

In Time for History

The work of Kelani Abass is not the figurative painting, which reflects a common practice of art making, or an embellished craft. In the aforementioned processes, images of contemporary moments fuse with photorealistic painting techniques. At best, such ventures end as commercially viable products and evidence of admirable skill. An artist with noteworthy technical ability, Abass has departed from the beginnings that might have otherwise led him down this mainstream path. And instead, he has chosen to explore an approach that embraces his gift for creating representational forms, while questioning the mediums with which to conceive and present images. The results carry meaning, both in the content referenced and the methods used. Their significance lies with the artist and his personal, family history, but also as evidence of collective histories to which a larger public can relate.

The content in this presentation is a continuation of an earlier exhibition, 'Àsìkò: Evoking Personal Narratives and Collective History', which was exhibited at the Centre for Contemporary Art Lagos (CCA Lagos) in 2013. It followed 'Man and Machine', a solo-exhibition at Omenka Gallery. This 2011 showing was arguably the first exhibition that sought to unpack the artist's unique history of working in a printing press as a child. Together, the featured works merged contemporary art with commercial printing skills, which he learnt from his father in the 1980s. At the CCA Lagos, an interactive typewriter installation, and meticulous paintings of printing machines and fonts, meandered among family photographs. The latter were created using new, digital technologies for printing images on canvas. Abass then added hand-painted time stamps and crop marks to each image. Additionally, as a part of this 2013 exhibition, the artist presented a book that includes dates of deaths and births in his family, love potion recipes, herbal panaceas, other words of wisdom and *jùjú*¹. These works at the CCA Lagos began to outline, render and organize the archive that has become central to his practice and expands in this new body of work.

As this current exhibition unveils new details of the artist's personal experience, a diachronic axis persists that connects Abass's past to more recent modes of production. Deepening his engagement with the previously described subject matter, the featured portraits have increased in number and are presented in drastically different scales. The tiniest images are just smaller than passport photographs. Another group comprises approximately 4 x 5 inch prints, as one might imagine these portraits were produced decades ago. The largest set is nearly life size. With all of these, the artist introduces more information that broadens the viewers' scope of his ancestry. As he continues to reveal and enrich this personal archive, he also constructs a window into histories of industrialization.

The most lucid example of this modern trope is Abass's appropriation of wooden cases. These were once used to hold characters configured for letterpress typesetting. For those unfamiliar with these objects, their peculiar structure of grids and metal handles indicate that they once had a specific purpose. As their organizing letterpress fonts has become

¹ Translation: *jùjú* – a Yorùbá word for the evocation of powers connected to a traditional Yorùbá belief system.

outmoded in an era of computerized graphics, such manual tools are being discarded by printers; elsewhere, similar artifacts might have become the subject of a historical display. Abass addresses the need to preserve these items by collecting and revisiting them through visual art. He titles each case as *Casing History*, and assigns a different number to each of them. The numbering differentiates unique layouts where distinct images are carefully placed into the now vacant case compartments. With this gesture, the artist addresses a void in the appreciation of printing histories. In addition, he continues to expand the content that grounds his practice.

Casing History 4 (2016) features various portraits, all of which showcase uncalibrated palettes of grayscale, sepia, and greens, which indicate the images were both taken and produced many years ago. The afro hairstyles and clothing depicted—bell-bottom pants and patterned, Nigerian styles of *bùbá àti sòkòtò*, *bùbá at'iró*, *filà*, and *gèlè*, suggest that the images are from the mid-twentieth century². The grid in this work separates passport style portraits, which are concentrated towards the right, from photographs in the middle of the frame that feature more than one person. Here, collisions of patterns indicate solidarity between family members and friends. And they bring to mind the work of Malian photographer Seydou Keita. The collaged fabric patterns, an aesthetic that Keita's work embellished, appears throughout these portraits produced by his contemporaries. These photographers' works, as presented by Abass, congeal into one object. As the grid of the case bifurcates images, and subtle hues and contrasts distinguish one image from the next, a community created by individuals is apparent.

In *Casing History 4* (2016), all of the images appear at the same level, just beneath the wooden grid. To contrast, *Casing History 1* (2016) has images imbedded into the case at different depths. Some images are set deep into the compartments of the grid and overlaid by shadows, created by the sides of their compartments. Others are positioned as close to the viewer as possible, and at the same position as those of *Casing History 4* (2016). Then there are the images that hover between these two positions. The variation of depth in *Casing History 1* situates the images in foregrounds, middle grounds, and backgrounds, adding dimension to the work. This placement might be considered as an extension of the artist's training as a painter, where many grounds create *trompe l'oeil* interpretations of three dimensions. The apparent relationship is further emphasized as each *Casing History* work is installed as a painting.

In both *Casing History 1* (2016) and *Casing History 4* (2016) the images become a language unto themselves. Each compartmentalized photograph is a mark that connects to other presented images, and also to font sizes, punctuation, language, and legibility in pixels of handwriting. Passport style portraits dominate the sections once used for uppercase characters and punctuation marks. The places that once held lower case letters are filled with group images, which document communal activities including burials, weddings, and

² Translations: *bùbá àti sòkòtò* - top and trousers worn by men; *bùbá at'iró* - top and wrapper skirt worn by women; *filà* - cap worn by men; *gèlè* - head tie worn by women

other *ówàmbè* parties³. Imagine if one were to try and compose a sentence with these images, based on the characters that once occupied the case. It would begin with a passport format photograph, followed by examples of collective histories, and then end with a passport format photograph. The sequence becomes a metaphor for life. Each individual is born unique and shaped by those encountered along life's journey. The end—death, is singular, lonely and finite.

It is such details of life that compose the hand-written book of family history, which the artist inherited, and reproduces in these cases. The compilation was started by Abass's grandfather, the first owner of the book, and then built upon by the artist's father who collected some of the included information from friends. Like the communal structure displayed in the portraits of people in groups, its many pages represent a shared history. The metal and wood that border images of excerpts from this book and other photographs become windows into pasts. And these are rich in detailed traditions of celebration and spiritual mysticism that are still embraced today. They emphasize the individual stories on which history is built and the role of Abass, an individual who has chosen to use his present to share the past anew. Surely, this work is building a narrative. As with history, it is infinitely additive and progressive. This perception of time segues into another addition of historicized matter in this exhibition—the stamp once used to number the invoices at the artist's father's business.

(Stamping History) Making Time 1 (2016) is one of two ambitious works in which Abass reproduces one of the group images in *Casing Histories* at an enormous scale. The size of this work is especially admirable when compared to its reference image. Taken from *Casing Histories 5* (2016), this image features an *òyìnbó* centred among Yoruba celebrants⁴. Drawn with different, overlapping numbers generated by a hand numbering machine, the work of composing this image stands for time itself. Here, Abass creates a visual of time. The rendering is evidence of the many days invested in its creation, but also of the many invoices the artist once generated with this tool. And by using this machine, the artist folds the stamper and its resulting imprint into the span of his practice. In this context, the significance of the object endures beyond that of purely functional objects, which are continually replaced or transmogrified as time passes.

The notion of objects made futile connects to the size 10-font in which this text is typed. It is the exact size of the size 10-font type that Abass once memorized, picked from cases, and manually arranged as text. He presents one such functional font in this exhibition. Viewers are invited to interact with it and thereby come to know the labour once invested to create printed text. This installation in particular brings to mind histories made obsolete by relentless evolution. It highlights an era of production, where the human hand was much closer to machines, and machines were more reliant on human beings. In the context of this work, it also points to a post colonial area where those colonized are empowered by,

³ Translation: *ówàmbè* – a large, celebratory party in Yorùbáland, which often brings together a large number of persons, which include family and friends of the celebrant. These parties often have colors of the day and fabric selected, and at times designed, specifically for the celebration.

⁴ Translation: *òyìnbó* – foreigner

and continue to reinvent the tools of their colonizers. Those liberated embrace an independence that enables the innovation demonstrated in this body of work. The historicized era of this exhibition is close to the one in which the artist's colleague, Abraham Oghobase, has found new meaning.

Abass continues to uncover means of appropriating tools and tangible references that would otherwise have been buried by their successors. His resulting work demonstrates how this contemporary moment can be enriched with handiwork abandoned for the sake of progress. It invites questions of work ethic sacrificed for expedited executions, and of possibly accommodating the two. Beyond creating this archive of what once was, and a nostalgic homage to labour of the past, the artist's work also reminds viewers of the personal memories encapsulated in an object. It excavates stories that can be told in describing how the featured objects were once used. And perhaps most importantly, this body of work suggests that the import and relevance of history might begin with the realities of the present.

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