Resonant Frequencies Beyond the Visible, Between the Lines: Re-visioning Photographic Subjects in the Encyclopaedia Britannica

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Abstract

This master's thesis gives an insight into my artistic practice – that explores colonial history, the 'otherness' of colonized subjects, environmental exploitation, and personal encounters with place –leading up to and informing my MFA final exhibition. My thesis project attempts to interrogate meanings inherent in colonial representations through an engagement with the materiality of photography, with a focus on the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1968). By photocopying, juxtaposition and layering images contained within its pages, I aim to open up possibilities for the re-conceptualization and re-visioning of African subjects of this compendium of knowledge who would otherwise remain voiceless and perceived from a limited, colonial gaze. The resulting images complicate and stretch the boundaries between art and history and raise important questions, including about the signifiers of feeling and vibration that invest certain images with mystery and power, leading to a dimension outside of sight and touch.

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Introduction

For more than a decade, I have embraced photography as a way of exploring socio-economic, environmental, and historic geographies – using my own body as recurring subject. For example, in late 2016, I traveled to the Jos Plateau in the north-central region of my home country, Nigeria, to seek out residues of British colonial tin mining activities in the region, a trip which has resulted in a long-term and ongoing body of work addressing colonial history, environmental exploitation, and personal encounters with place.

In the past six years, my artistic practice has embraced the materiality of photography – my primary medium. In the last few years, this involved a deconstruction of the lithographic printing process – combining and layering (various permutations of) monochrome prints on paper, metal plates and film transparencies – to complicate the boundaries between visual art mediums and stretch the possibilities of meaning that are held in a single image. More recent works have moved into the realm of digital deconstruction and re-composition, where I use Photoshop layers to juxtapose ideas, visuals, or time periods. My work attempts to interrogate meanings inherent in colonial representations by juxtaposition and layering, setting off reverberations between images. Experimentation is central to my work and has come to serve as a kind of methodology for my practice-based research. It cuts across the form, content, composition, materials, techniques, and processes involved in my artmaking.

I continued my explorations of materiality, deconstruction, and decolonization of the medium of photography along this trajectory during the MFA program, centering on the photocopy as material and process for exploring recurring themes in my artwork. I seek to uncover the ways and extent to which I can push the boundaries of image-making beyond their static, traditional forms and allow for abstractions to emerge that, in new ways, articulate thoughts and ideas – from the personal to the political – that I have been exploring in my work over the years.

My thesis project takes this experimentation with process and material as a point of departure and explores representation of race and geography within the context of colonial history and the hegemony of Western pedagogy and knowledge production. This is done by interrogating one specific embodiment of these concepts, the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, and simultaneously complicating the images contained within its pages.

Process / Methodology

The process I am using is photocopying – which involves the transfer of an image from one surface to another using the action of light on material placed on an electrically charged surface. Photocopying, as we know it today, has been in existence since the invention of the xerographic (originally called electrophotographic) process in the late 1930s by American physicist and inventor Chester Carlson and its subsequent commercialization by the Xerox Corporation starting in the late 1950s. (xerox.com) Even before the invention of xerography, copy machines using stencil-based or photographic methods – such as the Papyrograph, Mimeograph and Ditto Machine – were common in office settings as early as the late nineteenth century (Eichhorn, 4). Xerox copy machines (as well as the term "xerox" as a substitute verb for the act of making a print copy from a copy machine) became ubiquitous in offices and business centers around the world from the 1960s onwards – with the establishment and spread of the Kinko's copy center chain across the United States between the 1970s and 1990s being largely responsible for meeting the growing public demand for access to copy machines (Eichhorn, 2). In the late 1990s, xerographic copy machines began to be replaced by their digital imaging counterparts. In addition to commercial copiers, the introduction of multifunction machines – combining printing, scanning, and photocopying – for home office use has allowed for copying technologies to persist.

There is a slowness or slowing down that is very much a component of my making process for this project. Using the photocopy machine and making art requires patience and direct physical engagement and takes time: selecting images to use, cutting, and placing the cut-outs intuitively on a previously copied image (which consists of an image and sometimes line drawings using charcoal pencil), and running the paper through the copier over and over. The process could last anywhere from 15 minutes to two hours, depending on how long it takes before the resulting copies of copies become consistently uniform in their outcome**.** In *Art and Tradition in a Time of Uprisings* (MIT Press, 2020), Gabriel Levine explores fermentation practices in relation to art and activism and discusses the tangible process of scaling down and slowing down that is necessitated by home fermentation – similar to the copying process – as an opportunity for "bodily and spiritual regeneration that might offer ways to build strength, energy and hope" (203). There is also the chemistry that links this domestic, food-based process and the digital one – a metabolic conversion of sugar to acids and gases in the case of fermentation, and

a metaphoric transformation that breaks down and reconstitutes the image in the case of my photocopy process.

The concentration is intense and unhurried. I find that the waiting and the pauses as the photocopies develop also aligns with the intentional, patient, and perceptive practices of "doing nothing" – resisting the modern and narrowly defined idea of productivity to instead reengage with time and space, and place – and "Deep Listening" – itself a technique developed by musician and composer Pauline Oliveiros – described by artist and author Jenny Odell in her book, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (Melville House, 2019).

It is important to note that the primary agency I have in the entire process is deciding on the very first image or object to copy. Different factors play a role in how the images then respond when copied repeatedly; the result varies depending on the light, dark and mid tone areas of the image, the subject, the composition, as well as the amount of ink remaining in the toner cartridge. Making copies until the ink runs out means that the more an image is copied, the greater the chances of variations from the original copy. The results vary from becoming completely dark or blacked out on one extreme, to the opposite – washed out, white-washed images. In between, the images disintegrate at various levels; streaky lines and patterns or disparate pixels in a sea of white leave mysterious traces of what might have been of the image.

This waiting process, the relinquishing of a certain amount of control over the outcome on paper as well as the element of anticipation as part of the process offer a new way of experiencing an image to me, and hopefully also to the viewer of the work. The sudden appearances of the unfamiliar or unanticipated in an image delight me, and I often connect this experience to how I feel emotionally connected to certain music and musicians, such as Fela Kuti's Afrobeat compositions, ambient music by Brian Eno or a jazz album from Miles Davis.

The copying process (as well as the music) is intuitive / accidental, repetitive, and drawn out – one big "fermentation" process that requires the use and combination of material and ideas from multiple sources. This allows for the imagination and transformation of both images and concepts. As Marcus Boon elaborates on in the third chapter of his book *In Praise of Copying* (Harvard University Press, 2010), transformation is constantly taking place in the act of copying, with copying itself as a particular kind of transformation (80). Boon also discusses the idea of copying as appropriation, and collage and montage as direct acts of appropriation. Fragments of objects that belonged to one object become components of a new and larger assemblage. The

fragments are creatively reassembled and there is transformation, once again, when the fragments become a new whole. In the process of collage-making, as I have explored earlier, there is a tactile exploration of materials, of cutting, arranging, juxtaposing in a variety of combinations. Boon also points out that there is "chance, randomness, spontaneity" in montage, as well as a "tension between determinism and random ordering" (148), which I see resonating throughout this artistic project.

As an art form, I see photocopying as an extension of photography, another way to "paint with light". In a similar way, I consider X-ray machines as a kind of scanner, a "photocopier" of the body used in the medical and laboratory space. These machines, too, make copies as a camera does with photography, capturing images and reproducing them. In the case of medical equipment, there can be no intervention by the layman. He does not have the facility to interpret the images produced. It is the prerogative of a doctor or radiographer to do that and suggest medical treatment. Copy machines are considered office or home office equipment, used mostly to make copies of text documents for reading or filing. I should also mention at this juncture that in my own photocopy work, the images are copied onto standard, letter-size copy paper (20lb., 75 g/m^2, 96 brightness), which I eventually scan at a high resolution.

The equipment and material become outliers in the art world; one might not consider them (or might even frown on its use) for the making of images, and they certainly go against more traditional modes of making in photography – the camera / lens and digital (Photoshop) or film (darkroom) processing, the "holy grail" that must not be tampered with, in the view of some. I am interested in the holistic way one can arrive at making an image, regardless of the medium. The deliberate use of material that is widely available and considered "inferior" for artmaking is part of what I am proposing as an alternative mode of making that is peculiar to my experience, and I think of these experiences as fluid and elastic in nature. In the hands of the artist, and the image before them – regardless of how or with what they were made – the creative possibilities are endless.

Beginnings

Indeed, my foray into photocopying as part of my artistic experimentation began with such an all-in-one home office printer. With limited mobility, space and access to materials due to the COVID-19 pandemic and interminable stages of lockdown in the Toronto area over the past two years and counting, I began working with more readily available tools and subjects for making work. From taking pictures with my Google Pixel phone on my neighbourhood walks – of a full moon, moss-covered rocks on the shore of Lake Ontario or the bare branches of a tree in mid-winter – to printing them on my all-in-one home office printer, I noticed the photocopy setting, and, deciding to try it out with some printed work, I stumbled upon an idea. The photocopier, traditionally assigned to an office space for routine, bureaucratic tasks became something new in my artistic toolkit. Working with what was available at home became a liberating experience.

I began this current experiment by first printing and then repeatedly photocopying (black and white copies of copies of) the only photograph I own of my father as a young man in the 1970s, and the first passport photograph taken of me in 1984/85 prior to starting school. These two photographs hold a lot of meaning and are attached to memories of my childhood, including the loss of my mother to cancer when I was 11. The processes of photocopy and repetition have allowed me to revisit my childhood and reflect on this loss, and the place of my father alternately as absentee parent / provider / guardian. The relationship between my father and myself as it evolved and was 'overwritten' by the passage of years – just as the process of photocopying can alter an image – becomes a site for other childhood memories. The layering of memories is another way in which erasure operates in my work. I am aware of my agency to alter stories and reinvent my identity through the processes of art.

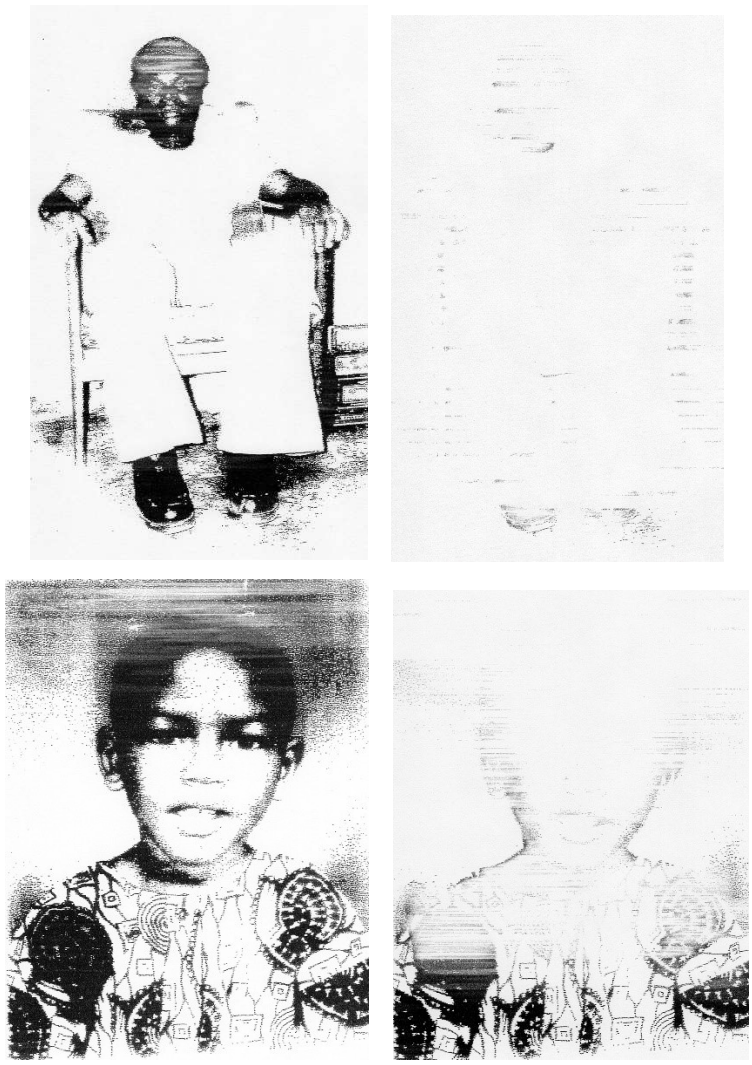


Figure 1: First experiments – childhood revisited; untitled works (2021)

As I engaged with the process of photocopying, repeating the motions a countless number of times and pushing the operation to its limits, a structure began to emerge. With each iteration, each copy of a copy, the ink began to run out, and with it the images began to disintegrate. The images became progressively pale and even 'whited' out. Lines and streaks appeared in the finished product. The repeated works – which, as the ink levels decrease, become streaky and fade away – serve as a material, tangible manifestation of time and stretch the medium to the point that new, abstracted forms emerge – in a similar way to which composer Alvin Lucier's 1969 work, *I Am Sitting in a Room*, which consists of a statement that the artist repeats numerous times until his speech is no longer recognizable, is a "poetic articulation" of "the physical aspects of sound and its interaction with the acoustical spaces in which they are heard" (Burt, 269).

Looking at the residue, the faint lines that have been overwritten in my work, larger postcolonial issues and their relevance in the light of what went before come into view. Through erasure, the acts of forgetting and disappearance become significant and even radical, reinforcing the "complex dynamics between absence and presence" (Sweeney and Benzon). I use erasure in my work in a layered manner in a way that moves from the personal to the political. Perception, memory and history converge as I engage with the work, resonating well beyond what is made visible.

Continuing to produce the photocopies, I arranged them into series. I had no clear idea at the beginning as to what the outcome was going to be. I curated what emerged and found a new world opening up. The repetition of image-making evolved into abstractions. The images, from time to time, became like drawings; the faint lines and dots left behind resembled the marks of a thin lead pencil. The photocopying process also compares with abstract painting; I am reminded of German painter Gerhard Richter, who uses a technique of building up the paint on the canvas and then stripping it away with a wooden block to create his renowned works. Or the abstract paintings of Japanese artist Takesada Matsutani, where the artist combines vinyl adhesive and graphite pencil to paint strokes in a "ritualized manner [that] presents a time-based record of his gestures" (hauserwirth.com). It is the beginning of the journey of the image. I am not in control of the end-result which, again, becomes the starting point for a merging of the present and the past. This was my epiphany.

In one series, I cut out an image of my ear and placed it on the map of Africa. As I repeated the copying process, the map gradually faded away in four prints and completely disappeared in the last, but the ear remained constant and bold in the foreground. Again, this was for me reminiscent of Alvin Lucier's *I Am Sitting in A* Room, as the repeated phrase ends up dissolving in the space in which it is recorded. The work also suggested to me the idea of equilibrium and disequilibrium, as someone constantly trying to find my balance (create possibility) in a world where my identity has been shaped and defined in many ways by colonial history and by the imperialist pursuits of European nations who arbitrarily drew borders in Africa and defined for us what it meant to be Nigerian or Gambian or Kenyan. An African artist floundering, trying to find my way in a racist Western world full of racial stereotypes. The map of Africa progressively fading in the background in successive prints suggest the loss of power

on the part of the colonizer. Countries and identities cobbled together by/under the White gaze melt away to blankness.

Figure 2: *Equilibrium 01-04* (2021); aluminium-mounted xerox inkjet prints, 14 x 13 in. each

I subsequently added additional layers of material and meaning, another recurring theme and approach in my practice, to the original photocopy works by creating collages of cut-out images – from personal and historic archives, as well as newspapers and other print media – and subjecting these to the same process.

The copies that emerge from the photocopier set me on a journey of re-imagining. The unspoken and unsaid found shape and voice. I realized that I am in the process of capturing the spirit of photography. I become a composer, a conductor, orchestrating the artistic process. I become aware of my agency, and my freedom to experiment with what is before me.

Resonant Frequencies Beyond the Visible, Between the Lines

My thesis project explores representation of race within the context of colonial history and the hegemony of Western pedagogy and knowledge production, by interrogating one specific embodiment of these concepts, the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, and simultaneously complicating the images contained within its pages.

Western, Eurocentric knowledge systems have been presented for centuries as occupying superior or expert positions in relation to their non-Western counterparts, and this has carried across in representations of these systems in images as well as text. Specifically, images of African people and landscapes are largely presented from a white gaze as exotic, primitive and 'other'. While the specific edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* that my work engages is from 1968 – the 200th anniversary of the publication – the images and the stereotypes they perpetuate have persisted through time in the way that Africans and Black people around the world continue to be viewed. The exhibition seeks to highlight the power of images to shape our thoughts and perceptions, and to demonstrate the role of images in "truth-telling". The question remains: whose truth is being told? I arrive at a personal, artistic response to my encounter with this set of encyclopedias, that aims to center the African subjects of the images and provides a counter-narrative for future imagining.

I have always been interested in books as powerful representations of knowledge and learning, and continuously seek to grow my personal collection. I remember marvelling at the tomes that filled the bookshelves of a friend's living room, as a child growing up in Lagos, Nigeria. At the time, owning a set of encyclopedias was a symbol of intellectual (and economic) prowess. Since beginning to explore ideas within postcolonial discourse in the past six years, my fascination with books has taken on another dimensions, alongside my experimentation with the narrative and multisensory potential of images and objects, including archival materials. In this regard, I have engaged with early twentieth century publications as found objects (discovered in obscure, antique bookstores on my different travels) – such as Sir Frederick Lugard's 1922 *Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*, the defining text on British colonial administration, or the 1912 *Text-book of Rand Metallurgical Practice: Designed as a "working Tool" and Practical Guide for Metallurgists Upon the Witwatersrand and Other Similar Fields* in my bodies of work, *Constructed Realities* and *Metallurgical Practice* (2019), respectively – to interrogate the assumed objectivity and authority of colonial narratives vis-à-vis the people and lands they

colonized and resources they extracted and demonstrate the visual and textual representation of the 'other' as a means to legitimize European colonial domination. I also engage with books as a way of challenging the stale notion of archives as static, physical repositories, participating in their "dislocation", as German artist Hito Steyerl describes it through her examination of the 1965 short film *Now* by Cuban filmmaker Santiago Alvarez in "Now! The Archive in Motion" (Ryerson Image Center, 2012). In my experience, too – similar to how *Now* was created – by re-visioning and recontextualizing images, several layers of meaning are created in the process.

With my keen interest to engage with books as object and archives, and when, in the course of our conversations about my work and representations (or lack thereof) of blackness in the media, my Canadian host mother offered me a set of encyclopedias that belonged to her late husband – a professor of religion who came from Nigeria to study in the 1960s – I was naturally curious about what these books could offer. I browsed different topics across the 24 volumes and when it came to the entries for specific countries in Africa – Nigeria, South Africa, and Ghana, for example – I experienced a visceral reaction to some of the images that were placed within the text – images that depicted Africa and Africans in a simplistic, primitive light. By 1968 and the bicentennial anniversary of the encyclopedia, many African nations had already gained their independence from European powers including Britain and France and were making strides in the advancement of their own people, and yet the depictions made clear that the colonial gaze remained.

For example, in 70 odd pages about "Africa", in Volume 1 of the *Britannica*, there is no single image of an African city or "modern" institution. Instead, apart from a few maps and images interspersed between the text depicting climate, geography and natural resources, there are six photo plates on "The Land and the People" of various regions of the continent. The landscapes are wild, foreign and exotic, and the portraits are of the ethnographic type – "intended to classify types rather than identify individuals" (Campt, 49). The captions verify this: "Fulani girls. Originally a non-negroid race, the Fulani intermarried with the Negro Hausa of Nigeria" under a snapshot of two shy girls smiling at the camera; or "Tutsi, or Watusi, of Burundi. Well known for their height – men often 7ft. tall – the Tutsi are a Nilotic people" to characterize a close-up image of a handsome older man, gazing into the distance.

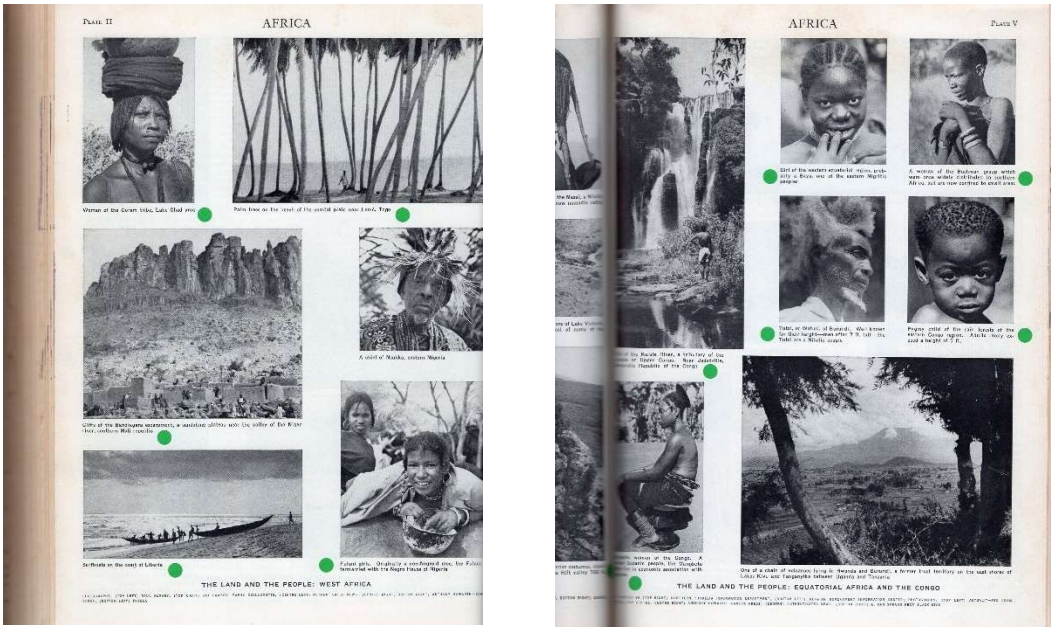


Figure 3: "The Land and the People": selected photo plates from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1968, Volume 1)

What I experienced when viewing these images – anger, anxiety, empathy towards the images' subjects – made me curious to question the inherent power of images to communicate beyond what is necessarily visible on the page or in the print. This sentiment is echoed by Soyoung Lee in a paper that discusses Roland Barthes' 1964 essay on the *Encyclopédie* produced by Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert, which was published in France between 1751 and 1772. The author addresses the "poetics" of the encyclopedia by quoting Barthes, who "points out that 'there is a depth in the Encyclopedic image, the very depth of time which transforms the object into myth' (Barthes, 2010, p. 34) and goes on to state that "This is surprising given that the very purpose of the *Encyclopédie* is to have clear explanations of the world. Yet, far beyond its own intention, the image in fact opens to something mysterious" (Lee, 1241). Both Barthes and Lee express this idea of the image – within the structured, systematic presentation of information as found in the encyclopedia, which promotes the idea of "human reasoning as power" (Lee, 1240) – as "resisting and breaking the information system in which it is supposed to fit" and producing "endless layers of meaning" (1241). This is something that resonates strongly with my work, where I have consistently tried to engage with my primary medium of photography – particularly through materiality – in a way that precisely uncovers and reveals these layers of meaning and possibility.

Author and professor Tina Campt, in her 2017 book *Listening to Images*, specifically explores these multisensorial, "counterintuitive" qualities of photographs through her examination of various archives of identity photography from the African Diaspora. The author proposes a theory, reflected in the book's title, to encapsulate this approach, as "an attunement to different levels of photographic audibility, many of which register at lower frequencies through their ability to move us", and "an attunement to sonic frequencies of affect and impact" – the "ensemble of seeing, feeling, being affected, contacted and moved beyond the distance of sight and observer" (Campt, 41-42). By "listening" to images, then, and also being in contact with them through physical touch – in the case of archival photographs and objects, such as old editions of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* – it enables one to tap into this power and mystery beyond the visual surface.

This also brings me back to the sonic practice of "Deep Listening" as pioneered by Pauline Oliveiros, who has described it as "going below the surface of what is heard, expanding to the whole field of sound" including the "natural or technological, intended or unintended, real, remembered or imaginary" as a means of "expanding the boundaries of perception" (deeplistening.rpi.edu). Here, Jenny Odell's proposal for "doing nothing", as it ties to Deep Listening, involves "[holding] yourself still so you can perceive what is actually there". Odell further describes the idea of resisting the attention economy and "doing nothing" as an intentional, "active process of listening that seeks out the effects of racial, environmental, and economic injustice and brings about real change". (Odell, 22-23)

In the case of the type of images used as reference and in support of the text in compendiums such as encyclopedias, beneath this subdued surface they contain the "tense relations of photographic subjects to the ethnographic gazes engendered by the history of colonial dispossession" (Campt, 50). I sensed this in my own encounter. Campt alludes to the double meaning of photographic "capture" while discussing the criminal photograph and the various ways it has served to portray and reproduce criminality. The author sees the "desire for photographic capture itself as a pernicious instrument of knowledge production used to subjugate Black bodies both in the present and into the future" (94-96).

I see/feel this subjugation reflected in the ethnographic images on view in the encyclopedia volumes; although not criminalized, the subjects are "othered" in a way that is disturbing and uncomfortable to me. Take, for example, the entry for Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's

first leader post-independence, in Volume 16 of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (entry: "Nkrumah, Kwame"). Next to a photo of Nkrumah in profile, he is introduced in less than favourable terms, as "dictator of Ghana until 1966 and pan-African statesman". I was struck that Nkrumah could be described as a dictator, as opposed to Jan van Riebeeck, "leader of the first white settlement in South Africa", who landed at the Cape in 1652. Over a 32-page entry on South Africa, only Jan van Riebeeck is worthy of a portrait, yet not mentioned in the context of a violent history of colonialism and apartheid in South Africa that began with Riebeeck and the Dutch East India Company's incursion into native southern African lands. Aesthetic notions of "beauty" and "depravity" and how they have informed the discourse on race in terms of their associations to whiteness (beauty) and blackness (depravity) appear to be relevant here. These ideas were elaborated on by Phyllis J. Jackson during a symposium organized in celebration of the opening of the exhibition "Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power 1963-1983" in 2019 at The Broad in Los Angeles, California.

It is interesting to note a couple of points here. Firstly, in the current edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, which has been online and digital since 2012, there is positive development in that, sometime in the last 50 years, the encyclopedia's editors have somehow recognized the power of language to reinforce stereotypes and updated the description of Kwame Nkrumah. No longer is he classified as "dictator of Ghana", but he is now referred to as "Ghanaian nationalist leader who led the Gold Coast's drive for independence from Britain and presided over its emergence as the new nation of Ghana." However, when considering the persistence of knowledge and ideas over time – through the printed book, for example – one may wonder if an update on a digital platform can really erase the harm done, and if the rewritten history carries weight if it comes from the same perspective of privilege. Secondly, I discovered that Kwame Nkrumah himself, as part of his pan-Africanist agenda, was very keen to promote postcolonial knowledge production through "specific efforts to transform both scholarly and public understandings of African history and culture locally and globally" (Allman, 181). One such initiative was the *Encyclopædia Africana* project first envisioned by W.E.B. DuBois in the early 1900s which Nkrumah eventually supported and housed within the Ghana Academy of Learning in the 1960s before Nkrumah was deposed in 1966 in a military coup. While the *Encyclopædia Africana* project never came to fruition, this second point was quite interesting for me to learn that Nkrumah, who himself was a subject of "objectification" in this very British,

colonial compendium of knowledge, had taken active steps (although never realized) to counter the narratives and pedagogy of Western with an equally important work where African academic scholarship about Africa would be foregrounded above Western and Eurocentric knowledge production about the continent.

My artistic project takes this same position – to foreground knowledge, learning and voices of the "silent" African subjects in the encyclopedic images, who are speaking in the intense, lower frequencies of feeling described by Tina Campt. Campt also describes this intensity as "the quotidian practice of refusal" that, rather than resistance, refers to "a refusal of the very premises that have reduced the lived experience of blackness to pathology and irreconcilability in the logic of white supremacy" (Campt, 32).

Refusal in my thesis exhibition manifests in the new possibilities created by complicating the images – portraits and landscapes – from various parts and entries in the Encyclopaedia Britannica through an intense, intuitive, and manual process combining photocopy and collage. The quiet and banal or quotidian nature of the manual process involved in creating the work suggests that everyday struggle of the dispossessed to create possibility out of situations of constraint. At times, I place the images in a sort of confrontation. For example, the ideas of landscape and aesthetic are complicated by combining two scenes – one of recreational skiers on the slopes in St. Moritz, Switzerland (entry: "Skiing"), and the other of a man with his back to the camera, observing the falls of the Kalule River in the Democratic Republic of Congo (entry: "Africa"). Despite the diversity in climate – temperate vs. tropical flora and fauna, and by extension, the people and cultures, the resulting composite image, to my mind, points to a certain balance as well as universality of human experience – the admiration and experience of nature, for example.

Figure 4: Complicating landscapes and aesthetic: untitled work (2022)

In another work, an everyday scene from the beach at Blackpool England (entry: “England”), is overlaid with a Fulani chieftain riding his horse, both in royal regalia (entry: “Nigeria”). The expression of these two representations of culture, the quotidian and the regal, in contrast and combination, with the chieftain effectively trampling over the beach scene, to me turns the notion of the superiority of whiteness and Western civilization on its head. The presence of the tea wagon in the Blackpool scene also points to notions of civilization as well as exploitation – with tea imported to Britain and becoming a staple there only through the exploitation of the colonies. Both images from the encyclopedia have been submitted to the photocopy process, separately; in combination, when they are copied again, the ideas are simultaneously reinforced just as the image of the Fulani chieftain is – darkened and presented in stark relief against a washed-out beach scene.

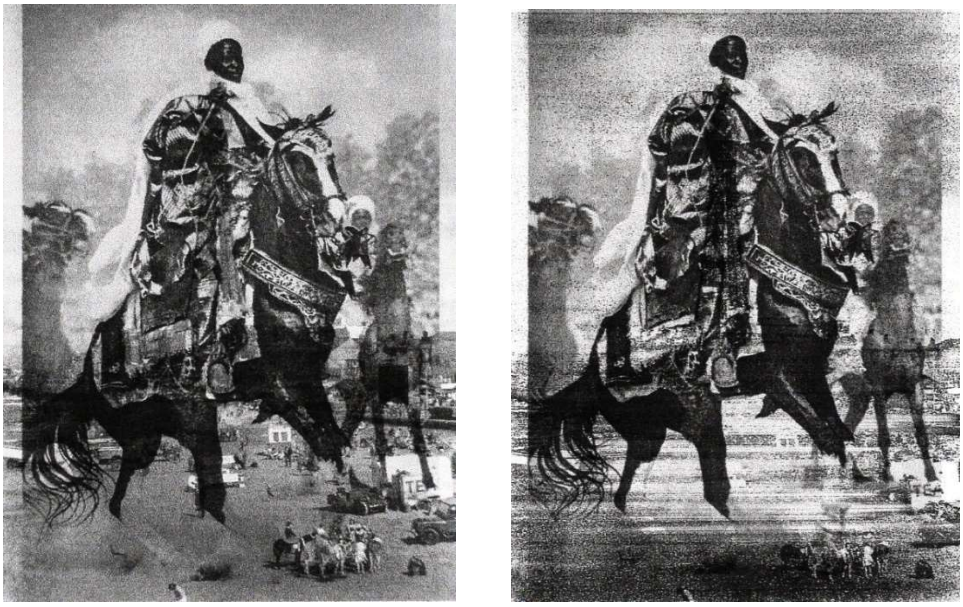


Figure 5: *The Quotidian and the Sublime* (2022); aluminium-mounted xerox inkjet prints on matte paper; 31 x 24 in. each

Some of the works deal with portraits. For example, the previously discussed images of Kwame Nkrumah and Jan van Riebeeck are combined. The beginning of the process in this subset of work is when I take a photograph of the portraits from the book. For certain portraits – those that are given precedence in the encyclopedia volumes and in society, by virtue of their whiteness – I deliberately photograph them out of focus, reducing the sharpness so that when they are combined with portraits of African subjects, such as Nkrumah, your eye is drawn to the person who is sharply in focus, as a kind of spotlight on what may previously have gone unseen. Here again, the portraits of the two men have been photocopied repeatedly and then the disappearing image of van Riebeeck is combined with Nkrumah's bold portrait. However, as the portraits of the two men are fused in the process of photocopying, it points to Africa's inability to untangle itself from its colonial past and influences that persist in the present.

Figure 6: *Muted Histories: Riebeeck / Nkrumah* (2022) – works in progress

Influences

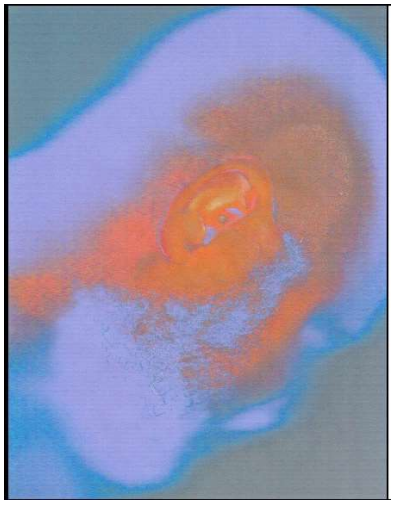
I liken this "quiet" approach of attempting to "mute" whiteness to that of artist Titus Kaphar. Kaphar is known for his works that address the lack of representation of Black figures in Western art history. Among the techniques that he uses is to faithfully recreate historical oil paintings – for example, in *Shifting the Gaze* (2017) – and then apply strokes of white paint over the white subjects, in order to draw the viewer's attention to the Black figure in the painting, who is an afterthought in the original image. Kaphar has also applied the same technique, which he calls "whitewashing", in an opposite way – covering Black figures in streaks of white paint, as in *Boys in* Winter (2013) and *Another Fight for Remembrance: Study* (2014), to "examine the subversion and struggle of the Black male in America from Jim Crow to the Black Power Movement to the 2014 protests in Ferguson, Missouri" (Kaphar, 199).

I am also drawn to the work of artists like Glenn Ligon, Sam Gilliam, David Hammons and Charles Gaines. I connect with the experiences of Black artists who are on the margins yet are attempting to "move the centre", as described by Kenyan novelist Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in his book of essays of the same title (East African Education Publishers, 1993). There is a nuanced way in which my work connects to the work of these artists and to what they represent, as Black creatives – writers, artists, musicians – whose work lies outside of popular culture and the mainstream and who are trying to escape from a certain stereotyping of what "Black" or "African" art should be. As outliers, Black artists are making their voices heard and their images viewed in multiple ways. Without seeking validation from the institutional art world, Black artists take up – and hold – space by challenging norms and staying connected with each other.

David Hammons work is also of particular resonance to me, in the context of previous work I produced as I explored the photocopy process during my MFA program, and how Hammons' work connects to my experience as a Black person and artist. In a *New York Times* review of an exhibition of Hammons' work at The Drawing Center in New York in March 2021, art critic Will Heinrich discusses the artist use of symbols of black identity to draw attention to the Black body and Black exclusion from the cultural and art space. Hammons was ahead of his time in turning art into activism, something which came decades later in the Black art space. His art was conceptual and in the early 1960s his work suggested art as resistance and protest. For the work on view, a series of body prints that Hammons began in the 1960s, he greased his body and made impressions on paper before sprinkling powdered graphite over the paper. Every detail

stands out sharply, producing X-ray like images. It was an innovation in figurative art and thought. In one work from the series, *Black Boy's Window* (1968), there is suggestion of violence as the x-rayed figure is presented with his hands raised up in surrender, behind the window. What is also striking about the artwork is the "abstractions of specificity" reinforcing the fact that this is a particular human individual standing against the glass, not a generalized Black boy. At the same time, as Will Heinrich comments, "cultural and historical contexts" come together in the image of the Black boy.

As Hammons highlights the Black body in his work, I too was (and continue to be) concerned with violence inflicted on the Black body. One series of work I developed earlier in my explorations that led up to the thesis exhibition brought my body – hands, feet and face – in direct contact with the copier glass. Because of the restrictive frame (A4 size), the process required for my body to work with this limited space meant that I had to contort myself to produce the images. After feeling the physical discomfort and soreness brought on by the process and finding myself almost suffocating and gasping for air at points, I realized that the postures that were required are very reminiscent, once again, of the very violent images and videos of police violence against Black people – knee in neck, pressing one's face into a car window or asphalt of the pavement – that flooded the media in 2020 as the United States faced a racial reckoning. Furthermore, I find it reflective of the abuse that the Black body has had to and continues to endure – from times of colonialism to slavery and beyond.



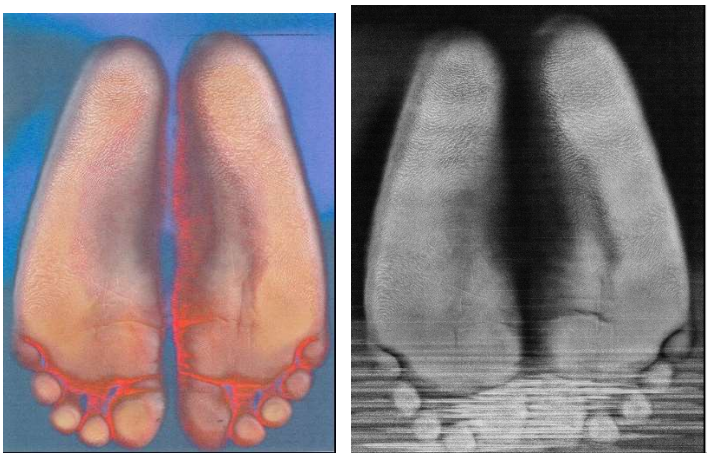


Figure 7: Racial reckoning – untitled works (2021)

The technique and process of repetition is a central element in much of Glenn Ligon's work that informs and reinforces his status as an outlier in the art world – particularly his text-based paintings, for which he is most well-known. Repetition is also apparent in Ligon's work in a variety of ways – from aesthetic and material, to the historical – and these serve to reinforce his interrogation of self and society working and making from the "margins" as a black, queer conceptual artist.

For example, Ligon's project *To Disembark* (1993), first shown at the Hirshorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., is a multidimensional body of work that encapsulates this idea of repeating the past in the present by referring to multiple slave-related histories. Part of *To Disembark, Runaways* (1993) is a series of ten text-based lithographs that reproduce the style of runaway slave handbills – which, from her extensive research on fugitive slave advertisements from Nova Scotia and Quebec in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, art historian Charmaine Nelson describes as "fundamentally visual textual descriptions" that serve as "a key historical source which can assist us in understanding the nature of slavery and the lives and experiences of the enslaved" (Confederation Centre Art Gallery). The text in *Runaways* presents multiple portrayals of Ligon himself, who asked friends to write descriptions of him as if reporting a missing person to the police (MoMa Learning). This type of (sometimes contradictory) encounter of the historical and impersonal with the contemporary and (auto)biographical runs through much of Ligon's work, as we see it in *Runaways*. The whole of *To Disembark* further reiterates that when you place historical events alongside contemporary happenings, it is evident that very little has changed. Bodies confined and voices suppressed in

slavery, black people have been silenced. The audience confronts the idea of slavery placed alongside images of oppression in contemporary times. The George Floyd scenario comes to mind; lynching and 'knee on neck' all amount to the same thing. Nothing has changed. When discussing *To Disembark*, art historian Huey Copeland comments that "In forging a link between the obstacles encountered by the fugitive slave and the dangers faced by the contemporary Black subject, Ligon's work enacts a kind of repetition familiar to students of African American culture, so that history, text, and performance become circulating quantities always subject to reiteration and renewal" (Copeland 84).

Installation of Resonant Frequencies Beyond the Visible, Between the Lines

As a way of reflecting both this reiteration and renewal of histories and the resonance from the lower frequencies emanated by the images in the project, I installed various series that make up the exhibition in a continuum, horizontally (in a straight line, without spacing) on one wall of Gales Gallery. This is to create a flow and a connection from one image to the other. As one work erases, another emerges, and the process is repeated.

For example, in one larger installation of works – printed on Epson photo semigloss paper (170 gsm, 7 mm), to mimic the paper used in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and similar publications – the photocopied images of African subjects from "The Land and The People" photo plates in the encyclopedia are juxtaposed with out-of-focus paintings of "British Men of Letters, 14th – 18th Centuries" (entry: "English Literature") and will be arranged in rows of images with varying heights. The arrangement resembles the visual display of an audio equalizer, used in sound engineering to adjust the volume of different sound frequency bands.

Figure 8: Installation mock-up 1

Further along the wall, Nkrumah and Riebeeck will be arranged in a configuration that gives prominence to the undermined African leader. Prints – 12 x 16" affixed to the wall will be installed adjacent to an aluminium-mounted inkjet print – 24 x 19" – that rests on two sets of

encyclopedias to create a platform that is 24” wide and 4” high. Through this presentation I am creating a new, physical structure that metaphorically disrupts and deconstructs the ideological structures that have been created by and within the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which encases and frames knowledge according to the ideological frameworks of its authors, while also creating boundaries and representations of the “other” through the text and images presented within them. The encyclopedia volumes become objects within the confines of the exhibition. The question arises: Are these sculptures/ objects, structures that challenge the ‘otherness’ of the African subjects?

Figure 9: Installation mock-up 2

The image of Jan van Riebeeck – whose air of superiority in the portrait’s pose is wiped out after repeated photocopying – appears elsewhere in the installation in conjunction with the image of a young man gripping a spear with both hands. The placement of Riebeeck’s hand on the lower part of the spear in the superimposed images suggests a struggle for control and representation. The steady gaze of the young African appears as a quiet act of refusal.

The same pair of images might also point in a different direction, to a nuanced objectification of the Black body as representative of violence and aggression. By manipulating

the images in photocopy and collage, I deny Riebeeck his agency and subvert his superiority. His hand is now gripping the spear, demonstrating the violence inherent in colonialism.

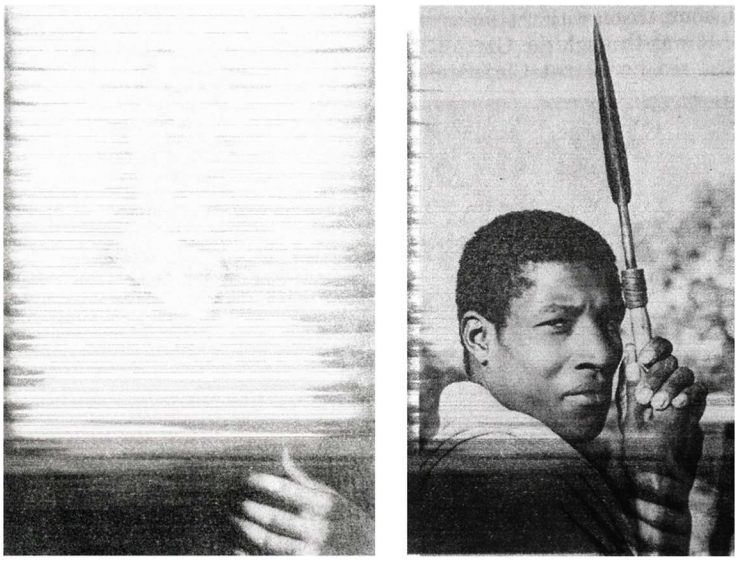


Figure 10: L to r: *Spectacles of Progress 01 & 02* (2022); xerox inkjet prints on semigloss paper; 13 x 19 in. each

The control and exploitation of Africa's natural and human resources is clearly visible in another set of images. The empire was built on the backs of Africans (and carried on their heads). Seen together, the strong frequencies in this group of paper and aluminium-mounted prints resonate and reverberate widely.

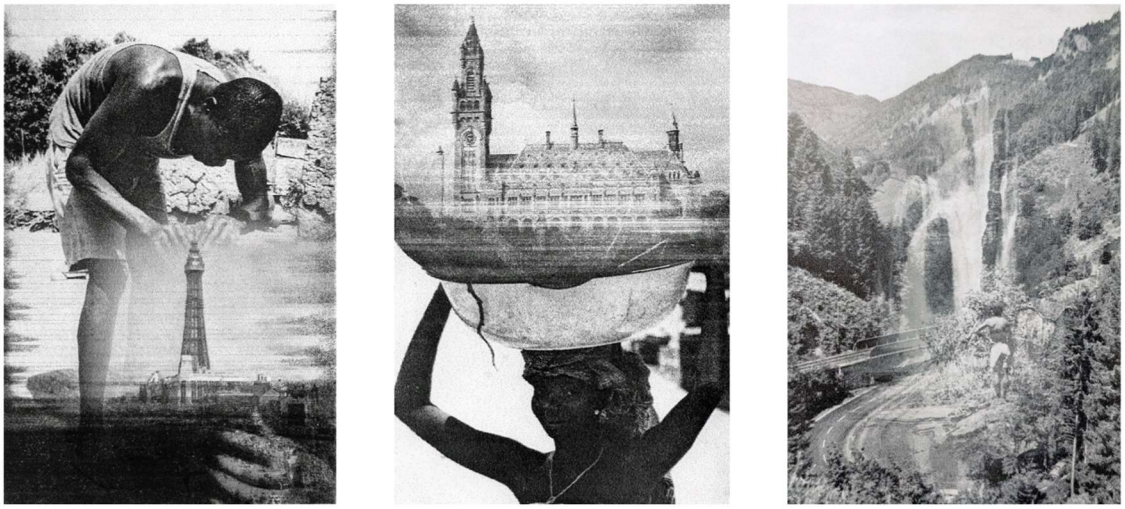


Figure 11: L to r: *Spectacles of Progress 03 - 05* (2022); aluminium-mounted xerox inkjet prints on matte paper; 24 x 36 in. each

Figure 12: Installation mock-up 3

A final series of images is concerned with the stage and the suggestion of spectacle when it comes to the Black body. Theatre also suggests culture and civilization. By superimposing landscape images – a herd of deer and a herder boy with his cow gazing across a large body of water – I am placing these elements on the stage, reinforcing the idea of spectacle but also centering the underrepresented. A triptych that brings together an ancient Greek amphitheatre and the Fulani emir on his horse echoes these sentiments, while also bringing to the surface the contrasts in history and the narratives of the powerful that have displaced and suppressed Africa's rich and ancient heritage in favour of Eurocentric ideals of civilization.

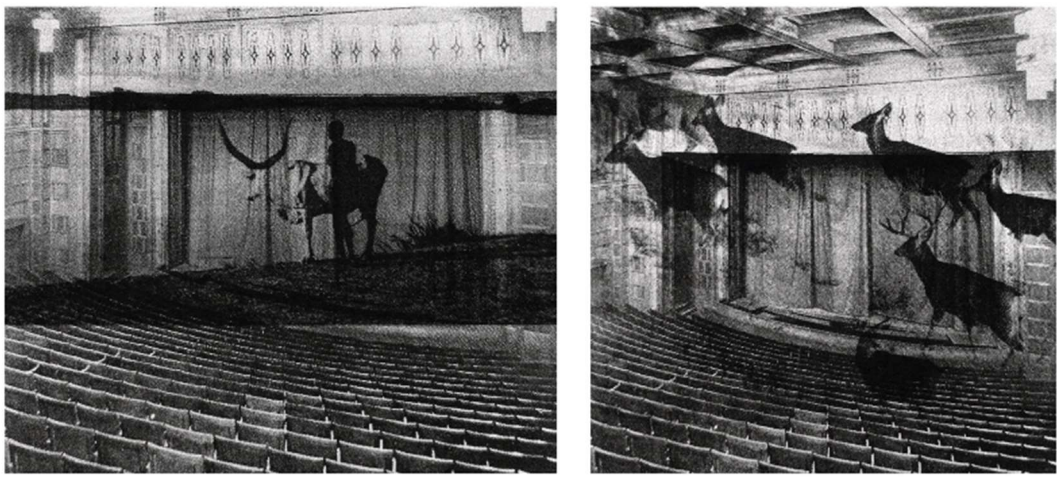


Figure 13: L to r: *Theater of Civilization 01 & 02* (2022); xerox inkjet prints on semigloss paper; 13 x 19 in. each

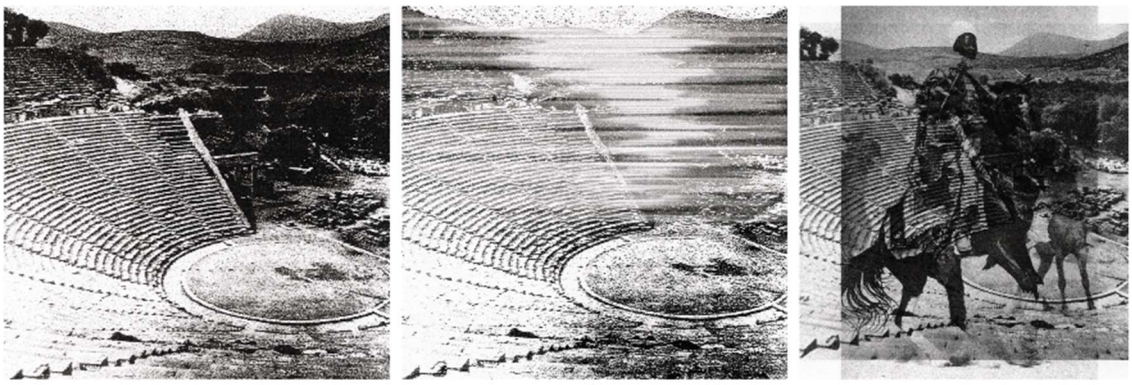


Figure 14: L to r: *Theater of Civilization 03 - 05* (2022); xerox inkjet prints on semigloss paper; 13 x 19 in. each

Conclusion

The role of photography in interrogating the colonial narrative and creating an alternative story is one of the aims of this exhibition. In the process, the recovery of identity is highlighted. While presenting this project as a way to acknowledge the "aspirations to dignity, humanity and futurity" (Campt, 43) of Africans and people of the Diaspora, I also see it as being open-ended, at times almost suggesting something, at other times ambiguous, and still at other times very clear. Through the exhibition, the artwork brings together objects and images that don't naturally go together.

Transformation is constantly taking place in the act of photocopying. Collage and montage become further acts of appropriation where fragments of images that belonged in one place become components of a new and larger format. My work involves a tactile exploration of images and objects. I juxtapose the material in a variety of ways. The assemblage might have the appearance of randomness but is the product of deep thought.

Colonial history is deeply embedded in landscape representations as I discovered in my work on the Jos Plateau tin mining sites. Digging deep below the surface becomes a metaphor for memory and recollection – bringing to life what is lost, forgotten or unseen. Photography becomes a malleable instrument pushing the boundaries of traditional image making.

I am interested in the sensory and emotional experience elicited by the combination of images and references, the personal as well as the political interpretations that point in varied directions. What is it about a particular work that might make a viewer uncomfortable, and why? What are the signifiers of feeling and vibration that bring the mysterious to an image and give it – or its subjects – power? These are, ultimately, the questions inherent in this work.

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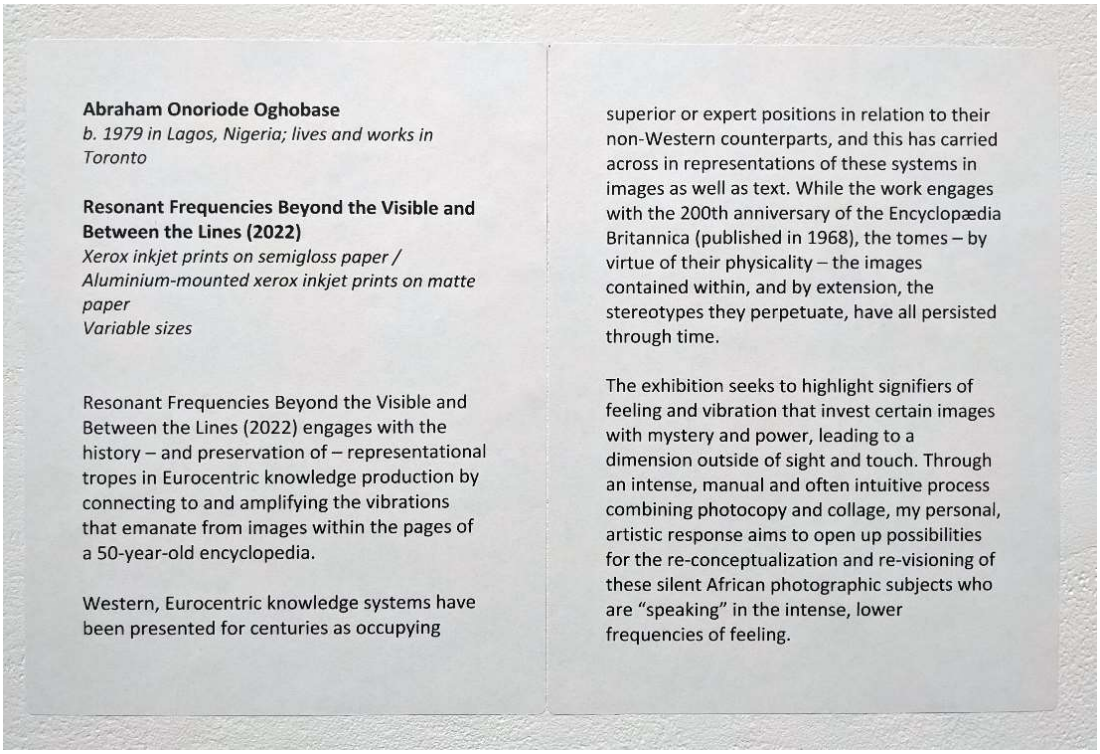
Appendix A: Installation Images from "Resonant Frequencies: Beyond the Visible, Between the Lines"; Gales Gallery, York University, April 4 - 8, 2022



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Resonant Frequencies Beyond the Visible and Between the Lines (2022)
Xerox inkjet prints on semigloss paper / Aluminium-mounted xerox inkjet prints on matte paper
Variable sizes

Resonant Frequencies Beyond the Visible and Between the Lines (2022) engages with the history – and preservation of – representational tropes in Eurocentric knowledge production by connecting to and amplifying the vibrations that emanate from images within the pages of a 50-year-old encyclopedia.

Western, Eurocentric knowledge systems have been presented for centuries as occupying superior or expert positions in relation to their non-Western counterparts, and this has carried across in representations of these systems in images as well as text. While the work engages with the 200th anniversary of the Encyclopædia Britannica (published in 1968), the tomes – by virtue of their physicality – the images contained within, and by extension, the stereotypes they perpetuate, have all persisted through time.

The exhibition seeks to highlight signifiers of feeling and vibration that invest certain images with mystery and power, leading to a dimension outside of sight and touch. Through an intense, manual and often intuitive process combining photocopy and collage, my personal, artistic response aims to open up possibilities for the re-conceptualization and re-visioning of these silent African photographic subjects who are "speaking" in the intense, lower frequencies of feeling.

Figure 15: Exhibition introductory text

Figure 16: Installation view of *Theater of Civilization 01* (2022); xerox inkjet print on semigloss paper; 13 x 19 in.

Figure 17: Installation view of *Custodians of Culture 01 - 21* (2022); xerox inkjet prints on semigloss paper; 13 x 19 in. each

Figure 18: Detail view of *Custodians of Culture 01 - 21*

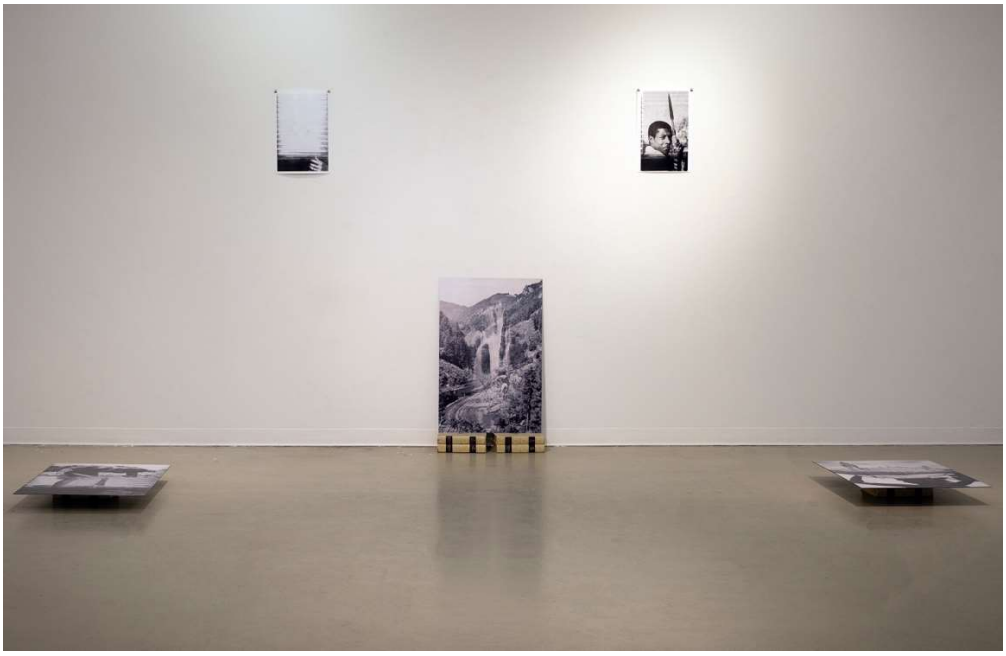

Figure 19: Installation view of *Spectacles of Progress 01 - 05* (2022); xerox inkjet prints on semigloss paper, aluminium-mounted xerox inkjet prints on matte paper installed on eight *Encyclopaedia Britannica* volumes; variable sizes

Figure 20: Installation view of (l to r) *Spectacles of Progress 01, 05, 02*

Figure 21: Installation view of *Spectacles of Progress 01, 02, 05* (background) and *Spectacles of Progress 04* (foreground)

Figure 22: Installation view of *Spectacles of Progress 03* (foreground) and *The Quotidian and the Sublime* (background)

Figure 23: Installation view of *Muted Histories: Riebeeck / Nkrumah 01 - 05* (2022); xerox inkjet prints on semigloss paper, aluminium-mounted xerox inkjet print on matte paper installed on four *Encyclopaedia Britannica* volumes; variable sizes

Figure 24: Installation view of *Muted Histories: Riebeeck / Nkrumah 01 - 04*

Figure 25: Installation view of *The Quotidian and the Sublime 01 - 03* (2022); aluminium-mounted xerox inkjet prints on matte paper, installed on 12 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* volumes; 31 x 24 in. each

Figure 26: Detail view of *The Quotidian and the Sublime 01 - 03*

Figure 27: Gales Gallery installation view 01

Figure 28: Gales Gallery installation view 02

Figure 29: Gales Gallery installation view 03