

KAMBUJ OLUJIMI

WHITEHOT
MAGAZINE™

Solastalgia and Personalizing Displacement at CUE Art Foundation, New York

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By Jan Garden Castro
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Installation view. Kambui Olujimi, "Solastalgia" (2016). (All images courtesy of CUE Art Foundation)

[Kambui Olujimi: Solastalgia](#)

CUE Art Foundation

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Can art somehow open viewers' eyes to the serious nature of displacement? *Solastalgia*, a term coined by Australian philosopher [Glenn Albrecht](#), is a psychic dislocation — being homesick while

at home. Kambui Olujimi's exhibition at CUE Art Foundation was titled for this phenomenon. The artist first witnessed this during an artist residency in Kellerberin, Australia as drought displaced the farmers from their land, preventing them from farming and thus earning a living on their land. Later, when Olujimi lost his mentor and friend Catherine Arline, a neighbor and active leader in their Bedford-Stuyvesant community, he experienced his own emotional displacement — he experienced solastalgia.



Kambui Olujimi, "Mercy Doesn't Grow on Trees" (2016), wood, glass, hair, gold leaf, ratchet straps, 12.5' x 4' x 2.5' (detail)

The resulting exhibition is a fresh approach to issues of dislocation. Olujimi's psychic dislocations stem from the systemic forces of police brutality, rampant gentrification and the personal impact of the death of his "guardian angel," Catherine Arline. Olujimi braids the personal and collective effects of loss and histories of radicalized violence and class warfare to remind us of the lesser discussed parts of the American experience. He explores dislocation — and his own grieving process — through the placements of objects belonging to his deceased friend. In works titled "Mercy Doesn't Grow on Trees," "Keys to the City," and "I Knew You Before You Was Born," the artist levitates an armoire, an old record player cabinet, and two doors from Miss Arline's home so that these objects reside above viewers' heads in relation to handmade memorials to his friend just below, including a broken glass wishbone in a bell jar, keys, pearls symbolizing those Arline wore, and hand-blown glass canes. Other works in the exhibition include "Midnight on Myrtle & Broadway," which uses the symbolism of a fallen chandelier and battered suitcases to remember two murdered policemen killed while sitting in their police car in December 2014. "Never the Best Time to Retire" is an out-of-focus serigraph of the police badge of New York's highest-ranking African American officer, Philip Banks III, who retired in October, 2014 following Eric Garner's killing by police in July 2014. Olujimi's scanned and digitally-manipulated photographs become psychologically-loaded images of loss. "I trained for You," a 60" x 48" serigraph, shows the unlit stairwell of the Louis Pink housing project where Akai Gurley, 28, was killed by a police officer.



Kambui Olujimi, "Where From Here" (2016), brass, 10 in. x 3 in. x 2 in.

In the accompanying catalog essay, Katherine Cohn suggests that “solastalgia marks a feeling of being lost existentially, because one’s own environment is changing in a devastating way.” In Olujimi’s case, it is a consequence of “his personal socio-environmental condition, which in many ways is reflective of a national condition as well.” Kambui Olujimi’s stated aims go beyond art: to break down rigid social practices and policies that no longer serve their communities, to point out how people are being dislocated from their own neighborhoods, and to memorialize a beloved elder as well as strangers whose deaths weaken communities and further confirm dislocations.

Olujimi told me, “The work confronts systems that are designed and profit from dehumanizing individuals, and how that process can transform a place. I hope that the work asks what creates the vacancy of a location. What is the relationship between the physical and psychic dislocation of an

individual and the mass dislocation of a city? Yes, it starts with me and who I am but to stop there would be missing so much.”

Physical displacement is both a global and local phenomenon that could be another kind of solastalgia; losing one’s home also displaces the heart; one’s surroundings and sense of home is lost forever. In 2015, the United Nations estimated that “The number of people forcibly displaced worldwide is likely to have ‘far surpassed’ a record 60 million this year, mainly driven by the Syrian war and other protracted conflicts...” In addition, these conflicts displace people whether or not they remain in their countries of origin. Closer to home, Olujimi’s Bed-Stuy is changing around its residents; one incident highlighted in “Midnight on Myrtle & Broadway” is the two policemen killed in 2014 by an outsider from Boston.



Kambui Olujimi, "Keys to the City" (2016), wood, glass keys, sand, ratchet straps, 10' x 5' x 1'7" (detail)

Other artists are tapping into this pervasive subtext of contemporary society. Cornelia Parker’s “Transient Object (Psycho Barn)” on the roof of The Metropolitan Museum probes solastalgia in a different way — mental dislocation from self. Olujimi’s use of the word solastalgia is congruent with Beatrice Galilee’s use of Freud’s *Das Unheimliche* or “the uncanny,” which, she offers, “can be better understood as the absence or opposite of *Heimlich*, the feeling of being at ease and comfort at home.” Parker’s “Transient Object (Psycho Barn)” uses wood from a Catskills barn to build the front of a spooky house resembling the one in Alfred Hitchcock’s film *Psycho*. Inside the house, Nathan Bates’ personal cycle of displacement begins when his mother takes a lover; after he kills both, he becomes a bi-polar murderer living with his mother’s corpse. Parker suggests Nathan’s mental dislocation by transforming a “wholesome” barn into a blood-red façade of a haunted house.

Nicole Eisenman’s 2016 exhibition “[Al-ugh-ories](#)” at the New Museum portrays many signs of solastalgia. “Coping,” 2008 (oil on canvas, 65 x 82”) shows the people of a village thigh-deep in

muck, each trying to deal with the same oppressive forces swamping their daily lives. Other works, including “From Success to Obscurity,” and “The Triumph of Poverty” show people who are either hostages or victims to forces in their own environments that dis-empower them. Some work suggests that patriotism can sometimes be a false slogan.

Artist [Shelly Silver](#), Chair of the Visual Arts Program at Columbia University where Olujimi received his MFA in 2013, explained why she identifies with the term solastalgia: “As resources dwindle, the distance between rich and poor increases and local national and global political power follows this consolidation. Without local and national political power, neighborhoods are rezoned and sold to the highest bidder. This development is most often referred to as ‘progress.’ It is also seen by many as inevitable or even natural. Of course this is never the case. Issues of inequality affect all of us personally and directly, whether we know it or not, acknowledge it or not. And it absolutely affects the work that I produce. My last feature film was shot from the point of view of a man who returns to NYC’s Chinatown to take care of his dying mother. As he revisits and rewrites his own fraught history and that of this neighborhood, his landlord starts proceedings to get him evicted. Chinatown has recently been ‘discovered’ by galleries and developers, and the shift here has been swift.”



Installation view. Kambui Olujimi, "Midnight on Myrtle & Broadway" (2016), mixed media, dimensions variable.

Silver observes that “Kambui Olujimi’s work is not one of distance, safety, cynicism or meta-relationships. It is rather an art of looking and feeling. Unflinching yet playful. Sincere yet complex. It is an art of transformation, and with this transformation, of politics and magic. Displacement. Doorknobs without doors. Impossibly fragile glass canes. Floating furniture, low enough to take in details, too high to use. A glass wishbone sitting on a bed of hair, already broken, the wish already

spent. Yet reconnected with gold, it implies that though you may have already gotten the short end, there is always another chance.”

“I keep thinking of (Olujimi’s) *Walk with Me*, the series of haunting watercolor portraits of Ms. Catherine Arline, who I remember meeting several years ago, on Kambui’s arm. Her face is open, smiling and youthful in portrait after portrait, some bearing uncanny resemblance to Kambui, as if he was taking her in, meshing with her, becoming her, or is it the other way around? The show tells of this woman and her bonds, bonds that spread out in an ever-expanding network impossible to fully map. Kambui’s show is a testament that this network continues, holds fast, gives hope, makes change...these objects and images point to the connection between people, both wondrous and fraught...”



Installation view. Kambui Olujimi, "Solastalgia" (2016). Left to right: "I Trained For You" (2016), serigraph; "Ultra Lux" (2016), serigraph; "Where From Here" (2016), brass; "The Waiting Game" (2016), serigraph.; "If Not Now" (2016), serigraph.

Solastalgia can variously displace body, heart, mind. Our surroundings may change due to the death of a loved one, a community leader, a friend, or an innocent stranger. The daily news, jobs, health, safety, housing, food, family — the ways solastalgia may enter our lives are endless. Kambui Olujimi, Cornelia Parker, and Nicole Eisenman are among artists and thinkers today who variously offer us art that asks us to mend the broken wishbone and to find new ways to cope with loss — to help restore communities beaten down by economic and political upheavals.