Artist Spotlight, Adedayo Laoye:

"Art, A Universal Language that Binds"

Adedayo Laoye (Dayo), who moved to the U.S. in the late 1980s at age 29 from Nigeria and has made Chicago his home for the past several decades, has shared insights into how visual arts can help fight systemic injustice.

For Dayo, “art is a universal language!” and “reacting and speaking to progress and injustice” is an essential role of the “Artist and their art.” Furthermore, according to Dayo, we can enhance our environments in ways that will reward all with a sense of belonging when we:

1. Allow employees to share their stories and speak their particular languages,
2. Invite each other to their unique ethnic ceremonies,
3. Serve ethnic foods in the cafeteria from some of the employees' traditions to increase dialogue between the staff,
4. Collect art from diverse backgrounds to create an environment of inclusion,
5. Invite artists to exhibit art works, perform the music or dance, read their poetry are ways to foster equity, and
6. Offer art workshops for employees to help them relax and inform them on our shared traditions.

When asked about the marginalization of black and brown artists in the 20th and 21st centuries, Dayo replied that he was in “shock” thirty-three years ago to find the position he was in as an African graduate student and artist in the U.S. That so few black and brown artists had works on display in galleries created an “unfair” situation that resulted in an “incomplete” picture of the history of a people “if told with prejudice,” he said.

As a marginalized, “struggling artist” back then, “and even now,” he interjected, Dayo could not afford canvas as a result of prejudice. However, thanks to a ceramics teacher named Professor Jenkins at Jaba Technical School of Art, who taught Dayo to use whatever he could find as his clay or canvas, Dayo began his mission of infusing African imagery into American life by “reincarnating” Yoruba Orisa deities into the Orisa Doors, a sixteen-door project that began with two old doors he found discarded in a southside alleyway.

What does Dayo miss most about his homeland? To answer this, he said that “there’s always a festival going on somewhere in Nigeria. Homesick for life there, Dayo recreated that festive spirit here by blending Yoruba spirituality and culture into his art, and the Orisa Doors are a brilliant example of that mixture.”
Dayo also credited artists Dalton Brown and Bayo Irhibogbe, of Wooded Isle Building Artists' Studios on Stony Island, for re-awakening his memory of Jenkins’ teachings and for encouraging him to transform alleyway doors into works of art. Photos of two Orisa Doors are on display now at the South Shore Cultural Center.

When I asked Dayo how art could help young first-generation Americans like my sons, who have Vietnamese heritage, he stressed that they should not forget how and from where their ancestors came to the U.S. His reasoning is based on many visits to elementary schools here where, although students were not afraid to ask questions adults were too shy or reserved to ask, they assumed that they were all just "American." However, he pushed them to consider that there was more to them than that and to ask their parents about their family heritage; we should honor our parents and ancestors, he stressed.

Art, like music or writing, has medicinal values for people of all ages. In response to this statement, Dayo told me that “Paintings are like a ‘talking drum’”. Art can “bring families together” by engaging children in meaningful family activities, he told me. Art and music have bound Dayo’s family together for generations going back to roughly the year 1500. Like his grandfather, Oba John Adetoyese Laoye (b. 1899), a Yoruba king who was a multi-talented trained pharmacist, singer, pianist, musicologist and expert at using the talking drum to communicate with people and who shared his talents throughout Africa and Europe, including playing before Queen Elizabeth II, Dayo is continuing his ancestral tradition here in Chicago via the visual arts.

- Authored by David Glaub, M.A.