reviewed by Tashima Thomas

The exhibition “Diagram of the Heart” at the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Art (MoCADA) featured fifteen photographs by photographer Glenna Gordon and an installation of an assortment of Hausa novels. The exhibition was curated by Elliott Brown, Jr., Exhibitions Coordinator of MoCADA. The introductory wall text informed the viewer that littattafan soyayya, or “books of love,” is a literary genre specific to Kano, Nigeria. The self-published paperback novels, which are written by women, often sold by women, and read by women, feature story lines that include love found and lost, educational pursuits, prearranged marriages, living with HIV/AIDS, global occupation, and the challenging aspects of women living in a conservative Islamic society. Many of the photographs represent “books of love” authors engaged in the labor of writing or selling their books, in conversation with other women, at wedding ceremonies (Fig. 1), within domestic interiors, or sharing moments of joy and comradesy.

Gordon’s photographs share a formal sensibility that complicates the documentary photographic genre through ambiguity and self-possession. The project began as a way for Gordon to document the relationship between the books, their authors, and the daily lives of these women that involved the negotiation of public and private spaces. Gordon’s penchant for creating narrative titles that describe the actions on view was a successful approach that contextualized the photographs. For example, in one photograph entitled Books are assembled by hand (Fig. 2) an aerial view surveys stacks of black and white pages, giving the impression of a literary sea of geometries. Two hands fold the pages for binding, creating a distorted ellipse of negative space between the collapsed pages and issuing a microcosm of shadow between the worlds and the words on the pages. The hands are represented slightly off center to the left of the upper picture plane, as if they are the hands of the divine folding the word—a comparable visual device to the disembodied hand of God often pictured in the same position in Byzantine icon paintings or on devotional relics. Gordon’s commitment to the poetics of everyday literary labor and the formation of creative female spaces and community are the focus of many scenes.

In a similar fashion to Books are assembled by hand, Gordon reproduces an aerial perspective in Hadiza Sani Garba writes her novels in bed or in her sitting room, by hand, in small composition books (Fig. 3). Garba’s upper torso descends from the upper picture plane into the center as her body curls and hovers over her composition book spread open to two pages full of her writing. Her head and body are covered in a corresponding eggplant-colored fabric with floral designs in fuchsia, black, and white. Her shoulders are bare, leaning forward into her process as she writes intensely with her whole body. Her corporeal body is almost hidden amongst the crimson bed linens with undulating floral patterns emphasizing the

1 Glenna Gordon
To gist is to gossip, to gossip is to be.
Women gist before a wedding ceremony
(October 13, 2013)
Digital c-print; 76.2 cm x 50.8 cm

all photos: Tashima Thomas
rhythms of the vegetal and oversized ecru blossoms. The fullness and openness of the composition book resonates with the decorative florets also opening in full bloom.

A simplified ladder-like wooden bookshelf leaned against the wall and the littutafan soyayya were displayed on a wire connected to a nail jutting out on each side of the bookshelf (Fig. 4). The paperbacks were hung as if on a clothesline, with their vibrant covers facing the viewer. The roughly hewn wood emphasized the use of raw materials and the earthy materiality of the bookshelf, which may imply an aura of a Kano marketplace, adding texture to the viewing space. The books are written in serial form and an example of this was presented on the lower branch of the bookshelf, where Brown emphasized the homologous relationship with the exhibition's title “Diagram of the Heart,” by featuring a four-part book published as a single volume entitled A Strong Heart. The purple cover featured a large, anatomical red heart crisscrossed with a large machete (Fig. 4, bottom shelf on the left). The violent juxtaposition of these two images are marketing tools for seducing the reader's curiosity. Fortunately, Brown provided a laminated page with an English translation that was inserted into the pages of the book. Like a museum guide that allows the visitor to identify the individual photographs of a large grouping, Brown’s “cheat sheet” allowed the viewer to read the book’s synopsis regarding Fatima, the central character, a robbery, divorces, and police pursuits. However, it was unclear whether viewers were allowed to peruse all of the writings freely or whether the other books were exclusively for viewing at a distance. Of course, the complications of excessive handling by viewers could compromise the paperback, hand-assembled materials.

The exhibition was on display in the Extended Gallery of MoCADA, which is a...
book review

Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice
by Krista A. Thompson
Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015. 368 pp., 143 color ill., notes, biblio., index. $99.95 cloth, $27.95 paper
reviewed by Matthew Francis Rarey

In her brilliant Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice, Krista A. Thompson considers four “lens-centered” aesthetic practices across the circum-Caribbean: street photography in Atlanta and New Orleans; Jamaican dancehall spectacles; extravagant prom entrances in the Bahamas; and the bling aesthetics of contemporary transnational hip-hop. Delving into the histories and visual economies of each, Thompson argues “contemporary diasporic formation takes place in the light of technology, in the flickering, unsettled, reflective and bright surfaces, the pixels, of photographic and videographic representation” (p. 9). Weaving together frameworks from performance studies, visual culture studies, ethnography, and art history, Shine offers an extended and deeply thoughtful meditation on how diasporic communities take up light’s simultaneous illuminating and blinding effects as representational possibility and performative excess. For Thompson, shine itself offers a metaphor of, and material response to, diasporic fragmentation, a critical space for considering slavery’s visual logics, and a new “representational space for figuring black subjects” (p. 33).

Shine’s animating framework comes from the 1981 edition of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, which uses the term “un-visibility.”