Fatimah Tuggar: Home’s Horizons
curated by Amanda Gilvin
The Davis Museum at Wellesley College
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reviewed by Rebecca Wolff

The Davis Museum’s Fatimah Tuggar: Home’s Horizons, curated by Amanda Gilvin, was an important exhibition that gave viewers an insight into the multifaceted yet interconnected aspects of Tuggar’s practice, which not only includes the digital montages for which the artist is most well known, but also sculpture, video, and installation. Accompanied by a catalogue of the same name, with contributions by Gilvin, Delinda Collier, Nicole R. Fleetwood, Jennifer Bajorek, and an interview with the artist, this publication is the first monograph on Tuggar’s practice. The publication is long overdue, as evidenced by each contributor’s call to consider the artist’s work beyond the lens of Afrofuturism, a designation the artist herself cautions against. Indeed, once you descended the staircase to Home’s Horizons exhibition space and entered into Tuggar’s world, inhabited predominantly by women who labor and entertain through the mediation of various technologies, you soon realized that it did not offer a chronologically straightforward and reimagined future. Instead, Tuggar’s world invited you to examine, question, and reconsider preexisting ideas about gender, technologies, race, class, and labor. Roughly divided into four sections—domesticity, labor, entertainment, and observation—Gilvin’s deft curatorial hand encouraged you to make connections between these interrelated concerns and, ultimately, connections to the world outside of the gallery space.

The exhibition layout nudged you to begin with the “Domestic Dreams” section, which primarily contained sculptures. These works adhered to the aesthetics of bricolage, as Tuggar assembled ready-made objects to comment on analog and digital technologies in a domestic setting, and to explore the fraught relationships among class, race, and gender that exist within domestic spaces (Fig. 1). In Fai-Fain Gramophone (2010), a brightly patterned disc called a fai fai—handmade by Northern Nigerian women to serve a variety of uses including as lids or sieves—spun atop a turntable in place of a record. Still, the music of Barmani Choge emanated from the piece through a hidden digital music player. The late Choge performed a type of music called ammada, which targets a female audience and often utilizes kitchen utensils as instruments (Gilvin and Tuggar 2019: 33). By collaging Choge’s voice to ready-made materials that span the breadth of handmade, electronic, and digital media, Tuggar celebrated the creativity, ingenuity, and technological savvy of African women.
The adjacent digital montage, in contrast, raised questions of race and class in the diaspora. Titled *The Lady and the Maid* (2000), it depicted a seated Nigerian woman, who looks up in surprise as she hovers her spoonful of meat above her bowl, and a White woman holding a calabash, who looks down in equal surprise, her style of dress harkening back to the 1950s racially segregated United States. The relationship between these two women is intentionally ambiguous. Although they share the same space, they are each preoccupied with their own drama and seem to exist in entirely different planes, a distance reinforced by the gulf between them cluttered with pots, pans, plates, and other domestic trappings. When viewing this work, you were forced to confront preconceived ideas about hired domestic labor as you questioned who lives in the middle-class home and who works for whom.

Also concerned with issues of class, the visually arresting *Fan* (1999) addresses technology and its access inside the home. Mounted on upside-down hanging ceremonial fans made from ostrich feathers, electric fans whirred quietly, their power source explicitly referenced by their dangling cords. The plumed fans, as the wall text explained, were used to fan Nigerian royalty, a labor-intensive cooling method in which the beneficiary does none of the work. With the invention of electricity, however, people could keep cool through the purchase of an inexpensive wall fan that required little to no labor. Technology, in this sense, is seen as a democratizing force that helps increase the comfort of all classes. If you were a viewer familiar with Nigerian contemporary society, however, you knew that the supply of electricity is actually quite sporadic. Thus, in the end, only those who can afford generators—the wealthy as represented by the ceremonial fans—truly have access to this modern comfort.

If you walked into a darkened room off of the “Domestic Dreams” section, you found Tuggar’s video *Fusion Cuisine* (2000). As different city and domestic scenes cycled across the screen, you could immediately identify the same type of collage aesthetics that informed the sculptures and digital montages in the previous space. Here too Tuggar spliced together a White Euro-American woman and a Nigerian woman so that they share the same space, this time in a gleaming chrome kitchen after baking a cake. You would have also spotted the 1950s American woman from *The Lady and the Maid*, but in the video, she appears in the courtyard of a Northern Nigerian domestic compound. Moreover, you would have noticed transpositions of Tuggar’s entire works onto billboards in various cityscapes. Tuggar’s use of recognizable imagery presented in a new context that forced you to reconsider their meanings set an important precedent of how to interpret the show moving forward.

Only after viewing Tuggar’s video, sculptures, and later montages did you enter into the gallery space that featured her well-known digital collages from the 1990s in a section designated “The Pleasures of Work.” These collages, which depict Northern Nigerian women largely engaged in domestic tasks with the aid or in the midst of various technologies, have been heralded as exemplars of an Afro-futuristic practice. Because you had encountered her later work in the previous galleries, however, you could now reposition these montages as initial meditations on different forms of and values towards technology and labor, the nuanced contours of which Tuggar has explored over a decades-long practice.

The first piece encountered was *Working Woman* (1997; Fig. 2), in which a smiling woman dressed in patterned fabrics sits next to a desktop computer and a rotary phone on one side, and a plush luxury purse on the other. Although the woman holds the computer’s mouse casually in one hand, she gazes beyond it without paying it any real attention. When you turned your own attention to the
computer, however, you found the central meaning of the work. The image of Working Woman’s entire composition appears on its screen, and on the computer’s screen within this image, the artwork appears again. By nesting images of the work within the work, Tuggar references fractals, which Ron Eglash has famously theorized as foundations of African design that provide pathways to new technology. In Working Woman, fractal images exist inherently within the computer, and since Tuggar used a computer to make this collage; it is thus inherent to the work itself. Eschewing a narrow definition of technology and confounding perceived hierarchies between technologies, Tuggar positions African indigenous design on par with—if not integral to—technological advancement.

Primed by the reappearing images in Fusion Cuisine, a cast of recurring characters emerged as you moved across this gallery. For example, the reversed image of the Working Woman figure sits behind washing bowls and in front of the neon lights of the Las Vegas Strip in Pleasures (1996; Fig. 3). The woman beside her, with her closely cropped hair and bright red shirt, appears doing the wash again in Shaking Buildings (1996). Tuggar sees technology as both the method and the subject of her artistic practice, and within the context of this conceptualization, the recognizable repetition of figures made sense. Like binary code, Tuggar reconfigures and remixes these characters to create new representations and meanings.

To exit this gallery space, you passed underneath Tuggar’s Fan (1996; Fig. 4) installed on the ceiling. Like the later work Fan Fan, Fan merges handmade manual fans with an electric counterpart. If you paused to look up, you noticed that the ceiling fan’s spokes were replaced with raffia fans, their woven strands and repeated geometric patterning reminiscent of the fractals that appear in Tuggar’s digital montages. Admiring the technical complexity inherent in the process of these seemingly simple hand fans forced you to reconsider its relationship to the seemingly more technologically advanced ceiling fan.

You then reemerged into the main gallery space in the sections on entertainment and observation, which seemed to meld into each other. The large-scale digital montage Robo Entertains (2001; Fig. 5) exemplified how this loose delineation of space helped understand the exhibition’s thematic undercurrents. Nominally belonging to the “At the Party” section, Robo Entertains faced the gallery space on observation. In the center it depicts Robo, who had previously appeared in the film Fusion Cuisine. Ever the consummate host, Robo approaches the table with a half-eaten shrimp cocktail platter, surrounded by guests dressed in fashionable twentieth-century Nigerian clothes. This lively dinner party owes its success to the planning and labor of a robot, who already appears quaint and outdated, a rumination on technology that is reinforced by the image of a fan in the top left corner, spinning in quite the same manner as the fan you just walked under in order to arrive at this piece. And, while the work is about the often overlooked and intentionally hidden elements of technology and labor that go into the creation of a perfect evening, it is also equally about the act of looking. The two women on the right peer over at the man on the left, who turns his head to smilingly glance at the woman bending down towards him. Robo gazes out at the viewer, as if extending an invitation to join the scene.

This act of seeing—and being seen—is echoed in the section across from Robo Entertains appropriately titled “People Watching” after a work of the same name (Fig. 6). Originally created for the 1997 Johannesburg Biennale, People Watching juxtaposes girls splashing in the tide of Cape Town’s beaches with a group of White tourists on safari. As the tourists look out of their vehicle, a trio of three Ndebele women turn their heads to look back at them. Although the Ndebele experienced marginalization by the post-apartheid state at that time, Ndebele women vividly painted
houses and geometric beadwork had long attracted both South African and international tourists, which in turn boosted the nation’s cultural capital. Here, these women reclaim some of their power by directing their gaze right back at their voyeurs. As the figures in People Watching squared off, you became cognizant of your own form of intense looking as you dissected the scene. You realized that these artworks exist for your viewership, an idea that cemented itself as you turned around to look at Voguish Vistas (2012), which depicts a storefront displaying a mash-up of mannequins advertising African and Western-style fashions. As you exited this space, you found yourself asking, aren’t you—like the tourists in People Watching and the guests of Robo Entertainers—also here to find some form of entertainment through the act of looking?

Coming full circle through the exhibition spaces brought you back to the introductory wall text. Here, at the crux between the domesticity, observation, and entertainment sections, was the installation Deep Blue Wells (2019). Commissioned by the Davis, Deep Blue Wells perhaps best crystalized the interconnected concerns of Tuggar’s practice encountered throughout the exhibition. On the walls of the installation hung textiles created in the indigo dye pits of Kano, an important commercial and cultural hub city in Northern Nigeria. Placed atop these fabrics were circular images, which you could engage with through augmented reality (AR). Once you either downloaded the free Fatimah Tuggar: Home’s Horizons app (which can also be used to activate certain images in the catalogue) on your phone or borrowed a museum-provided iPad, you could hover the device above these “modules” and activate their AR components. Once activated, the modules displayed a variety of content, from interviews with weavers and dyers, to images that reference the history of indigo textiles in Kano, to delightfully undulating design elements. In her catalogue essay, Gilvin insightfully refers to Tuggar’s use of AR as a new kind of collage, which layers “virtual images over the ‘real’” (2019: 25). Through technology, Tuggar explores the expansive possibilities of collage aesthetics. By layering technology over handmade fabrics, Tuggar also further interrogates the tension between handmade and electronic/digital media that appears in such works as Fan. The textiles’ smallest design unit, a circle (also the shape of the AR modules), often symbolizes the life cycle in Nigerian textiles. This idea resonates with the nodes to technological obsolescence in Tuggar’s works, from the rotary phone of Working Woman to the outdated visage of Robo. The life cycle motif also poignantly refers to the existential threat faced by handmade tie-dye textiles in Kano, as they are increasingly replaced by imports with digitally printed designs (Bajorek 2019: 68).

However paradoxical it may seem to highlight the history and knowledge behind the creation of indigo textiles through the engagement with digital technology, here the handmade and the digital were not in conflict. Rather, Tuggar positions artisanal knowledge as the impetus for her use of cutting-edge technology.

Importantly, students generated much of the AR. By inviting Wellesley undergraduates to become cocreators of the piece, Tuggar and Gilvin ensured that a university art museum functioned as it should: through active student engagement and participation. At the same time, the AR component introduced you to the men and women who created these textiles through their sophisticated knowledge of dying and weaving processes, which positions each cloth as a nexus of labor. The students’ contributions to Deep Blue Wells point to the expansion of this network. Extending beyond the men and women who produce the textiles, it encompasses Tuggar’s own labor towards the conceptualization and creation of this multimedia work, and the student assistants who helped her realize the project.

From here, it did not take much for you to begin to think about an even wider network of labor that circulates around Deep Blue Wells in its museum context: from Gilvin’s curatorial labor, to the art handlers who helped her install the exhibition, to the museum guards who watched over the works, to the visitor’s services associate who greeted you at the front desk and perhaps lent you an iPad. You could even start to extend the labor surrounding the exhibition to the scholars who contributed to the publication and the museum staff who likely spent hours fundraising and applying to grants for the means to stage the exhibition in the first place. Ultimately, when displayed insightfully the way that Gilvin and the Home’s Horizons team accomplished, the interconnected themes percolating throughout Tuggar’s body of work point to the microcosms of labor and technologies that inform all forms of artistic and knowledge production. As you ascended the staircase toward the Davis’s reception area, you left realizing that Tuggar’s world has incisive applications to our own.

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References cited


book review

Bloodflowers: Rotimi Fani-Kayode, Photography, and the 1980s by W. Ian Bourland
Durham: Duke University Press, 2019; 336 pp., 92 b/w ill. $27.95 paper

reviewed by Alexandra M. Thomas
Rotimi Fani-Kayode, the Yoruba photographer of Black queer lifeworlds, is coming home. Nigerian curator Bisi Silva imagined this homescoming as a solo exhibition. It would take place in 2039 as part of a queer-friendly future in the Lagos art scene. In the epilogue of his 2019 book, Bloodflowers: Rotimi Fani-Kayode, Photography, and the 1980s, W. Ian Bourland reflects on Silva’s speculative proposal. Bourland marks the ways in which Fani-Kayode’s creative practice—bringing together homoerotic photography, Western art historical iconography, and African aesthetics—was far ahead of its time. One might read this hypothetical return as a call for historians of African art to take seriously the ongoing project of situating Rotimi Fani-Kayode’s work as “in some crucial way, Yoruban” (p. 250).

Born in 1955 to an elite Yoruba family, Fani-Kayode spent the earliest years of his life in Lagos before moving to Brighton, England, in 1966, to escape the Nigerian-Biafran civil war. He earned his BA and MFA in Washington DC and New York City, respectively, before returning to England in 1983. Fani-Kayode produced an expansive archive of stunning photographs that blend West African spirituality and European art historical influences with the iconography of queer life in London during the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis. He classified his practice as “contemporary Yoruban art” and his medium as “Black, gay photography” (p. 7). Fani-Kayode was a founding member of Autograph: Association of Black Photographers in 1988 in London, which still exists as a photographic arts agency with exhibitions and archives. Since his death in London in 1989, Fani-Kayode’s work has been shown in Okwui Enwezor’s 1996 exhibition In/sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present, a 2014 touring solo exhibition that reached the South African National Gallery, and numerous other solo and group exhibitions. Although