"For me, it became a remarkable story to unpack, and one which influenced my whole being and my decision later to become an artist and to assimilate belonging and identity into my artistic practice.” - Zohra Opoku

To be a child of the African diaspora is to engage in a process of unraveling threads, of retracing a path that leads us to the places our ascendant’s left behind and an understanding of who we are. The path is not clear. There are gaps in our collective memory, the residual effects of trauma and displacement, of time and space, and of silence. We fill the gaps with pieces of exchanged personal history that when woven together bridge the otherwise impassable way forward and back. The rest we imagine for ourselves and for each other, through the work of artists like Zohra Opoku.

Unraveled Threads is Zohra Opoku’s latest contribution to this process: A collection of family photographs showing her father as an Asante King, Nana Opoku Gyabaah II, Chidomhene of Asato/Akan in the Volta Region of Ghana, screenprinted on cotton and canvas and interwoven with images of herself, her mother, and pieces of Kente cloth. It is a manifestation of her history in material form. For the artist, the prints resurrect a father she never knew. For historical others, they serve as evidence: we were once queens and kings.

Zohra Opoku is the daughter of a Ghanaian man, Dr. George Bob Kwabena Opoku and a German woman, Brigitte Gerda Marlies Jurk, who met in 1975 in the former East Germany (GDR) while studying. Behind the Berlin Wall, romance overpowered cultural boundaries; one year later, Zohra was born. Dr. Opoku had to return to Ghana shortly after, and Zohra’s mother was unable to follow. She remained in the GDR under constant state surveillance in the case that she attempted to contact him. So, Zohra was raised by her mother in Germany, without a point of connection to her African heritage and identity until her adulthood. Through her art, Zohra Opoku takes all of us along on her journey of self discovery.

In her evolving process, Zohra continues to explore the makeup of the self through various periods of time and cultural spaces. In constant dialogue with her surroundings and in the practice of regenerating every memento, she recreates the past while demonstrating her own interpretations of Ghana’s rituals and traditions. The photos featured in Unraveled Threads were given to her by her father’s younger children, after his death in 2004. The distorted images in the blurred and aged photos are metaphors for her own distance and disconnection from him:
“These are moments for which I was never present and could not completely recreate or understand because my much younger siblings were just too young to really comprehend and hold on to these events. I am learning about him through their memories and the precious few recollections my mother has, which she created with him as a young woman. All actions of missteps and faults in the screen-printing process create parallels with our memories and our own history. It provides the opportunity to unravel what needs to be made visible, in order to be in a position of confidence to appreciate and identify with our common family space where we live today. Therefore, I am rebuilding a new narrative for all of us, using textile and specifically Kente cloth, which had disappeared and was later given back to us.”—Zohra Opoku

An Ashanti legend tells of the birth of Kente cloth, the centuries-old fabric once made of imported silk and reserved for esteemed leaders to don at events of importance. Today, Kente is made primarily of cotton, making it accessible to people across social strata. Through Ghana’s diaspora, it has also traveled the world. Derivatives of Kente can be found in the traditional garments of various ethnic groups in the Americas. Seemingly endless varieties of the cloth pass histories from one generation to the next, as each pattern carries a story or proverb and each color a distinct meaning. In this way, history in Ghana exists in the present; it can be worn, and it can be felt. Zohra describes Kente cloth as “beautifully weaved, magically printed, and specially made for a traditional leader’s life in a few of the 1,000 combinations of designs from the deep-rooted culture of the Asante people.” She incorporates it throughout Unraveled Threads as extensions of the clothing visible in the screen-printed pictures, blending past with present and merging the setting of the images with the physical space of the artwork. The material draws our attention. It tells us a story.

Photography in Unraveled Threads functions as a form of communication, bringing the ancestors into the art and thematically connecting them with their living descendants. A sense of purposefulness, importance, and intimacy is intensified by the presence, in many of the photographs, of sacred trees and groves. In Akan cosmology, they serve as portals to the life-giving powers of divinities and ancestors. What can’t be seen is of equal significance to the artist: “I am embracing the imprint of errors in the work and now looking at the prints like they are paintings. They are becoming a mixture of dreams and my reality, though still somehow blurry, but with gorgeous, unraveled threads taken from my mother’s private storage, lancing and dancing in the works with images showing the cloth of my father.”
Even after Unraveled Threads, we diaspora children are left with a sense of longing. For Zohra, it means questioning in which of her two worlds, Ghana or Germany, will she ever find rest and relatability. Though her work is celebrated in Ghana, she is ultimately perceived as other. Yet, she is aware that returning to Germany means being perceived as other too. Identity can be as limiting and isolating as it is infinite. That is the point of unraveling threads. It is through art that we push the limitations of own identities. Ultimately, we are all meant to transcend. We are all others.

“This work is dedicated to children who grew up as others, having different origins or nationalities, but hopefully many perspectives and chances to succeed in a moving world, which still lacking in humanity.” — Zohra Opoku

Written by Ashley Elis