

Elvine Topac

OSAIRA MUYALE: SELF, MEMORY AND EXILE

Osaira Muyale is an artist who takes her personal life experience and transforms this memory into works of art. To her, art is personal for it is the most genuine human yearning towards attempting to make sense out of the human condition. She believes that there are shared experiences in life, a collective understanding, and her work is a testament to human memory. For the artist-individual that is Osaira Muyale, art is the only form of expression that exists where present day reality of life melts down to liberate personal experience in a symbolic language with intensity unique to her visual universe. The level of obsession, passion, sensitivity and fervor seen in her work remind one immediately of the sculptures and the installations of French-born American artist Louise Bourgeois. For they both understand that life is but a journey into the mystery of the self. For Osaira memory becomes her starting point and results in the creation of an exquisitely wide variety of artwork; from painting to sculpture and mixed-media installation to performance art, at times poetic, other times curious, but always engaging the audience.

Osaira is an alchemist; her philosopher's stone is her art, taking all that is false, ordinary and mediocre; turning in to painfully unselfish and open; for all to see. Her work bears witness that art is indeed very human; for this yearning to communicate is universal. In her installations, the manifestation of creative thought breaks through uptight conventions of society and takes a life of its own provoking and probing the

psyche of her audience. Her sculptures are potent and engaging. She travels to “no man’s land,” asking questions, seeking answers and encouraging us to make our own journeys. Her work challenges, enthralls, captivates and at times disturbs us. If art is personal for her, she wants us to take it personally, too.

In the last 15 years, the “Ear” has become the trademark of Osaira Muyale’s work. One can find the symbols of the Ear in her sculptures, paintings, mixed media and installations. In the human body, the ear is the nerve center; the center for balance. When our sight is lost, we can no longer see; therefore observe, but when our hearing is lost, we can no longer communicate, hear and truly express ourselves. We simply are no longer “there.” In Egyptian mythology, the eye is represented by Osiris as the seat of the Eye. According to Dr. Dimitry Halley of Aruba¹, the ear is the reverse image of the eye. Where the eye observes and therefore represents an extravert, the ear takes in and therefore symbolizes an introvert. But since, Osaira’s work is about creating mutual points of access; in a sense I believe she has managed to observe, take in, process and bring out her life experience in the form of her artwork.

It is said that a ‘name’ carries one through their journey in life. Born and raised in Aruba, Osaira’s seem fit to her purpose. Her name is the combination of the name of Egyptian Gods Osiris and Ra: *Osai-Ra*, providing her with the way to see the world, hear her soul and create her work. Born in 1964 in Aruba, Osaira was the third child and the only daughter; in a family of four children. She has two older brothers and a younger brother who was born when she was 10 years old. Her mother, a lady, stunningly beautiful, born and raised in Holland, was dedicated to her home and children. Her father was a true Aruban, in soul and spirit. An architect by profession, he nonetheless thought his children about the nature, mountains and the wild. Although they went to school in Oranjestad, they were raised in Matividiri, the breathtakingly beautiful north coast of Aruba. There, Osaira learned to ride the horses bareback, climb the rocks and took in the scenery of cacti filled hills, the blue, red, purple and the orange of the twilight sky and waited for her father to come up the hill every evening. Osaira also learned to live up to be an ideal daughter and wife; where it is understood by the nature of tradition that in the region that is the Caribbean, Latin America, and the Middle East; a daughter’s role is still defined by her father and a wife’s duties are identified first by her husband,

then by her family and at the end by the greater society. This may certainly sound archaic to American readers, but such is the tradition and although it may not seem present; it is the unspoken truth. In her adolescence, Osaira saw the reality around her and naturally rebelled. The wild child grew up to be a striking, feisty young woman. As it is also the tradition, she left for school in the United States. Yet, after completing her studies, upon returning to Aruba at age 20, Osaira accepted the hand of marriage to son of an influential and conservative family of Aruba.

She became pregnant to her first son Benoit soon after. She could feel the baby in her belly and hear his heartbeat. She painted watercolor and gouaches paintings where she drew ears in the shape of a fetus; she was listening to her child. Benoit was born in 1987. But this theme of the eggs remained with Osaira. She continued to draw and paint. Teardrops around the fetus now surrounded the eggs. Osaira was a good wife and a good mother, however, she could not repress the yearning neither could she quieten her soul. She started attending the Rietveld Arts Academy workshops organized by the Aruban Institute of Culture, including *Atelier '89*. She gave herself to studying fine arts and the works of other artists; mainly that of women artists such as Louise Bourgeois. She realized that the reaction to anger and happiness was somewhat the same in all people. The sculpture "External Milk" was created after her second son, Dominique was born in 1995; one big breast made of plaster, surrounded by other smaller animal breasts, surrounded by small pieces of black and white paper, on them poems and scenes from bible. Imagine, under the breast, like a cave, flowers, she called this little cave her "garden," and on the inside a guardian angel is coming down, a symbol of magical realism. She wanted to give children all that she had and nurture them; but she needed her own space, her garden. She adored her babies and nurtured them yet she felt that she lost herself and turned into a "one big suckling breast." From the depth of her being, she heard a voice and created a space for herself. She felt that to love was to sacrifice. Both her sons were born with a cesarean birth and she suffered from post-partum depression. After studying with Rietveld Kunst Akademie workshops organized by Elvis Lopez and the Aruban Institute of Culture through 1988-1990, Osaira attended Rietveld Kunst Akademie in Amsterdam. After spending time Holland, she was unhappy remaining away from her island. It is said that once one lives in the Caribbean, the sun makes you

fall in love with the wind. It must be true; for Osaira came back to Aruba as an artist, armed with her education from Rietveld. She also realized that artists in Aruba suffered from isolation, disillusion and lack of communication. Osaira believed that there needs to be a space for all the artists, curators and art lovers on the island to convene, exhibit and promote contemporary arts on the island. After experiencing the arts scene in Amsterdam, London, and New York, Osaira Muyale wanted to create a contemporary space in Aruba. She thought of an environment where artistic freedom and creation could flourish like it had never been done before. She founded Eterno in the same manner that she would create any other work; observing, seeing, living, feeling, hearing it in her soul, and finally making it into a reality. From 1993 – 2002, Eterno Gallery and Studios was a local and international venue that was highly beneficial for the cultural life of Aruba. Although Aruba was mostly known as a touristic island, Eterno added to the rich mosaic of the island and provided the much-needed artistic, aesthetic and cultural vibrancy to the land. Along with Institute of Culture and Casa di Cultura, Eterno was the only venue for contemporary art to be shown on the island of Aruba during those years and Osaira Muyale spearheaded this effort along with Elvis Lopez. Today, Aruban artists are represented in international exhibitions, art fairs and museums. But Eterno, began with an idea that belonged to Osaira Muyale, for she wanted to change the old and make it new and different. She wanted to apply her life experience and Eterno has also become her work of art. For 9 years, she was also the director of Eterno Gallery where Elvis Lopez, Remy Jungerman, Christopher Cozier, Alida Martinez, Yahaira Salas, Glenda Heyliger, Renwick Heronimo, Ciro Abath, Madelene Kelly, Ryan Oduber, Kevin Powers, Stan Kuiperi, Dimitri Halley, Ludwig de L'Isle, Osaira Muyale and many others have exhibited, lectured, curated, participated in discussions, and listened.

In 1994, Osaira gave life to a metal chair and let it have wings and fly. Upon her return from Rietveld, Osaira moved to Paradera, away from the scene in the city of Oranjestad. There, she took an ordinary metal chair, and turned it into a sculpture by fitting it into 4 shoes, for the Chair's four legs. The industrial chair then received hand-made pink wings and was painted red. An ordinary chair received life and became the "Flying Red Chair." It was then proven that anything and everything had the capacity to change and be changed around us. Osaira firmly believed in this, and she still does. She felt attracted to found objects; specifically plaster and plastic fragments of the body: a

finger, an arm, hair, and of course, the Ear. In Osaira's visual universe, these objects serve as her tools to discover the annals of her subconscious mind. Symbols and images that reflect her thoughts and her emotional patterns. In her studio, Osaira like to put these plaster body parts around, arrange them differently to "experiment" and to "see" how they compliment each other, and what they would say to one another, if they could speak. She creates the "Luggage:" a sculpture, made with a family heirloom, a 1920s antique valise that belonged to her husband's grandfather. From the upper corner of the luggage, a small little hand of doll's hand, a child's hand almost reaching out; imprisoned child is trying to come out. The child is in the luggage, in the closed and trying to come out, in a closed society, in a conservative environment and cannot be free. At the other end of the studio in Paradera, there is a sculpture "Untitled" – a mountain of shoes, but there is a baby doll who is without a shoe. There is no one to hear her; one rich island, one crying baby.

In 1995, Osaira Muyale had her first solo exhibition "The Mystery of Soul" at Eterno Gallery. Public came face to face with her work which connected the psychological complexity of the human mind to her favorite found-objects. She didn't stay there; she gave life to these objects. Using found objects was not new in art but the making them speak, that was Osaira's domain. She gave them a second life. Her "found objects" all possessed individual histories but have lost their original functions, the artist took them and gave them a second chance with a new life. She reincarnated them as works of art. Wandering through the intimacy of the exhibition, she took her audience through the age of childhood, the innocence of youth and passions of adulthood. One cannot help but remember the "Untitled" sculpture of the Chair, whose hands reach out, a praying chair; almost asking: could I be more than a chair, more than myself? These images symbolize a journey of the soul. Through her work, Osaira makes us confront our own personal history and past. "Mystery of the Soul" is about memory; and without memory, a human being is not whole. In her exhibition, her sculptures are visceral, they are strong and they have personality and life. They are given stories and now they have new memories. Torsos hanging upside down, legs, feet, hands, and hair and the Ear. They all tell a story; theirs, hers and perhaps ours? Although much of this may seem surreal, it is very much real to Osaira and she invites us into her world; she believes that by looking at her past, we are forced to look at ours as well.

In 1996, the visitors to the Institute of Culture in Oranjestad walked into an installation that was part of the “Women in Evolution,” an exhibition that showed four contemporary female Aruban artists. The room was covered with more than 1000 plaster ears in flat spiral arrangement on the floor reflecting the ear’s inside narrowing circles. The visitors had to tip-toe around the small plaster ears in order to go around the installation; as they did, they noticed that each ear was scribbled with a black magic marker; as they leaned down to see it closer, they discovered a poem written by Osaira in Papiamentu, the native language of the Dutch Antilles which is a combination of native Indian, Portuguese, Dutch and Spanish. The poem, loosely translated in English, said: “*Look*, if you don’t see, I can’t see, so we are blind, yet if you can, I too can see. *Hear*, if you can’t hear, I cannot hear, so we are deaf, yet if you can, I too can hear.” The poem continued, in spirals as she introduced “*Feel*,” “*Give*,” “*Receive*,” and along the journey there were pit stops where the travelers were first allowed to go to bathroom if they wanted to, in an old-fashioned baby potty, to let go of their fears, then they could rest on a rusty metal bed, for this journey can take a lot of you; the pillow was made of plaster cast ears, as they kept walking through the river of poetry and symbolism, they could stop at a fridge, filled with more ears, urging them to communicate with their fellow passengers, the spiral took them finally to a mirror for visual self-reflection, and then the poem and the spiral, the Ear, ended, with a final word “*Together*.” For Louise Bourgeois “*a spiral is also a metaphor for consistency...and the soul is a continuous entity*,”² and Osaira has been continuously encouraging her public to contemplate the reality in which they exist. With this work, she tells us that an artist cannot live in isolation and that communication is essential for the survival of all that is human. Osaira Muyale decides that she must take an active role in waking others up from their long sleep.

Osaira Muyale received local and international critical recognition between 1992 - 1997. She was part of the Mira Arte of 1992 in Aruba and two of her sculptures from the “Mysteries of the Soul” was exhibited at “Art in the Caribbean: Exclusion, Fragmentation and Paradise, “ in Barcelona in an exposition organized by the MEIAC Museum of Barcelona. Because of the unique quality of her work, the Artimo Foundation of Netherlands, recognized Osaira as an artist who is “*particularly well-equipped*” to breakthrough the literal and figurative barriers in visual art.

In early 1997, Osaira Muyale was invited to participate in the Sixth Biennial of Havana where the theme was “the Individual and Memory.” In Cuba, the ear became a symbol of love, loss, memory and exile. She listened and heard the voices in Cuba in silence. She fused her thoughts and their voices in one. She considered her public an individual, and her work of art to be an homage to their memory. She created a cascade of more than 1000 plaster cast ears – voices of silence: memories that are there, waiting to be heard. Only if you *LISTEN*, she says. Each piece with a personality of its own, a story to tell, waiting to be noticed, heard and seen. Osaira showed us that she has now become a master in turning life experience into sculptures. In this installation; we see genuine sensitivity, an openness and vulnerability, simplicity yet strength; all that is feminine and Osaira. She makes the statement: “*Cuba, I am here, and I am listening...Your thoughts, your laughter, your life and your suffering, joy and pain...you are not isolated....We are here, We are listening, and you are heard.*” Osaira gave Cuba the message that they were being heard. But more importantly, she gave the World the message that they should listen. This work “Listening and Being Heard,” was featured on the front page of Arts and Leisure Section of the New York Times in May by Mr. Edward Gomez in an article covering the Havana Biennial of 1997. During the last week of the Biennial, Osaira was invited to participate in the Soroa International Artists’ Workshop in Pinar del Rio, Cuba, which was organized by the Wilfredo Lam Center in Havana. The rural setting of Soroa encouraged artists to create site-specific work within the province of Pinar del Rio’s natural ecological environment. The work was to be experimental and imaginative. The workshop was unique in the sense that it brought international artists to inland Cuba to work closely with Cuban artists in a rural and residential setting. It was supported by Hivos in the Netherlands, the Triangle Arts Trust in London, the Gate Foundation in Amsterdam and Wilfredo Lam Center in Havana. A child of north coast of Aruba, Osaira felt right at home in Soroa. She wasn’t afraid of the wild natural environment around her, on the contrary, she liked to walk in nature, gather materials, wood, leaves, rocks and get her hands dirty, building and putting together “Matividiri No.9,” a name referring to her childhood home. As she walked, she searched and remembered. Using the technique of assemblage, she put together a wooden structure, which included objects that she brought from Aruba. The result was an installation of impressive proportions; created

with approximately 35 pieces of wood between 5 – 7 feet each held together with cords from Aruba. When asked, Osaira stated that in Soroa, she “*buried her father,*” and finally was able to say goodbye to him. She lost her father years ago. Although she grew up in a male dominant environment, she always had a sense of the fire in her and nurtured the feminine spirit that existed within her by listening to her Soul. In Cuba, she remembered, forgave and said goodbye to her father; whom after all she loved very much. To her, building this structure was the ritual of valediction. Getting down on her knees and working with the “dirt” symbolizes the artist’s acknowledgement of her mortality, humanity and wisdom. It also symbolizes strength and stability, which at this point Osaira Muyale has reached as an artist, mother and a daughter.

In Soroa, Osaira Muyale continues to exorcise her demons and develops a performance art piece titled “A Savage Dream.” In the piece, she wears a loose, untailed earth-colored garment. She slowly pulls strands and strands of thick long brown hair out of her mouth, till it becomes an uncontrollable struggle and hair reaches the floor and it is all out. Once it is all out, Osaira slowly removes her clothes and the piece culminates in her washing herself, with the ritual of bathing and cleansing with water. The power of this work comes from the fact that Osaira’s Savage Dream represents potent archetypal symbols and such; when experienced by the audience, the performance encourages individual examination. In Jungian terms, individuation is the inner experience of psychic growth of a human being and it is reflected through symbol images seen in dreams. This psychic growth, individuation, is an individual’s movement from a state of conflict to a state of greater freedom and unity of personality. Jung, in *Man and His Symbols*, writes that a symbol “*implies something vague, unknown or hidden from us...as a plant produces its flower, so the psyche creates its symbols...*” In our lifetime, archetypal images at one point or another appear to the individual and almost everyone; these images are usually quite bizarre; some mystical, usually too far-fetched. As the artist-individual, when Osaira Muyale creates and performs her work, “A Savage Dream,” she takes herself and her audience through the state of conflict into greater freedom. She lets the hair come out her mouth; for all in the audience this symbolizes release of confusion, and oppression of thought. For the women, the work lets them free of their role in a society that concerns itself so much upon appearances. Longer hair of a woman is typically linked to

conditioned qualities of sexuality, bearing children, vanity and pride. Osaira releases the repressed anxiety of her memories. She washes herself with water; for water symbolizes spiritual cleansing, expresses emotion, compassion and love. In ethno-mythologies, water is where gentle creatures make their home and live in peace: dolphins, whales, mermaids and water spirits. With the water, Osaira washes away the worries, sadness and conflict. She reaches freedom.

In 1998, Osaira Muyale participated in “Lips, Sticks and Marks,” a landmark exhibition of seven contemporary female artists of the Caribbean. The exhibition opened in Barbados at the Art Foundry and travels to Trinidad hosted by Caribbean Contemporary Arts at the Museum of Port of Spain. Her piece, “Chance and Change” was a multi-media installation, where Osaira’s performance and use of her body was in a sense a metaphor for the island of Aruba. Her mouth was silenced with an egg and there were corks in her ears. It represented the current affairs in Aruba, an island that did not listen to its soul, and could not speak its mind. The work also reflected her isolation from the rest of the world as an artist. It was also an expression of her personal suffering, for Osaira was going through divorce at the time. On the plastic see-thru cover that covered her body, with a black marker, she wrote “*A Letter to Myself.... I know you for a long time, we were playing hide and seek, I could and could not , Hear; see, touch, smell, talk to you...But still I knew you, and still, wanted to know more about you...appreciate, understand, trust and love you...we are playing another game, the game of affirmation...A relationship of soul and brain, you are teaching me...the existence of love, every time we meet....*” With an egg in her mouth, corks in her ear, covered with her writing on the see-thru garment, naked underneath, Osaira stepped under the water and took off all that silenced her and let the power of water cleanse and purify her. On a personal level, she could now hear and be heard; make the changes in her life. This was a meditation and a deep cleansing. It was also a message sent to her Island in the format of body politic; purify and remake thyself, heal thyself and listen to thy Soul.

Osaira Muyale’s profound love and devotion for Aruba provides her with the courage to produce work that continues to be experimental and unique.

At this point, the Ear not only is a symbol of hearing one’s soul, but also becomes a symbol that reflects our fears, miscommunication, imbalance, and isolation. The ear represents pain; despair and madness. Despair comes on when one is isolated and cannot

hear the voices of others. Madness moves in when one is not heard and slowly loses her own voice. In a world ruled by the Internet and digital media, where flow of communication is based on satellites and cellular phones, the voice of the Soul is lost, silenced. In a small country, a beautiful island visited by transatlantic ships and thousands of wealthy tourists staying in international hotel chains, neither Latin, nor American or European, surrounded by the sea, the social realities of a Caribbean artist become more and more visible in Osaira's work. She writes " *if the heritage, the culture, the system you live in doesn't work, you have to make a new culture, your own culture.*"³ After living in Aruba for a week, one realizes that it is a small community; away from the rest of the art world. Osaira therefore, through her work, including her involvement at Eterno Galleries, tries to break the silence and awaken the sleeping hearts and minds of all those around her. For she believes that indifference is unacceptable. Osaira states that " *everyday she can leave the island and plug into see what's happening, but an awareness of art needs to be developed and maintained in Aruba.*" So, she remains. For she believes truly that " *every day, art is a mission in Aruba, you have to have art in life.*" In 1999, for the "New Self Portrait" exhibit at the Institute of Culture, she creates a sculpture titled "Seven Days a Week." The work consists of alternate mousetraps representing entrapment, and small pink birdcages with open doors representing freedom; seven items for seven days of the week. The artist is telling her audience that freedom and entrapment exists within us; each and every day of the week. Without entrapment, there is no value to freedom, it cannot be understood. With freedom, comes a certain entrapment. Nothing in life is certain, all is a compromise. A beautiful sunny island, where tourists flock by the thousands to have fun; is it a cage for an artist? An artist in a big city without the sun and her roots; is it freedom?

Osaira Muyale was selected to exhibit at "Arte 99: Identity, Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow," in Willemstad, Curacao. The art exhibition was part of the Dutch Caribbean Islands commemoration of 500 years of written history. Osaira was awarded the Grand Prize for "Illusion," a mixed media installation for " *an emotionally moving, introspective, fresh and poetic installation which combines simplicity of traditional ritual with the complexity of post-modern techniques such as performance and video.*"⁴ The installation consisted of a magnificent wedding gown; the artist's, raised on stilts, which the visitor could walk in and view a video. Inside the gown, the floor was covered with Osaira's wedding

pictures and in the chest of the gown, a television set was embedded, the video showed Osaira's slow parachute descent from the skies of Aruba, free as a bird. In the text that accompanied the work, Osaira spoke to her audience from the heart; "...*this is my wedding dress you can step into, with wedding pictures on the floor, a contemporary look into the reality of my life, and perhaps yours...my chest is where I can feel my heart and soul...that's where the video sits...in this work, everyone can walk on my past, for that is why 'it is the past' that's why the word exists...and we are all free.*"⁵ During a discussion with Osaira about this work, she stated that, she wanted to jump out of the illusion completely, and continue to fly. To her, the illusion surrounded her island and could only be healed with effort and time. For her, the subject matter was personal and the fairy tale that she was brought up to believe was not real. From a personal perspective, "Illusion" was healing to her, and encouraging to the public in facing their own personal illusions in life. Osaira's use of materials from her own personal life and elements of memory resulted in making herself so vulnerable as an artist that her work reflected her humanity and engaged the audience in a uniquely meaningful way. The poetry of the work laid in simplicity of the idea combined with the high standard of effort in contemporary technique. In the text that accompanied "Illusion," Osaira also stated that "*one may determine a culture based on the art that is created at that moment..., and that art is so important for a country, for through art, one can understand the society...*"⁶ The tail of her wedding gown was 6 feet long, spread wide across the gallery floor, on it she wrote in red paint "*to a new life...to a new understanding...to a new freedom...*" On the 500th commemoration of the Dutch Caribbean Islands, Osaira Muyaale, was exhibiting a work that suggested the examination of past, understanding of current reality and change for the future. The theme of the exhibition was "Identity, Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow," and Osaira's work demanded that an identity that is defined only by honest self-examination could only result in personal freedom. The exhibition opening received 1500 visitor's and before it closed within a month, almost 12,000 visitors came to see the exhibit, including H.R.H. Queen Beatrix of Netherlands whom Osaira gave a tour of the installation wearing a white dress with one red, and one white shoe.

Osaira Muyaale participated in the Watamula International Artists Workshop and Exhibition in Curacao, September – October of 2000. There were total of 12 international and 12 local artists and the site was an eighteenth century plantation. For

Osaira, working, staying, and living in this location, the Lagun and Landhouse Knip site, was particularly challenging. In the past, this is where the slaves lived, suffered, died and were forgotten. She could sense their presence, hear their silent suffering and feel their tears. In the year 2000, the site was a combination of uncultivated and farmed land known as “cunucu,” meaning countryside, which offered possibilities of site-specific installation work. Osaira sensed that the conservative islanders and the Dutch preferred to live in Curacao; for the power structure of the island lent itself to the practices of the old ways and the old world. She felt that although 90% of the island was of African descent due to centuries of slave trade, they weren’t free enough and did not receive the same privileges as those who were of European descent. Living in the small chambers of the slaves, in the excruciating heat, only fueled her identification with those who suffered in the past, and those who were suffering in the new millennium. Freedom for Osaira, came through self-examination and discovery; which manifested itself in the process and delivery of her work.

The process began by walking in the wild, and Osaira discovered an abandoned house and started taking photographs of it. She looked for the owner and when she finally found him; he wasn’t interested in meeting her. She then started writing poetry in Papiamentu on the house and she painted the house. She made a kite and tied it to the house. She continued to write about what was it like to live in the Lagun, attracting attention so that all who lived around there could read it, she called it the “Neighbors.” During her walks in nature, she came across a pool where the slaves used to dye their clothes with indigo blue. She also saw an abandoned water tank, next to it a photo camera and condoms. Upon developing the film in the camera, she discovered that the camera told the story of a black and white gay couple that visited Aruba and Curacao on their honeymoon. She felt that their life crossed path with hers and she was “*bound together by fate and by this location with all its historical connotations.*” She then started cleaning the reservoir and met with Sharlon, a native of Curacao, who helped her. They became friends and exchanged memories. Osaira documented these memories as they worked and ate together. She also spent time with Wilson, a Columbian artist, whose artwork she truly loved. Sharlon was strong, heterosexual, black; Wilson, brave, homosexual, white. Osaira was looking at the pictures she found; a racially mixed couple; to her, the

story was unfolding to her like a film. She proposed a ritual to Sharlon and Wilson. They agreed. The piece "Bathing me, Bathing you,"(1) was a site-specific multi-media performance installation that was later exhibited to the public on film lasting 37 minutes. It was taped at night at 3 a.m. with other artists as the audience. Ryan Oduber another Aruban artist was responsible for the sound. The name of the piece referred to the ritual of cleansing each other in the blue reservoir that was used by so many slaves in the colonial past of the Caribbean. Osaira, Sharlon and Wilson each had blue indigo tablets in their hands, with them, they started writing on the walls surrounding the reservoir. The first one to write was Wilson, he said "I am scared...," in a sense they voiced the fears of those that came before them, for this environment where history and architecture became a catalyst for truth, was too intense to process with anything but simple truth. The pool was filled with water and Osaira, as the female, stepped into a pool with blue indigo tablets in her hand; followed by the black man and the homosexual white man. For Osaira, the water was an element that would soothe the past and help wash away the pain. There they started washing each other, slowly fear was lifted. Water is the symbol of compassion and love and in Watamula, after she submerged herself in indigo blue water, Osaira rose accepting herself once again a new person and announced the final portion of her performance; her declaration of love for all mankind and her engagement of love-making with Sharlon, her black friend from Curacao. She wanted to give a message to all to break the oppression, in the very same pool where the oppressed washed their clothes with someone who was still oppressed, by loving him unconditionally.

The national slogan of Aruba is "One Happy Island." It is on the license plates, it the greeting that a tourist will receive in a hotel and the statement that one sees when they arrive the island. But it is not such a happy island for those who live there, especially if they want to be different. For Osaira, the identity of a true Aruban is someone like her father; someone who worked to build the island and gave back to the island; someone who knew every inch of the island and rode horses on the island, walked the beaches of the island and spoke to the aloe vera plants on the island. As an artist, Osaira Muyale's love for her island is instinctive. She is that someone who walks the beaches, speaks to the stars and listens to the wind. She doesn't want to let go for she wants to give back. She also wants to change the old mentality of the island and introduce contemporary

thought. She wants public to de-isolate itself and believes that the process begins within the individual. In 2001, she participated in the exhibition “My Rights, Mind, Body and Soul” with her work “I Never Promised You a Rose Garden,” a mixed media work of photography, video & paper. It was part of the “Street Queen” series, where for a year Osaira worked with Natalie, a drug addict, helping her by giving her a job and a place to live at Eterno Studios. Natalie also became a model for Osaira where she posed during her sleep, while shooting drugs, having seizures and in the “Illusion” wedding dress. The photographs are a combination of roses, beautiful flowers and the scenes from the lives of the local drug addicts. Osaira’s socially conscious realistic works exhibited in downtown Oranjestad make the necessary statement that even in a “Happy Island” there are drug addicts and those who suffer. The flowers represent the happiness on the island which is an illusion. Osaira feels that as the artist it is her responsibility to see, feel and hear, but to listen, reflect and make others see.

Since the summer of 2002, Osaira has been working on the project titled “Immigration/Home.” This on-going project explores the issues of class stratification, immigration, multi-culturalism, diversity and economic life on the island of Aruba. As such, the work she produces reveals a radically different idea of art to the natives of her country. She completely rejects all relics of colonialism and conditioned conservatism. She creates an additional studio in her home for other artists, local and foreign, to come and collaborate with her. By the year 2002, the immigrant population in Aruba has gone up by 35% and most of these immigrants come to the island from Colombia. They are treated with not much respect and usually take “any” job. Aruba has two airports, one for those that come from the United States and Europe, a beautiful modern, newly built, air-conditioned terminal, and another one for those that come from the Caribbean countries and Latin America. The Columbians arrive on the latter one but they don’t care, for they are there to make a living. Their numbers are not even exactly known for they do not leave the country, and no one seems to care as long as they don’t cause a “visible” problem. Osaira’s concept of “God-Dog” series was during this time, where she felt that society was ruled and regulated by manipulation of words. The artist believed that by ignoring an issue, the said issue would not disappear but turn into a problem instead. She could feel the pain of the immigrants, the fact that they were treated poorly, when she heard the wind in Aruba, she could also listen to their sadness, too. Her island was

changing and no one wanted to acknowledge it. She believed that artists should work with their community. Early 2003, she opened her home, Osaira Muyale Studio/Gallery, for an exhibition, where she exhibited her Ear paintings, in the work "Untitled" (2) there were 9 red ears coming from the red painted center, Osaira was asking her visitors to not be deaf and hear the voice of their Soul, for she believed that that's where the process began. The fierce intensity of the color was to awaken the sleeping public; boldly. Yet, a few steps ahead, there laid sketchbook on a pedestal; "Untitled II". (3) It was painted grey, with a sculpture of a grey plaster cast ear on the top cover. In the book pages of the book, the visitor discovered the incredibly detailed and elegant drawings of the human body, reminiscent of the fact that we were all made of muscles, bones and blood; the same fiber. Osaira also installed a public neon sculpture to a beautiful house on the water at L.G. Smith Blvd. #30 in Oranjestad, where in blue she wrote in italics "I always thought that everyone is the same" In the accompanying press release, she stated that "*she has always lived these words...they came from her mother's heart and she believed in them. Until I have experienced and discovered through life that this is not the truth.*"

In July and August of 2003, Osaira's last work "Dog Race," a film/mini DVD with color, sound and 4 minutes in length, has been exhibited in Associacao Cultural – Videobrasil, Sao Paulo, Brazil and Caribbean Contemporary Arts Center in Trinidad. The work is based on society and barbarism and the fact that the society encourages barbarism when the public allows set rules, bureaucratic systems and comfort to rule and lets indifference take away human dignity. Based on this work, Osaira Muyale was invited to participate and represent the Caribbean region in the international artist's workshop in October 2003 in the Yunan Province of China. The workshop has been organized by the joint collaboration of Triangle Trust and Gasworks Studios, London, England, Caribbean Contemporary Arts Center in Trinidad and Upriver Loft in Kunming. The artists will work around Mu Wang Fu Palace in a virtually mediaeval city. The emphasis of the workshop will be the process; no doubt Osaira will hear the story of the Chinese and in a mediaeval city on an ancient land and share her journey.

Osaira Muyale's visual narratives are personal but they carry universal messages. She communicates her views with simplicity and eloquence. She knows her craft well and trusts in herself. She has developed a confident relationship within her own visual

universe where she speaks in a symbolic language which we call her art. This art is moving, challenging, different but it smells of life and can be all consuming. Whether the context at hand is social, historical or political, Osaira keeps reminding us that her work is personal; for she believes in the power of the individual. All changes begin at an individual level and importance of Osaira Muyale's work comes from it's constantly piercing the comfort bubble of the audience. For the artist-individual that is Osaira Muyale, indifference is unacceptable. She believes that if we listen to voice within, we hear our intuition, the voice of our Soul. This intuition, will not let us be indifferent to the suffering and exile of others. For an individual to be in exile, they do not have to be away from their home; they just have to feel marginalized within their society. Osaira hears and sees those who are in the margins and her work reflects this sense of social sensitivity. For she herself suffers from personal exile; and in the end, what is personal is universal; and what is universal is very much personal. For Osaira, the power to communicate and change relies within the individual, and with each work that she presents, she reminds us that we are all one and the same.

List of Images:

- (1) Watamula: "Bathing Me, Bathing You"
- (2) Untitled
- (3) Untitled II

¹ Halley, Dimitry, MD, Osaira Muyale "Reverses the Image"

² Herkenhoff, Paulo, Louise Bourgeois, Interview, Page 14, Phaidon Press Inc., NY, 2003

³ Osaira Muyale Diaries (private/non-published)

⁴ Jury Announcement, Arte '99, Curacao, Dutch Antilles

⁵ Text, Illusion, Osaira Muyale, November 15, 1999, Arte '99, Curacao, Dutch Antilles

⁶ Ibid