was the name given to cheap, boxy plastic personal-effects containers that many of the expelled used to bundle up their possessions, and that re-appear in Senam's installation in various clusters, like so many Judds or Lewitts gone Accra Duane Reade.



*Top:* Senam Okudzeto. *Above and right:* Installation views, "Ghana Must Go," February 2004, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, Cambridge MA.

## Senam Okudzeto

Herewith Okudzeto's summary memory of the inspiring event (from a recent e-mail):

"In west African slang, those bags are often called "Ghana Must Go". The majority [of the expelled] were Ghanaians. As they packed in a hurry they used those cheap plastic bags and the name stuck. People now remember the name, but not the incident, which was very bloody and dramatic, and almost missed by the rest of the world. Kind of mad, 2 million Africans crossing borders by foot. Also of note: the deportation was in part a retaliation for a similar incident, when in 1969, the Ghanaian government deported 250,000 ethnic Nigerians, most of whom were eligible for citizenship, but were too illiterate to realise it. The piece questions belonging and cultural identity. What you can't see from the photo is that each bag houses a little window, and in each window there are childhood photos of myself, where my body appears, I cut it out and replaced it with a mirror. The photos are from Nigeria, Chicago, London, and Ghana, all the places I lived as a child. I am also a part of the "Ghana Must Go" story, as my family's primary home was Lagos, Nigeria for 10 years, and from the age of 11 onwards we lived in London with the status of political refugees."



Above :Installation views, "Ghana Must Go."

## Senam Okudzeto

Okudzeto works along a broad horizon in which a single work or set of works is related to the larger project of, as she puts it, "seeking to find a new lens through which to view and discuss africa and modernity. [Ghana Must Go] is a mixture of autobiography, history, dada and situationist practice and it will take me five years at least to come anywhere close to finishing it."

That kind of scope allows Senam to undertake sustained mini-explorations, as in the set of ink drawings of disembodied arms presented here, which the artist calls the "Disarmament Series." These are related to "Ghana Must Go" as a kind of sidebar meditation on human communication and miscommunication. They are sepia ink drawings of body-less arms that gesticulate with all the pointedness and subtlety of muscle and bone in the service of human will. Based on photographs of the artist's own body, these images launch a clever visual double entendre on the word disarmament. Okudzeto calls them "a play on the semantic gesture, the idea that the gesture and the body are employed in the same way as a calligraphic alphabet. These works...then become component parts in the installation of a show. They are in a sense, the punctuation. they indicate, suggest and direct the viewer around the works."

Through these "deployed arms," Okudzeto also puts her finger on the connecting tissue between matters of great geopolitical urgency - violence, war, armament and disarmament - and the thing at the root of it all: the flesh-and-blood arm, first and irreducible agent of human intent and action. Following is a selection of works on paper from the "Disarmament Series."

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Above: Installation view, "Ghana Must Go."



















## CV

**Born** Chicago, 1972. Nationality Ghana/UK/USA. Currently Fellow at Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University.

**Education:** 1999- 2000 Whitney Museum Independent Program, NYC, USA  
1995-1997 Royal College of Art, Master of Arts (painting), London, UK  
1991-1995 Slade School of Fine Art, University College London, Bachelor of Fine Arts (Hons), London, UK

### Selected Solo Exhibitions

2004 Ghana Must Go, Radcliffe  
Institute for Advanced Study,  
Cambridge, MA  
2003 Senam Okudzeto, Burrough Market,  
London  
2000 Long Distance Lover, Dana Center,  
Loyola University, New Orleans, USA  
1999 Long Distance Lover, Skirt, NYC,  
USA  
Alive at the Fridge, The Fridge,  
London, UK  
1998 Fresh As A Daisy, The Brickhouse,  
London, UK

### Selected Recent Group Exhibitions

2003 Nueva Film Festival, Tokyo, Japan  
2003 Fela Kuti; Black President, New Museum, New York, USA  
2003 Fiction Ou Realite; Goddy Leye, Omer Fast, Senam Okudzeto, Kunsthalle  
Fribourg, Switzerland  
2003 The Circle Squared; Boxing in Contemporary Art, The Walker Arts Center,  
Minneapolis, USA  
2003 Split; Women in Dislocation, Curatorial Centre, Bard College, USA  
2003 Artists in Residence in der Scheiwz, Binz 39, Zurich, Switzerland  
2002 Regionale, Kunsthalle Museum Basel, Switzerland  
2002 Art on Paper, The Weatherspoon Museum, North Carolina, USA  
2002 Watercolour, The New York Studio School, NYC, USA  
2001 Sticky Fingers; Identity, Distance Desire, ParaSite, Hong Kong  
2001 Claudia + Julia Muller, Olu Oguibe, Senam Okudzeto, Outtara Watts,  
Gorney Bravin + Lee, NYC, USA  
2001 For The Record, The Studio Museum in Harlem, NYC, USA  
2001 Freestyle, The Studio Museum in Harlem, NYC, USA  
2000 Talk About Complications: (Re)presenting Women, Pratt Institute, NYC,  
USA

### Awards/Fellowships

2004 Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, Research Fellowship  
2003 BINZ 39, residency (feb-april), Zurich, Switzerland  
2002 Stiftung Laurenz Haus, residency (jan-dec), Basel, Switzerland  
2002 Pollock Krasner Award, NYC, USA  
2001 Jadeas Trust, International Achievement in the Arts Award, Lagos, Nigeria  
2000-2001 The Studio Museum in Harlem, Artist in Residence, NYC, USA

## Checklist

### Selections from the Disarmament Series

All works untitled; acrylic ink on acid-free paper; ~9"x12". 2004. \$1,400.



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