

**THE LOOKING GLASS:  
DECOLONIZING PERCEPTIONS ON CULTURE THROUGH VIRTUAL  
WORLDBUILDING AND SPECULATIVE FICTION**

**MONIOLUWA OMUBOR**  
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MONIOLUWA OMUBOR

Date of Defence: November 24, 2023

Dr. Daniela Sirbu	Associate Professor	Ph.D.
MFA Thesis Supervisor		

Dr Anne Dymond	Associate Professor	Ph.D.
Thesis Examination Committee Member		

Ryan Harper Brown	Instructor	MFA
Thesis Examination Committee Member		

Dana Cooley	Associate Professor	Ph. D.
Chair, Thesis Examination Committee		

## ABSTRACT

*The Looking Glass* is an MFA thesis project which raises questions concerning the ways in which culture, specifically Yoruba culture is perceived, interacted with, and experienced. It examines the discourse surrounding colonized and marginalized identities and explores how the literary tool of speculative fiction in combination with 3d computer graphics can be employed in subverting and decolonizing these conversations in the area of new media art. The project features a series of 3D computer generated portraits, landscapes, and short video clips which serve as “moving” or “living” paintings, with each piece revolving strongly around a selected element of Yoruba culture.

The subjects are situated against a surrealist backdrop while staged and presented with a minimalist aesthetic, an approach specifically selected to convey the themes and ideas for which are argued. Through this, each piece serves as a corner for critical reflection, reconciliation and exploration. Ultimately, the thesis investigates channels for the expansion of 3D computer graphics and its worldbuilding capabilities in the effort of propagating critical reflection through speculative work.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
LIST OF FIGURES .....	vii
LIST OF PLATES .....	xi
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH BACKGROUND.....	4
2.1: The Zambian Space Academy.....	4
2.2: How To Be Yoruba for Dummies: Where we are and Where We are Going .....	5
2.3: A Case for Speculative Fiction, Speculative Design and Radical Imagination.....	9
CHAPTER 3: 3D COMPUTER GRAPHICS FOR SPECULATIVE WORK .....	18
CHAPTER 4: THE LOOKING GLASS.....	22
4.1: Project Description.....	22
4.2: Featured Elements of Yoruba Culture .....	23
4.2.1: The Eyo Masquerade .....	25
4.2.2: Ife Heads .....	27
4.2.3: Ade (crown) .....	28
4.2: Visual Style and Influence.....	30
4.3: The Setting .....	32
4.4: The Pieces .....	33
CHAPTER 5: PROJECT DEVELOPMENT .....	48
5.1: Software .....	48

5.2: Hardware .....	50
5.3: Production .....	50
CHAPTER 6: THESIS EXHIBITION.....	58
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION .....	64
REFERENCES .....	65
APPENDIX 1: EXHIBITION DOCUMENTATION .....	68
APPENDIX 2: CREDITS.....	76

## LIST OF FIGURES

- Figure 1: Artist: Divya Mehra. Title: "Afterlife of Colonialism, a reimagining of Power,"  
Medium: PVC coated fabric, acrylic paint, plastic and electric components. Purchased 2019  
(48651). National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. © Divya Mehra Photo: NGC.  
<https://www.gallery.ca/magazine/exhibitions/sobey-art-award-2022-divya-mehra> ..... 7
- Figure 2: Artists: Ekene Ijeoma, Rad Mora. Title: "American Flag," Medium: 3D computer  
graphics, 2018. <https://www.archpaper.com/2018/07/artist-ekene-ijeoma-reflects-charged-life-american-flag/> ..... 11
- Figure 3: Artist: Toyin Ojih Odutola. Title: "Representatives of State," Medium: Charcoal, pastel  
and pencil on paper. 2016-2017. Jack Shainman Gallery, accessed March 2, 2024,  
[https://jackshainman.com/artists/toyin\\_ojih\\_odutola](https://jackshainman.com/artists/toyin_ojih_odutola) ..... 16
- Figure 4: Still image capture from the computer game Grand Theft Auto V featuring the digitally  
constructed fictional city of Los Santos created by Rockstar Games. Source:  
<https://www.cnet.com/pictures/scenes-from-grand-theft-auto-v-pictures/> ..... 21
- Figure 5: A woman's Adire cloth, composed of two even lengths of machine plain woven  
European cotton machine sewn together. Museum no. Af1971,35.15. © The Trustees of the  
British Museum, London. [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E\\_Af1971-35-15](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Af1971-35-15) . 24
- Figure 6: Photograph of Eyo masquerades from Lagos. Produced 1880-1905. Acquired 1970-  
1983. Museum no. Af,A51.76. © The Trustees of the British Museum, London.  
[https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/EA\\_Af-A51-76](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/EA_Af-A51-76) ..... 26
- Figure 7: Ife head sculptures, made of brass. Produced 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> Century. Acquired 1939.  
Museum no. Af1939,34.1. © The Trustees of the British Museum, London.  
[https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E\\_Af1939-34-1](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Af1939-34-1) ..... 27
- Figure 8: Oba Adémúwàgún Adésidà II, in the courtyard of his palace at Akúré, 1959.  
Photograph by Eliot Elisofon. Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of  
African Art-Smithsonian Institution. <https://sova.si.edu/record/eepa.1973-001/ref12334?t=W&q=Oba+Ad%C3%A9m%C3%BAw%C3%A0g%C3%BAn+Ad%C3%A9sid%C3%A0+II> ..... 29
- Figure 9: Photographer: James Barnor. Title: Everything in My Hand I Bring. Medium: Gelatin  
Silver Print, 1953. Printed in 2011. Museum no. E.105-2012. © Victoria and Albert Museum,  
London. <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/james-barnor> ..... 31

Figure 10: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Entrance. Medium: 3D computer graphics, 2022-2023.....	33
Figure 11: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Entrance II. Medium: 3D computer graphics, 2022-2023.....	35
Figure 12: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: Eyo, Right at Home. Medium: 3D computer graphics, 2022-2023. ....	35
Figure 13: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: Eyo, Right at Home II. Medium: 3D computer graphics, 2022-2023. ....	37
Figure 14: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: Eyo, Right at Home III. Medium: computer graphics, 2022-2023. ....	38
Figure 15: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: Light is The Head. Medium: 3D computer graphics, 2022-2023. ....	40
Figure 16: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: Light is The Head II. Medium: 3D computer graphics, 2022-2023. ....	40
Figure 17: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Altar. Medium: 3D computer graphics, 2022-2023. ....	41
Figure 18: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: Ife, Right at Home. Medium: 3D computer graphics, 2022-2023. ....	42
Figure 19: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: Ife, Right at Home II. Medium: 3D computer graphics, 2022-2023. ....	43
Figure 20: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: Monioluwa, Right at Home. Medium: 3D computer graphics, 2022-2023.....	43
Figure 21: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Screen capture from moving piece “Monioluwa, Right at Home II.” Medium: 3D computer graphics, 2022-2023.....	44
Figure 22: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Virtual photograph of the Eyo masquerades rendered inside of Blender. Medium: 3D computer graphics, 2023. ....	46
Figure 23: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Virtual photograph of the Ade (crown) rendered inside of Blender. Medium: 3D computer graphics, 2023. ....	46
Figure 24: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Virtual photograph of the Altar rendered inside of Blender. Medium: 3D computer graphics, 2023. ....	47
Figure 25: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Virtual photograph of one of the Ife head sculptures rendered inside of Blender. Medium: 3D computer graphics, 2023. ....	47

Figure 26: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: Adúgbò, 3D visualization for an open-air market design in rural Ogun state. Medium: SketchUp and Adobe Photoshop. 2019. .... 49

Figure 27: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Screen capture of the fabrication process of the Eyo masquerade’s attire in Marvelous Designer, 2022. Male figure by Daz3D (Genesis 8 Basic Male mesh) <https://www.daz3d.com/>..... 51

Figure 28: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Screen capture of wind simulation test in Marvelous Designer, 2022. .... 52

Figure 29: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Screen capture of test render in Blender, 2022. .... 52

Figure 30: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Cloth simulation test, rendered in Blender, 2022. .... 53

Figure 31: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Screen capture of digital sculpting process for the Ife head in Blender, 2022. .... 54

Figure 32: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Screen capture of final Ife head sculpt (dense mesh) in Blender, 2022. .... 54

Figure 33: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Screen capture of Ife head retopology process in Blender, 2022. .... 55

Figure 34: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Test render of Ife head model with bronze material generated and applied in Blender, 2022. .... 55

Figure 35: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Render of Ife head, testing cell fracture simulation and volumetric lighting in Blender, 2022. .... 56

Figure 36: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Photograph of the artist recording herself in front of a green screen cyclorama, 2022. .... 57

Figure 37: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. View of the initial stages of the MFA exhibition setup from the lobby of the Penny Gallery, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023. .... 59

Figure 38: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass Exhibition attendees interacting with the space and pieces at the MFA exhibition, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023. .... 59

Figure 39: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Camera and projector setup for standalone installation —The Nook — located opposite the entrance of the gallery space at the MFA exhibition, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023. .... 60

Figure 40: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Testing connectivity of the CRT TVs with the Intel NUC 12 Pro kits and HDMI to RCA adapters at the Penny Gallery, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023..... 61

Figure 41: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Testing connectivity of the CRT TVs with the Intel NUC 12 Pro kits and HDMI to RCA adapters at the Penny Gallery, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023..... 62

Figure 42: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Testing 3-projector setup in the projection room located at the rear of the Penny Gallery, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023..... 63

## LIST OF PLATES

Plate 1: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Digital displays and prints at the MFA exhibition, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023.....	64
Plate 2: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Digital displays and prints at the MFA exhibition, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023.....	65
Plate 3: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Digital displays and prints at the MFA exhibition, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023.....	66
Plate 4: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Digital displays and prints at the MFA exhibition, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023.....	67
Plate 5: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Close up of the prints featuring the Ade (crown) at the MFA exhibition, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023.....	68
Plate 6: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Close up of the prints featuring the Eyo masquerades at the MFA exhibition, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023.....	69
Plate 7: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Close up of the prints featuring the Ife head sculptures at the MFA exhibition, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023.....	70
Plate 8: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Standalone installation —The Nook — located opposite the entrance of the gallery space at the MFA exhibition, made up of two mobile walls, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023.....	71
Plate 9: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Full view of the CRT TV displays used to show the transitional progress of the 3D Models, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023.....	72
Plate 10: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. One of the CRT TV displays used to show the transitional progress of the 3D Models, photo by Moni Omubor, November 2023.....	73
Plate 11: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Close up of the label for one of the CRT TV displays used to show the transitional progress of the 3D Models, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023.....	74
Plate 12: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Projections of landscapes displayed side-by-side in the semicircular room located at the rear of the gallery at the MFA exhibition, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023.....	75

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

French Philosopher Michel Foucault argues for what he refers to as a heterotopia, a “placeless place.” A place which is foreign or “other,” outside of our traditional world and at the same time a part of it. In an effort to describe this place, he makes reference to the mirror and the way that one might look at it, knowing that what they see (the reflection) is unreal, yet they are connected to it by virtue of the mirror which physically exists, and in that moment, that reflection—that “virtual space that opens up behind the surface,” becomes real, causing the subject to rearrange or “reconstruct” themselves in the real.<sup>1</sup> Foucault uses this to argue for heterotopias within society; brothels, cemeteries, theatres, etc. which both mirror society and upset it, but ultimately heal it.

For the purpose of this project, I assume the role of this mirror and at the same time, I too stand in front of it. In my role as the mirror, I intend to provoke and to invite others to look at this “other” place, untethered by time; showing where we were, where we are and where we might go. It is for this reason that the project is titled as such. The title is also undoubtedly in reference to Lewis Carroll’s book *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* where the protagonist Alice, climbs through a mirror and into a fantastical realm wherein everything appears strangely familiar but not quite right.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, and Jay Miskowicz, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22-27, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464648>.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis Carrol, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*. (Chicago: W.B. Conkey Co., 1900).

Undertaking this research project with an autoethnographic approach, the basis for the work has been formed by a series of lived through events, experiences and observations that have taken place while navigating Yoruba culture and my identity in it. Expressing the ways in which I've come to be in my Yoruba existence and inviting others through looking to partake also in this reflection as it pertains to them. With this thesis, I look to relevant literature in reconciling with the remnants of colonization and postcolonialism, and explore the opposing nature of speculative fiction, social dreaming and radical imagination as a vehicle for deprogramming and potentially decolonizing the narratives associated with colonized identities.

Additionally, I engage with new media theory to explore the ways in which this speculative work might be constructed and disseminated in our digital age and ultimately to answer the questions: "in what ways can we simultaneously recognise and transcend our conception of colonized and or marginalized identity in order to imagine new and critical approaches to interacting with it? Furthermore, can 3D computer graphics partake in critical work? And what role might it play in arriving at this place of critical reflection?"

In discussing this heterotopia, this mirror, Foucault uses the analogy of a boat, stating that "the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea . . . In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up."<sup>3</sup> We are often taught how to analyse; to deconstruct.<sup>4</sup> However, if systems of oppression are able to persist through the construction of colonized and marginalized identity, then is it enough to deconstruct? Must we not also partake in a construction of our own?

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<sup>3</sup> Foucault, and Miskowiec, "Of Other Spaces," 22-27.

<sup>4</sup> Ozy Aloziem, "A Dinner Party Game to Spark your Radical Imagination," TEDx Talks, December 24, 2021, video of lecture, 11:03, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTbMjVqoWxs&t=171s&ab\\_channel=TEDxTalks](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTbMjVqoWxs&t=171s&ab_channel=TEDxTalks).

It is in exploring possible answers to these questions and that *The Looking Glass* has been formed, featuring a collection of distinct but interconnected 3D constructed portraits, landscapes and “living paintings”, the project represents digitally reconstructed elements of Yoruba culture, allowing myself and audiences to reflect on what we believe Yoruba culture to be, how we interact with it and how we situate it in the world.

## CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH BACKGROUND

### 2.1: The *Zambian Space Academy*

In October of 1964, during the cold war and on the periphery of the heated space race between the United States and the Soviet Union, Zambia (formerly Northern Rhodesia) became independent of British rule. While the event was a cause for celebration amongst members of the newly born state at the time, a *Time* magazine article published shortly after, featured a sensational closing paragraph which highlighted the concerns of a schoolteacher based in Lusaka who thought of the occasion as a setback in his grand ambitions for the nation:

One noted Zambian failed to share in all the harmony. He is Edward Mukuka Nkoloso, a grade-school science teacher and the director of Zambia's National Academy of Science, Space Research and Philosophy, who claimed the goings-on interfered with his space program to beat the U.S. and the Soviet Union to the moon. Already Nkoloso is training twelve Zambian astronauts, including a curvaceous 16-year-old girl, by spinning them around a tree in an oil drum and teaching them to walk on their hands, "the only way humans can walk on the moon."<sup>5</sup>

Reportedly inspired by his first plane ride in which he implored the pilot to stop the plane midflight to allow him walk on the clouds, Nkoloso founded and became the self-appointed director of the unofficial and unrecognized space exploration organization, generally referred to as the *Zambian Space Academy*.<sup>6</sup> In his backyard, Nkoloso concocted and implemented unusual training methods for his "afonauts" as he called them in the hopes of propelling Zambia (literally) to the finish line of the space race by launching a makeshift rocket to the moon. He was even more consumed and vocal about his intentions of sending his star afonaut Matha

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<sup>5</sup> "Zambia: Tomorrow the Moon," *Time*, October 30, 1964, <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,876312-1,00.html>.

<sup>6</sup> "The Zambian Space Programme" Royal Museums Greenwich, accessed September 2, 2022, <https://www.rmg.co.uk/stories/topics/zambian-space-programme>.

Mwamba, a teenage girl, alongside two cats to explore a possible future for a Zambian civilization on Mars. Matha would eventually fall pregnant, forcing her to leave the space academy and with the lack of funds, infrastructure and a myriad of other impossibilities, the space academy was finished.<sup>7</sup>

Inspiring works in the domain of photography and cinema such as the 2014 short film *Afronauts*,<sup>8</sup> the story is one that I've looked at critically in reflection of Africa, of myself and of being Yoruba. In all its absurdity, this failed space academy and the enigma behind it bring about so much opportunity for reflection and questions of what "could be".

## **2.2: How To Be Yoruba for Dummies: Where we are and Where We are Going**

Raised in modern day Nigeria in a middle-class, English-speaking household, the process of navigating my Yoruba existence and consequently my identity and place in it became one of primarily autodidactic labour, one that led me into a space of thinking, wherein I would come to interact with my cultural identity through an ambivalent and unequivocally colonial gaze. In a sense, I was within and without my "Yorubanness," an experience characterized by the Du Boisian double consciousness, in which one exists as though they are looking at themselves through the eyes of others, "[a sense] of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."<sup>9</sup> In *The Invention of Africa*, V.Y. Mudimbe posits of a colonialist tendency to "organize and transform non-European areas into fundamentally European constructs." With this, he proposes what he refers to as the colonizing structure which he uses to argue that in the

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<sup>7</sup> Namwali Serpell, "The Zambian "Afronaut" Who Wanted to Join The Space Race," *The New Yorker*, March 11, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-zambian-afonaut-who-wanted-to-join-the-space-race>.

<sup>8</sup> *Afronauts*, directed by Nuotama Bodomo (Mothertongue, 2014), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lb3pu5jXWHU&ab\\_channel=mothertongue](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lb3pu5jXWHU&ab_channel=mothertongue)

<sup>9</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," in *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Brent Hayes Edwards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 8.

structural framework of power used by colonialists, a model can be found in which they not only dominate physical space but actively partake in reforming the minds of the colonized whilst simultaneously inserting themselves into their local histories.<sup>10</sup>

Similar to Mudimbe's argument in the case of Africa, Edward Said proposes Orientalism in the case of the East, which he uses to describe the organization of the powers at play in the representation of the Eastern world and argues for the ways in which the west actively constructs the region as "other." Said claims that in the framework of colonialism and imperialism, the ability to truly 'conquer' a people comes from not only dominating their physical territory but also their identity and voice.<sup>11</sup>

The ideas for which Said argues have since situated him as a vital point of reference when discussing the work of recognizing and decolonizing discourse surrounding culture and representation.<sup>12</sup> In her exhibition titled *From India to Canada and Back to India (There is nothing I can possess which you can not take away)*, Canadian artist Divya Mehra presents a series of installation pieces which comment on and partake in this work. She approaches this in a playful but critical manner, one which characterizes most of her artistic work. At the heart of the exhibition is a brightly coloured bouncy castle, modeled in the image of the Taj Mahal. With this, Mehra comments on the ways in which colonised cultures and identities are interacted with and desired to be represented, as immediately recognisable, laced with exoticism and somehow showing no evidence of a lived reality. She alludes to the nature of representation in the case of othered cultures wherein they are presented to be looked at, in a way that fetishizes while

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<sup>10</sup> V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), 14.

<sup>11</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1978).

<sup>12</sup> Shela Burney, "CHAPTER ONE: Orientalism: The Making of the Other," *Counterpoints* 417 (2012): 23–39, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42981698>.

simultaneously according to them less cultural and artistic significance, situating them firmly as inferior.<sup>13</sup>



Figure 1: Artist: Divya Mehra. Title: "Afterlife of Colonialism, a reimagining of Power," Medium: PVC coated fabric, acrylic paint, plastic and electric components. Purchased 2019 (48651). National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. © Divya Mehra Photo: NGC. <https://www.gallery.ca/magazine/exhibitions/sobey-art-award-2022-divya-mehra>

Somewhere along the way, in my Yoruba mother's house in Lagos, I had managed to base my conception of humanity on legibility, on whether or not my identity was recognisable in the eyes of others. I had participated in validating a flattened construction of my existence, one which subjugated me as part of a collective other to the West. To be Yoruba became something outside of myself, something to strive for, a shrouded object that I couldn't unveil or touch. Furthermore, in the way things covered in a shroud typically are, I came to see it as dead, as a

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<sup>13</sup> John Hampton, "Sobey Art Award 2022: Divya Mehra," *National Gallery of Canada Magazine*, November 15, 2022, <https://www.gallery.ca/magazine/exhibitions/sobey-art-award-2022-divya-mehra>.

thing that I would never be able to have in a complete way. In many ways, this type of thinking was a disservice to the person that I am. While I may not be Yoruba in the same way as my mother or my mother's father, I am Yoruba, in a way that embodies the journey through space and time to arrive at what it has come to be and a passage into what it can be.

Hence, pertaining to the questions raised in chapter one, we can look to Bell Hooks' argument for *The Oppositional Gaze*, a term she uses to describe a way of looking which arises in the struggle of resistance. Here, Hooks borrows from Michel Foucault's "relations of power" where he argues for the inevitability of the possibility of resistance within the systems of power and that through critically looking, the marginalized can find agency in that possibility. Hooks argues for this as a form of "critical spectatorship" through which one can "actively resist the imposition of dominant ways of knowing and looking."<sup>14</sup>

On this matter, Hooks alludes to the construction of images as she argues primarily within the context of representation in mainstream cinema and television as well as the place of black female spectatorship in that regard. Similarly to Said and Mudimbe in addressing colonialism, she speaks again of construction, but suggests that in response, we cannot simply look or resist but we must also construct, not just in the present but in the past and in this reconstruction, we can access the tools to invent the future.<sup>15</sup>

In early attempts at developing the basis for my research, my heart was set on exploring the concept of designing happiness, with *The Looking Glass* it is my hope that we might be able to enter a space of reflection, allowing us to arrive at something close.

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<sup>14</sup> Bell Hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), 115-31.

<sup>15</sup> Hooks, *Black Looks*, 115-31.

### 2.3: A Case for Speculative Fiction, Speculative Design and Radical Imagination

In reflecting on Divya Mehra's work, I find that her approach is as critical as it is playful and in its conception of play, is radical. The keyword for me here being *play*, a term that I've come to find imperative in discussing the conceptual aspect of decolonisation. Another instance of the use of the term is found in *The Undercommons*, where Fred Moten in his criticism of the university and the way that play is regarded in that context, states that "play would be conceived of as pretending, as seeing what could be, as fantasy."<sup>16</sup> It is in this seeing of what *could be* and the search for answers to the questions posed in the previous section that I make a case for speculative fiction, speculative design and radical imagination.

To begin, I find it necessary to note that I do not suggest entering speculative spaces solely for the purpose of entertainment or escape but mainly for discussion and debate, for reflection and critique, and as is characteristic of the collective project of asking what-if questions, for provocation.<sup>17</sup> It is in this way that we're able to avoid relegating our dreams into the realm of hoping. As Dunne and Raby state in reference to seeking solutions for the apparently precarious future of our planet, "There are no more visions . . . We are just hopeful."<sup>18</sup>

In this way, by approaching the work of speculative fiction, from a place of vision rather than hope or fantasy, we are able to separate it from the frivolity generally associated with the two and instead explore an avenue through which to aid radical imagination and critical thought.

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<sup>16</sup> Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 130.

<sup>17</sup> Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013), 3.

<sup>18</sup> Dunne and Raby, *Speculative Everything*, 1.

Referred to as a “super-genre,” speculative fiction is vast in its types, encompassing a number of subgenres including but not limited to science fiction and fantasy.<sup>19</sup> It is extensive also in its application, as it is utilised not only in literature and cinema but also as a methodological vehicle for ethics, politics, fine arts and science to propose varied outcomes for hypothetical scenarios.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, it is then necessary to look for patterns in its subgenres as well as the approaches used in applying it across various disciplines in order to develop a hybrid of explorative methods for the purpose of the thesis project.

In the area of new media art and in the exploration of sociopolitical issues through speculative fiction, we can pull from Ekene Ijeoma’s *American Flag*, a digital media project which he uses to reimagine the national symbol as a living thing. With this project, Ijeoma collaborates with cross-disciplinary artist Riley Hooker and 3D animator Rad Mora to ask how in this digital age, the American flag can be more useful in facilitating national solidarity and be more responsive to the changing conditions of the country, as a way of maintaining accountability and weaving the truths about the American experience into everyday life. With this, he conceives of a new flag, one that would be “alive,” changing and adapting itself in accordance with the state of the country. Ijeoma argues that in this age of information, outside of our technological devices and the internet, there are no tangible reminders of national goings-on and consequently they risk ephemerality in the American psyche. This presents an opportunity for him and consequently his audience to speculate on the ways in which more ubiquitous fixtures can be used to avert this potential danger, allowing for not only a reflection on the

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<sup>19</sup> “What is Speculative Fiction? Defining and Understanding the Different Genres of Speculative Fiction,” *MasterClass*, last modified September 1, 2021, <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/what-is-speculative-fiction-defining-and-understanding-the-different-genres-of-speculative-fiction>.

<sup>20</sup> Dunne and Raby, *Speculative Everything*, 3.

possible future but also of a troubled present. Furthermore, his proposal does not only call for the reimagining of the flag but also the possibilities for other national symbols.<sup>21</sup>



Figure 2: Artists: Ekene Ijeoma, Rad Mora. Title: "American Flag," Medium: 3D computer graphics, 2018. <https://www.archpaper.com/2018/07/artist-ekene-ijeoma-reflects-charged-life-american-flag/>

Another instance where this sort of speculative and fictional work is used to reflect on our present and the various possibilities in our emerging future is with Jann Choy's experimental fabrication project titled *Liǎn* (脸) where she uses code, soft robotics and machine learning to ponder on the possible directions for online representation. Drawing inspiration from the

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<sup>21</sup> Ekene Ijeoma, "Artist Ekene Ijeoma Reflects on the Charged Life of the American Flag," *The Architect's Newspaper*, July 2, 2018, <https://www.archpaper.com/2018/07/artist-ekene-ijeoma-reflects-charged-life-american-flag/>.

traditional Chinese art of Bian Lian (Face-changing), she analyses the evolution of online representation; from primitive emoticons, to rendered emojis, to virtual avatars, asking the question “if this is where we started, and this is where we are, then where could we go?” She not only asks this question but also looks critically at the anonymity the internet offers and the ways in which humans have come to capitalize on it, almost as if we are given a mask through which the possibilities of what we can say (and who we can be) are limitless. The resulting project by Choy is *Liǎn*(*脸*), a biomimetic robotic face mask which changes form and inflates at different sites on the face based on sentiment analysis of subjects’ online posts, allowing it to reflect their emotions as presented online. In a sense, we can draw connections between Choy’s mask and Ijeoma’s *American Flag*, in how they both comment on the ways of potentially conceiving more tangible and tactile manifestations of our realities offline but more broadly in how they use speculative fiction as a tool to look towards possible futures by holding out a mirror to our present.<sup>22</sup>

As we examine the methods used in these areas of technology, digital media and design in utilising this type of fictional construction for the purpose of critical reflection, we can also look to film and television for inspiration. As in the realm of exploring what-if scenarios, they excel in execution, even if for the primary purpose of entertainment.<sup>23</sup>

While riddled with controversy and accusations of perpetuating white saviourism, the science fiction film *District 9* manages to shine in the area of fictional construction for the purpose of provocation and critical reflection. Directed by South African film director Neill

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<sup>22</sup> Jann Choy, “How to Use Speculative Design to Question Our New Realities,” TEDx Talks, January 10, 2023, video of lecture, 15:11, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdT5YZ-t8Ho&t=477s&ab\\_channel=TEDxTalks](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdT5YZ-t8Ho&t=477s&ab_channel=TEDxTalks).

<sup>23</sup> Dunne and Raby, *Speculative Everything*, 76.

Blomkamp and released in 2009, the film boasts a sophisticated integration of CGI in the creation of a world where aliens or *prawns* as they are called, exist. Furthermore, it takes a satirical but critical approach to comment on the history of race relations and apartheid in South Africa. I make reference to this film not just because of its use of speculative fiction but also because of how it speculates.

For example, I find using the government's interest in the alien's weaponry, an interesting approach to addressing colonial exploitation as this is something that was born from them (the aliens), an inherent part of their culture. This is in comparison to the more common trope of extracting natural resources which a race might just happen to be sitting on. In this case, the desirable thing was born directly from the marginalised group. This is not in a way of dismissing the factual exploitation and violence meted against colonized groups over natural resources but an observation of the ways in which it has historically been depicted and represented, and the impact this representation has had on how the world interacts with the cultures of these groups.

*District 9* suggests possible ways in which humans might respond to an alien race while considering and visibly drawing from the way that the west has historically responded to cultures outside of their own. With the film, through this form of construction, we are able to address the past, to see the way that it has informed not just our present but all alternate realities should prejudice remain a common factor.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *District 9*, directed by Neill Blomkamp (Sony Pictures Releasing, 2009), 1:52:30, Blu-ray Disc, 1080p HD.

Another example in cinema where humans are reimagined as nonhuman for the purpose of questioning our reality is in Yorgos Lanthimos' 2015 black comedy *The lobster*. Set in a fictional city where being single is outlawed, the punishment for which is being turned into an animal, the film uses an absurd construction of society to question the ways in which it interacts with romantic relationships.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, Dunne and Raby argue, and I agree that in looking at these applications of speculative fiction in cinema, what it is of more interest to them than the characters and the plot, is the backdrop; the foundational principles for the construction of societies wherein these kinds of existence can thrive.<sup>26</sup> I also believe that it is through this type of thorough worldbuilding, that we are able to allow audiences remove themselves from reality and partake in making an alternative one real. In defence of the genre of science fiction and arguing that it is a “literature of revolt” Darko Suvin proposes “cognitive estrangement” which he argues is a thing that must occur in order for audiences to convince themselves into believing in the possibility of an alternate world. In naming this place, he coins the term “novum,” a place that is “necessarily both different from our world and irrevocably connected to it.”<sup>27</sup>

Nigerian American visual artist Toyin Ojih Odutola has with multiple bodies of her work, partaken in this project of building detailed and convincing fictional worlds, often partnering with novelist Zadie Smith to describe and illustrate in painstaking detail, the worlds which her characters inhabit. With her exhibition titled *To Wander Determined* she presents a series of portraits as the private collections of two fictional Nigerian aristocratic families, united through

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<sup>25</sup> *The Lobster*, directed by Yorgos Lanthimos (Element Pictures, 2015), 1:58:15, <https://www.primevideo.com/detail/0OBBW23TXI2XC0FZQ0MD05J0NI/>.

<sup>26</sup> Dunne and Raby, *Speculative Everything*, 75.

<sup>27</sup> Perry Nodelman, “The Cognitive Estrangement of Darko Suvin,” *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (Winter 1981): 24-27, <https://doi.org/10.1353/chq.0.1851>.

the marriage of their sons. In this world, she has taken up the role of “Deputy Private Secretary” of a fictional “Udoka House” and even features a letter from herself as this deputy in the exhibition.<sup>28</sup> The Nigeria in which Oduola constructs through this work is not and was never colonized, and with it she doesn’t just ask *what if* but also declares *if only*.<sup>29</sup>

In an interview where she discusses the lengths to which she goes to construct the worlds in her art, Oduola argues that in the struggle to free ourselves from the white and or colonial gaze, black and brown people often expend copious amounts of energy on just existing and justifying that existence. She claims that this gaze categorizes us in a way that is distracting and doesn’t afford us the freedom to constructively dream.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Rujeko Hockley and Melinda Lang “Toyin Ojih Oduola: By Her Design,” Whitney Museum of American Art Essays, accessed June 2, 2023, <https://whitney.org/essays/toyin-ojih-odutola>.

<sup>29</sup> Zadie Smith, “What Would We Be Like If Racism Never Existed?": Zadie Smith On The Joyful “African Utopias” Created By Artist Toyin Ojih Oduola,” *British Vogue*, June 4, 2020, <https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/zadie-smith-on-toyin-ojih-odutola-artwork>.

<sup>30</sup> Toyin Ojih Oduola, “A Portrait of an Artist Toyin Ojih Oduola,” interview by Sam Fragoso, *Talk Easy with Sam Fragoso*, Spotify, September 19, 2021, audio, 1:09:15, <https://talkeasypod.com/toyin/>.



Figure 3: Artist: Toyin Ojih Odutola. Title: “Representatives of State,” Medium: Charcoal, pastel and pencil on paper. 2016-2017. Jack Shainman Gallery, accessed March 2, 2024, [https://jackshainman.com/artists/toyin\\_ojih\\_odutola](https://jackshainman.com/artists/toyin_ojih_odutola).

Additionally, there is another type of speculative work that can be observed, one that uses exaggeration and surrealism to expose the absurdity of our reality as a way of provocation. While we can argue that *The Lobster* uses this same approach, the works for which I speak of are categorically black and subsequently address the experiences of the historically colonized and marginalized. Examples would include black comedies such as Donald Glover’s *Atlanta*, Jordan Peele’s *Get Out*, Terrence Nance’s *Random Acts of Flyness* and Boots Riley’s *Sorry to Bother You*. All of which can be grouped under the category of “Afro-surreal,” a term coined by writer

Amiri Baraka and elucidated by D. Scot Miller in his *Afrosurreal Manifesto*.<sup>31</sup> This type of work allows for critical discourse by asking *what if* while suggesting that the *if* in question is not so different from our lived reality. In this manifesto, Miller quotes Jean-Paul Sartre in his commentary on this type of fiction, stating that it "is revolutionary because it is surrealist, but itself is surrealist because it is black."<sup>32</sup>

There is much discourse on whether or not Nkoloso's space program was intended to be satirical and it is in reflecting on *afrosurrealism* that my curiosity on that prospect is piqued. Reportedly, in a written piece by him where he reveals the methods used in the realization of his space program, he writes:

"We have been studying the planet through telescopes at our headquarters and are now certain Mars is populated by primitive natives . . . Our rocket crew is ready. Specially trained spacegirl Matha Mwamba, two cats (also specially trained) and a missionary will be launched in our first rocket. But I have warned the missionary he must not force Christianity on the people if they do not want it."<sup>33</sup>

If the sheer absurdity of Nkoloso's proposal wasn't enough to convince me that his intention was to provoke, this statement definitely was. If we are to look at it in the context of *afrosurrealism*, then we can assume that Nkoloso had much to say about Zambia's "liberation" and the government from whom they had just been liberated.

Finally, in analysing the use of speculative fiction across multiple areas, a common theme that I find is the need for construction, not just of places but also of ideas. These are spaces that are by logic impossible and cannot exist under the laws of our physical world. It is with this in

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<sup>31</sup> D. Scot Miller, "Afrosurreal Manifesto: Black is the New Black—A 21<sup>st</sup> Century manifesto," *Black Camera* 5, no. 1 (Fall 2013): 113-117, Project MUSE.

<sup>32</sup> Miller, "Afrosurreal Manifesto," *Black Camera* 5, no. 1 (Fall 2013): 113-117, Project MUSE.

<sup>33</sup> Serpell, "The Zambian "Afronaut"."

mind, that in my consideration of various media, I look to tools that could render these alternate realities, this “novum” with sophistication and in a loose sense of the word, accuracy.

### **CHAPTER 3: 3D COMPUTER GRAPHICS FOR SPECULATIVE WORK**

In considering the appropriate media through which this sort of elaborate construction and worldbuilding can occur, it is necessary that we look to the fields and disciplines where they are ubiquitous and achieved with sophistication, where these worlds can be prototyped and simulated to speculate on possible outcomes and even sometimes with the intention of making them a reality. For me, this would include the discipline of architecture as well as the video game industry. In this chapter, I will expound on not only the ways in which practitioners in these fields approach worldbuilding but more relevantly on the tools with which they achieve it.

Architecture was my introduction to the concept of worldbuilding—of constructing the imaginary and a significant part of my architectural education was spent speculating, conceptualizing and proposing. Considering all the possible ways that a structure could be experienced, all the types of people that could inhabit it and the ways that they might all be able to access it. In the area of conceptualization and world creation, the discipline is prolific and architectural models have historically and contemporarily been used to create three-dimensional manifestations of ideas. However, with architecture, the endgame is typically a physical structure, a tangible manifestation in our material realm and as such these ideas must follow the laws which govern our world, they must be feasible.<sup>34</sup> It is in reviewing this limitation of feasibility, that I explore the capacity of computer graphics and the virtual in speculating, conceptualizing and playing.

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<sup>34</sup> Mark J.P. Wolf, “Miniature Places for Vicarious Visits: Worldbuilding and Architectural Models,” *Architectural design* 91, no. 3 (May/June 2021): 24, <https://doi-org.uleth.idm.oclc.org/10.1002/ad.2689>.

While purely conceptual architecture –which focuses more on the expansion of ideas as opposed to buildability— had existed for years before its arrival, the advent of computer graphics as a tool for architectural design in the 1970’s and 1980’s offered a new and more sophisticated avenue through which architects and designers could explore worldbuilding.<sup>35</sup> It allowed for the propagation of play, to create not for the purpose of building in our physical world but to explore the possibilities of what it could look like. As Sarah Bonser states in her book *Virtual Vernacular*:

Visually, virtual architecture can be “pure” design, not influenced by constructability or gravity. From a narrative standpoint, this gives virtual spaces more potential to be compelling than built spaces. Virtual spaces often have the role of “storyteller” and forgo their role as “shelter.”<sup>36</sup>

Interestingly in this instance, Bonser is speaking on the interconnectedness of architecture and computer games, and the ways in which architectural theory and concepts can aid in the storytelling element of world creation for computer games. At this juncture, we can then look to computer games and the ways in which they are constructed, perhaps even more radically than in the area of architecture, considering that for the target audience, the primary objective is for escape and entertainment.<sup>37</sup> The constructions that exist within the worlds of these games are by virtue of this fact fictional.

While criticisms arise when observing the nature of computer games, in their tendency to create avenues through which violence, antisocial behaviour and problematic outlooks on race and gender can be perpetuated, it is relevant to note that they also partake in exploring avenues for tackling social and cultural issues, as they create spaces wherein critical thinking can occur.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Wolf, “Miniature Places for Vicarious Visits,” 28.

<sup>36</sup> Sarah Bonser, *Virtual Vernacular* (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2020), 47.

<sup>37</sup> Mary Flanagan, *Critical play* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>38</sup> Flanagan, *Critical play*, 223.

Moreover, insofar as any vehicle of entertainment is concerned, there is always the chance to offend. My interest however, lies more in the vastness of possibilities that emerge in the realm of play, and in the tools which allow for the construction of worlds where this sort of play can occur.

This is with reference to the aforementioned “novum” where according to Suvin, partaking in the belief of an alternate world is paramount.<sup>39</sup> In this regard, we can examine the extensiveness of computer graphics, specifically as it pertains to 3D graphics, its worldbuilding capacity and the degree to which we can utilise it in modelling, prototyping and rendering alternate realities for the purposes as discussed in chapter 2.

In the discipline of architecture, physical models have historically been used to visualise what a final structure might look like.<sup>40</sup> However, by entering the domain of virtual construction, audiences are afforded the opportunity to interact with these spaces through immersion. This immersion can be further facilitated by the introduction of real time generated imagery, which would allow for them to move through the spaces by their own accord. In this project of virtual worldbuilding, computer games excel. A prime example being open world games such as Grand Theft Auto V, where the fictional world and the ways in which gamers can explore it are constructed with great detail.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, In a way of reflecting on Foucault’s heterotopia, we can look to the game’s fictional city of Los Santos, modelled loosely after the real city of Los Angeles and constructed in a way that mimics our world, a reflection.

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<sup>39</sup> Nodelman, “The Cognitive Estrangement of Darko Suvin,” 25.

<sup>40</sup> Wolf, “Miniature Places for Vicarious Visits,” 24.

<sup>41</sup> Wolf, “Miniature Places for Vicarious Visits,” 30.



Figure 4: Still image capture from the computer game Grand Theft Auto V featuring the digitally constructed fictional city of Los Santos created by Rockstar Games. Source: <https://www.cnet.com/pictures/scenes-from-grand-theft-auto-v-pictures/>

In contemporary times, computer graphics have also been used to augment the immersive and story-telling elements of cinema. For example, in the 2014 science fiction film *Interstellar*, director Christopher Nolan brought on physicist Kip S. Thorne in collaboration with visual effects studio *Double Negative* for the purpose of simulating and capturing a physically accurate blackhole. For this, they developed a specialized render engine that would be capable of calculating, generating and capturing the millions of light paths that this theoretical black would produce, and with this, *Interstellar* became the first Hollywood movie to attempt visualizing a blackhole as it would be seen in real life up-close.<sup>42</sup>

In conclusion, by examining its use in the areas of architecture and computer games, it is evident that the capacity of 3D computer graphics to construct for the purpose of speculation,

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<sup>42</sup> Oliver James, Eugenie Von Tunzelmann, Paul Franklin, and Kip S. Thorne, “Gravitational Lensing by Spinning Black Holes in Astrophysics, and in the Movie *Interstellar*,” *Classical and Quantum Gravity* 32, no. 6 (February 2015): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1088/0264-9381/32/6/065001>.

play and conceptualization is boundless, even more so when we reject the limitations imposed by feasibility. In this sense, its capacity is not in question. However, the possibilities are much more extensive when we consider not just that one could speculate through this medium but also the different types of speculation that it could propagate. For example, while there is much to say about the issue of ethics in the case of computer games, specifically in the case of Grand Theft Auto V and the sort of worldview that it is able to impart through gameplay, it is crucial to note that it is nonetheless able to do this imparting.<sup>43</sup>

## CHAPTER 4: THE LOOKING GLASS

### 4.1: Project Description

*The Looking Glass* is a new media visual experience which makes use of 3D computer graphics and speculative fiction to explore questions concerning how we've come to experience and interact with the cultures of colonized and marginalized groups, specifically as it pertains to Yoruba culture. It features objects, places and characters that have been developed by drawing inspiration from various traditional elements associated with the ethnic group (including myself). These elements have been reimagined, deconstructed and reconstructed in a virtual world with the aim to explore the reality of their representation in our physical world. They have been set against a surreal and otherworldly backdrop, primarily juxtaposed with Graeco-Roman inspired architecture, making reference to the ways in which fragments of Yoruba culture (amongst others in Nigeria) currently sit across multiple museums and institutions in the west and commenting on how they are presented and intended to be perceived.

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<sup>43</sup> Flanagan, *Critical play*, 223

It is a collection of static portraits and landscapes, which have been further enhanced through the application of physics simulations and subtle camera movements to transform them into moving or “living” paintings. Through the setting and the implementation of motion in these moving paintings, the intention is to evoke a sense of the subjects being alive, even in the way that they are presented as objects. With little to no camera movement, the focus remains primarily on them, allowing viewers to immerse themselves into these virtual spaces, to observe and reconcile with the simultaneous reality and unreality of what appears before them.

Finally, the order in which the work is to be experienced is not prescribed, instead individuals are invited to explore these spaces and draw conclusions of their own accord. Untethered by direction, space and time, each piece by itself serves as a corner of reflection but they can also all be pieced together to form an entire conceptual image or mosaic, conveying the proposed theme and message.

#### **4.2: Featured Elements of Yoruba Culture**

As previously stated, various traditional elements of Yoruba culture were a source of inspiration in the construction of this virtual world. They include:

- The Eyo masquerade
- Copper alloy head sculptures from Ife
- An Ade (traditional Yoruba beaded royal crown)
- Adire (indigo dyed fabric)

The Adire textile which can feature various shapes and patterns, appears primarily in one of the pieces titled “The altar” which reimagines a Catholic home altar with Yoruba influences to

propose what a “Yoruba prayer altar” might look like in this fictional realm. I shall expand on the other selected elements in the subsequent sections.

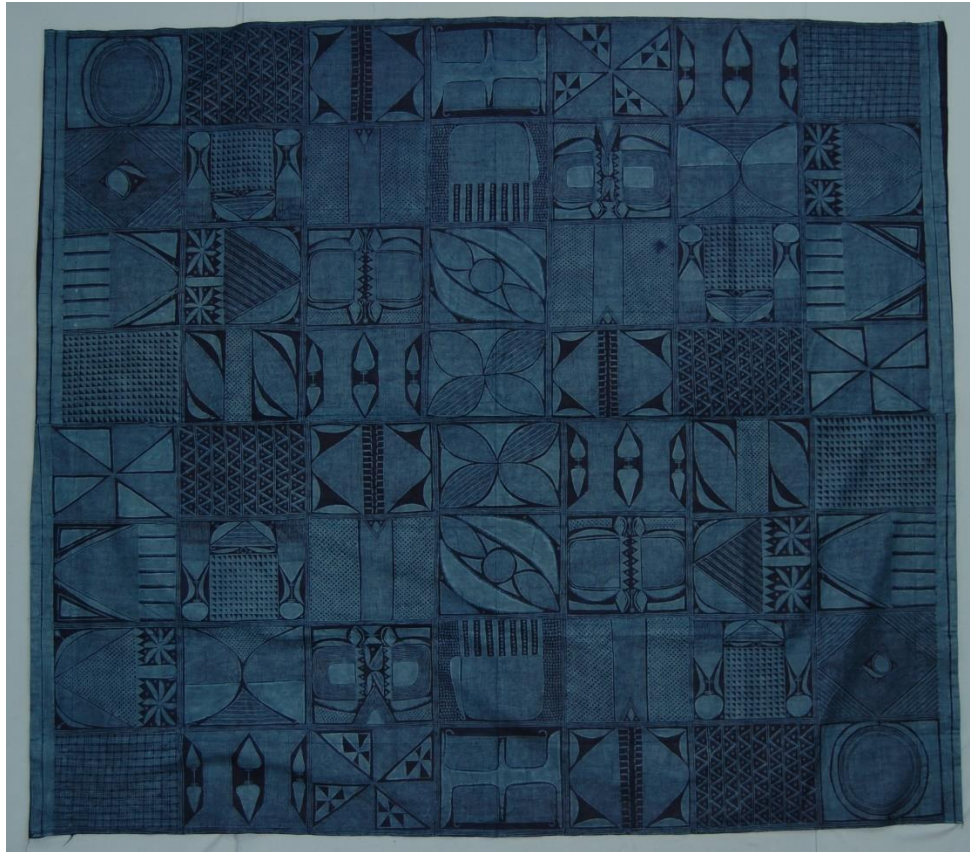


Figure 5: A woman’s Adire cloth, composed of two even lengths of machine plain woven European cotton machine sewn together. Museum no. Af1971,35.15. © The Trustees of the British Museum, London.  
[https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E\\_Af1971-35-15](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Af1971-35-15)

### 4.2.1: The Eyo Masquerade

While the stories of its origin vary and are uncertain, it is reported that the Eyo masquerade festival was established somewhere in ancient Yorubaland and eventually moved to Lagos Island during the reign of Oba Ológun Kútéré to be performed within his palace. It is here, in Lagos Island that the festival continues to take place till date.<sup>44</sup>

Preparations involve spiritual rituals overseen by the Eyo supreme council, consultations with the king (Oba) of Lagos and Ifa oracle consultations to determine its date, time, and required proceedings. The festival consists of various theatrics involving music and dance, with the focal point being the Eyo masquerades and their costumes, the costume plays a crucial role as it symbolizes purity and rank amongst the masquerades. It is made up of multiple components which include the Agbádá (white gown), Àrópalè (long white wrapper), Èlèyà funfun (face veil), and Àkẹ̀tẹ̀ or Aga (hat), each serving its role in concealing the identity of the masquerades as they are believed to be ancestral spirits. These costumes contribute a great deal to the festival's visual spectacle and spiritual significance.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Shuaib Shadiat Olápéju, and Léwú Mary Àlàbá Yétúndé, "Exploring the Historicism and Theatrical Aesthetics in Èyò Masquerade Festival," *E-Bangi: Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 17, no. 7 (2020): 107, ProQuest.

<sup>45</sup> Olápéju, and Yétúndé, "Exploring the Historicism and Theatrical Aesthetics in Èyò Masquerade Festival," 110.



Figure 6: Photograph of Eyo masquerades from Lagos. Produced 1880-1905. Acquired 1970-1983. Museum no. Af,A51.76. © The Trustees of the British Museum, London. [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/EA\\_Af-A51-76](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/EA_Af-A51-76)

Growing up in Lagos, I was raised to believe that it was taboo for women to look directly at Eyo masquerades, hence I was discouraged from interacting directly with them but was however typically aware of whenever the festival was taking place. Owing to this belief, I have also only ever seen these masquerades through second-hand content such as in films, documentaries and photographs.

#### 4.2.2: Ife Heads

The bronze (or more general copper alloy) human head sculptures were accidentally discovered by workers who were clearing topsoil for house foundations in the Wunmonije Compound, situated in the city of Ife in the late 1930's. This accidental find led to the unearthing of seventeen heads made from brass and copper, along with the broken top half of a figure believed to depict a king and these sculptures were eventually acquired by the British museum.<sup>46</sup>



Figure 7: Ife head sculptures, made of brass. Produced 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> Century. Acquired 1939. Museum no. Af1939,34.1. © The Trustees of the British Museum, London.  
[https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E\\_Af1939-34-1](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Af1939-34-1)

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<sup>46</sup> The British Museum, "Head of a ruler, Ife," *Smarthistory*, accessed February 13, 2024, <https://smarthistory.org/ife-head-ruler/>.

Initially met with skepticism regarding their African origin, the lifelike craftsmanship of the sculptures prompted comparisons to the classical works from Ancient Greece and Rome. Some even speculated that the sculptures were evidence of Ife being the fabled lost civilization of Atlantis, as described by Plato. However, over time, these sculptures have rightfully come to be recognized as one of the pinnacle achievements of African art and culture.<sup>47</sup>

#### **4.2.3: Ade (crown)**

Amongst Yoruba people, the significance of the head extends beyond its physical presence and is seen as the seat of one's personal destiny. Consequently, rituals surrounding the visible, physical head, hold immense importance, particularly as it pertains to the head of a king (Oba), who is believed to embody the destiny of his people. As such, the beaded crowns worn as part of royal attire and regalia symbolize the social, political, and religious authority vested upon him, and are often elaborate in design and crafted from luxurious materials of the time. This crown, known as an Ade, serves as a symbol of the ruler's power, wealth, and prestige, while also representing the collective prosperity of the community.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> The British Museum, "Head of a ruler, Ife."

<sup>48</sup> Mary Jo Arnoldi, and Christine Mullen Kreamer. "Crowning Achievements: African Arts of Dressing the Head," *African Arts* 28, no. 1 (Winter 1995): 25, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3337248>.



Figure 8: Oba Adémúwàgún Adésidà II, in the courtyard of his palace at Akúré, 1959. Photograph by Eliot Elisofon. Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art-Smithsonian Institution. <https://sova.si.edu/record/eepa.1973-001/ref12334?t=W&q=Oba+Ad%C3%A9m%C3%Baw%C3%A0g%C3%BAn+Ad%C3%A9sid%C3%A0+II>

Yoruba kings are considered divine figures, with their authority rooted in mytho-religious narratives. When the beaded crown is placed upon the Oba's head, it symbolically unites his "inner head" with those of all previous kings, emphasizing a spiritual continuity across generations. By obscuring the king's face with a beaded veil, the crown hides his humanity and reveals his divine essence. The act of donning the crown emphasizes the Oba's ceremonial authority, it serves not only as a symbol of royal authority but also as a conduit through which the Oba accesses his divine heritage to fulfil his sacred role.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Arnoldi, and Kreamer, "Crowning Achievements," 28.

## 4.2: Visual Style and Influence

The look of this project draws from the surrealist movement in a way of representing the oddity of journeying into the looking glass as depicted by Lewis Carroll, as well as the aesthetics of unreality as discussed by Dunne and Raby. Works by René Magritte in particular have inspired a significant portion of the visual direction, especially his paintings featuring representations of the sky. While the intended direction for the project is to depict a bizarre realm populated with a host of subjects as is characteristic of surrealism, the busyness typically associated with the movement does not suitably express the intended aesthetic. The visual style is hence an amalgamation of surrealism and a minimal aesthetic, characterised by surrealist elements but presented and staged in a simple fashion. We can consider this to be minimal surrealism.

With *The Looking Glass*, the muteness and minimal aesthetic particularly ubiquitous in film photography is strived for; to create images as a photographer would with a camera, making use of visual and cinematic techniques that do not draw attention to themselves, thereby presenting the ideas as simply as possible. The influence of portrait photographer James Barnor for example, is manifested in my choice of composition, colours and (virtual) set design. While the setting and backdrops possess their own capacity to spark interest, the various scenes are set up in a way that directs the attention of the viewers primarily to the subjects.



Figure 9: Photographer: James Barnor. Title: Everything in My Hand I Bring. Medium: Gelatin Silver Print, 1953. Printed in 2011. Museum no. E.105-2012. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/james-barnor>

### 4.3: The Setting

*The Looking Glass* is therefore set within an expansive and fantastical fictional museum, with the subjects situated within various “rooms” and corners of the realm. Whether in reference to Foucault’s mirror as a heterotopia or Suvin’s Novum, the setting is ultimately intended to be unusual but familiar, to remove audiences from our reality while indicating that it is undoubtedly a part of it, to be experienced in the way that one would look at a mirror. It is hence as Foucault calls it “a placeless place”<sup>50</sup> or as Dunne and Raby call it with reference to Marc Augé, a “nonplace.”<sup>51</sup> Moreover, in the work of speculation, it is common to assume that the intention is to look toward a possible future. However, this is not the case.<sup>52</sup> With *The Looking Glass* the intention is to look simply to another place, parallel to our material reality. In this sense, we are released from the burden of attempting to analyse it with respect to the speculated aesthetics of futurity and allow ourselves the freedom to examine it with a more critical eye, contemplating what it might have to say about our past, present and future.

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<sup>50</sup> Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 4

<sup>51</sup> Dunne and Raby, *Speculative Everything*, 129.

<sup>52</sup> Dunne and Raby, *Speculative Everything*, 129.

#### 4.4: The Pieces

The resulting pieces hence present the aforementioned subjects as part of an entire exhibit, while residing in their own distinct corners of a collective whole, and for each subject, a series of images were made. They are mostly titled with absurdity in accordance with the traditional elements which they represent and the context within which they are situated. The pieces also include visualisations of the architecture and landscape wherein these subjects reside.



Figure 10: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Entrance. Medium: 3D computer graphics, 2022-2023.

The pieces titled "The Entrance" and "The Entrance II" as seen in figures 11 and 12 respectively, establish a visual prelude to the rest of the project. Situated against a subdued, brown-toned landscape with mountainous silhouettes in the distance, the focal point of these pieces is a glass structure made up of four walls arranged in a row and arches, deliberately obscured by a faint mist. This architectural element functions as a metaphorical and physical entrance to this fictional museum.

The muted color palette here conveys a restrained aesthetic, allowing the glass structure to subtly assert itself within the landscape. The transparent quality of the material is intended to blur the boundaries between the tangible and intangible, a deliberate choice contributing to the overarching theme of questioning the delineations between reality and speculation.

This structure and its surroundings are intended to embody the qualities of a nonplace and the incorporation of arches alludes to the Graeco-Roman, Greek revival and gothic architectural styles that have been adopted by museums in the west. The intentional obscurity introduced by the fog prompts reflection on the cultural threshold and the transition between the familiar and the unknown. Finally, in alignment with the visual style of minimal surrealism, the composition remains unobtrusive, directing attention to the symbolism of the architecture. This approach is intended to embody a simplicity that encourages viewers to project their own interpretations onto the metaphorical gateway.

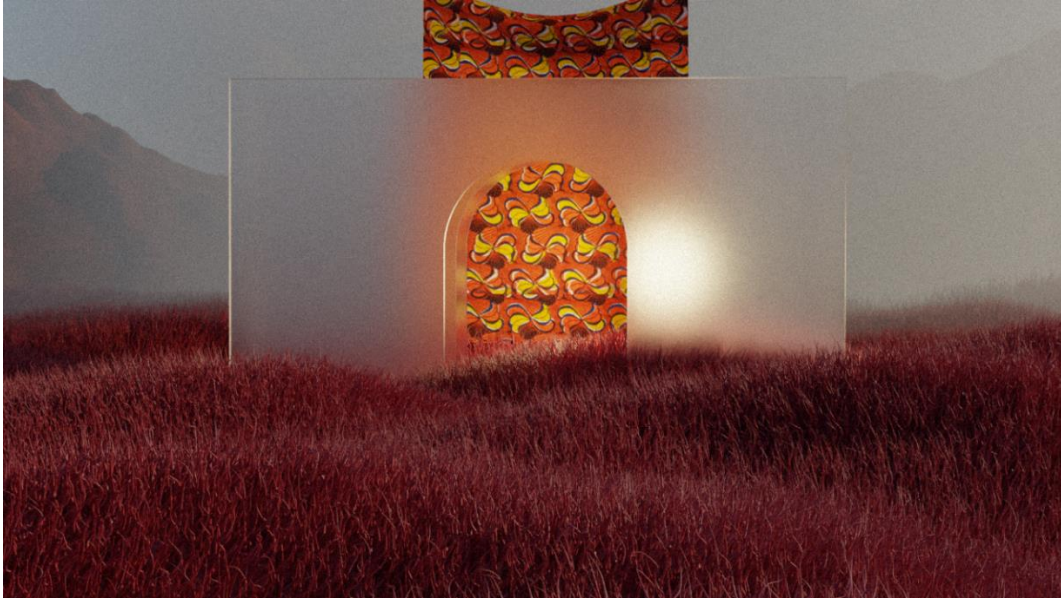


Figure 11: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Entrance II. Medium: 3D computer graphics, 2022-2023.



Figure 12: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: Eyo, Right at Home. Medium: 3D computer graphics, 2022-2023.

“Eyo, right at home,” “Eyo, right at home II” and “Eyo, right at home III” (figs 13, 14 and 15) take on a serene but haunting atmosphere, compelling viewers to reflect on the dual nature of cultural representation—serenity encapsulated in tradition, juxtaposed with the haunting implications of cultural artifacts displaced from their origins.

The first, "Eyo, Right at Home," places the masquerade within a corridor made up of concrete arches. In this setting, the juxtaposition of red-colored grass emerging from the ground and scattered puddles of water introduces an element of surreal serenity. The vibrant red hue contrasts starkly with the concrete surroundings, evoking a sense of paradoxical harmony.

The title serves as commentary on the display of cultural artifacts within Western institutions. "Eyo Right at Home" and “Eyo, Right at Home III” become poignant symbols within the museum corridor—a satirical commentary on the dissonance between cultural heritage and its presentation, inviting viewers to navigate the interplay between presence and absence, tradition and displacement. "Eyo Right at Home II" unlike the other two deviates from the museum-like corridor, and presents the masquerade in an exterior setting, situating the cultural symbol in the midst of vibrant red grass and in front of a translucent glass arch.

The red grass introduces a visual element that contrasts with the traditional green landscapes often associated with a sense of home. The glass arch, echoing the architectural motif from "The Entrance," creates a conceptual continuity within the project. Its transparency symbolizes the porous nature of cultural boundaries, allowing viewers to glimpse both the Eyo masquerade and the surrounding environment. This intentional setting fosters a sense of connection and displacement simultaneously, inviting contemplation on the complexities of cultural identity.

In this piece, the Eyo masquerade becomes a visual protagonist, prompting reflection on the dualities inherent in cultural representation.

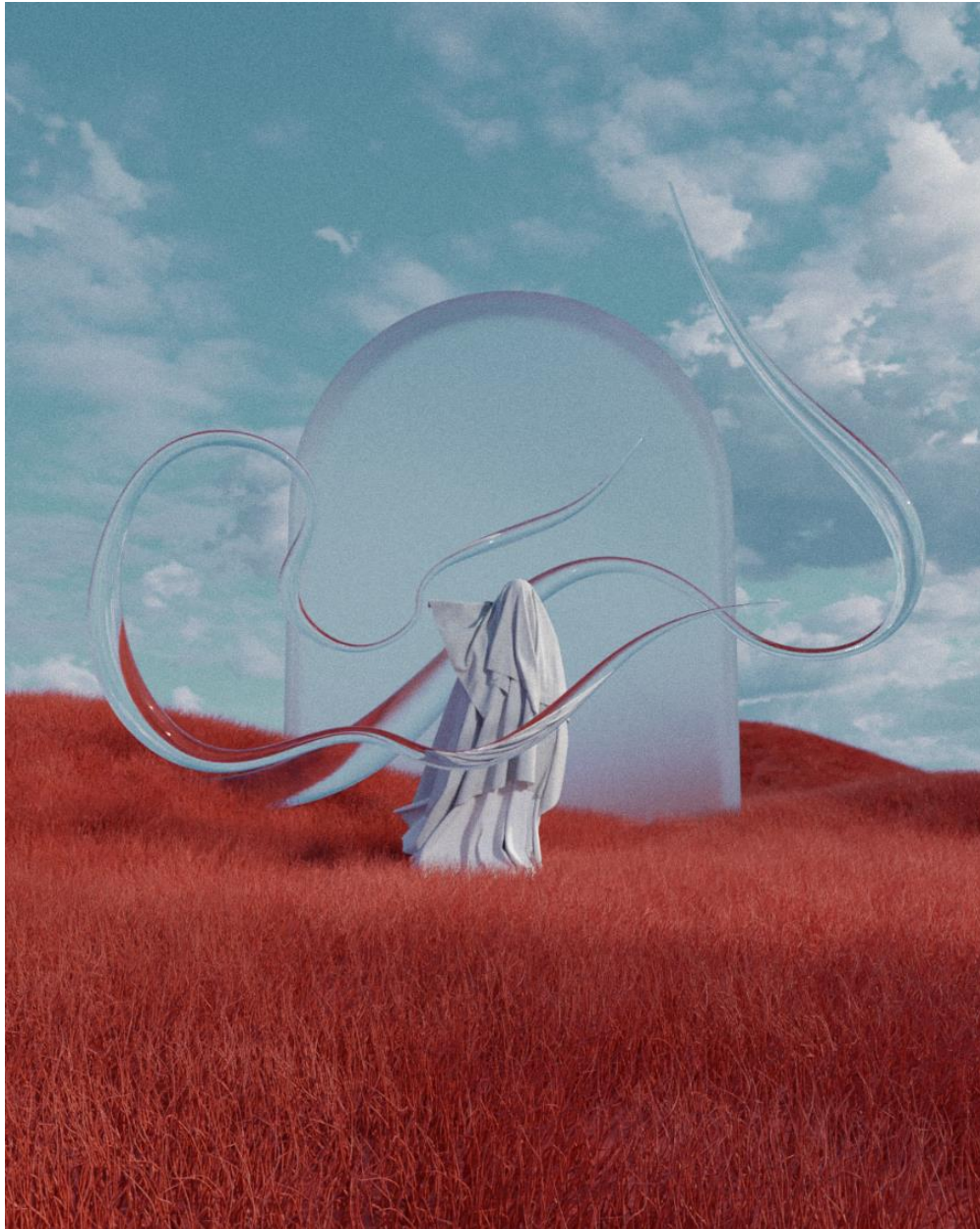


Figure 13: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: Eyo, Right at Home II. Medium: 3D computer graphics, 2022-2023.



Figure 14: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: Eyo, Right at Home III. Medium: computer graphics, 2022-2023.

The visual narrative in "Light is the Head" and "Light is the Head II" (figures 16 and 17) follows a traditional Yoruba Crown, known as an "Ade," taking center stage along the corridors and crevices of this museum. The crown, usually a symbol of authority and cultural continuity, becomes a witness to its own absence from the cultural context within which it was intended to reside. The titles are a play on the Shakespeare quote 'uneasy is the head that wears a crown' from Henry IV part 2 which is popularly misquoted as "heavy is the head that wears the crown," alluding to the misplacement of this crown.

"Ife, Right at Home" and "Ife, Right at Home II" feature the Ife head sculptures situated within similar museum-like corridors as the Eyo masquerade compositions and a similar approach is used for the pieces titled "Monioluwa, Right at Home" and "Monioluwa, Right at Home II" but in this case, the subject featured is me. The piece titled "The Altar" draws inspiration from the Catholic home altar and reimagines it to propose a "Yoruba prayer altar" as a way of symbolizing what it may mean when sacred objects of spiritual significance are presented for western consumption.

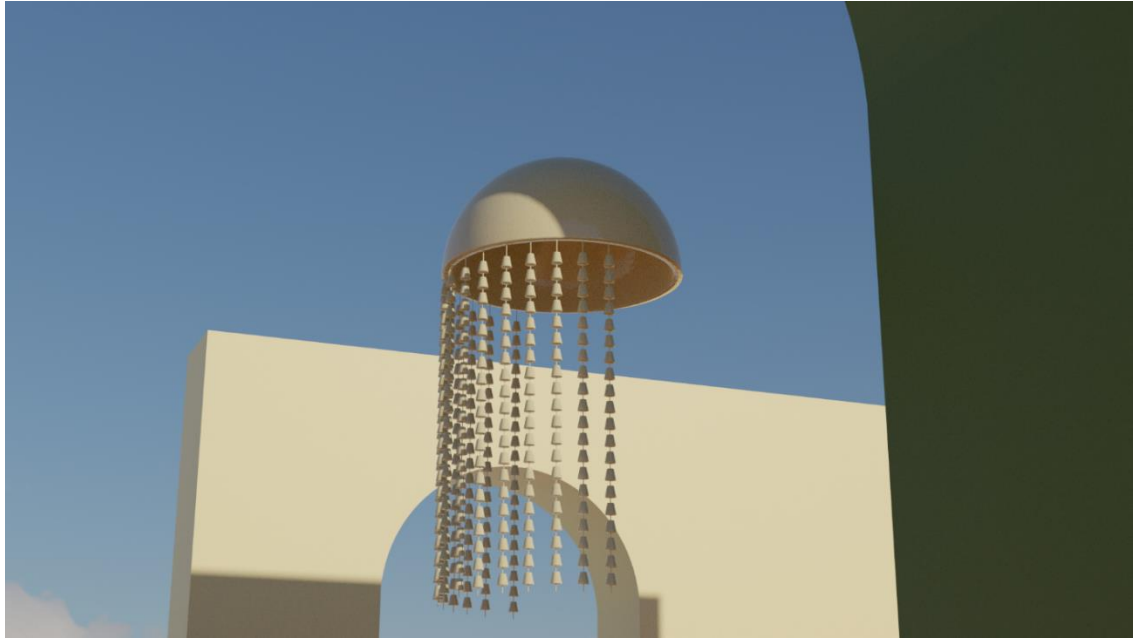


Figure 15: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: Light is The Head. Medium: 3D computer graphics, 2022-2023.



Figure 16: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: Light is The Head II. Medium: 3D computer graphics, 2022-2023.

Animated versions of a number of these pieces were created, introducing a layer of dynamism within an otherwise static setting. In these animations, the subjects come to life within this world. These subtle motions serve as a visual device, underscoring the notion that these cultural artifacts, removed from their native contexts, belong to a lived reality despite their static presentation within western museums. The stillness of the setting serves as a stark contrast to the subtle animations of the subjects, prompting viewers to reflect on the paradoxical nature of cultural representation.



Figure 17: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Altar. Medium: 3D computer graphics, 2022-2023.



Figure 18: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: Ife, Right at Home. Medium: 3D computer graphics, 2022-2023.



Figure 19: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: Ife, Right at Home II. Medium: 3D computer graphics, 2022-2023.



Figure 20: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: Monioluwa, Right at Home. Medium: 3D computer graphics, 2022-2023.



Figure 21: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Screen capture from moving piece “Monioluwa, Right at Home II.” Medium: 3D computer graphics, 2022-2023.

Finally, in a separate set of black and white close-up images, the subjects—ranging from the Eyo masquerade to the Ife head sculpture—undergo a transformative shift. With the choice to detach the subjects from their original surreal, museum-like setting serving as a thematic exploration of cultural displacement to serve as a continuation of the project's narrative.

The black and white aesthetic, devoid of the contextual surroundings, places the focus completely on the subjects. Each element is isolated, emphasizing the individuality and inherent significance of each cultural artifact. This deliberate separation from the museum backdrop is intended to explore these subjects in their own right, beyond the confines of any external gaze.

This approach also serves as a remediation of photography within the 3D software realm, reimagining the medium to transcend the constraints of traditional photographic methods. By presenting these cultural artifacts in isolation, the images evoke a sense of contemplative stillness, encouraging audiences to reevaluate their perceptions and recognize the stories embedded within each element. In this remediation of photography, the intention is to redefine how cultural artifacts can be visually represented, transcending the boundaries of traditional mediums.



Figure 22: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Virtual photograph of the Eyo masquerades rendered inside of Blender. Medium: 3D computer graphics, 2023.



Figure 23: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Virtual photograph of the Ade (crown) rendered inside of Blender. Medium: 3D computer graphics, 2023.



Figure 24: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Virtual photograph of the Altar rendered inside of Blender. Medium: 3D computer graphics, 2023.



Figure 25: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Virtual photograph of one of the Ife head sculptures rendered inside of Blender. Medium: 3D computer graphics, 2023.

## CHAPTER 5: PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

### 5.1: Software

As stated in chapter 3, my entry into the realm of worldbuilding was through architecture and as such my choice of tools at the time were tailored primarily to technical drawings and architectural visualization. I was trained to use the industry standard BIM (Building Information Modelling) software Revit which is developed by Autodesk. I found it to be an all-in-one database driven program, which is most useful when designing for the purpose of physical construction. With the software, one is able to produce detailed schematic diagrams as well as pre-construction documents, making it useful for architectural practitioners from the conception stage up until the construction stage. However, as Revit is not meant to be used specifically for design conceptualization and modelling, I found its interface convoluted and methods too tedious. It is for this reason that I gravitated towards Google's SketchUp. While not as thorough in generating the necessary data and documentation for building construction projects, I found its specialized modelling tools provided me with more leeway when it came to experimentation, iteration and essentially playing. It is with SketchUp (and Photoshop) that I created the visualizations for Adúgbò, a third-year studio project which I used to explore the possibilities for open air market design in rural Ogun state.



Figure 26: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: Adúgbò, 3D visualization for an open-air market design in rural Ogun state. Medium: SketchUp and Adobe Photoshop. 2019.

Ultimately, Blender, a program developed by the Blender Foundation was selected as the primary platform for the 3D development aspect of the thesis as it supports the entirety of the 3D creation process. This includes but is not limited to modelling, sculpting, animation, rendering and compositing.<sup>53</sup> Its extensive worldbuilding capabilities allow for the freedom to iterate, sculpt and refine in detail every aspect of a virtually constructed space or object.

Additionally, I made use of Marvelous Designer, an industry standard specialised 3D creation software, used almost exclusively for fabricating clothing and simulating clothes physics. While Blender allows for the modelling of clothes as well as physics simulation, I find Marvelous Designer to be much more intuitive and the process more streamlined, which was to be expected given its specialization. Finally, I included the Adobe creative suite (Photoshop,

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<sup>53</sup> “About Blender: The Software,” Blender, accessed, September 22, 2023, <https://www.blender.org/about/>.

Premiere Pro, After Effects) for postproduction i.e., adding texture, colour grading etc. in an effort to maintain uniformity in the aesthetics of the pieces as well as adding extra refinement.

## **5.2: Hardware**

All the hardware and physical spaces used for the creation of this project are listed below:

- Dell Precision 5820 with NVIDIA Quadro P4000 GPU and Intel Xeon W-2123 3.6 GHz processor.
- Dual Dell Ultrasharp UP2516D HD colour calibrated monitors
- Wacom Intuos Pro graphics tablet
- Canon 5D Mark III
- Canon EF Zoom 24-105mm lens.
- Manfrotto 755XB Tripod
- Green screen cyclorama (The Cove Studio) for compositing work
- Kino Flo 4Bank lighting bars.

## **5.3: Production**

In attempting to visualize this alternate space while connecting it directly to our reality, I worked primarily with photographs featuring the selected elements that would inhabit the virtual space and reconstructed them in 3D. After gathering references, I began to develop strategies for constructing each element. For the Eyo masquerade, I made use of a free male base mesh as it was going to eventually be covered in fabric, rigged and posed it in Blender, then proceeded to model and simulate the fabric. I was able to create an iteration of the masquerade's attire in Blender but found the process within the software tedious and extremely taxing on the computer.

It was at this point that I explored other solutions for clothing fabrication and landed on Marvelous Designer. While this would add extra steps to my workflow, I found the program more intuitive and time efficient. Hence, after rigging and posing the male mesh in Blender, I exported it to Marvelous Designer to model the fabric and simulate wind physics. I then "baked"

the simulation which meant that its information was now saved into the fabric's mesh, this would allow me to delete the base mesh while having its silhouette impressed unto the fabric. This way, it would still look as though there was a figure under the fabric and I would have a much smaller file. I eventually exported the .obj file of the fabric mesh as well as its mdd cache into blender in order to add materials, texture and render.

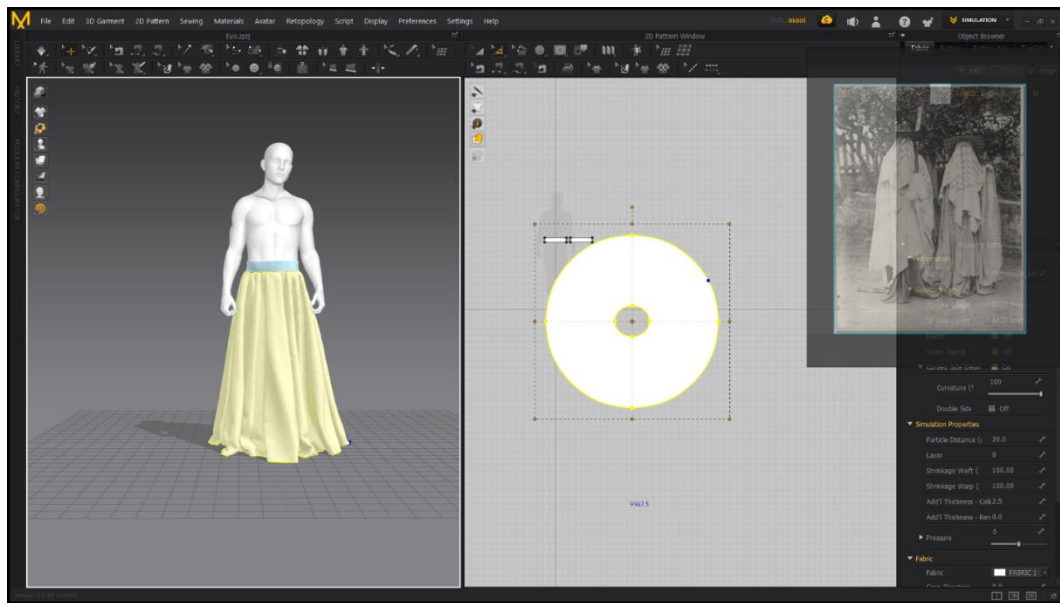


Figure 27: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Screen capture of the fabrication process of the Eyo masquerade's attire in Marvelous Designer, 2022. Male figure by Daz3D (Genesis 8 Basic Male mesh) <https://www.daz3d.com/>.

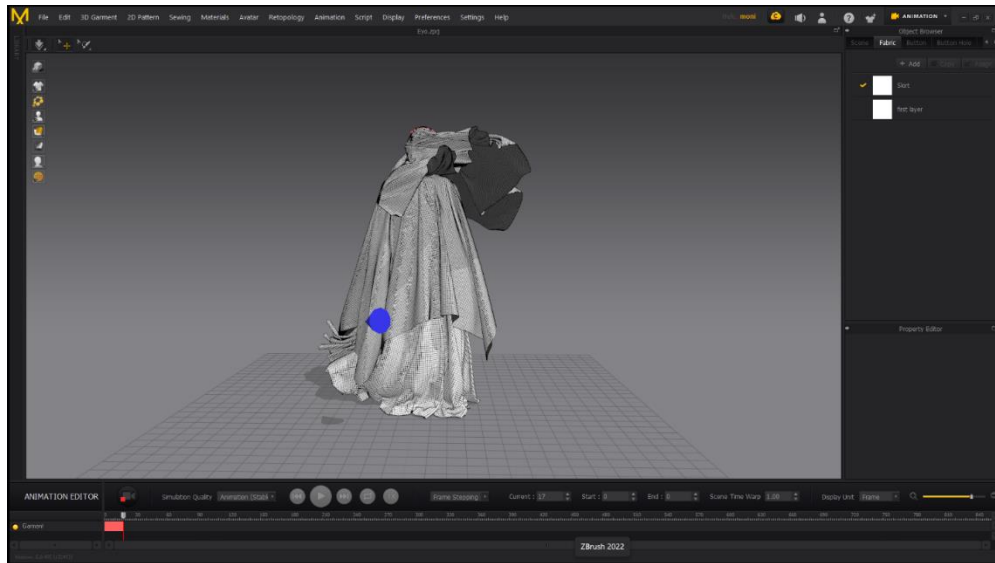


Figure 28: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Screen capture of wind simulation test in Marvelous Designer, 2022.

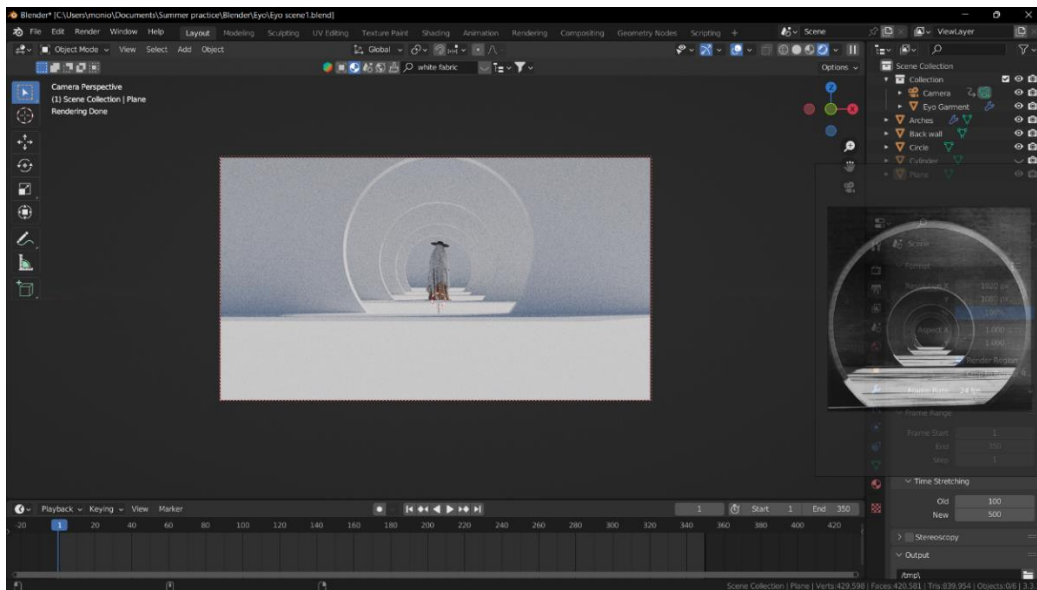


Figure 29: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Screen capture of test render in Blender, 2022.



Figure 30: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Cloth simulation test, rendered in Blender, 2022.

For the Ife head sculpture, the entire process was done in Blender. I used the software's sculpting tools to mold the base of the head, then refined it until I was able to capture the likeness of the actual sculpture. However, as is usually the result of sculpting in 3D, I ended up with an unworkable mesh, riddled with over a million polygons. It slowed down the computer and I wasn't able to texture or animate it. It was at this stage that I needed to clean up the mesh through retopology. I was then able to add a non-destructive subdivision modifier in order to recover its smooth surface and texture it to replicate the bronze material. Finally, I used this mesh to explore cell fracturing and volumetric lighting.

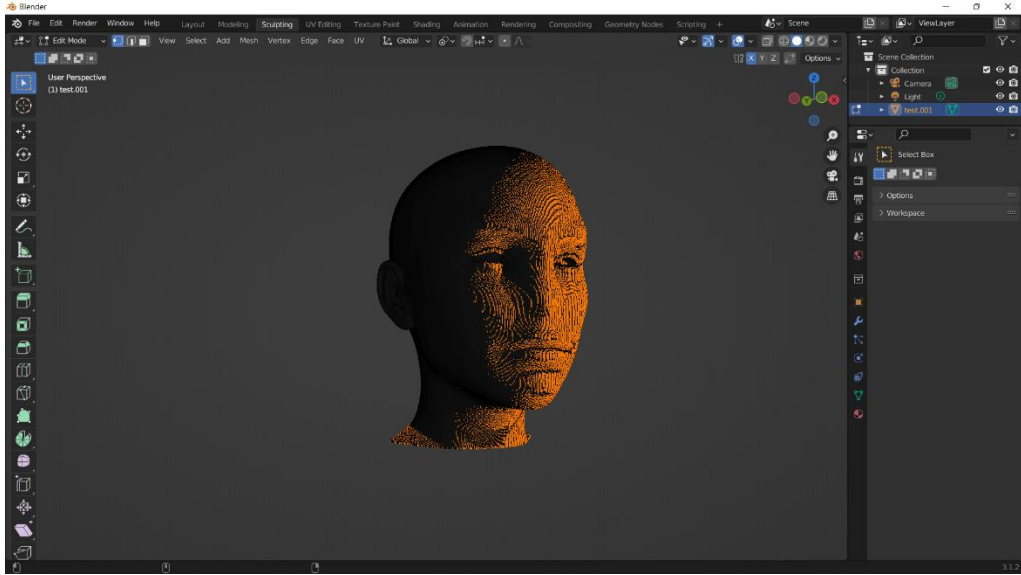


Figure 31: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Screen capture of digital sculpting process for the Ife head in Blender, 2022.



Figure 32: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Screen capture of final Ife head sculpt (dense mesh) in Blender, 2022.



Figure 33: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Screen capture of Ife head retopology process in Blender, 2022.

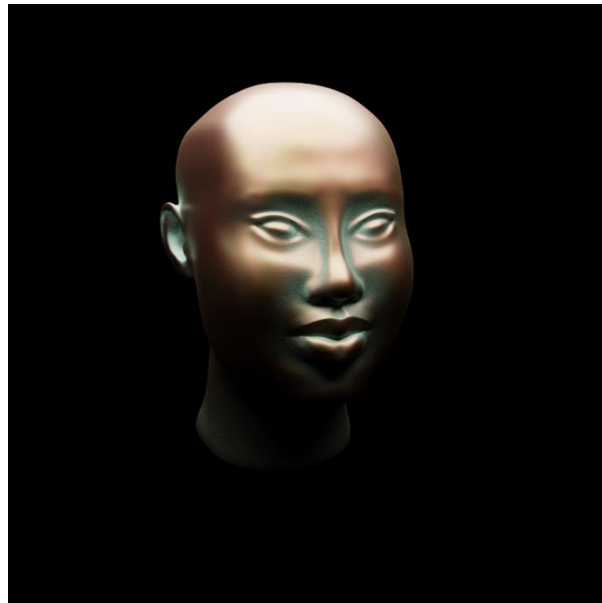


Figure 34: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Test render of Ife head model with bronze material generated and applied in Blender, 2022.



Figure 35: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Render of Ife head, testing cell fracture simulation and volumetric lighting in Blender, 2022.

As I intended to also feature myself in this project, I made use of the cove studio at the university which houses a green screen cyclorama. I recorded myself in various positions (sitting, laying down etc.) and made use of chroma key compositing in Adobe premiere pro to isolate myself before transferring to Blender.



Figure 36: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Photograph of the artist recording herself in front of a green screen cyclorama, 2022.

After creating these elements, I proceeded to model various settings within which to situate them. In attempting to capture the essence of a fictional and fantastical museum taking reference from Graeco-Roman and modern-day western architecture. I also modelled the landscapes and used a hair particle system to generate the grass. With the landscape, I attempted to reference surrealist art in an effort to embody the aesthetics as discussed in chapter 2. Finally, I arranged all the elements into multiple scenes and rendered them in Blender, experimenting with multiple aspect ratios, focal lengths and lighting styles. All images and clips were rendered in the RAW format and imported into Adobe Premiere Pro and Photoshop for postproduction.

## CHAPTER 6: THESIS EXHIBITION

This work was presented in the form of an exhibition at The Penny Gallery in Lethbridge, Alberta from November 24<sup>th</sup> to December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2023. A diverse set audiences visited, ranging from University of Lethbridge faculty members and students to friends and family, and it was designed with the aim of fostering an open-ended and self-guided experience.

Upon entering the exhibition space, visitors were presented with an arrangement that was designed to facilitate a fluid movement without a prescribed order. Four monitors, each connected to a dedicated Intel NUC 12 Pro kit, showcased videos highlighting selected elements of Yoruba culture, and were each accompanied by four prints placed on the wall next to their respective stations. These prints were of the black and white renders created in Blender, of each element on display, offering a connection to the virtual world presented on the screens.



Figure 37: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. View of the initial stages of the MFA exhibition setup from the lobby of the Penny Gallery, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023.



Figure 38: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass Exhibition attendees interacting with the space and pieces at the MFA exhibition, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023.

To the left of these computer stations and opposite the entrance of the gallery space stood "The Nook," a stand-alone installation comprising of two mobile walls set at a 160-degree angle. On each of these walls was a projection of half of a landscape, which was intended to create an immersive visual experience. For the projection on the wall to the left, I employed OBS Studio on my personal laptop (HP Pavilion Gaming Laptop), combining a live video feed from a Sony HXR-NX5U NXCAM camcorder with the virtual landscape. The live video, confined within a glass arch, symbolized a metaphorical mirror, inviting visitors to reflect on themselves and the virtual world within which they had been situated.



Figure 39: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Camera and projector setup for standalone installation — The Nook — located opposite the entrance of the gallery space at the MFA exhibition, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023.

In deliberate contrast, on the opposite end of the gallery, three CRT TVs were mounted on white plinths, each displaying turntable videos illustrating the transition of the selected 3D models from wireframe to fully rendered. This intentional use of CRT TVs, as opposed to the computer stations employed on the other end of the room, was intended to emphasize the rudimentary nature of this aspect of the work, deliberately showing the underlying process rather than presenting a polished and finished product. Benches were placed in front of these TVs to encourage visitors to pause at this point. For this display to work, HDMI to RCA adapters were used to connect each TV to an Intel NUC 12 Pro kit.



Figure 40: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Testing connectivity of the CRT TVs with the Intel NUC 12 Pro kits and HDMI to RCA adapters at the Penny Gallery, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023.



Figure 41: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Testing connectivity of the CRT TVs with the Intel NUC 12 Pro kits and HDMI to RCA adapters at the Penny Gallery, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023.

Finally, In the semicircular room towards the rear of the gallery which typically serves as a dedicated area for projections and video installations, I had three projections set up side-by-side, each of various landscapes that I had constructed in 3D. In the middle was a video of the Eyo masquerade, with its fabric blowing in the wind and on either side of this video were images of a glass structure which I called “The Entrance.” In this room, I also set up multiple speakers with a looping sound of blowing wind playing. The aim of this was to blend the virtual and physical by means of a multi-sensory experience, allowing visitors to engage with what they were looking at through thought and immersion. This room was to serve as a physical corner for reflection with an ambience that was simultaneously peaceful and uncomfortable.



Figure 42: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Testing 3-projector setup in the projection room located at the rear of the Penny Gallery, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023.

## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

Informed by personal experience and an examination of Yoruba culture in both a local and global cultural context, the research presented in this MFA thesis paper addresses the issue of representation and perception as it pertains to the cultures and identities of colonised groups. With it, the capacity of speculative fiction and 3D computer graphics in the work of propagating more relevant and constructive discourse surrounding these cultures and the people to whom they belong is explored. It does this in a way of investigating methods through which to transcend flattened constructions of identity and existence, rejecting what one might believe they should be and instead recognising what they are and what they could be.

With the visual approach of “minimal surrealism,” these ideas are presented and conveyed plainly, while situated in a world that resembles but upsets our own, forcing or provoking viewers to not only look but to look critically.

Ultimately, in practising this sort of opposition through fictional construction and reconstruction, the thesis explores possible avenues through which we could learn from history, recognise our reality, and decolonise our minds in ways that might allow us access the thinking we might need to possibly subvert the emergence of a precarious future. Moreover, with the technological advancements made in the area of computer-generated 3D graphics, this thesis offers the possibility for its expansion in the area of critical reflection and speculative work as it pertains to new media art.

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## APPENDIX 1: EXHIBITION DOCUMENTATION

This appendix offers a visual documentation of the MFA thesis exhibition which includes photographs of all the sections and stations at the exhibition as described in chapter 6.

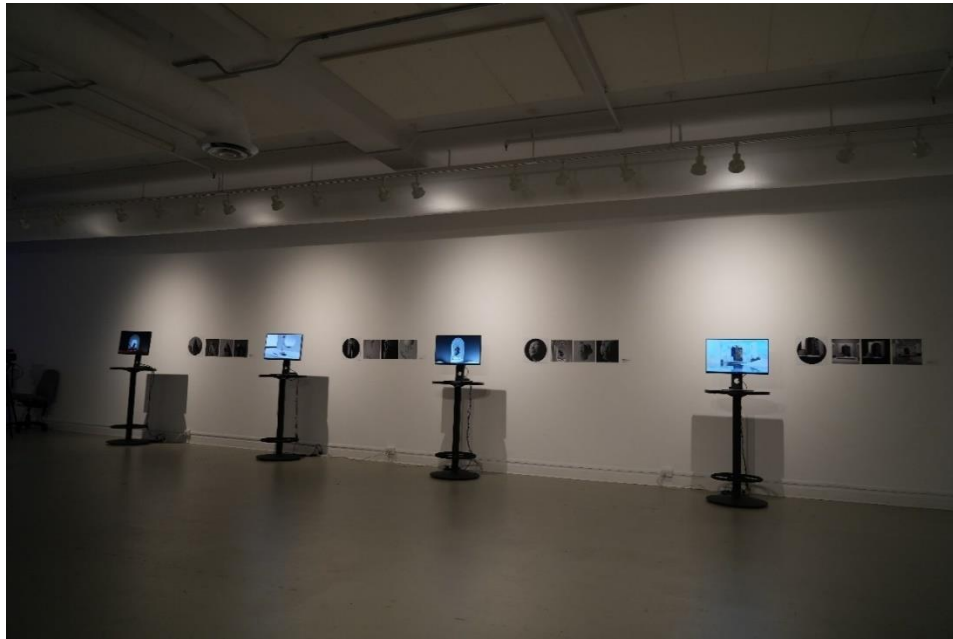


Plate 1: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Digital displays and prints at the MFA exhibition, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023.



Plate 2: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Digital displays and prints at the MFA exhibition, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023.



Plate 3: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Digital displays and prints at the MFA exhibition, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023.



Plate 4: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Digital displays and prints at the MFA exhibition, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023.

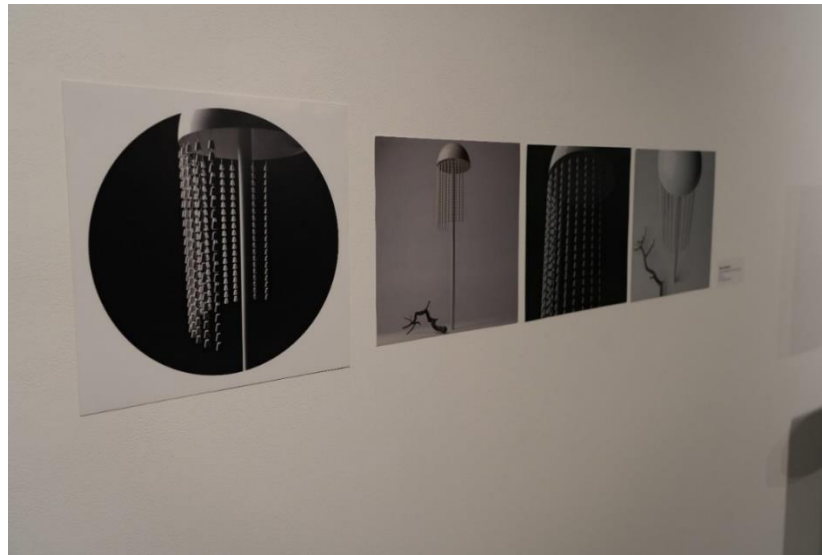


Plate 5: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Close up of the prints featuring the Ade (crown) at the MFA exhibition, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023.



Plate 6: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Close up of the prints featuring the Eyo masquerades at the MFA exhibition, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023.

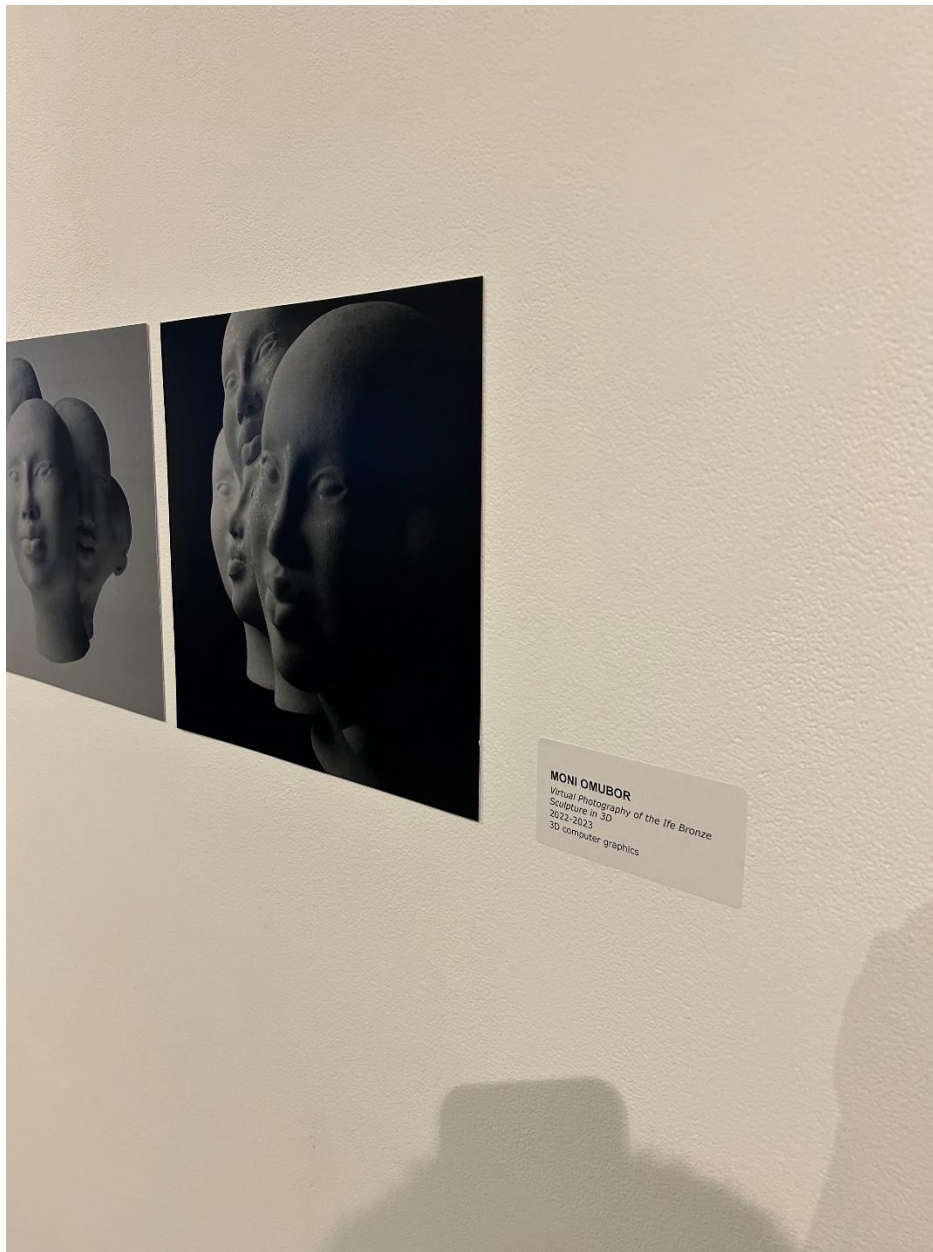


Plate 7: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Close up of the prints featuring the Ife head sculptures at the MFA exhibition, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023.

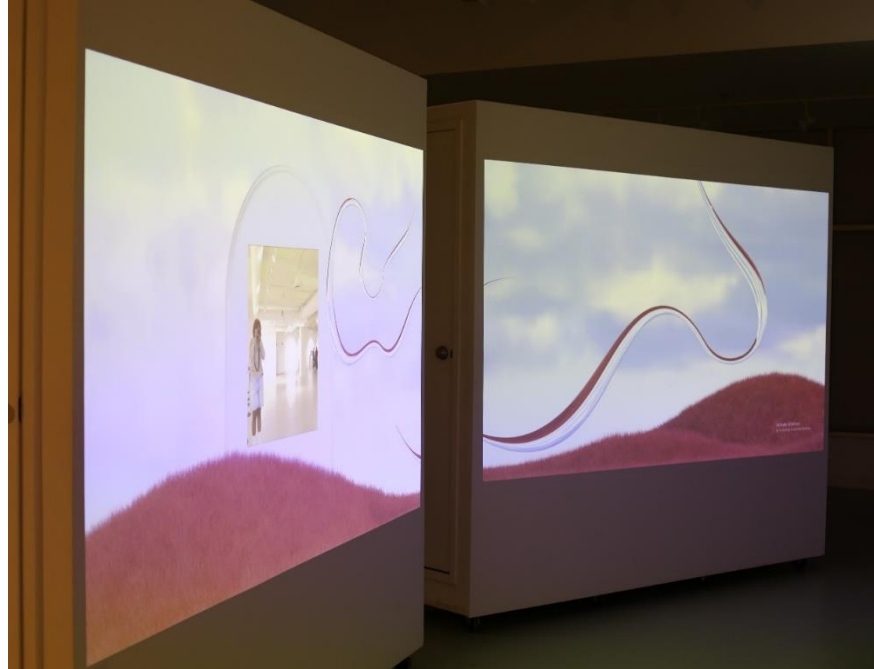


Plate 8: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Standalone installation —The Nook — located opposite the entrance of the gallery space at the MFA exhibition, made up of two mobile walls, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023.



Plate 9: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Full view of the CRT TV displays used to show the transitional progress of the 3D Models, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023.



Plate 10: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. One of the CRT TV displays used to show the transitional progress of the 3D Models, photo by Moni Omubor, November 2023.

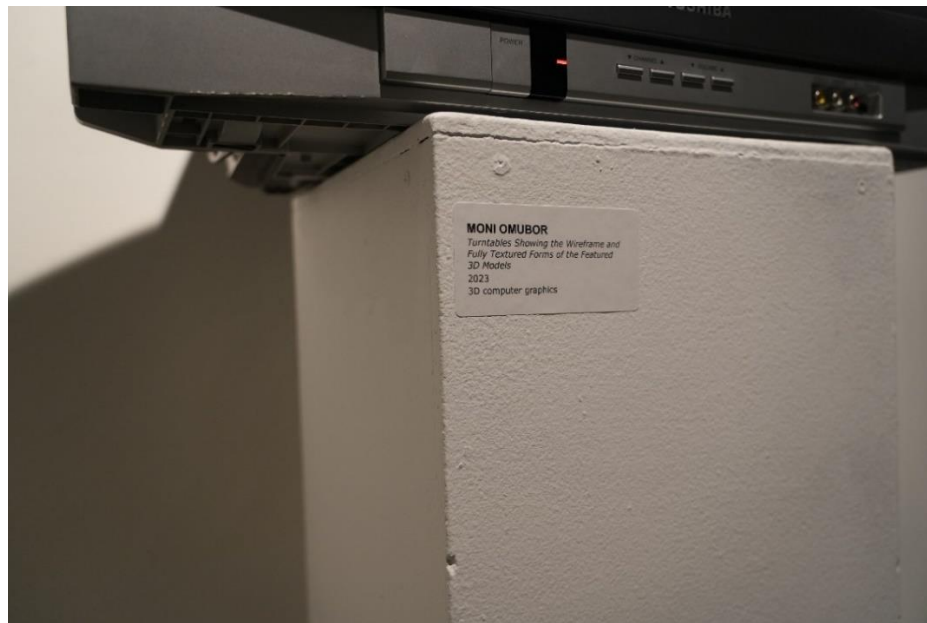


Plate 11: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Close up of the label for one of the CRT TV displays used to show the transitional progress of the 3D Models, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023.



Plate 12: Artist: Moni Omubor. Title: The Looking Glass. Projections of landscapes displayed side-by-side in the semicircular room located at the rear of the gallery at the MFA exhibition, photo by Moni Omubor. November 2023.

## **APPENDIX 2: CREDITS**

All credits for the resources (both external and by the author) used in the development of this thesis project are listed in the following appendix.

Thesis work and content developed by Monioluwa Omubor include:

- Academic research
- Conceptualization
- Visual design
- Photography
- Videography
- Cinematography
- Direction
- Green screen compositing
- Photo manipulation
- Video editing
- 3D modelling, staging, animation and visualization.
- Photographing fabric to generate textures.
- Texturing
- Retopology
- Architectural design

All credits for external resources used in the development of the thesis include:

- Cloudy Sky HDRI, Nathan Samani, BlenderKit. Royalty Free, <https://www.blenderkit.com/asset-gallery-detail/d1161a02-bcdc-4b1f-ac6f-ed65947ee90a/>  
As seen in the pieces titled: “Eyo, Right at Home II,” “Light is the Head,” and “The Altar.”
- Young Lemon Sprout 3D Model, Rex Hans, BlenderKit. Royalty Free, [https://www.blenderkit.com/asset-gallery-detail/95035c7d-4488-4f39-9725-003cfb9eef3f/?query=author\\_id:50096](https://www.blenderkit.com/asset-gallery-detail/95035c7d-4488-4f39-9725-003cfb9eef3f/?query=author_id:50096)  
As seen in the piece titled: “The Altar.”
- Creosote Bush 3D Model, Alioramus Turtle, BlenderKit. Royalty Free, <https://www.blenderkit.com/asset-gallery-detail/35416ab5-b12d-4b26-b512-c30cd623455d/>  
As seen in the piece titled: “The Altar.”
- Pineapple 3D Model, Lassi Kaukonen, Sketchfab. Creative Commons Attribution License, <https://skfb.ly/6TQSO>  
As seen in the piece titled: “The Altar.”
- Smooth Concrete Material, Paco Salas, BlenderKit. Royalty Free, <https://www.blenderkit.com/asset-gallery-detail/906e6202-3841-4140-813e-e9762c7e2545/>  
As seen in the piece titled: “Eyo, Right at Home III.”
- Genesis 8 Basic Male 3D Model, Daz3D, Academic License, Accessed for free through the software, <https://www.daz3d.com/>  
Used as a base mesh for the creation of the Eyo masquerades.
- Dry Branches Medium 01 3D Model, Rico Cilliers, BlenderKit. Creative Commons 0 License, <https://www.blenderkit.com/asset-gallery-detail/caed7d9f-f824-4493-a789-c155feda76b0/>  
As seen in the piece titled: “Light is the Head II.”
- Marble 4 Seamless Texture, Belaid Ziane, BlenderKit. Royalty Free, <https://www.blenderkit.com/asset-gallery-detail/faa204e6-40c8-45f1-b177-0a057454118e/>  
As seen in the piece titled: “Light is the Head II.”
- Cold Wind Howling, Envato Elements, Commercial License, <https://elements.envato.com/cold-wind-howling-KET4JL3>  
Played on a loop as part of the MFA exhibition.