

Kapwani Kiwanga:
Flowers for Africa
Or Gallery, Vancouver
Sept. 9 — Oct. 14, 2017
by Karina Irvine

Flowers for Africa, an exhibition by Kapwani Kiwanga and organized by Kathleen Ritter at the Or Gallery in Vancouver, showcases nine floral designs. Each design rests on its own plinth, representing the moment when an African country gained independence from colonial rule.

Looking through photographs and film footage of the celebratory events that took place in each country, Kiwanga's attention focused on the floral arrangements: on a speaker's lapel, a bouquet or a wreath. These arrangements are taken out of their original contexts — groups of people, grinning faces, microphones and shaking hands. They represent an archive as a physical corpus, not of humans but of plants, animated by duration as they lose their vibrancy and wither throughout the course of the exhibition. As with the physical photograph, this living and fictive archive resurrects the past while being vulnerable to its own temporal degradation — quickened in this case and questioning the lack of fixity a document really has. Kiwanga's act of selecting a single reoccurring element from a photograph or film still also brings to mind how history is a constructed discourse — in this case, recalling "celebrations" haunted by systems of oppression.

The context of this encounter is presented as a sort of showroom, brightly and evenly lit, with floral designs placed on plinths throughout the gallery space. A local florist was asked to interpret the photograph or film still chosen for each of the nine countries represented: Tunisia, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Algeria, Nigeria, Mozambique, Uganda, South Sudan, Tanganyika. Portrayed as documents, or witnesses of an event, these flowers similarly shape an experience. As if materialized from a photograph, they emphasize affect over what might otherwise be

seen as evidence, representing not a direct copy but an interpretation. Henry Fox Talbot, one of photography's pioneers, understood photography to represent similarity over sameness, where the interplay between fact and fiction becomes blurred. In this sense, perhaps it is more useful to think of them not as documents at all but as analogies, as described by Walter Benjamin in *Little History of Photography* (1931). Benjamin suggests that rather than thinking of the photograph as a facsimile, or exact representation, it is disclosive and concerned less with a stable image than with its development or, in the flowers' case, its regression. These floral arrangements are presented as documents in and of themselves, derived from photographs and film footage. But, they are unstable documents threatened by the processes of duration and a flower's natural inclination to dry up when cut from its source.

Kiwanga's taxonomic approach blurs the role of the archive, questioning representation, visibility and what constitutes the production of knowledge in exhibition display. Each arrangement in *Flowers for Africa* has been extracted from its historical context. In so doing, what can we understand from the event and those preceding it — the struggles, assassinations and coups that led to it, and after? How do these flowers function when removed from their surroundings? The absence of the political leaders affiliated with each country's Independence Day, bringing an accessory or background decoration to the fore, lends weight to the celebratory moment while acknowledging its presence as memorial.

Flowers for Mozambique, for instance, makes visible a floral decal tea cup, holding a small bouquet on a tall plinth just wide enough to accommodate its saucer. This is perhaps the most peculiar arrangement in the gallery space. Why a tea cup? The florist Kiwanga worked with saw in the grainy image for Mozambique a small indication of what could be a bone china tea cup and saucer. This process of moving from interpretation to representation demonstrates the ease with which material evidence can oblige different truths.

Mozambique gained its independence on June 25, 1975, following four centuries of Portuguese rule, becoming the People's Republic of Mozambique.

Kapwani Kiwanga, *Flowers for Africa* (installation view), 2017.
PHOTO: RACHEL TOPHAM. IMAGE COURTESY OF OR GALLERY.



Preceding this day was a decade of war between the guerrilla forces of the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) and Portuguese Armed Forces (PAF). At least 10 years were marked by village massacres, rape, mass murder, disease and starvation. It is in recognizing this history that the dried-up flowers occupy a position of remembrance, while also pointing to the vulnerability of memory. In Kiwanga's re-presentation, or resurrection of these flowers, we are reminded of these events and of the ongoing process of decolonization.

In *Flowers for Africa*, the relationship between the original photographs and the flowers they represent has been reversed: the photographic document is absent here, and so is its authority, the flowers take its place. With this gesture, Kiwanga underscores the instability of the photograph and emphasizes its affect by focusing on a reoccurring motif. The floral designs on display are impressions of introduced species, materialized from the ones seen in the photographs and film stills. If we begin to recognize that these objects are present and very real, as is made apparent through their degradation, we can, as Benjamin suggests, begin to redeem "what is" with "what was." With these flowers, the main question that persists is how it is that we can recognize and feel what is not made visible?

Karina Irvine is a writer based in Vancouver.

Prospect.4: *The Lotus in Spite of the Swamp* New Orleans Nov. 18 – Feb. 25, 2018 by Sylvie Fortin

Curated by Trevor Schoonmaker, *The Lotus in Spite of the Swamp* – the latest edition of the New Orleans Triennial – assembled works by 73 artists. While the works were presented in 17 venues around the city and across the Mississippi River in Algiers, the majority were concentrated in New Orleans's three predominant art institutions. Such institutional dependency significantly impacts Prospect.4's approach to display, with two strategies dominating: tightly confined solo presentations sequentially organized and easy juxtapositions relying on material resonance, formal play or thematic connections. The selection of artists, more diverse than prior editions of Prospect, was very promising yet the exhibition failed to mobilize the full meaning and potential of diversity. Too often, we are served up orthodoxies that arrest the potency of the works. This is all the more surprising in New Orleans, where cultures of display reign supreme.

Gracing the walls of the New Orleans Museum of Art's Great Hall, Barkley L. Hendricks' 11 portraits – black, beautiful, confident and in control – welcome viewers. Half of these works are from the mid-1970s, and half from the 2010s, confining Hendricks' five decades of practice to a familiar narrative arc that is also a current market favourite. The curator clearly intended to celebrate community and redress historical omissions with cool, matter-of-fact understatement, but the dynamics of the space trumped curatorial intention. Tightly squeezed between pilasters and often visually bisected by Ionic columns, the portraits are arrested, isolated and at times amputated. This great white-marble edifice of culture prevents the subjects from coming together – and with us – to issue a challenge. In addition, NOMA's Great Hall is a highly sought-after entertainment space. This means that Hendricks' works will unforgivably serve as a "cool" background for many weddings and corporate events. Elsewhere, Hendricks' still-life *Innocence and Friend* (1977) is installed amongst 15th-century works. While this type of intervention was once provocative and playfully critical, it has now devolved into curatorial fashion – an easy, convenient way to feign institutional self-reflexivity or innovative scholarship.

Ambivalent engagement with the collection continues upstairs, where we traverse permanent collection galleries to get to Dawit L. Petros' extraordinary *The Stranger's Notebook* (2016). Here, the juxtaposition is startling: after strolling through works by late-19th-century painters – paeans to modernity and industry, and portrayals of women in elaborate interiors tinged with orientalist fantasies – we arrive at Petros' photographs of contemporary migration. Petros' images displace the gaze – and the crisis – from the shores of the Mediterranean to the multiplicity and complexities of African departures. His figures look away, to unknowable distant shores. Some hold up a mirror on their shoulder, stressing both the burden and the need to deflect our gaze. They leave behind the wrecks of our modernity.

In *Historical Rupture* (2016), 12 prints of various sizes are clustered on two adjoining walls, from floor