

Kambui Olujimi



PROGRESSIVE. ALTERNATIVE.

'Zulu Time' reflects systems' control of people

By Michael Muckian

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SF

248 Utah Street
SF, CA 94103
+ 415 399 1439

NY

313 W 14th Street 2F
New York, NY
By appointment only

WEB

www.cclarkgallery.com



The first thing you notice when entering *Zulu Time* — the new installation by artist Kambui Olujimi at the [Madison Museum of Contemporary Art](#) — are the handcuffs.

Their presence is at first subtle, almost obscured by the lengthy ropes of colorful costume jewelry of which they are a part. Some are single cuffs, while others appear in the familiar pairs used to restrain individuals, often by law enforcement. Most are standard silver, but the more attractive ones are lacquered shiny black.

For the Brooklyn-born African-American artist who created the five pieces, part of his *Killing Time* series, the cuffs are more than a clever, decorative conceit. Instead, the restraints are one more representation of the largely invisible systems that governments and other authorities use to control people.

These systems are deeply felt throughout the exhibit.

“Kambui Olujimi’s work explores the power dynamics and the relationships of person to person, as well as people’s relationship with authority and the state,” explains Leah Kolb, MMOCA’s associate curator responsible for the exhibit. “The pieces reflect the layered impact of the systemic forces at work on people, particularly people of color, and the historic outcomes of that impact.”

Who sets the time?

Those systemic forces include time itself and how it has been measured throughout history, Kolb adds. Indeed, *Zulu Time* has nothing to do with the South African people of the same name.

Instead, the exhibit’s title is the U.S. military shorthand for Universal Time Coordinated. Computed from its location in Greenwich, England, at the prime meridian of 0 longitude, Zulu Time was created to help manage England’s military advancement and commercial shipping needs.

The management of time itself as established by the one-time western superpower is one of the last vestiges of European colonialism, Kolb says, and to this day exerts its profound influence.

Concepts drive media

Olujimi’s mixed-media approach throughout the 13-work exhibit is the result of letting concepts rather than their media drive his art, Kolb explains.

“His work is clearly rooted in the realm of ideas, and he chooses the materials best suited to the messages he wants to send,” she says.

Consider the series *T Minus 0*, a collection of 13 flags whose full-color photographic imagery reflects the failures of the U.S. space program. With different photos on each side of each flag, rockets explode and launch pads burn in vain attempts to pursue the latest and most ambitious form of colonialism.

The fact that Olujimi chose the medium of flags — and specifically 13 flags that may or may not represent America’s 13 original colonies — is not lost on viewers.

“Fathom,” which welcomes visitors to the exhibit, is a freestanding piece in which six chandeliers of varying colors lie crashed and broken on shipping pallets tied to three large innertubes. The imagery evokes America’s immigrant crisis, Kolb says, and despite the chandeliers’ broken nature, each of the lights still shines brightly.

Photography also comes into play in two large wheat-paste prints that face each other, reflecting the impact of time and institutional oppression.

“The Black that Birthed Us” is a large, wall-sized black-and-white photo of the cosmos on which hang small shelves each of which is outfitted with an 1980s-era digital alarm clock with the time, while accurate, flashing as if in panic mode. Small snapshots illustrating African-American family life perch atop each clock.

Opposite that is “Ville Radieuse, habite-à-machine (The Radiant City, the living machine),” a fragmented black-and-white photo of the 1972 implosion of the Pruitt-Igoe housing project, erected in St. Louis in the 1950s and one of the country’s most notorious public housing failures. The image is decorated by a three-dimensional doorknob, a decorative peacock sculpture and an electrical plate to give a sense of human scale.

Returning to time as controlling system

Olujimi takes on time once again with pieces from his *InDecisive Moments* series. The blown-glass works are designed to represent oversized, melting hourglasses, each filled with some water in which partially submerged icebergs appear.

The icebergs represent the fact that much of the systemic oppression is hidden beneath the surface, adding to the layered complexity of the exhibit’s themes. Time — past, present and future — intertwines in ways that define our lives as they are now and what they likely will become, Kolb says.

“Time is one more invisible system that affects us,” she adds.

On exhibit

Kambui Olujimi: Zulu Time runs through Aug. 13 in the State Street Gallery of the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, 227 State St. Artist Kambui Olujimi will give a talk at 6:30 p.m. during the June 2 opening reception in MMOCA’s lecture hall. The reception is free for MMoCA members and \$10 for nonmembers.