

We live in unstable times. Perhaps we always have. A sense of instability and equilibrium permeates the work of New York-based artist Kayode Ojo. For the artist assemblage is a methodology. “The forms are often dictated by the least I can do,” he explains. His aim is to create objects that teeter on the edge of precarity, yet do not fall apart.

Emerging originally out of photography, it is unclear whether his objects made from upturned furniture, internet-sourced sequin slip dresses and slabs of mirror are the actual work itself. Or if, in fact, the documented image is the realization of the artist’s ideas. Ojo enjoys that lack of clarity. “My sculptures are often inspired by photographs I’ve seen. And they all pose,” he observes. “They are made to be photographed.”

Kayode photographed his family and friends at school—a process that still informs his work. He studied photography at the School of Visual Arts in New York, and became frustrated with the conversation around framing and the production value of images. He began to experiment with sculpture. Initially, he made a work from cheap gold frames, balanced on acrylic rocks, laid on top of a mirror. He refers to these structures as a “type of architecture.” Ojo resists the two-dimensional limits of the photograph. The result is a mid-point between two mediums, which struggle and complement each other.

There is a sense of queerness to some of his materials. Metallic sequins, glittering fabric, sparkling fringe. Sometimes the results looks like Diana Ross or Judy Garland got creative or angry at the furniture in their dressing room. He uses blonde hair-pieces and fake perfume bottles. “The image culture around women is the most intense and that

is what draws me to it.” Ojo notes. “I don’t actually engage with the term queer, but I’m willing to flirt with it. I feel more related to perversion.”

The idea of seduction and failure permeates the works. Ojo is drawn to “glamorous material, or faux glamorous material, as the idea that it’s someone trying to express value.” There is an anxiety around the real or authentic. He sources most of his material online, often from ASOS. “I’m always searching, tracking the types of things I like—auditioning materials,” he considers. Sourcing a jacket for a piece in Dallas, for example, was a typically long process. “I probably bought and returned five different blazers just trying to find the one that kind of made sense or had the kind of quality that I wanted.”

The domestic is his stage. He uses furniture, in particular chairs, mirrors and tables, almost as actors. Everything is seen upside down or from a strange angle. His domestic objects have an inbuilt sense of narrative. As Ojo puts it, home is “where the action happens.” Ojo was invited by artist Heather Guertin to create an apartment show in 2016, an ideal location for his work. “I was having some problems with my personal relationships at the time. The press release was a fictional email to a former collaborator/lover, exploring the idea of ‘closure’, or maybe its impossibility. I had the idea to create the aftermath of New Year’s Eve—my favorite holiday—six months too late. I mostly just brought clothing into the apartment and used the existing furniture. A mix of characters slumped over and clothes discarded and thrown in improbable places.”

The show included a table upturned and placed above shelves full of vinyl, its legs trans-





formed into a place to hang a French Connection blazer. A perfume bottle labeled Arrogance, behind an upside down raffia chair. A peach sequin dress draped over a metal chair leg. Reflection and mirroring is a repeated motif in his work. Often pieces are placed on top of mirrors. We see the underside, a doubling. His references include French erotic thriller *L'amant double* (2017) directed by François Ozon, and Paul Pfeiffer's pink, mirrored installation *Playroom* shown at Paula Cooper in 2012.

Ojo may have been drawn to non-traditional spaces in New York, but this autumn sees three solo shows by the artist in more traditional gallery spaces in three cities—Balice Hertling in Paris, Sweetwater in Berlin, and Martos Gallery in NYC. This follows a solo presentation at Paula Cooper, curated by Laura Hunt, alongside Zoe Leonard. This exhibition focused on photographic images of after parties of the New York art scene, alongside images of his own family in Cookeville, Tennessee. The contrast was interesting, placed between something almost gothic and private, and a more public display of hedonism. There was a marked difference between where he came from, and where he was heading.

Much of Kayode's photographic work has a darkness to it. There is an interest in addressing the representation of masculinity. He sometimes uses images of idealized white, jock guys, often with undercurrents of serious violence and racism. "I grew up around guys like that," he notes. "I think people want an idea of progress, but it's really not happening everywhere. My work doesn't often deal so explicitly with ideas of racial identity. I'm from a very homogenous place, and I continue to exist in one in New York and in the art world. I'm making these works that have this type of standard all-American or German white person in it. Really making you think about the absence."

*Natural Selection* was a series of works re-contextualizing images or criminals in public archives. "I discovered a Tumblr called 'Hot and Busted'. The site featured the mug shots of men the author found attractive, gleaned from public records. Because the men chosen were exclusively Caucasian, criticism of the blog ranged from discomfort with the limited view of physical beauty to accusa-

tions of racism. The author of the blog claimed to be challenging the stereotypical image of a criminal." 'Hot and Busted' was eventually shut down, due most likely to legal issues, so Ojo researched its sources, mostly in Florida. He discovered other mugshot archives that offered cataloging systems based on the physical features of the accused. "I chose images that fit the Aryan ideal, and also referenced portraits of actors or athletes. I built a physical representation of my complex relationship with the images by exposing the undeveloped film to light and photographing flames over the images."

The series used layers of double exposure. Candles reflected over almost psychedelic versions of the mugshot portrait. His *Kapital* series, or *Kapitalistischer Realismus*, also used multiple exposures, of 35mm film of images displayed on a computer screen. Ojo exploited unintentional overlaps. "Fashion models, Neo-Nazi skinheads, UFC fighters, US Army soldiers, Vladimir Putin, The New York Stock Exchange, North Korea at night, luxury goods, and stadiums collapsed together to present American anxiety, aggression, and desire," he explains. "*Kapitalistischer Realismus* conflates high and low culture, spectacle, violence, and desire."

Ojo is not limited to the figurative or the photographic or even sculpture. He also creates abstract paintings from acrylic paint, gloss, Elmer's glue and non-toxic liquid plastic. "They're about marble, and Kenneth Noland, and other types of art I imagined being in homes of people with 'good taste.' Pictures of art in minimalist homes from the '70s." What makes his practice so interesting is its lack of confinement. Instead, there is a sense of a reflection on contemporary American life. The underside of the domestic. The hidden meaning in an image. The darker edge of idealization. The dirt beneath the glamour.

**Overdressed (Blush), 2018 (opposite page) A Straight Razor in the First Act (Gold Green Marble), 2018 (p. 211) Installation view, Kayode Ojo: Betrayal, Balice Hertling, Paris, 2018 (pp. 212-213) Courtesy: the artist**

