Echoes of Africa in Harlem
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Africans on the continent may be surprised to learn just how often blacks in the America’s look toward the motherland searching for a sense of home and guidance and, for many, this exploration resides in ripe, complex psychological territory. Such themes are the subject of the latest shows at Art in FLUX gallery in Harlem, ECHOES: A Time to Keep and ECHOES: A Time to Let Go, ambitious presentations featuring the work of 17 artists who interrogate personal tensions between the traditions that should be retained and those which no longer serve.

ECHOES: A Time to Keep successfully avoids the common trappings of mythology based afro-nostalgia as it grounds itself in representations of African traditions that should be revered and held dear. In the piece “Kalunga Twilight,” Leonardo Benzant uses a collage of yarns in rich cranberry, deep blues, warm browns, and variegated greys to capture the type of natural rhythms found in tree bark and soft ocean waves. The lateral movement both opposes and converges with the flow of beads wrapped around a staff that’s attached atop the yarn, creating a sense of infinity and flow, similar to the dynamics of time and space. Referencing the Congolese deity Kalunga, who represents the Atlantic Ocean, Benzant connects Africa to the Americas through natural forms that serve as a physical bridge and historic link as the pathway of the slave trade.

Gail Shaw-Clemons’ work also references the enduring trauma of American slavery through collages of imaginary currency made with African bark paper, leather lettering, paint, graphite, beads, and shells. Her piece “In God and Ourselves We Trust,” exists in a future where financial reparations have been made for slavery in the United States and features an African woman who has survived with her grace and pride in tact. The fictional bill has the feel and essence of contemporary African money and asks pertinent questions about monetary value, cultural values, and choices around what can and has been bought and sold.

“In God and Ourselves We Trust.” Gail Shaw-Clemons
Ibou Ndoye’s work draws directly from the African continent with a focus on the practice of scarification in the Ivory Coast. The painting “Village to Village” elevates the practice from an aesthetic and cultural identifier to an element that permeates all facets of life by using the same markings to depict facial scars as he uses to show pattern, energy, and movement on clothing, baskets, trees, vehicles and buildings. With a simple and elegant palette of black, white, ochre and butter yellow, Ndoye supersedes the idea of traditions that should be kept by revealing the traditions that cannot be removed simply because they permeate the practices of daily life.

On view in the second show, ECHOES: A Time to Let Go, is a more contemporary layout featuring an installation in the center of the floor and looping video to the left of the entrance. The pieces are all inspired by Siri Oko Fo (Mending Fences), a short film by Ebbe Bassey, which debuted at the Cannes Film Festival. Bassey, who was raised in Calabar and now resides in New York, tells the story of a Nigerian woman named Eme who visits her brother, Essien, for the first time in many years in his adopted home in Harlem. She arrives to find that he is in a same-sex partnership and learns that his daughter, her niece, hasn’t been taught about her cultural heritage. While she comes to tolerate her brother’s relationship, Eme is unable to accept her niece’s lack of culture and, without her brother’s permission, takes it upon herself to perform female circumcision.

In the context of the title of the show, a surface analysis may see the film as a rejection of traditional beliefs around disdain for homosexuality and as a condemnation of female genital mutilation, however Bassey’s own comments reveal a more tender and understanding perspective. “Eme made peace with what Essien had become, but she saw another avenue for family redemption through her niece, Asari. Asari belongs to the family and is as much Eme’s child as she is Essien’s, which gives her every right to do what she did,” explains Bassey. It is this intentional avoidance of binary judgment and insistence on cultural context over condemnation that provides a layered relationship with tradition, even those traditions that may deserve review and critique.

“Wit Sucks an Shoes.” Neuen Smith
Artist Nguyen Smith captures this same nuanced spirit of the ability to move forward while both respecting and protecting the past in his piece, “Wit Sucks An Shoes.” The work plays upon a common narrative of struggle referenced by parents as they speak of their past challenges and often emphasize how they did the most difficult tasks without socks or shoes. With a multidimensional piece made of found and reclaimed objects, showing wood plank legs with crude socks inserted into brown oxfords, Smith acknowledges that those stories no longer make up the current paradigm while suggesting that they still have their place in contemporary memory. It’s a piece that’s both rough around the edges and elegant in its structural creativity and asks, what defines our struggle now that we have our basic needs met?

Rich with the questions of culture, tradition, heritage, individualism, and community, Art in FLUX’s shows are even more impressive given that the gallery is only sixth months old. Notable for the high level of tenderness and care in the choice of work by the shows curators, the ECHOES shows indicate that we can expect more ripe artistic content to come.