



MOUNT HOLYOKE
COLLEGE ART MUSEUM

*Romuald
Hazoumè* *I will spatter
the sky utterly*



Curated by Kymberly S. Newberry

I will spatter the sky utterly: Romuald Hazoumè
Curated by Kymberly S. Newberry

August 29, 2023–May 26, 2024

*This exhibition is made possible by the Susan Davenport Page 1931
and Margaret Davenport Page Fales 1929 Art Fund*

This exhibition is dedicated to Polly Nooter Roberts,
Rowland Ola Abiodun and Jessie R. Newberry.

You have been "my faith, my winged joy, my pride, my
utmost mirth....

You are with time, as wind and weather are,
as is the sun and every nailed star."

– Countee Cullen

About the exhibition

This single-object exhibition, curated by Kymberly S. Newberry, includes a creative contextual installation with video projection and hanging jerry cans.



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Enter this sacred space, colored for divinities: RED for Ògún and BLUE for Yemoja. Red embodies the hot, aggressive nature of Ògún—it attacks the eye and mind. Ògún, god of iron, guides and protects the jerry can carriers on their perilous journeys to survive. Blue are the waters of Yemoja, goddess of the sea. Blue is cool, refreshing, and life-sustaining. These are the waters destroyed by Big Oil that Ken Saro-Wiwa died to protect and save for his people.”

—Henry John Drewal, Evjue-Bascom
Professor Emeritus, University of
Wisconsin–Madison



Kymerly S. Newberry and Dr. Henry Drewel, 2023. Photo © Laura Shea.



Romuald Hazoumè, Beninese, born 1962
***Kawessi*, 2013**

Plastic can, synthetic hair, and copper wire
Purchase with the Belle and Hy Baier Art Acquisition Fund
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It was my luck and privilege while planning this exhibition to have a spirited and absorbing conversation with Romuald Hazoumè. Hazoumè was born in 1962 in Porto Novo on the west coast of Africa, the official capital of Benin, where he lives and works. A Yoruba who grew up in a Catholic family, he maintained a relationship with ancestral worship, and much of his work is influenced by West African Vodun.

Keenly aware of African politics at a young age, Hazoumè began using salvaged plastic jerry cans as his medium to create his now iconic anthropomorphic masks. Hazoumè's masks glide seamlessly between his blistering commentaries on the atrocities visited upon society's most vulnerable, and, at times, wickedly humorous social commentaries. The elaborate hairstyles of his masks, for instance, may announce a woman's social and marital status. In *Kawessi*, a recycled jerry can has a tornado of hair sweeping skyward and three coquettish curls on each side. According to Hazoumè, this indicates she is an accomplished woman of great wealth...and is open to receiving even more!

*“When my turn comes
into the air I will raise up
a cry so violent that I will
spatter the sky utterly.”*

These final lines of politician and poet, Aimé Césaire’s powerful poem, *Lost Body*, trumpet freedom, making space for the jerry can masks of Beninese artist Romuald Hazoumè and the life of Nigerian activist Ken Saro-Wiwa. Hazoumè’s masks are narrative sculptures memorializing people, places, and moments. Composed mostly of plastic gasoline containers and other discarded materials, the masks are a voucher for reuse, resilience, and rebuilding. Heavy with subtext, they speak to the fraught life of the Beninese men and women who are forced to navigate porous borders between Benin’s capital, Porto-Novo, and neighboring Nigeria as part of the illicit fuel trade in order to survive.

Saro-Wiwa was a member of the Ogoni people, an ethnic minority in Nigeria. His struggle against environmental genocide by the oil industry's devastation of Ogoniland ended in his shameful execution in 1995 at the hands of the Nigerian government. Ken Saro-Wiwa's last words before his execution were, "Lord take my soul but the struggle continues." Hazoumè, using the ubiquitous plastic jerry can, reminds us that art and awe are born from struggle. Never forgetting Saro-Wiwa's last words...he continues the fight.



Photo: [Javier Corso](#)



Photo: [Luka Tomac/Friends of the Earth International](#)



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Listen to music from Ogoniland

Nigerian singer, Wisdom Miidom, professionally known as Srem Life, dedicated the song, "Spirit of Ogoni," to the continued fight of the Ogoni people and to the legacy of Ken Saro-Wiwa.

Content warning



This music video includes graphic images of human suffering



The Execution of Nigerian Activist Ken Saro-Wiwa

Read a personal reflection from Stephanie Shonekan, Professor of Ethnomusicology and Dean of the College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Maryland:

I remember the moment I heard that Ken Saro-Wiwa had been executed. The news brought me to my knees and I mourned as if Ken Saro-Wiwa had been a family member. While the Nigerian populace was distracted by a national soccer match one night, the Nigerian president, a ruthless former army general, ordered his execution because he had dared to speak up against the continual environmental terror that foreign oil companies, in collusion with the Nigerian government, had wreaked on his community of Ogoniland in the Niger Delta. As I reflect today, I realize that Saro-Wiwa was my age today when he was killed in 1995. But then, I was only 27, newly married to the love of my life, and eagerly anticipating motherhood in my future. There are no words that describe my horror at the news that this compassionate poet-activist had been executed, but what really saddened me was that there was nothing we could do about it. Yes, there was public outcry, and world leaders scolded the Nigerian government, but that was all. The execution passed on like a storm in the night, and morning came, and life went on. But I remember worrying about the kind of world my children would be entering, a world that is not yet just and free.

Read Nelson Mandela's statement on the
execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa:

November 11, 1995

I have received with deep shock the news of the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and other Ogoni leaders.

If this is in fact the case, this heinous act by the Nigerian authorities flies in the face of appeals by the world community for a stay of execution. It also puts into question the commitment of the Nigerian military regime to the democratisation of Nigerian society.

In view of this latest development, the South African delegation at the Commonwealth Conference will recommend the expulsion of Nigeria from the Commonwealth pending the installation of a democratic government. The South African Government will also recommend that similar steps be taken by other international bodies, so as to strengthen the international community's solidarity with the Nigerian people.

The South African Government is recalling its High Commissioner from Lagos for urgent consultations.

Source: Nelson Mandela Foundation Centre of Memory Archive



Scan the QR code to view the New York Times cover
article on Saro-Wiwa's execution, November 11, 1995.



When you say my work has a relationship with Ken Saro-Wiwa, with the Ogoni people, I say YES —but not only with the Ogoni people, not only with the Yoruba people, not only the African people, my work is for everybody.”

—Romuald Hazoumè

Scan this QR code to enjoy a playlist as a musical companion for the exhibition *I will spatter the sky utterly*.





Romuald Hazoumè, 2017. Photo © Jonathan Greet.

