

Exhibition Review: *Kapawani Kiwanga: Safe Passage*

Kapawani Kiwanga: Safe Passage. MIT List Visual Arts Center. Cambridge, Massachusetts: February 8–April 21, 2019.

The cold game of equality staring makes me feel like a thin sheet of glass. . . . I could force my presence, the real me contained in those eyes, upon them, but I would be smashed in the process.

—Patricia J. Williams¹

Kapawani Kiwanga's solo show *Safe Passage* was a superimposed arrangement of four sculptural works that at first seemed to echo the Minimalist oeuvre. In time, however, a different impression unfolded, and the works soon revealed themselves as repositories of complex and nuanced meaning. By degrees, an underscore built, thematically unifying the four pieces, which revealed Kiwanga's approach for what it is: an expedition into forgotten and marginalized histories to expose what poet Claudia Rankine has called "the buildup of erasure" that is so common to lives ravaged by racism.²

"At the core of the exhibition," the wall text read, "is an engagement with racialized surveillance and the systems used in monitoring and controlling the movement of bodies in space." Kiwanga thus animated her selected materials with the content of forgotten history, and while the four pieces in *Safe Passage* share a strongly formalist approach, the historical narrative and archival content that animates the work simultaneously exposes the formalist impulse to a haunting critique. After all, it is Donald Judd who, in his seminal essay "Specific Objects," proclaims that "the thing as a whole . . . is what is interesting."³ And in contemplating *Safe Passage*, as one encountered Kiwanga's unavoidably formalist creations, the viewer was also led to consider just how much of "the [actual] whole" is left unconsidered if one's attention is moored to exclusively formal concerns.

Before entering the gallery proper, a black standing sculpture with an embedded spherical light greeted the viewer from within the gallery. [Image 1] Though formally abstract, due to its proportions and scale it was difficult not to anthropomorphize the piece. And

1. Katie Conby, Nadia Medina, Sarah Stanbury, eds. *Writing on the Body, Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 161.

2. Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014), 66.

3. Thomas Kellein, *Donald Judd: Early Work, 1955–1968* (New York: D.A.P., 2002), 94.



IMAGE 1. *Glow* (2019) by Kapwani Kiwanga; courtesy the artist.



IMAGE 2. Installation view of *Kapwani Kiwanga: Safe Passage* (2019) at MIT List Visual Arts Center, © Kapwani Kiwanga; courtesy MIT List Visual Arts Center; photograph by Peter Harris Studio.

just like that, the message was received. Instinctively, imperceptibly, the viewer's participation in a scopic regime was confirmed. The four black standing pieces that comprise *Glow* (2019), each with its own unique physical form and lamp shape, were arrayed about the gallery, facing the entrance. The high polish of the gallery's concrete floor elongated each lamp's reflection in a manner suggestive of a wet city street at night. Thus, even without specific knowledge of what *Glow* is about, the four standing black shapes emanating light served to correlate in the viewer's mind with variations in human form, arrayed in an urban setting.

It happens that *Glow* arose from Kiwanga's research into Boston's Lantern Laws of the 1770s, which declared that slaves walking the streets at night must carry lanterns and give a full account of their business. *Glow* thus illuminates the legacy of forced visibility of black bodies from an antiquated reference point, offering up a rather timeless reference point for the social dynamics of "seeing" and "being seen." At the same time, *Glow* brings today's lens-based regimes of electronic surveillance firmly to mind. Such is the raw power of Kiwanga's synthetic visual language, which, in bringing attention to forgotten and ignored subjects, allows the viewer to rediscover the present through the prism of the past.

Glow shared the same gallery space with two other pieces, *Tripartite* (2019) and *Jalousie* (2018), while the fourth piece, *Greenbook (1961)* (2019), occupied a separate space at the far end of the gallery [Image 2].

Like *Glow*, *Tripartite* and *Jalousie* approach questions of forced visibility and obstructed/directed movement in different ways. *Tripartite* consists of four steel, ten-foot-tall right triangles, three with black and one with pink shade cloth stretched across them. One black

triangle stood with its back against the wall opposite the gallery entrance, and an identical black triangle faced it on the opposite wall. Positioned closer to the gallery entrance, and thus initially having an outsized impact, one black and one pink triangle shared a hypotenuse to create a ten-foot-tall square. The fact that just one of the four right triangles was stretched with pink shade cloth, and the other three with black, made a stunning visual impact. Shade cloth is typically used in tropical climates to block out certain ultraviolet rays and to demarcate land ownership. Shade cloth is therefore a material associated with the selective obstruction of both light and movement in and around a given space. In the context of *Safe Passage, Tripartite* both enabled selective filtration of certain views of the space and, as the largest forms in the gallery, dictated the path of acceptable movement through the gallery space.

Just on the other side of *Tripartite* and *Glow*, and within the same gallery space, visitors encountered the beguiling work *Jalousie*. Comprised of four standing hinged panels measuring seven feet tall by three feet wide, a two-way mirror was mounted, in a combination of full panes and louvers, to each steel panel. The piece was thus suggestive of the louvered windows common in Caribbean locales such as Haiti that promote increased air circulation. The use of a two-way mirror of course referenced a very different set of associations than the normal settings in which such louvers are typically encountered. The two-way mirror, commonly encountered in interrogation rooms or corporate settings, calls to mind power differentials and again raises the specter of forced visibility. Placing *Jalousie's* panels at right angles to one another, and lighting the piece from both sides, the artist ensured that the mirror remained transparent rather than opaque. And just as the opening of louvers encourages free airflow, using a two-way mirror in this manner retains visibility and forces the material to reflect upon itself.

Greenbook (1961), the fourth piece in *Safe Passage*, was, like *Glow* and *Tripartite*, created expressly for the show. It was the only piece of the four, however, that occupied a self-contained area within the gallery. Having traversed the area shared by *Glow*, *Jalousie*, and *Tripartite*, the viewer encountered a wall, on the other side of which *Greenbook* (1961) was displayed [Image 3].

The eponymous *Green Book* was named after Victor Hugo Green, an African American veteran of World War I and a mail carrier, who in 1932 conceived of an annual travel guide for African Americans. In coordination with other like-minded people (including others of the postal profession), Green worked to publicize a network of safe places for African Americans traveling across the US. The resulting pocket-sized paperbacks, published from 1936 to 1966 under various titles including *The Negro Motorist Green Book* and *The Travelers' Green Book*, contained business addresses, personal addresses, and advertisements, compiled to support free and safe movement of African Americans in the face of racial animus. Kiwanga's piece thus brings our attention to the 1961 edition of the *Green Book* (the very year, viewers may recall, Freedom Riders traveled across the South to protest segregation).

Kiwanga's *Greenbook* (1961) consists of pages corresponding to listings for twenty-one states, printed exactly as they appeared in the 1961 edition, with one glaring exception: all personal names, business names, and advertisements have been removed. Each single page is presented as it initially appeared, and each state's pages are framed together inside



IMAGE 3. *Greenbook (1961) (2019)* by Kapwani Kiwanga; courtesy the artist.



IMAGE 4. Detail of *Greenbook (1961) (2019)* by Kapwani Kiwanga; courtesy the artist.

light-colored hardwood frames, with each page lightly affixed to a green background. [Image 4] The display, spanning the four walls at the end of the gallery space, formed a single line set at about chest level, with the length of each frame dictated by the number of listings published for each state. Between frames, an empty space provided a visual pause between

states. Kiwanga's engagement in this process of erasure thus leaves addresses intact, presented exactly as they appeared, and removes everything else.

The viewer, no doubt seeking content, was left to contemplate what the street addresses by themselves signify. One irony is that though the piece is immaculately crafted and executed, the addresses listed are clearly less a formal concern than a stirring testament to places where African American bodies were not under threat in the year 1961. *Greenbook (1961)* therefore presents a lyrical yet silent testament to the kind of strategic resistance brought to bear in this historical instance, in which structures already in place (through the postal service) were utilized to secure the promise of free (and safe) movement of all American citizens within its borders.

In a manner as profound as it was understated, and as formal as it was content driven, Kapwani Kiwanga's *Safe Passage* deftly demonstrated that free movement (of *all* bodies within the country's borders) is never simply a matter of law. The reality is that, up to and including the present year (in which a film entitled *Green Book*, based on the very travel guide conceived by Green, won an Oscar for Best Picture), the process of securing safe passage is an ongoing struggle. And one keenly senses, assisted by Kiwanga's singular vision, that it is often the direct, diligent action taken by regular citizens on behalf of themselves, and others like them, that ultimately resonates the strongest. ■

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