

WORKING ARTIST | SCULPTOR FUNLOLA COKER

'I'm building a world,' says sculptor Funlola Coker

The artist, originally from Lagos, roots her sculptures in the tangible practices of traditional crafts

By **Cate McQuaid** Globe Correspondent, Updated November 18, 2024, 7:00 a.m.



Sculptor Funlola Coker, from Lagos, Nigeria, creates dreamlike installations that draw on Yoruba cosmology and Afro-futurism. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

he sculptures [Funlola Coker](#) makes spring from her childhood in Lagos, Nigeria, and her Yoruban heritage.

T “It’s looking at a memory through touch,” she told the Globe during a studio visit at the Boston Center for the Arts. “We do that with food, with taste and smell. It makes sense that you would be able to do that with texture.”

Coker, who won a \$15,000 [Boston Artadia Award](#) from the nationwide nonprofit Artadia in October, isn’t simply a sculptor. Her pieces have prompted her to write a mythic narrative and to create a [Yoruba alphabet](#) that’s based on gestures made in the Indigenous dance [Bata](#).

“They don’t necessarily all have to work together at the same time or in the same way,” she said. “But I’m finding that they do.”



A table containing some of Coker's projects, along with objects that inspire her. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

Where to find her: www.funlolacoker.com

Age: 35

Originally from: In Lagos, Coker grew up in a household of artists, and she immigrated to the United States as a teen to attend Memphis College of Art.

Lives in: Beverly and Roslindale.

Making a living: [Artist and Educator in Residence](#) at Montserrat College of Art.



"The Gathering Table," with pewter highlights, was inspired by Coker's childhood spent around a low table listening to her brother read stories by candlelight. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

Studio: Coker moved into her BCA studio in September. Her sculpture “The Gathering Table” is on the floor, a low terra-cotta-colored piece with glittering ribbons of molten pewter. Smaller artworks, sculptural gestures, and inspirational items sit on tables and hang on walls: textiles from home, experiments in copper, alabaster sculptures. Her fictional world is charted on a stretch of brown paper on the wall.

“As I was thinking about all of these pieces,” she said, “I was like, ‘Oh, I’m building a world. It makes sense that I would have a character who’s navigating through this space, trying to figure out who they are.’”



Coker works by the windows in her new studio. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

How she started: After college, Coker made jewelry and sold it at craft fairs for eight years. But what she made didn't satisfy her.

“I started having these thoughts and feelings about sharing my identity and contributing that to society, and seeing how that actually could affect change,” she said.

She went to grad school at the State University of New York at New Paltz in 2020. There, “I started to feel like I *am* an artist. I wasn't just fiddling around,” she said. “It felt necessary to my survival.”



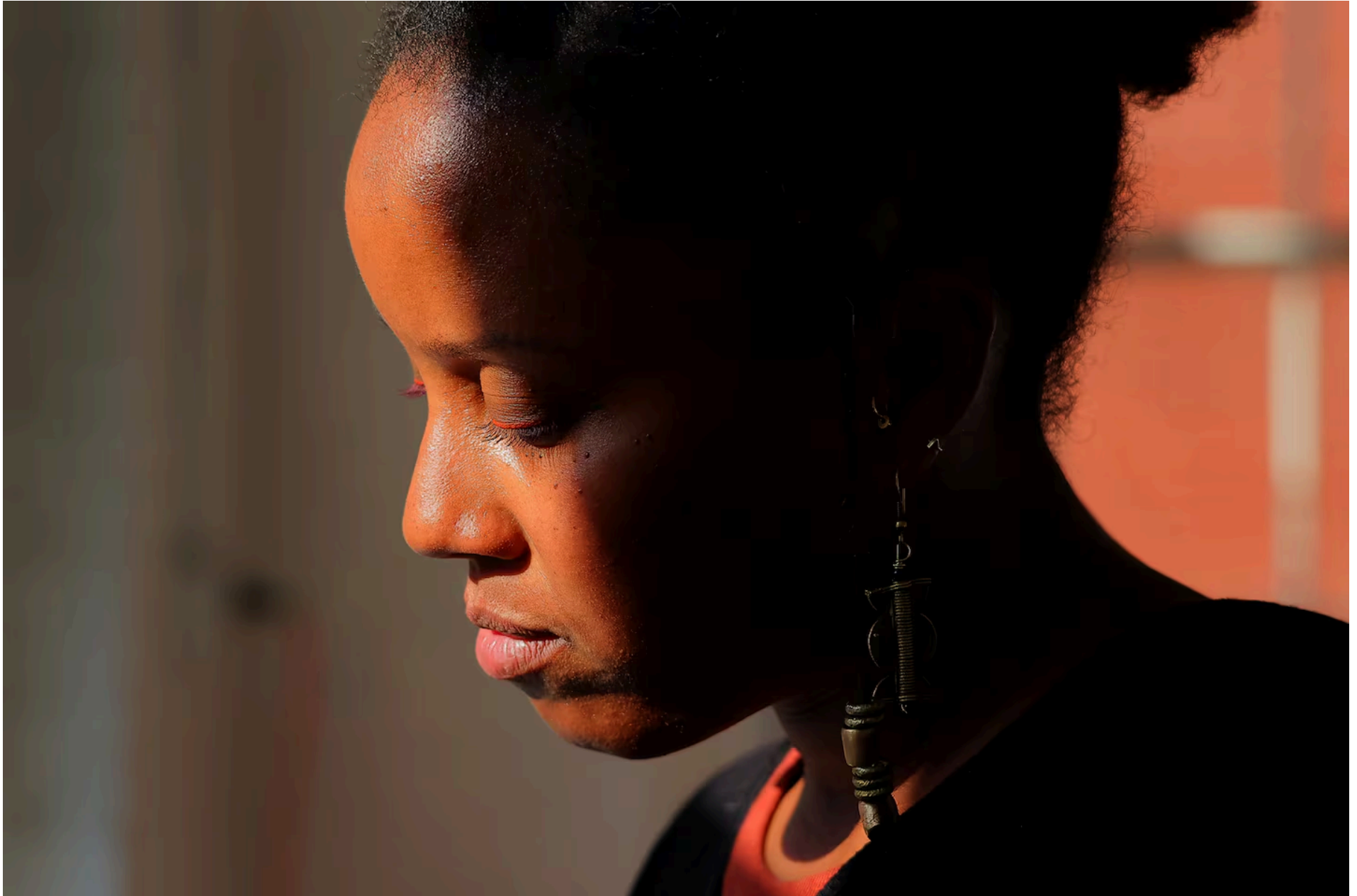
Coker crafting a vessel series called "Igba" (calabash). She makes wax braids and fuses copper onto them using electroforming, then melts the wax. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

What she makes: Coker roots her sculptures in the tangible practices of traditional crafts — first and foremost, metalsmithing.

“I love moving this material that seems impossible to move, understanding the basics of its molecular structure,” she said. “What happens when you heat it up? What happens when you hammer it for too long? It’s a conversation with the material you can have in silence.”

How she works: “You’re sitting at your bench forever, working on this one thing, and all of a sudden it’s speaking to you, telling you, ‘This is what I am. This is what I want to be,’” Coker said.

Advice for artists: “Being able to persist through all the challenges is key,” she said. “Finding people who will tell you not to give up, because that’s always in the back of your mind, especially in the beginning. Know that your contribution to the world is valid.”



Coker works on a new piece. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

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