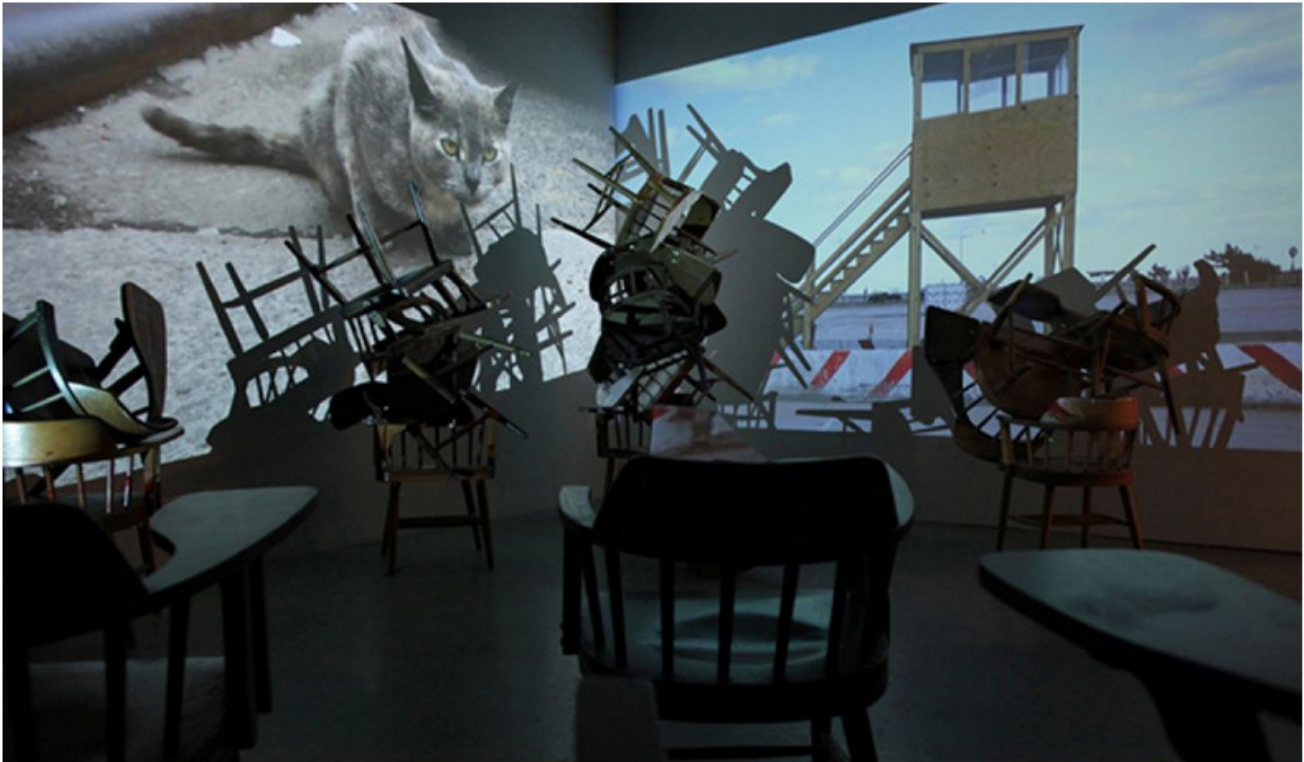


BLOUINARTINFO

January 29th, 2014

A Story Grows in Brooklyn: Kambui Olujimi's "A Life in Pictures",
Thea Ballard, Blouin Art Info, 1/2<http://bit.ly/1h1HX5n>

Installation view of "We Became Statues" (2013)
(Courtesy the Artist)



From the February 2014 issue
of Modern Painters

"It starts with biography." Kambui Olujimi is sitting in a front-row pew of an otherwise empty church in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, across the street from the house where he was born and raised. Currently between studios, he thought this would be an appropriate location to show me some new pieces: "Most of the work comes from a world outside of the art market," he says. "I grew up on this block. I thought it was fitting to have studio visits around where the work comes from."

Olujimi has neatly arranged a selection of around 200 photos—primarily 4-by-6-inch prints of the kind one has developed at a drugstore photo lab—in stacks on a small table. This represents a sampling of the evolving collection that recently went on view at MIT's List Visual Arts Center as part of his installation *A Life in Pictures*. The premise of the project, previously staged in 2012 at New York's Apexart, is this: Olujimi brings 1,200 photos from his own life to the gallery, which has been converted into a sort of homey communal space (at Apexart, he built shelves, wallpapered the room, and added tables decorated with printed tablecloths). Visitors are asked to bring a photo of their own, which they then trade for one of his. "As it moves, there's a kind of genetic or biographical splicing that happens," he explains. In the end, "some of them are my photos, some of them aren't. The authorship is blurred, which is interesting to me."

What begins as Olujimi's own life in pictures, so to speak, gives way to any number of new stories, the exchange of which is fostered by the installation's setup. As we thumb through photos—a plaza in Cuba, a close-up of a very broken toenail, innumerable pet portraits—he plays archival interviews culled from the project's Apexart staging, which he describes with a list of ad-hoc titles: "Dead birds, Carlos tattoos, polish beach, rich people table"; he's as amused by the irreverence of what he's collected as he is genuinely curious about how these photos came to be.

BLOUINARTINFO

January 29th, 2014

A Story Grows in Brooklyn: Kambui Olujimi's "A Life in Pictures",
Thea Ballard, Blouin Art Info, 2/2<http://bit.ly/1h1HX5n>

Kambui Olujimi (Photo by Anna Sacramento)

Many of Olujimi's projects seem to begin with stories, though their grounding in personal or political histories is almost always swiftly upended by his interest in their intersection with myth and magic—"exposing incongruities and spaces where third things happen," he says. He tells me about blackouts and riots in 1977 on nearby Broadway and the Larry Davis manhunt in 1986, both referenced in his collage series *The Clouds Are After Me* (2007–09); the dance-a-thons of the 1920s and '30s, which he builds on in various iterations of his performance *Finding and Forgetting* (2011–12); the numerology-driven dream books with titles like *Blackjack*, *Lady Luck*, and *Lucky 7* that are sold in Brooklyn corner stores, of which he created his own version in 2007. His two-channel video installation *We Became Statues*, 2013, revisits the Willowbrook State School—an over-crowded New York institution for disabled children that was the scene of scandal after whistle-blowing visits from Robert F. Kennedy and Geraldo Rivera in 1965 and '72, respectively—through a juxtaposition of images of the city and the now-closed school, a mix of abstract and figurative, contemporary and historical, narrated by his "guardian angel," Catherine Arline, a city employee who worked at the institution. School chairs are stacked in towering clusters in front of the projected videos,

disrupting the images. Emphasizing site, a recurring method in Olujimi's practice, the piece causes viewers to negotiate the space of the room and their own presence in it. And, he adds, in the installation "the image is like a sunset happening behind the shadow. You start to see it as an object." The abstraction deployed here as a formal tool mirrors the process of human abstraction that Arline describes in her retelling of her time at Willowbrook.

Something emerges as well from the tension between historical and contemporary in the overall narrative Olujimi has woven. "We live in this mud-muck of time, where I'm sitting in a chair that's a hundred years old, with somebody I just met today, with things that I'm going to make in the future," he says of our encounter. "I want to collapse time. I want there to be a simultaneity of time in the things that I make."

Most recently, he has taken an interest in the notion of self-immolation, looking to the Arab Spring and 13th-century monks' affirmations, as well as an incident during the recent government shutdown in which a man lit himself on fire on the National Mall. "In the few photos taken, he looks like an African-American man, which is so counterintuitive in some respects," he explains. "Traditionally, that sacrifice is predicated on a valuing, and historically, there has been a devaluing of African-American bodies, and therefore you don't have those kinds of sacrificial gestures." New works in progress exploring this idea include figurative ink drawings that show torsos turning to plumes of smoke or the near absence of a body dissolving into blackness; smaller sculptural experiments take the form of charred photographs, faces carved out by flame—the so-called third space, perhaps the ideas that fill in the absence of a body: "Right now I'm interested in this idea of transforming a body into just energy. What is that space? What's this sort of place of sacrificing?"



A Polaroid traded by Stan Shallabarger for Olujimi's rainbow snapshot at "A Life in Pictures," Apexart, May 2012.

Taking its place within "a tradition, a legacy, an economy, that's outside of the art market," Olujimi's work possesses a warmth, even an empathy, for the viewer. The open invitation to become a part of his *Life in Pictures* extends outward, offering, in varied forms, a nuanced worldview that's dense with stories.