



February 1 – March 6, 2022 Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery

Brandon Ndife

Down to the Spoons and Forks

Like a touch from another time, Brandon Ndife's sculptures reach back to us from an evacuated future past, emptied and then refilled. Sited between decay and regrowth, his sculptures speculate on historical conditions that constitute our present while the objects' own histories seem to exist in our future. The sculptures' temporal duplicity is matched in their material presence. Aspects of the works appear as additively-composed of something else—vegetables and fruit, wood, dirt, and furniture—often so convincingly as to elicit a double-take. The artist has described this as “code-switching” rather than as *trompe l'oeil*, the French term for “deceiving the eye” in paintings that create perspectival illusionism. Code-switching suggests that the object is shifting linguistically, registering differently for audiences, and performing legibility in various, sometimes overlapping contexts.

The coincidence of multiple texts, especially when doubling, creates the conditions for one text to be read through another. The organic vegetable matter and fragments in Ndife's sculptures appear in states of decay, suggesting their own history. As ruinous speculative remnants, they ask to have their multiple meanings disentangled from the material and melancholic aesthetics of history. In Walter Benjamin's words, “This is the core of the allegorical vision...meaningful only in the stations of its decline.”¹

The dirty and decaying vegetables represented in the sculptures specifically reference diasporic plants, painted casts of gourds, squashes, sweet potatoes, and cassavas. Many of these vegetables, native to South America or Africa, arrived in North America through the trans-Atlantic slave trade.² In the sculptures, they become allegories for the communities they feed. Ndife recalls seeing gourds such as these stored in the kitchen cabinet of his childhood home alongside packaged snacks. As an adult, moving through largely-white homogenous suburban areas of upstate New York, Ndife found cassavas and other foreign vegetables in the grocery store, evidencing the presence of nearby immigrant people. He also found an analogy between the racist and xenophobic treatment of non-white communities and the gentrification or whitewashing of cuisine. A repulsiveness or abjectness was ascribed by white suburbanites to the food as well, leaving Ndife to ask “who is actually antagonizing whom here?”³

Furniture, in Ndife's sculptures, signifies a mass-produced suburban aesthetic, a simulacrum of historical value. Rather than signify a particular person or taste, they begin as empty containers, only taking on specificity through their dirtying and marks of their use. For Ndife, the furniture may not have a value outside of the people who used it, it may not have a meaning apart from its accrued sentimentality.⁴

In Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman's *Notes on Conceptualisms* (2010) they share a diagram about the opposing relationship between allegory and symbolism.



The allegorical pushes outward, away from the object towards something else whereas the symbolic, as Place and Fitterman suggest, pulls inward toward the object. As the artist has explained about his own work, "I always think that I make sculptures that are meant to be jettisoned and unclaimed...almost left behind."⁵

Place and Fitterman continue, "Note the potential for excess in allegory. Note the premise of failure, of unutterability, of exhaustion before one's begun." Within the sculptures, this weariness reads as a melancholic position. The vegetables, forks, and plates exceed their literal and figurative containers and acquire a new spaciousness. Vast, they are either inconsistent or incomplete, requiring pretextual associations to achieve post-textual understanding. As Fred Moten explains, "To invoke the more (or less) incalculable is to recognize how life-in-danger takes certain conceptual apparatuses over the limit, in unnatural defiance of their rule, placing them in danger, such that the difference between internal and external imposition, or that between major and minor struggle, fails properly to signify."⁶

Rather than an end point, the evacuated, post-apocalyptic nature of Brandon Ndife's sculptures are the stage for another beginning. Either they are impoverished down to the spoons and forks or they've deliberately re-incorporated only basic constitutive elements as a creative constraint. Even in this reduced state there is an excess left in the vacuum of variety and choice which we can only hesitantly recognize as new ground. After all, hope lies not only in the Earth, but also in its metaphor.

- 1 Walter Benjamin, trans. by Howard Eiland, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2019, p.174.
- 2 The artist has referenced Judith A. Carney and Nicholas Rosomoff, *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World*. University of California Press, 2009.
- 3 Conversation with the artist, January 2022.
- 4 <https://thisispublicparking.com/posts/haptic-suppositions-some-ruminations-with-brandon-ndife>
- 5 Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman. *Notes on Conceptualisms*. Ugly Duckling Presse, 2010, p.16.
- 6 Fred Moten. *Stolen Life: Consent Not to be a Single Being*. Duke University Press, 2018, vii.

CHECKLIST

Brandon Ndife

Down to the Spoons and Forks

Provisions

2022

Cast insulation foam, aquaresin, resin, soil, glue, wood, enamel paint, oil paint, ceramic plates, forks, various hardware

32 ½ × 30 × 26 inches

Courtesy of the artist and Bureau, New York

A Master's Tools

2022

Cast insulation foam, aquaresin, resin, soil, glue, wood, enamel paint, oil paint, ceramic plates, forks, various hardware

35 × 28 × 37 inches

Courtesy of the artist and Bureau, New York

Rinse Cycle

2022

Cast insulation foam, aquaresin, resin, soil, glue, wood, enamel paint, oil paint, ceramic plates, forks, various hardware

42 × 20 × 95 inches

Courtesy of the artist and Bureau, New York

Unfurled

2022

Cast insulation foam, aquaresin, resin, soil, glue, wood, enamel paint, oil paint, ceramic plates, forks, various hardware

46 × 24 × 20 inches

Courtesy of the artist and Bureau, New York

Brandon Ndife

(b. 1991 Hammond, Indiana; lives and works in Brooklyn, New York)

Brandon Ndife received a B.F.A. from The Cooper Union and an M.F.A. from the Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts at Bard College. Solo and two-person exhibitions include *MY ZONE*, Bureau, New York, 2020; *Minor twin worlds* with Diane Severin Nguyen, Bureau, New York, 2019; *Ties That Bind*, Shoot the Lobster, New York, 2018; *Just Passin' Thru*, Interstate Projects, Brooklyn, 2016; and *Meanderthal*, Species, Atlanta, 2016. Group exhibitions include New Museum Triennial: *Soft Water Hard Stone*, New Museum, New York, 2021; *Cascadence*, Altman Siegel, San Francisco, 2021; *Winterfest*, Aspen Art Museum, Aspen, 2021; *Material Conditions*, Matthew Brown Gallery, Los Angeles, 2020; and *Fixing the "not...but,"* LC Queisser, Tbilisi, 2019. Forthcoming solo exhibitions include Storm King Art Center, New Windsor, New York, 2022. Write-ups of his work have been featured in publications such as *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *Interview Magazine*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Mousse*, and *Flash Art*.

RELATED EVENTS

Opening Reception

Tuesday, February 1, 2022 from 4:30pm to 6pm

Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery

Artist Talk and Dialog with Anthony Hatch

Tuesday, February 22, 2022 at 6pm

Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery

Cover image:

Installation view of Brandon Ndife, *Down to the Spoons and Forks*, 2022, Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery. Photography by Paul Theriault.

Curated by Benjamin Chaffee. Art installation by Paul Theriault and exhibition management by Rosemary Lennox. Special thanks to Brandon Ndife, Gabrielle Giattino, Weston Lowe, and Michael Moore at Bureau, New York, Kyle Beaudette, Andrew Chatfield, John Elmore, Rani Arbo, and Justin Ross.



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