



Trickster, Friend and Protector

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20/20 is an ambitious three-year programme that engaged 20 emerging or mid-career ethnically diverse artists of colour and 20 public art collections across the UK, resulting in 20 new permanent acquisitions.

Generously supported by Arts Council England, Freelands Foundation and UAL, 20/20 combined artist residencies and commissioning at scale, with the aim of catalysing artists' careers and fostering meaningful change in collections - not only through the artworks that will ultimately enter the collections but also through a peer network of artists and curators, and the critical interrogation of collections practices.

The three objects emerging from Zöe Tumika's material and conceptual examinations for the 20/20 project are manifestations of the twin acts of creation and relation. The 'Trickster', 'Friend' and 'Protector' are character archetypes that Tumika proposes can expand what is possible within a museum's galleries and archives, should we take the full potential of the objects housed within them seriously. Describing each of these vessels as 'entities', Tumika imbues them with an agency beyond their own creation; or rather, Tumika listens to what they have to say, engaging in a reciprocal act of shaping and affirming, where each supports the others in being more themselves and in imagining and creating a world more conducive to their individual and collective becoming and flourishing.

On a smaller scale, the artist considers how they may reshape the museum from the inside. If the museum, with all its benefits to culture and learning, remains part of our global 'infrastructures of containment',¹ Tumika offers in their glazed clay representations of 'Trickster', 'Friend' and 'Protector', technologies of possibility and boundlessness that may be able to infiltrate this infrastructure and attend to the needs of those inside through the act of acquisition. Tumika's key question in the forming of these artefacts and relations is, 'what 'can' these entities carry?'.² With this question comes those of what they can hold (far more intimate) and what they can smuggle (far more forceful).

In ensuring that their bodies are hollow and can be filled, Tumika gives them a form that can offer ease in this carrying, holding, smuggling. The vessel form is also testament to the form of narrative act Tumika wishes to engage in through their interpretations of these character archetypes and their placement within the larger container of the museum, which functions completely differently from the human-scale vessels acquired to inhabit and be displayed within it. In acknowledging the fundamental nature of storytelling in our species' self-conception and understanding of the world we inhabit, Tumika's vessels – as any narrative act that takes the form of a container – 'cannot be characterised either as conflict or as harmony, since its purpose is neither resolution nor stasis but continuing process'.³ The form of the entities is indicative of the form of narrative they are intended to serve. 'Trickster', 'Friend' and 'Protector' could have easily been phallic, but that would be an entirely different story.

There is a finality and completion to the act of acquisition at odds with this artist's process or primary concerns. The temporality of a residency and production period, with its clearly delineated beginning, end and material support puts full stops in places better served by commas. Tumika shares about their relationship with clay, the joy they get from the space material gives you to 'make over

a period of months or even years'. Throwing and then living with a form before returning to it as an old friend to glaze, it feels as though you were never apart. Within the temporality of commissioned work, Tumika expresses about the end goal of this creation and relation, 'I have the feeling of it, I just can't see it'. What is made available is the 'for now' of the relationship. The objects that find themselves in the museum's collection, fabricated by Tumika's hands, are better understood as prototypes, as rehearsals; not the thing itself but that which makes the thing possible. Here, the 'making of a prototype levers moments of energetic assembly and disassembly', enabling the appearance of a 'figure of possibility and suspension where relationships and objects can be at once "more than many and less than one"'.⁴

The entities are placeholders for the transformative and magical potential fundamental to the creative act and therefore housed within the museum. If all 'magic, including sorcery, is the putting into practice of this: that the subtle rules the dense',⁵ then the most significant part of Tumika's vessels is the empty space within them waiting to be populated by... something. That something exists in the artist's studio and is in consultation with them long before it is allowed to do the same in the museum. For Tumika:

Anyone who is ready to embark on a journey of giving physical form to these entities, spirits, giving a representation or trying to manifest them, is also someone who is ready to never be ready. It is an act of conjuring, that process, in that conjuring there are many considerations, which could also be thought of as cautions or warnings.

'Trickster', 'Friend' and 'Protector' speak to the risky business of both the creative act and of intervention in systems and institutions larger than oneself. These entities are created as much for Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (MIMA) in particular as they are for the idea of the museum more broadly. Acknowledging that MIMA, as a younger institution, has a collection that constitutes fewer 'icky' histories for their entities to contend with, Tumika faces the broad history of museums and their associated histories of containment head on. Within the museum is the possibility of the containment of objects that may be thought of as kin with Tumika's 'Trickster', 'Friend' and 'Protector' What would those already contained require of these entities entering the infrastructure of the museum? In recognising the persons and ideas that have served them well in the studio, Tumika provided these as archetypes for the museum; in their formation, imbuing them with the traits their kin already in the museum may need.

One may imagine 'Trickster' making containment suit them; or perhaps imagining escape, more than imagining – smuggling within their interior the tools of escape and in doing so creating an opening that others may follow. Perhaps 'Friend', their interiority waiting to welcome one's tears, their ears primed for deep listening, asks:

| Tell me what is dear to you, your deepest hurts and
| grandest ambition left untold and unrealised by
| these walls, I will listen as long as you need.

And what of 'Protector'? Their weapons smuggled into the museum and offering cover:

| As long as I am here you will be safe.

Beginning by forming 'Friend' – of the three entities, the relational model closest to their own life – Tumika was able to begin working out the 'entangled encounter of embodied exchange' fundamental to this relation that was also emerging in the act of making with clay in particular.⁶ 'Friend' also opens the door to Tumika's engagement with the intellectual labour of artistic practice. If a philosopher, through its etymology, is a friend or lover of wisdom, recognising this affinity places work of the mind within reach.

'Friend' led Tumika to 'Trickster', a fundamentally liminal figure enabling engagement in the movement between the literal, figurative and intangible, between the here/now and elsewhere/otherwise. 'Trickster's' multiple faces are indicative of the multiple worlds he can occupy. In his capacity to disobey rules and disrupt normal life is the ability to make and remake the world. This capacity to make the world differently, rethink what is just and necessary outside of culturally established norms and mechanisms are shared between 'Trickster' and 'Friend'. As Tumika, in their studio practice, moves towards that which may warrant caution, friendship itself, at its most potent, may be seen as something dangerous, 'a technique for undoing the processes of subjectification that make us legible to Empire', enabling us to 'begin to understand the tactics that Empire uses to keep us Powerless'.⁷ Considered in this sense, it must be understood that

| if we do need to be affected, if a world of constantly shifting
| identities leaves us feeling alone and depressed, then the
| worst outcome for Empire would be for us to find one another
| in our sadness. To become what we need to each other,
| and to find power in friendship, is to become dangerous.⁸

In this risky business of finding one another, of facing danger head on, 'Protector' reassures.

| As long as I am here you will be safe.

Their presence supports the grasping towards the as yet unknown, coming together to form an idealised team of creative and thought partners that may offer support both to the artist within the studio setting and other artworks contained within the museum. When the objects themselves are conceived of as agents in this manner, the question then becomes, for Tumika:

| What are these artworks up to when the lights are off and there is nobody about?

Endnotes

¹ Re-connecting 'Objects' Epistemic Plurality and Transformative Practices in and beyond Museums, research project, Pitt Rivers Museum, 2021, <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/reconnecting-objects>.

² Unless stated otherwise, all quotations are Zöe Tumika in conversation with the author, in person, on Zoom or via voice notes between 25 March and 25 June 2024.

³ Ursula K. Le Guin, 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction', in 'Dancing at the Edge of the World', Grove Atlantic Press, New York, 1989.

⁴ Alberto Corsín Jiménez, 'Introduction. The prototype: more than many and less than one', 'Journal of Cultural Economy', vol.7, no.4, 2013, pp.381–98.

⁵ Phoebe Collings-James, 'The Subtle Rules the Dense', Arcadia Missa Publications, London, 2023.

⁶ Johnny Golding, 'Friendship', in Lynn Turner, Undine Sellbach and Ron Broglio (eds), 'The Edinburgh Companion to Animal Studies', Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2018, pp.262–76.

⁷ crisplydefinedaffect, 'Robot Seals as Counter-Insurgency: Friendship and Power from Aristotle to Tiqqun', 'Human Strike', 27 August 2013, <https://humanstrike.wordpress.com/2013/08/27/robot-seals-as-counter-insurgency-friendship-and-power-from-aristotle-to-tiqqun/>.

⁸ Ibid.

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