

REMEMBERING TO REMEMBER: OBJECTS OF HISTORY AND MEMORY:

KELANI ABASS IN DISCUSSION WITH ODUN ORIMOLADE

OO: Kelani, this new body of work highlights an area of interest that has followed your trajectory for the last few years. What is this particular body about?

KA: This exhibition comprises of two body of works, Casing History and Stamping History. They highlight the importance of family Heritage and History, cultural characteristics, national belonging, fashion and social prominence as well as the role of archives in the making of African history. In so doing they question how memory is shaped through archival materials.

OO: Memory and the archive are compatibles they influence one another in different ways. In which way does your work attempt to question the way in which archives shape or affect our memory?

KA: Art is a perfect tool to use in questioning archives as they hold the evidence of what has happened before, they are a means to recover the 'truth' about the past. Memory is embedded in archives and it falters without archives. I am questioning the way in which remembrance is structured – outside the human faculty of memory - from oral to written to print to electronic memory and harnessing the visual power of remembering as a way of intersecting the past, present and future.

OO: There is an obvious engagement with the history of printing in the works which seems tied to looking back in order to see the present. This also gives a feel of the manual participation in the mechanism of the printing process.

KA: The passage of time is obvious in each piece, dating back to nearly five hundred years from the middle of the 15th century to the 1950s, when the majority of typesetting was done with a type made of metal. Until the end of the 19th century, printers typically would purchase fonts (complete sets of type) of particular styles and sizes from a type founder in quantities sufficient to accomplish the job at hand.

As letterpress printing inexorably gave way to offset lithography during the 20th century, the need for hot-metal typesetting diminished and the cases were no longer useful.

With these outdated cases, I re-appropriate the use of the letterpress type-case by replacing the letters in each box (measuring 3x4cm, 3x9cm, 6x9cm and 6x13) with archival images from family albums, an archival book written between the 1920s and 1970s, old post cards and Photographs from autobiographies.

OO: 'You use the cases as the art work. Your family archival piece. The value and use of the object is consistent in communicating metaphor. The turns from the yellow books tucked into the boxes are very interesting, what are they about? What is their story? And how do they play here in the arrangement of collected items within the boxes?

KA: The book constitutes seventy years of my family history with recordings of events, child births, deaths, traditional invocations, orthodox prescriptions and autobiographies. The compilation of the book was started by my grandfather and later transferred to my father, who added personal collections gathered from his friends, bonded them together, and then passed on to me. The book represents the imagery and the voices of people that were part of the compilation of a History in which their faces could not be represented.

OO: The presentation of the elements arranged in the box pieces suggest a display of the ambiguous characteristics of archiving in itself with ideas of keeping versus putting away and preservation versus allocation of points of reference. There is something seductively suggestive about how the objects which happen to also be the images are placed. Is there a method to the actions, situations and emotions that inform the process of keeping in the display box?

KA: In type cases, there are spaces for capital and small letters, I deliberately allocate single portrait for capital and group pictures for small letter spaces, because of the role that each of them play in the composition of manuscripts. I realize that the part that capital letters play in making a sentence is less significant to that of small letters. In essence, the impact we make individually cannot be compared to what we can achieve collectively, I left some spaces empty without attaching any image thus representing those period we ran short of letters in the process of typesetting.

OO: Would it be appropriate to think that in discussing the shaping of memory you address the effects of memory on the present?

KA: My Art focuses on archival materials, archivists have an awareness of the societal, institutional and individual construction of memory and an understanding of the implication of how that memory is represented and transmitted overtime. This awareness becomes increasingly important for me, as more of the world's collections are reformatted and represented. It is important to keep hold of evidence in time and over time through my practice.

OO: In the body of work there is a recurrence of portraits, in groups and as singles. What were the modalities for the selections?

KA: The recurrence of pictures were purposely positioned to represents the misplaced types in the process of redistribution in letterpress printing.

Some of the images werebrought by clients to be used for diverse purposes; for some, to enhance their position in the society by stamping their best look in the middle of an almanac or Calendar, for some, to express grief or to celebrate their dead by putting their faces on obituaries, posters or showcasing their entire lifestyle in autobiographies. Another function would be to celebrate the beginning of another life; invariably referencing the entire community and their involvement and placement in history making.

OO: There is also this different set of works epitomized by the number print stamps. The very personal action of lifting and stamping feels much like something that has been ingrained at some point in the past. Would the action of the process have a direct relation to your past experience?

KA: These works are actually inspired by memory of a letterpress printing using a manual digital hand numbering machine to number documents; I can recollect that after school hours, my father would give me thousands of client's receipts and invoices to number continuously, that became a regular practice for me and my siblings.

OO: This is the Stamping History?

KA: Yes, in this body of work I use this numbering machine as a drawing tool to generate images from the archive, stamping side by side and overlapping numbers in creating density. I utilize the numbers starting from zero till infinity which for me is the best way to understand time.

OO: I find it interesting that you are generating new imagery from the stamping tool, a printing tool that becomes the subject of your narrative as opposed to using imagery from the archive. The resulting visuals are new information inspired by old photographs for example in the case of the stamped numbers on the invoice or receipts that you must have worked on endlessly. Is there anything related to domestic ritual in this with the counting, numbering and ordering to create a familiar image to the eye and mind?

KA: The act of stamping in the mark making process connotes one of continuous and repetitive activity. To be emphatic about a mark and to keep score at the same time through the numbering process, it testifies to contact between one and the machine. In the process of stamping there were periods I felt like speeding up time, or look for something that could just roll over it and make impressions on the paper for me, because of the enormity of the work, but I am constantly reminded of what I want to accomplish.

OO: As such it becomes a memory making device not so?

KA: Yes, most especially because of its ability to keep a record of time.

OO: In this way the numbering machine becomes something of a sort of Ex-votos. As much as they are deeply entrenched in experiences, emotions, memories and sensory awareness, they can also be objective in their role as element in an art work. Would you look at printing actions, tools and objects in your work as agents?

KA: At some point in our lives, we must expect innovations to transform the technique of our practice, thus affecting what we create positively; I see these printing tools and the idea of letterpress as an agent of transformation.

OO: You have such a strong relation to printing in material, techniques and imagery, could you tell me about your connection to it?

KA: Printing history has been a major influence on my work today, alongside a research on my family's autobiography in relation to socio-cultural realities of my community using archival resources gathered from my family's collection. I was born in Abeokuta South-west Nigeria in 1979 into a family with a tradition of letterpress printing, typewriting and shorthand. As a child, I remembered helping my parents out in manually completing' jobs and creating designs to be used for "offset printing", a technique that bridges the gap between analogue and digital printing.

OO: This collection seems to be a walk through your family dynasty, a walk through generations that would resonate with anyone. There is quite an expanse of information to consume on your life in relation to the print industry...

KA: Yes, the collection includes family photographs, posters, calendars, invitations, old type cases, movable types, hand numbering machines, old metal casts, post cards, woodblocks, and a hand written book that I mentioned earlier.

OO: You oscillate within themes of your personal history and the memories of yourself and others on what has brought you to this point and used them in your expressions....

KA: Actually since 2010, my interest has been on time and memory. I employ a wide range of media including drawings, paintings, photography and installations, exploring the possibilities inherent in painting, photography and printing to highlight personal stories against the background of social and political events.

OO: Would you say that the intimate thoughts which make up your history that have become tools for questioning and engaging how art affects public memory and memory of others are driven by triggers?

KA: My tools are stimulus that recall memories, the more momentous a story or event is in the history of a community, the more it is likely to be included in the collective memory of its people.

The body of works and discussing objects, memory and Remembering reiterates how impactful objects are in our lives in how we use them as mechanisms to navigate our own feelings, memories and how we move forward. They communicate to us non verbally and help us to comprehend our experiences and inculcated history. They are anchors for our memories that create connections for us with others in their own experiences, memories and history. Inadvertently giving meaning to what we do and how we come up with our norms and eccentricities.

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