

Wednesday, November 5, 2008

The Clouds Are After Me (Review)

Kambui Olujimi indicts all of us in his solo show at UC

By Laura James



At first glance Brooklyn-based artist Kambui Olujimi's solo show at Meyers Gallery at the University of Cincinnati, *The Clouds Are After Me*, seems sparse. Loose-leaf pages hang from the white walls in likely formations. They become both more interesting and more disappointing when you look a little closer. The "clouds" that follow the artist are the unlucky, the illegal and the politically incorrect.

What this means is not at all simple. The papers are painted beautifully — in the loose but contained way of a lot of art right now. It's also politically charged. But bringing the two together makes something consuming. We, as viewers, stand face-to-face, surrounded by the criminal acts of our generation. Phrases such as "parental neglect," "shoot to maim," and "life without parole" hang precariously from Olujimi's papers, letters missing from the words like teeth from an impoverished smile.

Certain papers allude to wanted posters. Others refer to newspapers. Some are denials — fear of getting caught — and even more are accusations. Throughout the exhibition, Olujimi repeats Edward R. Murrow's catch phrase, "Goodnight and good luck," and it seems that we all, criminal and victims alike, need that luck.

Beyond the words are the truly ominous things: the clouds. According to Olujimi's artist statement, the wanted poster format of the exhibition "explores the anxieties and phobias that permeate the public and private sectors of our lives and nation. Through a series ... depicting clouds as (the perpetrators of our fears), I draw parallels to the 'elusive,' 'ever present' dangers, which we are both running from and hunting for."

The clouds here are not the cotton puffs of a happy child's imagination. They are the colors of a nasty, unnatural storm brewing. What makes the paintings interesting is that the artist has not separated victim and perpetrator, and the viewer gets lodged somewhere in between. The clouds then represent both the anxiety of being raped, robbed or killed and the anxiety of spending a life behind bars, getting caught in the act — and to a broader extent, the anxiety that comes with being greedy, selfish and neglectful. And who among us could cast the first stone here?

Two works included in *The Clouds Are After Me* are given a place of importance because of their size. They are as big as bed sheets. In fact, they might actually be bed sheets — and they dwarf the 8-by-10-inch papers that hang around them. The use of sheets brings an element of the "private sector" to which Olujimi refers in his artist statement. Indeed, the wanted-poster format brings to mind a post office, a police station or a place in the city. Bed sheets, soiled with paint, clouds and words, call to mind a broken home, a tragic personal nightmare or a violent relationship.

At home or in public, then, you are not free of these criminal clouds. Olujimi pushes the broadness of his idea in terms of the scope of this project as well. As he calls it, *The Clouds Are After Me* is "one project (in) three converging events."

Two other galleries — Main Gallery in Las Vegas and Branch Gallery in Durham, N.C. — carried the clouds to other states and other viewers. There is no escaping the anxiety of our age.

THE CLOUDS ARE AFTER ME is on view at UC's Meyers Gallery through Nov. 7.

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