

OPENINGS

FRIDA ORUPABO

PORTIA MALATJIE



Opposite page: Frida Orupabo, *Untitled*, 2019, collage and paper pins mounted on aluminum, 52 x 48 3/4".

Below: Frida Orupabo, *Untitled*, 2019, collage and paper pins mounted on aluminum, 19 3/4 x 39 3/4".

WAITING IS AN ACTIVITY familiar to most, but in South Africa it carries a particular charge. In 1995, the country officially celebrated its first Day of Reconciliation, marking the supposed unification of its Black and white populations following the demise of the apartheid regime and in the wake of the first democratic elections in April 1994. It's been twenty-eight long transitional years, and yet a truly egalitarian South Africa remains but a dream, as Black South Africans still face systemic subjugation in a white-dominated economy. This imbalance affects living conditions, quality of life, and access to resources. Case in point: A walk or drive past predominantly Black neighborhoods will almost always reveal lengthy queues at underfunded clinics, hospitals, supermarkets, and financial institutions. Waiting, whether in line or in the (dis)comfort of one's home, is certainly not the sole domain of the structurally marginalized. But what I call "extreme waiting," whether it is for basic state services and infrastructure or for fundamental rights like freedom, equality, or just a recognition of one's humanity—in effect, waiting *to matter*—is a pain reserved for those forced to operate from the periphery.



Norwegian Nigerian artist Frida Orupabo grounds the act of waiting as an unacknowledged by-product of systematic exclusion, inequality, and displacement. She highlights the correlation between waiting and the legacies of subjugation-based structures such as colonialism and apartheid as they pertain to Black lives. While the artist may have titled a recent solo show at Stevenson: Cape Town “I’ve been here for days,” Orupabo chooses not to wait for days (let alone decades) for historical ills to be rectified, and instead proposes fantastic alternatives to the limited and exclusionary mainstream accounts of our communal past. Through experiments that open different modes of seeing and unseeing, she offers a path to liberate the imaging of Black women and their bodies from centuries-long violence.

Orupabo’s interest in Black ontology stems from her experience growing up in Norway as the child of a white Norwegian mother and a Black Nigerian father. She first turned to family photographs to make sense of her upbringing and surroundings before pivoting to the exclusive use of found imagery to reflect on tensions in a country that proclaims inclusivity despite alarming evidence of deep-rooted racial discrimination. Trained as a sociologist and formerly employed at a resource center for human trafficking

and sex workers, Orupabo began to accumulate her own visual archive through Instagram in the early 2010s. Her work caught the attention of Los Angeles-based filmmaker Arthur Jafa, who included the artist in his 2017 show at London’s Serpentine Gallery. The exhibition kicked off a series of collaborative projects at institutions like Oslo’s Kunstnernes Hus; Stockholm’s Moderna Museet; the Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art in Porto, Portugal; and Gavin Brown’s Enterprise in New York, for which Jafa penned the text for Orupabo’s solo exhibition “Cables to Rage” in 2018. A year later, curator Ralph Rugoff selected seven collages and a video work for “May You Live in Interesting Times,” the main project at the Fifty-Eighth Venice Biennale. Since then, Orupabo has had solo shows at Portikus in Frankfurt (2019); Kunsthall Trondheim in Norway (2021); and the Museo Afro Brasil in São Paulo, as part of the Thirty-Fourth São Paulo Bienal. This year she was named one of four finalists (coincidentally, alongside Jafa) for the Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize. As part of the award, her work is currently on view at the Photographer’s Gallery in London.

Orupabo centers Black archival practices, speculation, motherhood, and the perpetual construction and deconstruction of the archival object. Held

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Opposite page: Frida Orupabo, *the mouth and the truth*, 2019, collage, paper pins, mounting tape. Installation view, Portikus, Frankfurt, 2019. Photo: Diana Pfammatter. Above, left: Frida Orupabo, *A lil help*, 2021, collage and paper pins mounted on aluminum, 55 7/8 × 50". Above, right: Frida Orupabo, *Hair roller*, 2022, collage, paper pins, 74 3/4 × 40 1/2".

together with clothing pins, the artist's collages tackle tropes in mainstream representation of Black women. *Hair roller*, 2022, a portrait of a young woman with a disappointed smirk on her face, confronts the social pressures that often discourage Black women from feeling their feelings, triggering self-policing for fear of being read through the stereotypes that have marked them. Clad in red trousers and an oversize shirt, the woman is awkwardly positioned, styling her hair with hands that seem not to belong to her body. Orupabo has stitched together all these different parts—trousers, blouse, head, and limbs—from different sources, using paper pins to pierce the elbows, hips, fingers, and feet of the seemingly annoyed subject. The pinning makes it unclear whether the young woman is coming together or being pulled apart, integrating or disintegrating, her body yielding to or resisting its fate. The very being of this figure is put in question; the intriguing materiality of the composition, emboldened by its physicality, sits in opposition to a suggested precarity of the flimsy pins that both hold it together and tease how easily it could come undone. Through this layered and nuanced device, Orupabo appears to insist that we accept Black women

as complex emotional beings whose response to daily abuse and the systemic undermining of their right to exist may sometimes, justifiably, present as anger, pain, disappointment, or discomfort.

Orupabo dares us to spend time with disquietude. The content of her work requires intentional, active looking, as we search not only for meaning within the presented symbolisms but for sense and coherence in discombobulated assemblages. She has a cheeky tendency to force viewers to physically reorient themselves, for instance by putting two-dimensional works on plinth-like platforms once described as akin to operating tables. In the constellation *the mouth and the truth*, 2019, the audience must crouch to view the images, sometimes taking them in from an angle that distorts them or makes it impossible to see them as a whole. The work was conceived for her eponymous solo exhibition at Portikus, which offered an additional view from a balcony.

Orupabo's mobilization of agitation seeps into her treatment of the collage form. She splices, weaves, braids, cuts, pastes, and pins components in a manner that aspires not to a fluid coherence but to an intentional



misfitting. The distortion is as uncomfortable as it is joyful. Through this bold disruption of imagery, Orupabo embraces anomaly and repurposes it for transformative self-gain. She makes unruly use of the archive, mining her imagery from publicly available sources including eBay, Pinterest, Instagram, and online image libraries like Getty and Alamy, whose holdings have been shaped by a lingering grammar of colonialism that continues to shackle the visual identity of Black and marginalized people. These archives often allow others to view their images but not to use or own them, turning Orupabo's unsanctioned consumption into a form of self-proclaimed robbery. In recent works, including *Fragments II*, 2022, which was commissioned for "The Machine Is Us," the inaugural Munch Triennale in Oslo, the artist chose to leave the companies' watermarks on the photographs, boldly displaying their repossession from capitalist visual monopolies. While she has occasionally sought permission, Orupabo sees this thievery as a necessary reclamation of the freedom of the many figures who continue to be subjugated by the repositories that house them.

In a similar vein, the artist's borrowing from and appropriation of Western art-historical images becomes an act of archival disobedience. The collage *Mother and Child I*, 2020, continues her interest in themes of Black mothering, with Orupabo pairing the black-and-white bejeweled head of a Black woman and a naked torso with long bare legs capped off in red boots. Against the figure's womb rests the head of a Renaissance-style painting of a young child, hinting that the subject could be pregnant. The amalgamation is tense and resists the romantic, pristine, and serene imaging of mother-and-child representations from the Renaissance. Meanwhile, in *Reclining Woman II*, 2022, Orupabo nods to modernism, placing another—more stoic—head of a Black woman atop a Henry Moore-esque recumbent body. Unlike in *Mother and Child*, where the juxtaposition is deliberately labored, there is a symmetry to this marriage, giving the illusion of something that just fits. And yet, despite the visual coherence, something will always be

Above: Frida Orupabo, *Mother and Child I*, 2020, ink-jet prints and velour foil mounted on primed anodized aluminum, eight pieces, 21 ¼ × 6".

Below: Frida Orupabo, *Fragments II*, 2022, rendering.

Opposite page: Frida Orupabo, *Reclining Woman II*, 2022, collage, paper pins, 42 ½ × 70 ⅞".



amiss. In Moore's sculptures, the negative space in the middle of the figure's torso is suggestive of depth and enhances perspective, but in Orupabo's almost two-dimensional works, the gaping hole is more pronounced, eliciting feelings of discomfort and pain, the ghostly pangs of phantom limbs.

As part of the exhibition at the Photographer's Gallery, Orupabo presents the wallpaper *Turning*, 2021, which reads differently from her earlier motifs. This collage simply superimposes a single cutout of a Black woman's head onto an unsevered photograph of what appears to be a burlesque dancer. If previous cuttings left endless vacuums of negative space as empty

as they are full, here we are presented with a unified figure without referential multiplicity, her surroundings intact. This integrity offers no illusion of relief or complacency; the placement and angle of the turned head are still visually awkward. However, Orupabo offers a reprieve from the confrontational and violently disturbing compositions for which she is known, as if to encourage us to wait for moments of rest amid the turmoil. □

PORTIA MALATJIE IS A CURATOR AND LECTURER IN VISUAL CULTURES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN'S MICHAELIS SCHOOL OF FINE ART AND AN ADJUNCT CURATOR OF AFRICA AND AFRICAN DIASPORA AT TATE MODERN'S HYUNDAI TATE RESEARCH CENTRE: TRANSNATIONAL. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)

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