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## Artist at MMOCA links time and power dynamics

by Gayle Worland

When Leah Kolb, associate curator for the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, saw an exhibition of work and heard a talk by artist Kambui Olujimi in Milwaukee, she became determined to bring his work to MMOCA.

The Brooklyn-born artist, she felt, had a lot to say to Madison.

Olujimi has indeed made a statement in the new exhibition “Kambui Olujimi:Zulu Time,” now on view at MMOCA through Aug. 13.

An opening reception, featuring a talk by the artist, is scheduled from 6-9 p.m. Friday.

Olujimi created all new work for “Zulu Time,” in media ranging from cloth to metal to virtual reality. The show’s name comes from the term used to designate time at the Earth’s prime meridian — longitude 0 degrees, or “Zulu” time — from which all timezones around the globe are calculated.

That invisible, arbitrary line (also known as Greenwich Mean Time) was assigned by the British, who at the time commanded the world’s most powerful maritime fleet and needed to standardize global timekeeping for that reason.

But for Olujimi, “Zulu” time is symbolic of a subjective, yet profound, standard imposed on humanity from a distinctly European point of view.

“Over all arches this idea of time,” he explained while helping to install “Zulu Time” last month in MMOCA’s State Street Gallery.

“The hour glasses speak to geological time,” said Olujimi, noting his glass sculptures shaped like those ancient timekeeping devices. “Zulu time speaks to a time of colonialism, a time of empire.”

“It’s all this kind of overlapping time. And what I’m hoping with the show — it’s about a disruption of the projection of time,” he said. “Because that projection of time is a projection of a set of power dynamics.”

Olujimi created a series of wall pieces for the show titled “Killing Time” from handcuffs and jeweled bling — collapsing eras of slavery, veiled discrimination and present-day mass incarceration.

In one “Killing Time” piece, titled “Litmus Test,” “I was thinking about how notions of whiteness become a baseline for humanity,” he explained.

“Then it becomes a litmus test against which other people are measured. For instance, in Trayvon Martin’s case, there’s this reiteration of ‘But he was wearing a hoodie,’” said Olujimi, referring to the 2012 fatal shooting of the Florida teenager by a neighborhood watch captain.

“But it’s a fashion that is just contemporary fashion,” Olujimi said. “So what is it when a young black boy wears a hoodie versus a young white girl? Or someone else?”

It’s these types of questions that are raised by Olujimi’s work in understated ways, Kolb said.

“He’s really interested in paying attention to these invisible hierarchies, and these invisible systems that perpetuate inequalities,” she explained during the show’s installation.

“He does it metaphorically, so the work itself doesn’t explicitly say anything necessarily, but he’s making these visual connections, these visual references.”

In another piece, Olujimi ceremoniously hangs a line of cloth flags printed with photos of failed American rocket launches — in his eyes, repeated acts of nationalism, ego, squandered technological resources and moments of failure witnessed by the world, now frozen in time.

The work is titled “T-Minus 0,” a phrase that means “time is out.”

“If you say it, the ship has already gone,” the artist said. “These are all failed rocket and shuttle launches. So it’s thinking of space or an aspiration of space, thinking about the challenges of a nation and how that operates.

“In a very basic way, nation is an imagined community,” he said. “I think the space race was a very great metaphor for this tenuous position. There was no true need for it. It was all symbolic.”

The flags in “T-Minus 0” “have a double meaning in the moment we are in now, with the Trump Administration (and the question) ‘Will this be the last American president?’” Olujimi said. “When you have a president, the head of the executive branch, openly saying that he’s interested in dismantling the government ... again, it comes out of the discrepancy between the America we imagine and the America we live in. At some point we have to face that delusion.”

Olujimi, who holds an MFA from Columbia University School of the Arts in New York, is an eloquent spokesman about his work. But he doesn’t plan his artist talks, such as the one he’ll do at MMOCA on Friday, in advance.

“When I give a talk, I just think about things I want to get into,” he said. “I just take my slides and I start.

“That way you keep discovering things — and also people ask different questions. I discover different things about the work when I answer those questions.”