

Independent Weekly

Arts » Visual Art

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Two artists, bold visuals and layered meanings at Branch Gallery

Both sides now

by Amy White

***Water/ weight* by Stacy-Lynn Waddell**
***The Clouds Are After Me* by Kambui Olujimi**
Branch Gallery, through Oct. 25

When you enter Branch Gallery this month, you will first encounter Stacy-Lynn Waddell's *Water/ weight*, a congregation of large, pendulous droplet shapes in muslin that hang loosely from the walls. The title of this work is "When they ask be sure and tell them" (2008), and the construct of asking and telling (or not telling) resonates throughout each of Waddell's works.

The droplet shapes are literally branded (as in burned) with alternately cryptic and direct statements that contain seismically shifting meanings ("I think of the end at the beginning," "I knew it all along"). One of the phrases, "It will never belong to you," raises essential questions of ownership inherent in the art object, suggesting that while it is for sale, it also contains something that can never be owned. The "it" in "It will never belong to you" could also refer to something else entirely, a quantity that is so secret it remains unnamed and unseen. *Water/ weight* seems to be as much about what is not on display as what is.

Waddell's two other works include "Follow it down" (2008), a rope ladder made of human hair, and "Make me a sanctuary" (2008), a large-scale cloth wall-hanging that seems to embody a personal cosmology. The overarching thematic image of this work is that of an antiquated sea vessel located in the upper left of the composition, radiating like the sun over the horizon of a huge sea. The rest of the piece manifests a kind of surreal topography and the paradoxical contrast of its vastness of scale and distance rendered in domestic fabrics (pillow cases and bedclothes). Waddell's work seems to push for such an awareness of microcosm and macrocosm (as seen in out-scale raindrops or tears offset by the image of an endless ocean).

Aside from the three works on view, Waddell has transformed a glass showcase into a vitrine that contains an agglomeration of objects, drawings and books that serves as a kind of legend or commentary on the artwork. The materials include a set of four porcelain swans, two sepia-toned Polaroids of a nude masked figure, and a scattering of Mexican *loteria* cards



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Photo courtesy of
Branch Gallery

Stacy Lynn Waddell's
"When they ask be sure and
tell them" (2008).
Installation view, burned
muslin with acrylic on
canvas. 72 in. tall each x
varying widths.

with pointed racial stereotypes on top of the pile ("El Negrito" and "La Sandia"), poignantly situated next to "The Black Book," which has a cover that features a compendium of black figures and faces. This collection of materials, which also includes a hand-done sepia ink drawing with letters that spell out "shhhhhh," is at once illuminating and veiled in its relationship to Waddell's artworks on view. Indeed, Waddell's final text in "When they ask ..." is the phrase "I will never tell." Waddell walks a line between an overt discussion of race and the realm of interior experience and secrets. *Water/weight* feels like the forging of a new language or system of poetics, an integration of an infinite interiority and the tidal forces of social culture and history.



click to enlarge
Photo courtesy of
Branch Gallery
Kambui Olujimi's *The
Clouds Are After Me* (2008).
Installation view, acrylic,
paper and ink on vellum. 12
in. x 9 in. each.

Also on view is Kambui Olujimi's *The Clouds Are After Me*, an installation of painted vellum pages that float upon the walls like points along a digital grid. Each of Olujimi's vellums contains a partial wording, set forth in component letters as in the game Hangman, that reference specific social ills or criminal behaviors, naming indictments such as "S P CT D K DN P G" or "CHI D P RN." Olujimi plays with a degradation of language here—at what point will these texts become drained of meaning and rendered entirely abstract? In this way the artist parlays the tension between content and form, abstraction and figuration, social critique and formal aesthetics. No two pieces are alike, with variations in wordings, an ever-changing palette and the presence of a unique cloud form in each, either cut

from found magazine images or crudely painted.

One singular large-scale work is done on clear plastic hung over white lace. The word "Alleged" is painted in white on the opposite side of the plastic (and therefore appears backward) while the word "Suicide" is clearly asserted in white block letters. A phone number, (415) 412-7711, is included with the words "Call Mon." I made a point of calling this number several times on a Monday and only got a recorded message: "I'm sorry, but the person you called has a voicemail box that has not been set up yet. Good-bye." This painting can be seen through the lens of cold minimalism, a "white-on-white" painting. It can also be seen as the saddest piece of art ever.

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by Amy White

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