

Kotama Bouabane

We'll get there fast and
then we'll take it slow



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We'll get there fast and then we'll take it slow

Kotama Bouabane in conversation with Leila Timmins

We'll get there fast and then we'll take it slow is a new body of work by Kotama Bouabane that examines the relationship between object and image through an experimental ethnographic approach. Taking its title from the Beach Boys' 1988 song "Kokomo," which describes a lush fictional island off the Florida Keys, the exhibition similarly explores the construction of tropical non-places—ones that exist only in the North American middle-class imaginary—through numerous familiar tropes in travel photography.

The following text is a conversation between Kotama Bouabane and Leila Timmins, Head of Exhibitions at Gallery 44 on the occasion of Bouabane's exhibition *We'll get there fast and then we'll take it slow* at Gallery 44 April 29 – May 28, 2016 as part of the Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival.

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Leila Timmins: Perhaps the most obvious place to start is why coconuts? What got you thinking about coconuts and going in this direction?

Kotama Bouabane: I work as a photo technician at a university and I always go through old manuals. I was really interested in why certain images are used to illustrate different photographic techniques and I came across the image of the still life of the coconut [CC50G], which is really dramatic and kind of odd, and I became obsessed with it. It started to make sense in terms of my practice in thinking about cultural appropriation and how culture is produced and constructed. I knew this image was a perfect starting point for a body of work. I think coconuts have a lot of different cultural associations, especially in terms of thinking about leisure and place, but at the same time there is something kitschy or humorous about them to me.

LT: I am interested in hearing more about place. I know in your practice you often weave personal narratives into your work, but they are often hidden behind the larger stories and conceptual concerns. It is never the focus of the work, but they are always entwined. I think there's something similar happening in this work where there are glimmers of a personal narrative, but they are hard to decipher.

KB: Yes, I think that for me the personal narrative keeps going back to this idea that a sense of one's own identity is



Kotama Bouabane, *Mark #5*, Silver Gelatin Print, 8"x10", 2015

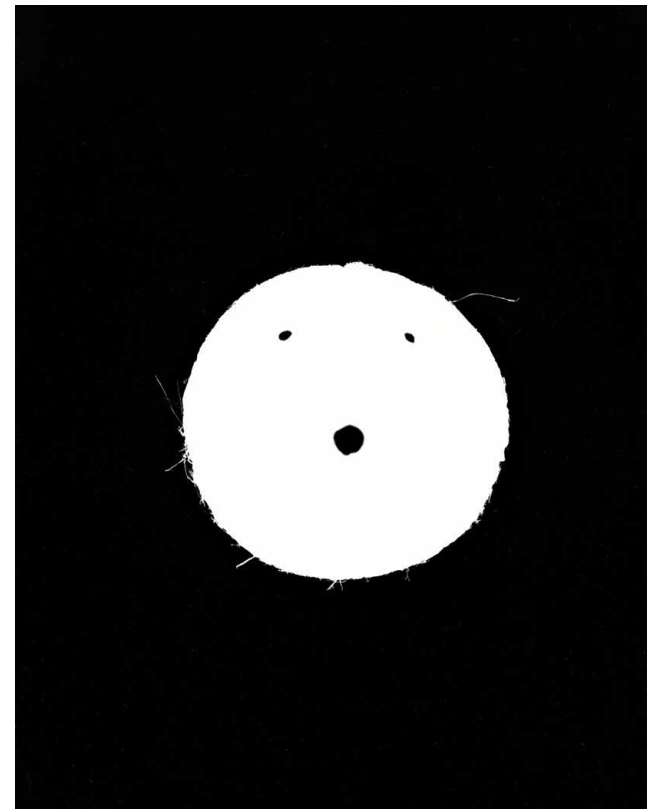
always in flux and always moving, which is similar to how I think photography works, it can encapsulate disparate and conflicting perspectives. When I think about personal narrative, I am trying to picture what a place should be. It circles back to my guilt for not knowing exactly what it is to be Laotian, what exactly it is to be Canadian and trying to negotiate both of those spaces. I think, for me, when I speak to family about the projects I'm working on they still don't understand my motivations. I like to draw from those experiences and those sorts of miscommunications of how things are supposed to come about, and why I'm an artist. It terrifies me but at the same time it also makes me feel really good in terms of trying to understand what it is that I'm trying to draw from.

LT: I remember the story you told me about the first time you met your grandfather on a trip to Laos and how he climbed up a coconut tree and brought down two coconuts. I feel like it points to something deeper about your use of coconuts. Can you talk more about your relationship to coconuts?

KB: Yes, I also associate coconuts with the first time I met my grandfather and trying to connect with him. Those moments in time are so hard to articulate both verbally and visually and so it also speaks to the limitations of photography to depict place and time.

I wanted to explore the limits of representation and abstraction by trying to balance what is shown and what is hidden in this body of work.

Similarly, there was a work in my last show at Erin Stump Projects that included an image of the Honda hat that my dad had worn to work every day of his career. The first year after my undergrad at OCAD, I went and worked in the factory with him for the summer and that was one of the most challenging



Kotama Bouabane, *Face #11*, Silver Gelatin Print, 10"x8", 2015

experiences of my life. It made me really appreciate how hard his work was, and also made me realize that I didn't want to work on an assembly line. It's the guilt of having parents that always say 'we immigrated to Canada to give our kids a better life'. It's the mentality that I grew up with but it also forms the reality where I am able to be an artist and create and make things. It is okay that they don't fully understand the process; I still try and show them that I am very appreciative of their support. Working with the big fibreglass piece in this exhibition reminded me of being in the car factory, working on the bumpers and trying not to over polish them to the point where they burn. There is a tactile feeling of the fibreglass that brought me back to my position in the factory where I needed to take care of the object and make sure that it looked good and functioned properly.

LT: You have been learning how to play the *khene*, which is a Laotian reed instrument made out of bamboo, with the goal to record a version of "Kokomo" for the exhibition. How have you been learning to play and do you see that process of learning as important to the work?

KB: It's complicated and difficult trying to learn the *khene*, but I think that there is something important in handling materials, such as the coconuts, that activates the materials in an important way. I see a lot of this show as an extended experiment. When I was going into the darkroom and using the coconut water and pieces of coconut, I didn't know how it would work out. I didn't know the coconut photographs would have an anthropomorphic undertone and in that way, I don't know how the music will turn out or if it will allow the viewer to make the connections I hope it will. I think a lot about failure and how it can be productive.



Kotama Bouabane, *Sulphur Mountain I*, C-Print, 28"x42", 2015

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 karate 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 wanted 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 so 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 you had found similar exotic 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 their 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 exhibition, "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 because it is about this fictional island off the Florida Keys. The work deals with many fictions, including a North American middle-class imaginary of tropical places. How were you hoping the title sets up the show?

KB: For me, it was about an idea of movement in a projected sense of space. *We'll get there fast and then we'll take it slow*, is literally about movement and I was thinking about travel and the circulation of images, there is something cyclical about them both. I feel like the title encapsulates all of these ideas, but is open to new connections. I liked the idea of a fictional place, since our experience of a new place is always disconnected from our perceptions. I am trying to grasp that tension between trying to represent something for the future and at the same time being in the moment.

I think that yearning to get there fast and then take it slow is something to negotiate.

Incidentally, there is also something about returning to an analogue process that is about taking it slow. I love the physicality of being back in the darkroom. I used to print large murals in a colour darkroom and I remember fumbling around in the darkness with my hands on the material, which was so much fun and also such a different way of thinking about process. I haven't done a body of work in black and white 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.

LT: I want to talk about your obsessive use of coconuts in the work. Coconuts are used in all stages of production, from the coconut pinhole camera, to using coconut water in the chemistry to develop the images, and using coconuts

to create the photograms. There is a large coconut sculpture in the space, as well as music that is being played on an instrument made of coconuts. How do you see this layering and obsessive use of coconuts functioning in the work?

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 this 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 short 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 this can help to build layers of meaning in a work and allow for multiple access points. At least that is what I am trying to do with the work, I hope the absurdity falls away and the more pressing ideas come through.

LT: There are subtle references to National Geographic in this work such as the images of bamboo which are from the National Geographic bamboo issue and the black sand is a National Geographic brand pet store product. As the first and most prolific magazine on travel photography, it feels like the work is very much in dialogue with this legacy. How do you see the connections to the politics and history of National Geographic in the work?

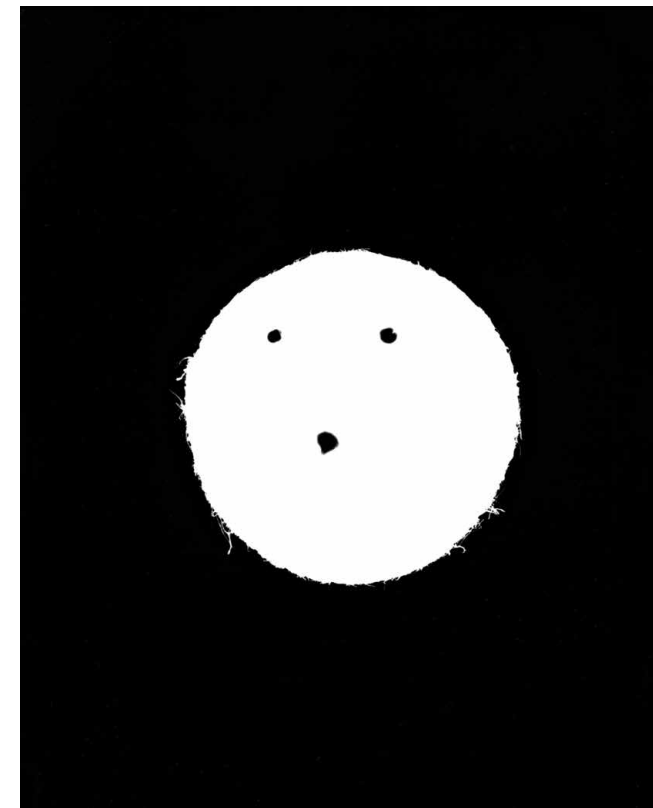
KB: There has been a lot of debate around ethics and representation associated with National Geographic. It is always talked about in terms of flattening a sense of place or creating stereotypes of the people and places that are represented. It's interesting because the magazine almost spans the whole history of photography and so is implicated in the politics of the medium that have spanned its history. When the magazine started in October 1888, it was trying to open up the world to new audiences who were unable to travel and it was trying to share knowledge that no one had. Unfortunately, our way of viewing these images has changed and instead of opening up the world, they have the capability to limit and close down knowledge or exploit the people in the photographs. But I am also interested in the economy and circulation of images through the magazine. I am interested that most of these magazines have ended up in thrift stores and have very little value now. I also get excited about how National Geographic uses objects to represent a sense of place—it's the failure to aestheticize a sense culture.

Cover image

Kotama Bouabane, *Sulphur Mountain II*, C-Print, 28"x42", 2015

Poster image

Kotama Bouabane, *CC50G*, C-Print, 2015



Kotama Bouabane, *Face #12*, Silver Gelatin Print, 10"x8", 2015

Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography is a non-profit artist-run centre committed to photography as a multi-faceted and ever-changing art form. Founded in 1979 to establish a supportive environment for the development of photography, Gallery 44's mandate is to provide a context for reflection and dialogue on contemporary photography and its related practices. Gallery 44 offers exhibition and publication opportunities to national and international artists, award-winning education programs, and affordable production facilities for artists. Through its programs Gallery 44 is engaged in changing conceptions of the photographic image and its modes of production.

Kotama Bouabane has an MFA in Studio Arts, Photography from Concordia University, Montreal and a AOCAD from OCAD. His work has been exhibited in many galleries including Centre A (Vancouver), Parisian Laundry (Montreal), Gallery 44 (Toronto). He has received many awards and grants from the Toronto Arts Council, Ontario Arts Council & the Canada Council for the Arts. He lives and works in Toronto and is represented by Erin Stump Projects.

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