

FELIX & SPEAR

Telephone 020 8566 1574
Email press@felixandspear.com
Website www.felixandspear.com

Press Release
March 21, 2024

Fowokan George Kelly

Speak To Me Great Lionheaded Ancestors

6 Apr – 5 May 2024

Opening reception: Sat 6th Apr 12-3pm

London, March 21, 2024 – Felix & Spear are pleased to present '*Speak To Me Great Lionheaded Ancestors*', an exhibition of sculptures and wall-based works by Fowokan George Kelly (b. 1943).

Becoming 80 has been an interesting journey. In the years leading up to 80, I have spent more time reflecting on my life, and generally, what this thing called 'life' is all about, than in the creation of artworks. Nonetheless, I have been productive both ideologically and practically in the creation of new works. The range of artworks in this exhibition represent markers of my life as an artist, from my earliest works to my most recent. It is an insight into the evolution of my practice, informed by migration, my travels and the development of technology.

My work is rooted in the traditions of pre-colonial Africa and ancient Egypt rather than the Greco Roman art of the West. Finding my calling as a visual artist late in life, I deliberately chose not to be trained in western art institutions as I felt that these institutions could not teach me what I needed to know. They were too deeply entrenched in their own traditions with little or no understanding, or interest in the things that interested me most: which are the ideas that lie behind the prized, yet often unacknowledged art, culture and influence of Africa.

As an African, born in the Caribbean under British colonial rule, I was completely cut off from any knowledge of my ancestral home, and completely dominated by western culture; it was important to gain some understanding of my ancestral self. Art was the most accessible way of doing that. Africa and that which was deemed African were things labelled as dark and hidden, to be feared, avoided at all costs.

I decided to become an artist whilst in Benin, Nigeria in the mid-1970s, as a touring musician. Whilst there, I believe I experienced a kind of fundamental transformation, or enlightenment. Inspired by the iconic bronze sculptures, I returned to London determined to acquire knowledge of the technique of sculpting, which I was able to find in books and through trial and error. The philosophical aspect came through a deep intuition and repeated journeys across various parts of Africa; Journeys that explored the spiritual side of my ancestral home; this was my art school, my higher education. The intuitive/spiritual aspect of reality still abounds on that Continent.

The encounter between the African and the European has brought about deep-rooted spiritual and mental conflicts at the core of the African, along with the commonly held stereotype that the African is nothing more than: “the reflection of a primitive and barbarous mentality.” I believe that this point of view cannot be left unchallenged, and that art has an important role to play in the struggle to define and redefine a contemporary African worldview. He who defines “the story” is the one who controls, and so we are engaged in a struggle to define for ourselves, thereby becoming masters of our own destiny.

In today’s African artists’ work we must: see the eyes and hands of the contemporary artist, looking anew, not at, but through the prism of an African aesthetic, speaking in a new world with the voices of the ancestors; voices for so long silenced; in doing so, their art will offer new generations the opportunity to look again with fresh eyes, to see themselves in new ways. The late Professor Stuart Hall wrote this for my inaugural solo exhibition in 1992; it is still relevant today, for me and for many artists of the African Diaspora.

Fowokan George Kelly (March 2024)

About Fowokan George Kelly

Born in Kingston Jamaica in 1943, Fowokan migrated to the UK in 1957, attending secondary school in Brixton where, among his teachers, was Stuart Hall (the late Professor). He became a sculptor after working as a musician, playing with several bands, including Symande. Whilst working as Jimmy Cliff’s sound engineer on his first tour of Nigeria, Fowokan encountered the wealth of sculptures from Benin and Nok. Returning to London, he decided to give up music and taught himself sculpting techniques. As his work gained attention and the quality of his technique improved, he adopted the Yoruba name, ‘Fowokan’, meaning ‘one who works with his hands’. Fowokan has exhibited widely including in the iconic group exhibitions of Black British Artists of the 1980s and 1990s and in their important group exhibition held at the Guildhall Art Gallery in 2015. By Invitation, Fowokan became a member of the Society of Portrait Sculptors, exhibiting in their annual exhibitions, as well as that of annual summer exhibitions held at the Royal Academy. Among his international exhibitions are the Cuban Biennale and the Studio Museum Harlem. Fowokan's works are held in private and public collections in the UK, Europe and the US. Fowokan also expresses his creativity through poetry, prose, photography and videography. His writings have been published and vignettes of his video documentaries have been shown on BBC Breakfast with several on YouTube. His works have featured on television: BBC (Artsnight 2014 and When I came to Britain part 4: 2004) and Chanel 4 (The Empire Pays Back 2005). The biography *Becoming Fowokan: The Life and Works of Fowokan George Kelly*, by Margaret Andrews, was published in January 2022.

NOTES TO EDITORS

Gallery address: **Felix & Spear, 71 St. Mary’s Road, London W5 5RG**

Exhibition Opening Hours: Wed – Fri 11.00 – 18.00, Sat - Sun 12.00 – 15.00

If you would like more information/images about this topic, please contact 020 8566 1574 / press@felixandspear.com

© 2024 Felix & Spear. All rights reserved.