



## The Daily Fool: Q&A with Auction artist D. Denenge Duyst-Akpem



*Featured Image: D. Denenge Duyst-Akpem, Super Space Riff. Photo credit: Matt Woods*

D. Denenge Duyst-Akpem is an Afro-Futurist space sculptor, performance artist, designer, and educator who meticulously constructs fantastical Afri-sci-fi narratives inhabited by hybrid creatures as representations of identity and beauty. She holds an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a BA from Smith College and is the recipient of awards and commissions including most recently a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship for the Institute on Black Aesthetics and Sacred Systems for which she joined leaders in the field as a scholar and a presenter on Afro-Futurism. Her work has been presented at Fe Gallery, Philadelphia, Art Loop Open, Chicago, THE LAB, NYC, the Museum of Contemporary Art and Hyde Park Art Center in Chicago, among many others. Hyde lives and works in Chicago.

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Jefferson Pinder (also a Chicago-based artist) selected Duyst-Akpem's "Wan Chuku's Mystical African Yam Mound" for the 2017 WPA Auction Gala.



*Wan Chuku's Mystical, 2017, African Yam Mound, 25 x 18 x 8 in.*

**What is the most important object in your studio?**

My sewing machine is the most important tool in my studio. I have used it to create all of my costumes, custom interior design projects, and sculptures, and it is most precious to me because it was a gift from my mother in 1994. It is not the fanciest or most streamlined model, but it's metal--newer versions are often plastic--which means good quality and long-lasting. It gets the job done. When I use it, I feel close to her, and it reminds me of how much she inspired and supported my artistic practice from childhood through the present.

### Which artists have had the biggest impact on your practice?



My work spans installation, sculpture, and performance in the areas of site-specific commissions, interior design, and science fiction. The overarching connection is an interest in "space sculpting" which refers to understanding how we move through, interact with, and can shape spaces and objects within them as transformational acts. So I am inspired by and most impacted by artists whose work addresses the body in performance and interaction with audiences--such as Marina Abramovic and Adrian Piper--and also those who honor indigenous traditions in the creation of tailored objects and spaces that evoke history, memory, and future visions. Ilse Crawford, founder of Elle Decor UK and the Department of Man and Wellbeing at Eindhoven Academy in the Netherlands, is one of my favorite designers. I also am impacted by traditional Tiv artistic practices from Kwagh-hir social theatre to textile weaving. Yinka Shonibare, Magdalene Odundo, Moyo Okediji, and Octavia Butler have also had significant impact on my artistic practice and within my teaching. For costuming, exquisite craft and conceptual vision, Eiko Ishioka, renowned Academy Award-winning costume designer, is hands-down my favorite.

### Tell us something surprising about the work you will exhibit.

The whimsical form and quality of *Wan Chuku's Mystical African Yam Mound* is directly connected to my childhood in Tivland and reading *The Lorax*. I teach and study Afro-Futurism and so much of my work is connected to science fiction as a mode of manifestation and transformation. The paint mixture on top of the yam mound is meant to evoke an indigenous libation for prosperity and protection.

### Why is WPA -- and organizations like it -- important?

WPA provides a space for art appreciation and support. It brings a diverse range of artists together under one banner, creating a vision of what art can be and connecting collectors and art appreciators. It provides essential networks, threads and tentacles that link us together and show us how large we can be, how connected we are. Organizations like this are crucial to the celebration and support of the arts, especially in our current climate where national arts funding is being stripped away. WPA reminds us by its very presence that the arts matter, artists matter, collectors matter. Together, our stories matter and shape the next phase and generation; we shape the new world.

### What is your most memorable April Fools joke/prank?

I don't really have an April Fools prank but as an oldest child, I remember a number of pranks of my younger siblings over the years. One was that I would lightly squint my eyes so I could just barely see though my eyelashes but it looked as if my eyes were closed. Then I would tell my siblings that I had X-ray vision through my eyelids. That one they believed for quite a while...

### Do you have a website where we can see other examples of your work?

[www.denenge.net](http://www.denenge.net)