

CELEBRATING DILIGENCE WITH KELANI ABASS

Experience nurtures creativity in the human as a fabricator of things. In the same vein the thing fabricated usually becomes a metaphor as it bears witness to the time it was made. The fabricated thing within the chronicles of cultural history remains intrinsic to the human in constant struggle with self to understand the world of experience. The proclamation, which Kelani Abass (b.1979) makes in his recent collection of works carefully titled “Man and Machine” is deftly pointed to the values of experience, the things experience beget and the knowledge they incubate. For, he declares; “I created ‘Man and Machine’ from my experience in my father’s printing press where I worked for years as a machine operator before gaining admission into an art school.”

But contained in the above declaration is the fusion of thoughts which Abass presents in his understanding of Walter Benjamin’s (1892-1940) essay entitled *The Art-work in the Age of Technical Reproductions*. Benjamin, a German literary scholar and cultural critic who belongs to the Frankfurt school, became famous for his exposition on the material conditions that aid artistic productions.

But central to Benjamin’s thoughts were his premonitions regarding the fate of the work of art with the invention of diverse technical devices that now tamper with the cultic value of the work of art; converting the work of art to objects of common property. Of value to Benjamin’s work is the redefinition of the aesthetic canons that held the genres of architecture, sculpture and painting as worthy of art historical discourse. By the time Benjamin was writing his essay, the above art historical restriction had become obsolete as the world of man-made things once again became of value to the understanding of culture in its totality.

Abass has read Walter Benjamin’s book and he is so enthused by it that he lodges his inspiration in the content and context of the book. Abass’ thematic frame focused on the way the human’s stand-in product - the machine – means more than a surrogate is a pivotal statement that re-accords cultural value to the object. Hence, in this exhibition I appropriate his work within the frames which Benjamin’s ideas propose. In a way it could be taken that these works are his interpretation of Benjamin’s text eulogizing humanity’s ingenuity at inventing devices as stand-ins that enhance life’s diverse purposes.

Abass studied painting at the College of Technology, Yaba, Lagos, graduating in 2007. He has diverse bodies of work that define an artist that seethes with enthusiasm at maximizing experiential knowledge. In Sir Joshua Reynolds’ *Discourses* delivered while he was President of the Royal Academy of Art, London, he regularly stressed the importance of intellectual pursuits and attention to principles, as well as the synthesis of *observations* and *experiences* of others, to the creation of art (mine emphasis). By the above enunciation, which I hold dear to an artist who

aspires to make a mark in his or her profession must be drenched in diverse experiences that govern his or her environment in the diverse form in which they occur. Giorgio Vasari equally in *The Life of Artists* had noted Paolo Uccello's disregard of visual experience for theoretical underpinnings of the mathematics of perspective, noting that such focus amounts to squandering time and energy and chocking the mind with difficult problems and often enough turning a fertile mind into something sterile and labored.

It is not out of place thus to observe with Abass the strength that defines his forms. Beyond this vigor is their unique identity. In the series "Man and Machine," an installation with sound effects of the printing machine at work, we encounter a series that are analogous to one another in terms of their conceptual framing. In all, a consistency attends to them in the way machine parts; especially, the wheel, which resonates in them calls attention to how our mechanized world mimics the human as a configuration of parts that work in harmony and where all parts are respectively important. Thus man as a template to the machine as Abass underscores asks that we celebrate industriousness and thanks to the technological man. The indices that articulate this understanding in the works here is their presentation either as triptych or diptych. In the segmentations that characterize these works a willful collaboration of these disparate parts is harmoniously constructed.

In the composition entitled *Man and machine* (a diptych), an extended rectangular plane that is broken into two unequal segments that are bonded by a cluster of wheels and gear systems connected by a spool. On the cluster in the left an arm is located as if pulling on the spindle while another arm engages the gear on the right. In this mixed media composition a newspaper clip is attached with the text "Hi-Tech" conspicuous on it. The composition is dominantly tilted to neutral gray but with a disjointed splatter of the hue of red, blue and green that create an ornate field of colours. *Man and Machine IV* (a triptych), replicates the above composition in its orientation. However, it is proportionately segmented into three fields that are bonded again with the emblems of technology, which acquire a different orientation. This composition also has text materials attached that hint at the story of printing. Its colour composition simulates paper. Other compositions in this installation are *Man and Machine I* and *Man and Machine II* (both of diptych configurations). The consistency in these compositions in terms of style is central to their appreciation.

The above compositions underscore the passion of the artist as one who was previously engaged in the trade of printing. Valuing his vocation before his formal training as a visual artist points rather to one who remains mindful of his erstwhile trade – printing. In this regard, the way these metaphors cue into collective consciousness deserve brief evaluation. Knowledge has been enhanced greatly with the invention of the printing technology in its most rudimentary beginnings, altering as it were, a sole dependence on memory and allowing for excavation of

printed materials in the search for the reality that govern past histories of our seeming familiar civilization. While the above value remains primary, there is a way Benjamin's attention to technical reproducibility, though of the artwork, impacts on the vulgarization of knowledge.

The artist calls attention to the deliberate segmentations of his panels into triptych and diptych to highlight the interface between opposing and or opposite states of consciousness. One of Benjamin's focuses in his treatise was the way printing technology sought to re-integrate art into life by altering its institutional value as an object that was exclusive culturally. Even the appropriation of ready-mades by artists of the period, especially Marcel Duchamp remains instructive regarding the promptings of the age of machine.

One phenomenon that the works on exhibition here evoke and which they share with the machine age is the wheel, gear and spool. Added to this is the hue that grounds the compositions and their unique application, which provides a common template for them.

We are thus presented with a seamless transformation in an installation of diverse subjects that is central to humanity's native obsession to create prime objects and at the same time replicate them. The above value is where knowledge and its vulgarization remain of value to humanity.

To appreciate the depth these images are targeted at the accompanying sound that foregrounds the experience of printing machines in their ecology is a device Abass deploys for us to celebrate human industriousness.

I urge us to be as inspired as Kelani Abass asks from us to commemorate diligence and assiduousness; they are virtues on which human history thrives.

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