

**Gallery Visit Report
Chastain Arts Center**

**Isaac Ojo Fajana,
Master Dyer**

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Nigerian fabric artist Isaac Ojo Fajana comes from a family of traditional indigo dyers in western Nigeria. This indigo dyeing tradition came to this continent with the slave trade of the 1700's and early 1800's, and continues in this country in the Gullah tradition of coastal South Carolina. It is thus appropriate that Fajana has been working with a South Carolina artist for some years promoting the cross-cultural exchange of technique and idea that has enriched the work of both groups in recent times.

Fajana's work, recently exhibited at the Chastain Arts Center in Atlanta, uses batik, tie-dye, embroidery, reverse applique, and traditional indigo resist dyeing to produce textiles rich with traditional African techniques and motifs. Yet at the same time Fajana's work shows the influence of the Western world in its inclusion of non-traditional imagery and coloration.

Fajana works on both fabric and rice paper for his batik pieces. The fabric pieces used as wall hangings are done on a flat fabric, while the garments and yardage are mostly done on commercially woven damask patterned fabric. The imagery woven into the fabric itself is nearly hidden by the deep, rich colors of the dyes used, but it nonetheless adds a dimension of subtle depth to the pieces. On the wall pieces, the colors are primarily warm oranges, reds, yellows, and rust. The garments use a wider variety of colors -- some use the above-mentioned warm colors, but many of the garments use deep, rich blue and purple.

The rice paper batiks are actually done with a variation of the traditional fabric batik process. Fajana starts by outlining his designs in black ink first. Obviously rice paper is too fragile to be immersed in a dye bath, so Fajana uses a diffuser to spray paint onto areas of the paper, carefully controlling where each color appears. The paper is then

waxed over the painted areas, and other areas are painted another color. The process is repeated until the layers of color are laid down. For a traditional crackle effect, the paper can be very carefully crumpled to crack the wax, flattened back out, and painted once again. Once the paint dries, the wax is carefully removed by ironing. The entire process gives an image that is obviously batiked, but because of the rice paper foundation it has a translucent glow to it that cannot be achieved with fabric.

Fajana's embroidery pieces catch the eye as well. "The Maidens," "Timi and Gbonka (Two Ancient Warriors)," and "Struggling for Life" all show traditionally stylized African images on a black cotton twill fabric, stitched with a wide variety of brightly colored embroidery threads. Lines are drawn on the fabric using mostly a long stem stitch, while the solid areas of color are not truly solid, but are straight stitches spaced approximately one-eighth of an inch apart, woven across one another to fill in the area. This gives the visual appearance of solid color while keeping the image from becoming too heavy and dense, as well as letting the black background set off the vibrancy of the color.

The majority of Fajana's reverse applique quilted pieces are a traditional handwoven off-white fabric for background, with a dark layer of fabric on top, cut away in areas as part of the reverse applique process. Two pieces, however, stand out for their differences in this collection. One piece is navy fabric atop a purple background, with additional layers of fabric that are indigo-dyed in a shibori-like pattern. The other is a large wall hanging which catches the eye with its green, yellow, and red layers of reverse applique cut away to reveal one another as well as the white fabric underneath.

In addition to the reverse applique quilts and smaller pieces, the exhibit featured two pieced quilts made primarily from indigo-dyed fabrics in a variety of resist patterns. The quilt pieces themselves are simple blocks and triangles stitched together with seemingly little regard for the arrangement of motifs. The motifs themselves are primarily stylized and traditional, old-fashioned even, though the inclusion of the "place-setting" design of a simple knife, fork, and spoon together brings a modern touch to these traditional designs. In addition, these quilts stray from the purely classical by incorporating occasional purple or green pieces scattered across the quilt top for contrast.

The work of Isaac Ojo Fajana, as seen in this exhibit, makes its initial impact from its use of color. Beyond the use of color, though, his use of form and of subtle texture adds richness to the work, while his explorations beyond the traditional form of African fabric craft bring added dimensions to his work.