

Cut, layered and reassembled: Frida Orupabo's practice

by Ingvild K. Melby

Born in Norway to a Norwegian mother and Nigerian father, Orupabo, a trained sociologist, began her career working at the PRO center in Oslo with sex workers and people who had been subjected to human trafficking and forced prostitution. In 2013 Orupabo started posting digital collages on Instagram under the handle @nemiepeba. Her posts ranged from direct uploads and reposts to digital collages. Often shared in bursts of five or six, they formed short sequences. Her first digital collages, posted on Instagram in 2013, combined fragments from her family album with found images. Very soon however, she moved away from using her personal archive, instead sourcing images on diverse digital platforms such as eBay, Tumblr, Google, online image banks, and film clips —platforms through which colonial photographs circulate, often detached from their original archival contexts. This shift in source material coincided with a move to predominantly black-and-white compositions.

The recurring themes in Orupabo's work —race, identity, sexuality, violence, slavery, pregnancy, birth and death —permeate her collages. These concerns emerged within a Norwegian context at a time where race, and Blackness particularly, had not featured prominently in art discourse. This, together with Orupabo's lack of a formal art education, may explain why her work went under the radar of Norway's art scene until video artist and cinematographer Arthur Jafa discovered her Instagram feed in 2014. A dialogue between them led to him asking her to exhibit together with him at the Serpentine Gallery in London in the show titled *A Series of Utterly Improbable, yet Extraordinary Renditions (2017)*. The show marked the beginning of what has been described as the “comet-like” rise of her career in the art world, with her work being bought by institutions such as the Norwegian National Museum, Tate Modern and Guggenheim Museum in New York and exhibited in the Venice Biennial main exhibition in 2019. It was in the period leading up to the show at the Serpentine that Orupabo started to make her physical collages, possibly influenced by the visual grammar of the Berlin Dadaist's photomontage. Encouraged by Jafa to make material works, she began making collages after a full day's work as a social worker, often working through the night in her apartment in Oslo. The images she had initially sourced for her Instagram feed became the material for what are often referred to as her paper doll collages.

She constructs her collages by piecing together cut-out photographic fragments of bodies drawn from individuals of different genders, ages, and ethnicities. The compositions begin as digital sketches in Photoshop, which are subsequently enlarged, and printed as fragments. These are assembled layer by layer using split-pins, so that one fragment slightly lifts or protrudes above another, creating hinge-like articulations and endowing the body of the collage with a three-dimensional quality. In later years, Orupabo has moved beyond collage. She now also works with sculpture and large-scale installations. The image material she uses, however, is predominantly the same.

Although her practice started out on Instagram, she now describes her use of the platform as a kind of “sketchpad:” a place to test images and remain in dialogue with others. As her audience grew, however, she found the platform too exposed for this kind of experimentation. Her last series of posts dates from September 2023. She has since moved to a private account, where Instagram continues to function as a working sketchbook and a place for research, rather than a public site of display and dialogue.