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BloodLetter

Monilola Olayemi Ilupeju

Blood remits to color, vitality, paint, family and violence; letter to language, communication, traces, healing, and so on. One's own creation (blood, kin) becomes inseparable from creative acts (letter, writing). This is an important force animating both **Monilola Olayemi Ilupeju's** practice and *BloodLetter's* many meanings. Her new works on leather, canvas and birch function like a sort of family album, often depicting the artist's close relatives, interspersed with other motifs and scenes complementing the family story. Bloodletting—the deliberate drawing of blood for relief or health—operates like a metaphor for art about one's kin. The metaphor extends to both the exhibited paintings and a collection of texts by the artist sharing the exhibition's title. The texts collected in this leather-bound artist book include poems, essays, a letter to her mother and several journal entries related to family, ancestry, and themes of belonging and home. The exhibited works "draw blood," meaning they re-narrate a personal archive.

Extensive writings and occasional scribbles cover the paintings' support: mostly cowhides that are painted, scratched and also burnt through pyrographic technique. *Grandpa's Balcony*, for instance, reveals less some innate truth about Ilupeju's family history and more the importance of writing for the artist, who refuses lingering hierarchies among the arts. The writings on the paintings are largely undecipherable, functioning like a claim to opacity invested in decorating and conveying, in this specific painting, the historical excess populating the seemingly empty balcony of her grandfather. It is as if a dense chaos of information lives on beneath the surfaces—a delirious mess of tracings and memories from all the stories once told on that balcony, some of which can be read in the artist book in an interview with the artist's father. It is this cacophony that a traditional family album tries to contain through carefully stored photographs and commemorating special dates, which *BloodLetter* complicates, revises and fictionalizes. The show becomes a blood letter, a letter of blood, written in blood, about blood, for blood, and just like that, the stories begin to pour out, as Ilupeju writes, "drop by drop."

Bloods

Two works in *BloodLetter* are based on actual photographs from the family album. *V. & Blue Tree* depicts Ilupeju's mother in a beautifully rendered living room soon after moving to Maryland in the 80s. Her expression conveys a disquiet akin to the migrant's paradox—the excitement of a new beginning and its burdensome uncertainty, a new environment and its xenophobic hostility. Similarly, *Big Man* portrays the artist's brother as a child. Adapting two original photographs, Ilupeju depicts her brother in a suit with a Batman mask painted on his face, standing with his arms awkwardly puffed out to make his frame appear bigger. The contrasting innocence and mischievousness imbued in the mask correspond to the ambivalence of their relationship up until his recent passing. A replica of a green pocket bible is wedged between the leather and wooden frame as if it were an afterthought, like the unexpected work of posthumous forgiveness and reconciliation. These paintings inevitably carry a seed of what has happened since, not as condemnation, but often to remember and forgive, to make sense of the past and to let go without forgetting.

The approach resembles autofiction and autotheory, genres the artist is well acquainted with that characterize her collected writings in *Earnestly* (2022), where she collages essays, video scripts, letters, poems and journal entries. Although the autobiographical and multimedia approach persists in this exhibition, it comes closer to what Lorraine O'Grady calls "writing in space" to describe both the viscosity and intellectual rigor of her artistic interventions. Considering *BloodLetter* literally and Ilupeju's naming gesture seriously, the show is a blood letter written in space. A letter with a cutting eye for the gaps between image and text, between the stories we are told and how we choose to retell them.

The sense of the artist revising and adapting an archive is furthered by her presence in the works, most directly in a self-portrait of the artist behind dangling flowers titled *Shower* and in *Box Braids at Uncle's Arba'in*, a joyous scene of her aunt's friend and daughters doing her hair. The braiding scene is how the artist retells her first trip to Nigeria in the context of her late uncle's Arba'in, a memorial service forty days after death in Shia Islam. The artist condenses mourning, joy and various traditions into an image of return, of discovering an ancestral home. That Ilupeju is rewriting the family album appears most explicitly in *(No) Fear*. As viewers, we are placed in the artist's perspective—a notebook and a pen held between fingers as if contemplating what will come next in the family saga. This work is key to Ilupeju's intervention in the family album. We are invited to embody an artist's perspective as much as we are alerted to how *BloodLetter* will not deliver any straightforward narrative: the pages seem empty at first but the surfaces are textured with unreadable calligraphic tracings and flowers similar to those in *Shower* and *communing with her ghosts under rain water, speaking in forgotten tongues*. The journal pages once containing the artist's thoughts and feelings on grief are now painted over; as if the artist had scratched, burnt and poured paint over the surface, less to erase than to condense narratives. The initial outpour of feelings is doubled with an outpour of paint. Ilupeju revisits her autobiography and posits her artistic identity as a bloodletter, as someone whose grief has been alleviated through bloodletting, and the exhibited works have risen out of the drawn blood.

Bloodletting

The practice of drawing blood with the hope of healing or alleviating a particular ailment is common in ancestral cultures around the globe. From Ayurvedic medicine and the sacrificial rites of the Nahuas to the many syncretizations of the Yoruba religion, blood is vested with spiritual significance as a ritualized offering. Yet the show relies less on the history of bloodletting or its efficacy as a transcultural practice of healing, and more on the many shapes healing may take, for instance, in the form of repair, retribution or care. *NCNMOUSA Medical Mission (Ibadan, July 2023)* renders this notion explicit. The day after the Arba'in, Ilupeju volunteered in a medical mission organized by her uncle and the National Council of Nigerian Muslim Organizations USA. The painting depicts a waiting scene: patients-to-be holding a slip documenting their name, vital signs, and symptoms that would grant them overdue care, that is if their turn comes. A text in the exhibition problematizes the lack of long-term infrastructure surrounding such missions, affirming both their urgency and the need for organizational changes that could enable ongoing care. The seemingly endless crowd waiting to be helped speaks to this need, while the slips they hold become placeholders for bloodletting, the uncertain hope that our pains and sorrows will find lasting atonement. It was during a conversation with her mother that bloodletting came up as a metaphor for mourning: tears work similarly, offering relief and respite, timed release as a short-term cure. To let it all out too thoughtlessly, the tears, the blood or the stories, means to risk one's life. This is why, as in bloodletting, telling the family story goes bit by bit, drop by drop.

Letters

The family album is more colloquially known for remembering joyous moments and suppressing the miserable ones. The works in *BloodLetter* might seem to affirm this notion of the family album, although, as already implied, certain textures, compositions and facial expressions suggest otherwise. In defiance of conventional painting, the exhibited works operate less like an album and more like an archive aware of its irredeemable incompleteness. The holes visible on the paintings, a result of the irregular shape of cowhide, speak to what has been omitted from the family archive. The paintings often relay a scene as documented in a photograph, transferring the image associated with a memory onto the frame only to reveal that the cowhide is not square. The animalistic in these blood letters refuses the smoothness of photography. The photograph does not fit onto the painting to the extent that a family's saga does not fit into neatly curated photographs, and just like that, leather becomes a better container for the personal archive, and the exhibition format a better place to tell one's story.

BloodLetter negotiates the limits of the personal archive—that an archive contains the past inasmuch as it registers editions and deletions. In *Custody*, for example, Ilupeju paints the houses of her divorced parents on opposite sides of a small chunk of birch tree. Drawings from her childhood diary, created in art therapy during the parent's separation, have been engraved onto the bark. Looking at this artwork will always leave a part of the full picture out. It attests to ruptures in the family archive, the work these command and the imminence of artistic revision. Ilupeju's approach comes closer to the healing role Suely Rolnik ascribes to some artistic interventions in "Archive Mania" (2011). The "work of thought," she writes, "in art or other languages" must take the "dead ends" of past worlds "to draft cartographies while new existential territories are taking shape and others are vanishing" (18). Rolnik ascribes a worldmaking quality to art that takes the limits of one world to imagine another, offering an important conceptual framework for Ilupeju's exhibition: that an archive's specificities should not be exceptionalized, but instead generalized. The archive must be artistically opened up to an audience, so that the stories can pour out.

This generalization of the family archive is central to *dust floating above my head like gnats in a daze*. The painting depicts an endless field of poppies, a symbol with a material history inseparable from colonialism, war and death. The history of opiates, their criminalization and resulting racialized violence are written into the beauty of what might be an exotic flower for many. So are red poppies also a symbol for those fallen in war, but also an ode to fallen freedom fighters. The martyred souls that died to escape their fate and fortune. This painting on leather is part of the personal archive, and like *(No) Fear* it has no holes. While this can be attributed to their smaller size, it also appears like a fortunate coincidence; these works are part of a family album without holes, meaning without the deletions of the archive. They are like indirect quotations of the album—the fiction that becomes autobiographical and opens up to stories beyond the archive.

BloodLetter

Aware that the archive always speaks to irretrievable absences, the exhibition insists that there must be an archive that accommodates memory, grief, beauty and the im/possibility of belonging: *BloodLetter* as an archive that remembers to forgive the unchangeable and returns to the body, to the skin, to one's own blood to muster the courage healing necessitates. This healing potential is paired in the exhibited works with the burdensome privilege and political obligation of retelling stories, especially one's own, in art or other languages. This exhibition which is an archive that is a family album is also a testament to what the outpourings metaphorized in bloodletting might bring. And what comes out are not the irrepresentable torments of this or every family but the images that offset it, the blood letters that seem unrelated, the portraits that open the past for repair and atonement. And just like that, the stories pour out. So we draw some blood and let it out.

- José B. Segebre

Monilola Olayemi Ilupeju (born 1996) is a Nigerian-American artist and author based in Berlin. She graduated with distinction from New York University, where she studied studio art and social and cultural analysis. She is also an alumna of the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Through painting, writing, performance and installation, she balances intimate experiences of connection, violence, and healing against broader observations on cultural distortion and identity. She has done extensive curatorial and editorial work with SAVVY Contemporary and Archive Books, among others. *Earnestly* (2022, Archive Books) is her debut collection of writing.

Recent solo exhibitions include *Saint V.*, Tarte Vienna, Vienna (2023); *Gymnasia*, A plus A Gallery, Venice, (2023); *Hands Full of Air*, Galerie im Turm, Berlin (2020); and *Eve of Intuition*; The Institute for Endotic Research (TIER), Berlin (2020). Ilupeju has also participated in numerous group exhibitions, including *Twilight is a Place of Promise*, Esther Schipper, Berlin; *non playable character*, School for Curatorial Studies Venice & The Fairest, Venice (2022); *my whole body changed into something else*, Stevenson Gallery, Johannesburg (2021); *where will i be buried*, Flux Factory, New York (2020); and *Queer Intimacy and States of Emotions*, Human Resources, Los Angeles (2019).

Exhibition dates: September 6 – November 9, 2024

Open: Tuesday – Saturday 12 – 6 pm

On the occasion of Berlin Art Week, on Saturday September 14th at 7pm, Monilola will hold a reading of the texts conceived around the exhibition's themes.