Kotama Bouabane
We’ll get there fast and then we’ll take it slow

APRIL 29 – MAY 28, 2016

G44 Centre for Contemporary Photography

SCOTIABANK CONTACT PHOTOGRAPHY FESTIVAL
We’ll get there fast and then we’ll take it slow

Kotama Bouabane in conversation with Leila Timmins

There is a fine line between failure and control in the work and mostly it was when I started to let things go that the work naturally began to come together. It is what I really like about the show. I think about the process of learning in the same way I thinking about appropriating images—you recontextualize it and make it your own in some way. It goes back to this guilt of not fully knowing how to represent something [Laotian] in a proper way, and even if I study YouTube videos or get lessons, it is never going to fully translate. I think there is something in that failure that can be successful. In a past body of work, I collected broken pieces of kale wood from a taekwondo studio and photographed them to try and find the connections for the ones that broke. I liked the idea of this inanimate object having so much meaning for the student to break and then next second it becomes refuse or firewood. There is something for me about trying to put these pieces back together, to re-energize them in some way.

LT: It also seems to comment on photography and the inherent failure of the medium always present in the act of translation. Do you see this work as an act of translation?

KB: Yes totally, for me, working as a photo technician and teaching, I think a lot about the technical side of photography and how you are never able to capture something wholly. The historic expectations of truth in photography and this failure is in part why I went to go back and work with analogue technologies. I think analogue processes are seen as more pure, but maybe pure is not the right word. In the digital realm everything is about megapixels and clarity, and so I am interested in this idea of clarity. It’s why I used the coconut water in the chemistry to develop the prints. Conceptually, it messes with the image, and in a way I am trying to heal it through the coconut water. I find it interesting how coconut water is associated with new age mysticism and alternative medicines, and how it is supposed to have healing properties. There is something over the top in the marketing of these products with brands like “Buddha Water” and “Coco Life” which becomes much more about selling a lifestyle and false promises of health associated with the tropics.

LT: In an earlier conversation, you had mentioned that there were many similar tropes in many technical manuals, paper stock catalogues, and camera and equipment advertisements designed for a North American audience.
that used images of tropical retreats as a means of selling its products. It seems like there is clear link between the commodification of travel and the camera as a tool to capture and define that experience. At the same time, this work seems to suggest that these tools become implicit in an erasure of cultural difference and a flattening of meaning where these symbols, such as the coconut or bamboo, become extensions of consumption and the transitional modes of capitalism. It seems that the work is also pointing to how photography is implicit in that process.

KB: Yes definitely. I came across so many instances of these types of images in my research—there is of course the still life of coconuts which come from a Kodak manual on colour correcting and the images of bamboo are taken from a photo paper catalogue, from the section advertising Hahnemühle bamboo-fibre papers. These kinds of images can reinforce cultural stereotypes through capitalism and globalization. The work emphasizes how the materials I use to create the photographs/installations are part of this economy but from a more subversive approach. Trying to define places through idealized travel imagery contradicts the real experiences and histories of those places.

LT: The title of the work, “We’ll get there fast and then we’ll take it slow” comes from the Beach Boys song, “Kokomo.” I think this song is a nice entry point for the work since I was in my undergrad, and it was a nice return to being in the darkroom and taking things slowly; with a pinhole camera made out of a coconut you have to go slow.

KB: I think, for me, it’s about transformation but also in the obsessiveness, there’s something banal too. I think when you start to scrutinize something it can stop making sense, and so the work is about trying to make sense of an object and also showing the futility of that action, or hopefully the humour in that action. By taking a coconut and re-imagining it in all these different ways, there’s never going to be an end result that makes me feel like I get it, but through these translations and the process something in me gets excited about transforming it and altering it and making you think about it in a different way.

There’s a video piece by Rodney Graham called Vexation Island, where a coconut falls on the head of the sole occupant of this tiny desert island. The video is on a loop so it just repeats and repeats. I was thinking about this work and how the repetition functions as a tool—both the repetition of the use of the coconut and the slapstick humour that comes from it. I think that humour like LT: The title of the work, “We’ll get there fast and then we’ll take it slow” comes from the Beach Boys song, “Kokomo.” I think this song is a nice entry point for the work since I was in my undergrad, and it was a nice return to being in the darkroom and taking things slowly; with a pinhole camera made out of a coconut you have to go slow.

KB: I think, for me, it’s about transformation but also in the obsessiveness, there’s something banal too. I think when you start to scrutinize something it can stop making sense, and so the work is about trying to make sense of an object and also showing the futility of that action, or hopefully the humour in that action. By taking a coconut and re-imagining it in all these different ways, there’s never going to be an end result that makes me feel like I get it, but through these translations and the process something in me gets excited about transforming it and altering it and making you think about it in a different way.

There’s a video piece by Rodney Graham called Vexation Island, where a coconut falls on the head of the sole occupant of this tiny desert island. The video is on a loop so it just repeats and repeats. I was thinking about this work and how the repetition functions as a tool—both the repetition of the use of the coconut and the slapstick humour that comes from it. I think that humour like