

From: Joy Labinjo's Family Album
by George Vasey
13 December 2018

Frieze

In her show at Tiwani Contemporary, London, the painter draws on the intimate atmosphere of rediscovered photographs



Main image: Joy Labinjo, *The Elders*, 2018, oil and household paint on canvas, 1.5 × 2 m. Courtesy: the artist and Tiwani Contemporary, London

What do family photographs tell us about the lives of the people they depict? The photographer Jo Spence said that an understanding of identity politics and representation should start with an analysis of the family album. While the way we take and share photographs has changed since Spence's death in 1992, the purpose of family portraiture remains the same. Families dutifully document intimate memories to create intergenerational bonds and preserve their personal histories. Joy Labinjo's recent paintings, brought together for her solo exhibition 'Recollections', are based on a family album the artist discovered at her parent's house a couple of years ago.



Joy Labinjo, 'Recollections at Tiwani Contemporary', 2018, installation view. Courtesy: Tiwani Contemporary, London; photograph: Deniz Guzel

Visiting Great Grandma (2018) is typical. Shot from a low angle, the figures are cropped awkwardly. The woman standing in the background is caught with her eyes half shut, before she has composed herself. In the digital era, it is the sort of image that is typically deleted and re-taken. Is this character the artist's grandma, mother, cousin or aunt? Is that Labinjo as a young girl at the front? Vertical blocks of pink, orange and baby blue denote architectural features and a plant provides an irregular, decorative pattern. The lack of deep shadows mimics the effects of flash photography. The figures are painted more fluidly, with Labinjo attentively detailing the African ankara print worn by two of the characters. The work's flat graphic style – more print-like than painterly – with its merging of abstraction and naturalism, is reminiscent of the paintings of Jonas Wood.

Labinjo paints faces like a cartographer maps a mountain range, with the skin smoothly contoured. This is an ageless world without blemishes and wrinkles. Labinjo takes liberties with the human anatomy, which – like the perspectival space around it – is stretched and flattened. The body, rather than the voice, becomes the site for communicative potential and we read them for narrative clues. We've seen these images before: stolen moments before the official wedding photograph, shots taken with the last bit of the film roll before it gets sent off to the chemists. Labinjo has an eye for photographic details: goofy smiles, awkward siblings forced to stand closer together, a body yet to settle into itself after a sudden growth spurt.



Joy Labinjo, *Gisting in the Kitchen*, 2018, oil, acrylic, and household paint on canvas 1.4 × 1.6 m. Courtesy: the artist and Tiwani Contemporary, London

In *The Elders* (2018) a group of smartly dressed figures are gathered. Some are dressed in traditional African clothing. Are they at a wedding, a party or a family reunion? This picture could have been taken at any point in the last 50 years, and it is sometimes unclear in Labinjo's paintings whether we are seeing the same characters at different points in their life. There is a thick border of unpainted canvas around the image, interrupted by a plant leaching out of the frame. Labinjo seems to be having fun, playing around with the potential of painting to create its own fictions. I'm reminded of early David Hockney and his formalist games, his pictures within pictures and painterly jokes about flatness.

These paintings are about the pleasure of looking at the intimate lives of people we've never met. They are also about the domestic space of black lives. By painting her family, Labinjo foregrounds her British Nigerian heritage and affirms the voice of people who have been largely absent from the narratives of figurative painting in the West. She has previously noted the influence of older artists such as Claudette Johnson, Sonia Boyce and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, who have similarly placed the black figure as a protagonist in their own work. While these family photographs are taken predominantly between the UK and Nigeria, the paintings create a third space that is as much temporal as it is spatial, historical as it is geographic. Labinjo places her cast of characters in the story of art, and proudly attests to her own family's histories.

Joy Labinjo, 'Recollections' runs at Tiwani Contemporary, London, until 22 December 2018.