

As We Were

A solo exhibition by Joy Labinjo

06 April – 04 May

Bloc Projects are delighted to present *As We Were*, a solo exhibition of new work by Joy Labinjo. To mark the occasion a new text by writer Philomena Epps has been commissioned to accompany the exhibition.

Joy Labinjo's practice currently occupies a transitional phase, with the artist engaging in a period of experimentation and curiosity, breaking down and re-learning what the medium of painting can offer, and testing both its limits and her own. Discontinuing her previous use of household paint and now working with a combination of oil and spray paint, the exacting nature of using these new materials is highlighted, as the artist's hand and working process becomes revealed within the frame. Outlines and provisional marking is left visible, showing a looser and more gestural side to Labinjo's process. Opaque block colour is occasionally eschewed in favour of repetitive sweeping layers of brush marks. There is depth and texture to the vibrant background shades of orange, red, yellow, blue. The proportions are off. Perspective is skewed. Her representations are simplified, refusing realism for tessellated, flattened, and stretched shapes. The paint reaches over the sides of the canvas, enveloping all the available space.

Labinjo's canvases have always been large: they fill up galleries with confidence. In fact, the decision to use more durable paint was rooted in her intention for the paintings to take up room indefinitely: an investment that will keep them perpetually fresh, alive, and present. This desire for endurance also testifies to Labinjo's belief that, within the history of art, quotidian or domestic examples of everyday life should be treated with the same gravitas as elegiac portrayals of the human condition. While studying for her BA in Fine Art at Newcastle University, Labinjo began to use family albums as source material for her paintings, often collaging individuals found in multiple photographs into a fabricated snapshot moment. Labinjo is British-Nigerian, and these archival images provided visual access to communities who have been marginalised throughout canonical Western art. Citing her discovery of the 1980s British Black Arts Movement as particularly formative—significantly the work of Sonia Boyce, Lubaina Himid, Claudette Johnson—Labinjo has commented that her paintings similarly provide room for black people to breathe and tell their own story, rather than perform a sensational or preconceived narrative.

Working with the knowledge that her current repository of photographs will eventually run out, Labinjo has begun to paint from alternative image sources, often scouring Instagram, furniture websites, or local archives for the objects or individuals she wants to portray. Previous bodies of work—notably the exhibition *Recollections* at Tiwani Contemporary in 2018—paid attention to the collective, they bustled with extended family crowds. However, these recent paintings are more akin to portraits. By capturing single figures, a pair, or smaller groups, Labinjo is able to dedicate time to working on the minutiae of a scene: the elaborate graphic print on a dress, the intricate detail on a plant, the wood stain on a chest of drawers, the simple beauty in a bouquet of roses.

Despite their evident figuration, Labinjo's paintings are more abstract than first meets the eye. Often evasive and deliberately vague, they decline to reveal the specifics of time or place. It could be 1979, 1999, or 2019. Her subjects aren't identified either; works are either untitled or simply descriptive. Labinjo's representation of the young, the old, and everyone in between also contributes to this feeling of timelessness. The title of this exhibition—*As We Were*—is appropriately nostalgic, sentimental. It implies letting go and a process of reflection: the psychic landscape in which the past, present, and future meet. Through slowly relinquishing the use of the family albums in her creative process, Labinjo begins to generate another type of family, creating bodies of work that aren't necessarily bound by bloodlines, but rather by artistic logic or a way of thinking: a personal house style.

Joy Labinjo was born in 1994 in Dagenham, UK and is currently based in London, UK. Her recent large-scale paintings depict intimate scenes of contemporary family life: a group of people casually lying down on a sofa and chatting after a family gathering, a child and his grand-mother posing together in front of the camera, or stolen moments before the official wedding portrait. Taking inspiration from family photographs, Labinjo transcribes her personal imagery into a bright and vibrant composition of colour and patterns. Having grown up in the UK with British-Nigerian heritage, Labinjo questions our idea of belonging and notion of identity. She invites us to rethink it as more fluid constructions taking into consideration both past and present, personal and collective subjectivities.

Labinjo was awarded the Woon Art Prize in 2017. Recent exhibitions include: Gallery North, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK (2018); Cafe Gallery Projects, London, UK (2018); Bonington Gallery, Nottingham, UK (2018); Goldtapped, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK (2018); Morley Gallery, London, UK (2018); Baltic 39, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK (2017); Hoxton Arches, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK (2017); The Holy Biscuit, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK (2017); FishBowl space, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK (2015); XL Gallery, Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK (2013).

www.joylabinjo.co.uk

Philomena Epps is a writer and art critic living in London. She is also the founding editor and publisher of Orlando magazine.

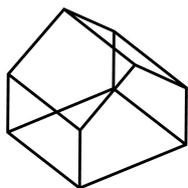
www.philomenaepps.co.uk

-

The exhibition would not have been made possible by the generous support of The Arts Council England and The Elephant Trust. We would also like to thank Tiwani Contemporary for their support.

Gallery Opening Hours: Wednesday – Saturday, 12 – 6pm

Please note: Large print copies of this text can be provided on request.



**bloc
projects**



Supported using public funding by

**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**