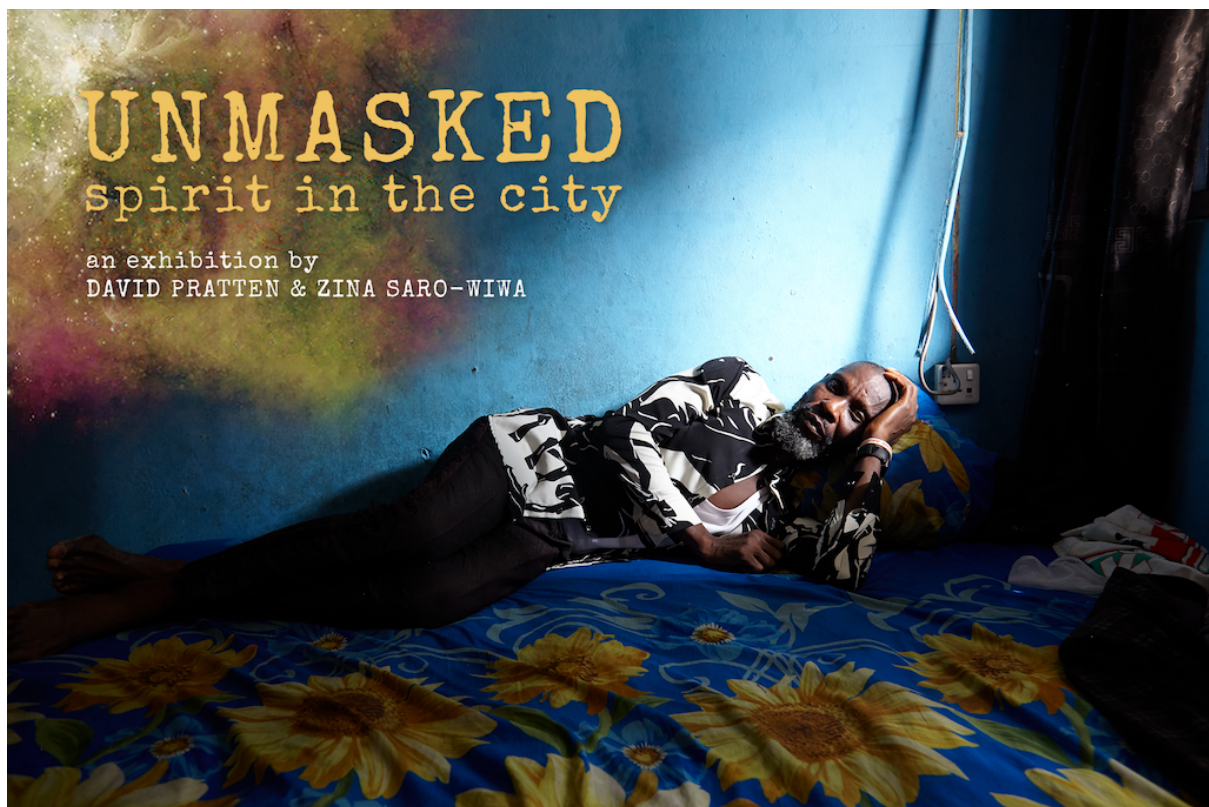


Press Release: 30 January 2023

UNMASKED spirit in the city

A new exhibition and installation by artist Zina Saro-Wiwa and anthropologist David Pratten at the Pitt Rivers Museum

28 January 2023 – 7 January 2024



Nicholas Kuapie from 'Bad Boys and Broken Hearts' © Zina Saro-Wiwa

UNMASKED spirit in the city is a radical new exhibition and installation that explores the personal stories behind modern masquerade in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, challenging traditional museology to unmask not just the costumed dancers but also their emotional universes and economic realities.

Masquerade is a public spectacle based on disguise. It conceals and resists knowledge. In many ways it is unknowable. In ethnographic museums such as the Pitt Rivers Museum, masks are presented as if they reveal the mysteries of a culture and its cosmology. Museums pin them down in glass vitrines and furnish them with explanatory labels. As a result, African masks are often presented as static symbols

of the identity and material culture of rural communities from a bygone era. But masking has always been current, reflecting the times in which it is performed, and the landscapes - including cities - that masked spirits encounter. A collaboration between Port Harcourt-born British-Nigerian artist Zina Saro-Wiwa and Oxford anthropologist David Pratten, *Unmasked* tells a very different story about the meaning of masquerade. The show's focal point is a modern urban masquerade tradition called Agaba, which comprises of young and middle-aged men, who often work in the underbelly of Port Harcourt society but use masquerade as a way to express themselves, make money and provide social cohesion and protection.

The Agaba is one of the enduring masquerades of the oil-producing Niger Delta region of Nigeria. It is outdoor theatre: loud, rambunctious and urgent. On the surface, Agaba masking enables the men that comprise the group to perform a tough, masculine identity that is physically, politically and spiritually 'rugged' but *Unmasked* shows that behind the mask, in the songs they sing and in the bedrooms where they dream, these men reflect on their fate in intimate and ironic ways. It is striking how many of the songs sung by these men and boys are tender, wry love songs, contrasting with the 'bad boy' image of urban masqueraders, as well as the drier taxonomic presentations of masquerade culture in Western museums.

Using the songs, the mask carving and performance, the storytelling employed in this exhibition weaves art and anthropology, creating an expansive visual language that exposes the vitality and vulnerability of life in modern day Port Harcourt, life which has been impacted deeply – and often traumatically – by the international oil and gas industry. Using film and audio to bring these stories to life, Zina Saro-Wiwa's featured major new installation *Bad Boys & Broken Hearts*, is inspired by David Pratten's findings on the nature of the songs of urban masquerade and continues her own work exploring emotional landscapes and the intersection with masquerade culture. Instead of the usual museum displays of artifacts from masquerade culture, the installation features two large vitrines containing life-size replicas of the actual bedrooms of two Agaba masqueraders from Port Harcourt. These rooms, furnished with clothes and objects gifted from the featured men, are a poignant reflection on power, poverty, strength and vulnerability. Exploring the spiritual ecologies of the oil-cursed Niger Delta of her birth, the artist asks: "Does a permanent sense of socio-political heartbreak lie at the heart of the Niger Delta experience? And does this societal grief manifest itself in the bodies and cultural performances of its citizens?"

Oxford University anthropologist David Pratten says: "In collaborating with Zina and in combining anthropology and contemporary art, *Unmasked* tells a new story of masquerade, finding tenderness and everyday tragedy in the personal and the political."

Unmasked takes us through the glass vitrine to expose the beating heart of the humanity that created the mask. It shows the secrets of masquerade are not essential and esoteric but elusive and everyday. Capturing the universal emotions of love, joy and hope combined with tales of loss, fear and heartbreak, the exhibition explores how masking is an art form of the urban present, speaking to modern day hopes and hurt.

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CONTACT DETAILS

Louise Hancock, Marketing and Press Officer
01865 613 017 | 07553 433 635 | press@prm.ox.ac.uk

PRESS IMAGES

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About Zina Saro-Wiwa

Zina Saro-Wiwa is a multi-disciplinary artist working with video installation, sound, photography, film, distillation, food and institution-building. Her subjects of interest are primarily environmentalism, spiritual ecologies, emotional landscapes and the nature of power. She is committed to exploring how earth-based wisdoms challenge power dynamics and advance creativity. She runs her own not-for-profit the Mangrove Arts Foundation which uses art, culture, food and agricultural projects including her Illicit Gin Institute project to transform the fate of the oil-cursed Niger Delta. She is also working on her first ever feature film titled *Eucharist*.

<https://www.zinasarowiwa.org/bio>

About David Pratten

David Pratten is a social anthropologist and is currently Head of School, School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography at Oxford University. His research focuses on themes of history, violence and the oil culture in Nigeria. The focus of his initial work was a historical ethnography of colonialism which focused on the events surrounding a series of mysterious deaths in south-eastern Nigeria during the late 1940s. More recently his research has examined issues of youth, democracy and disorder in post-colonial Nigeria with a particular focus on vigilantism and new masquerade performances. His latest research examines the relationship between popular culture and the oil economy in a cultural history of Port Harcourt in a project called the Arts of Oil.

<https://www.area-studies.ox.ac.uk/people/prof.-david-pratten#/>

The Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford is one of the world's leading museums of anthropology, ethnography and archaeology. Established in 1884, it now has over 700,000 items in its collections and is in the top 100 most visited museums in the UK, welcoming nearly half a million visitors in 2019. The Museum was shortlisted for the Art Fund Museum of the Year 2019 for its creative programmes of reinvention and reinterpretation, which show a much-loved Victorian space challenging perceptions and demonstrating the vital role museums can play in contemporary society.

Open: Mondays 12:00–17:00; Tuesdays–Sundays 10:00–17:00
Admission: Free. | www.prm.ox.ac.uk | 01865 613 000