



# JEBILA OKONGWU

b. 1970, London, UK

Lives and works in Rome, Italy

Studied PG Diploma in Fine Art (Painting), Victorian College of Arts, Melbourne, Australia

Jebila Okongwu's primary inspiration stems from his father's Igbo heritage. Native to South East Nigeria, Igbo art is characterized by striking, abstract geometries and bright colours which represent traditional spirituality and cultural beliefs around cosmology.

By appropriating the forms of Igbo art for a contemporary context, the artist explores socio-political concerns and themes such as identity and sexuality.

Okongwu's sculptures are usually made from the discarded banana boxes gleaned from fruit stores and market places. Portions of the boxes are cut out and reassembled into varying shapes such as bananas, boats and oars. Sometimes they are cast in bronze, in order to further accentuate the qualities of the materials and juxtapose the materials available in the West with those in continental Africa. The banana boxes are interesting not only in their materiality, but for their democratic qualities – they can

be found on the street for free and would otherwise be discarded, and Okongwu uses them to raise complex questions about the inherent value of art when reduced to its raw particulars.

For the artist, the designs, motifs and slogans that appear on the boxes articulate an exoticism similar to the media's portrayals of stereotypical black and brown bodies according to the desires and constructs of western cultures. The journey of the boxes – shipped across the ocean to the West from Africa, the Caribbean and South Africa – retraces the routes of slavery, bringing to light questions surrounding historical and persisting views on race. These vital issues are handled in a seemingly light-hearted manner: the works' cheery colours and comically illustrated bananas are uneasily, tellingly at odds with the powerful meaning therein.



Far left: Paddle No.1 and Paddle No.2, 2013  
archivally treated  
banana boxes, bamboo,  
fiberglass, pigment and  
plywood. 164 x 9 x 5 cm  
(64 5/8 x 7 1/2 x 2 in.)

Left: Banana Sculpture No.  
23, 2016, bronze, 129 x 36.5 x  
22 cm (50 7/8 x 14 3/8 x 8 1/4  
in.)

Opposite Banana Sculpture  
No.17, 2013, archivally treated  
banana boxes, fishing line,  
polyurethane foam, epoxy  
resin, pigment wood and hot  
glue, 180 x 184 x 62 cm  
(70 7/8 x 72 1/2 x 24 1/4 in.)

Related artists: Olaniyi R  
Akindiye, Serge Attukwei  
Clottey, Ghost of a Dream,  
Jerry Kowalsky



'The context of creation is particularly important to me, so I frequently "activate" my works through performance. The density and resonance of traditional African art often comes from the utilitarian or ritualistic dimensions which bring it into existence.