

Kemi Lijadu



Guardian Angel

ICA Theatre, Thursday 17 March, 7pm

A multi-screen projection and multi-sensory live performance, *Guardian Angel* (2022) is a newly commissioned film event that explores the artist's relationship with religion, informed by her grandmother, study of African philosophy and Catholic upbringing.

Q&A

So where did the idea come from for the new work?

The idea for *Guardian Angel* was sparked in the wake of my grandmother's passing. My grandmother was a terribly intelligent and thoughtful person, deeply nuanced and open to the full spectrum of cultures, spirituality and ways of being. As a child she would tell us fantastical stories about figures from Yoruba folklore, such as Ajapa the Tortoise, along with those from Catholicism about guardian angels and angels on earth. I was captivated by the intermingling of disparate worlds and the contradictions then and now, so the questions that my work tackles are things that I have been wrestling with subconsciously and consciously for much of my life.

I remember when I was 16, I read *Fela: This Bitch of a Life*, Carlos Moore's biography of Fela Kuti. It discussed Fela's decision to move away from Christianity and embrace Yoruba traditional spirituality. It radically transformed my world view and exposed the depths of 'colomentality' all around me despite living and growing up in Nigeria. Turning those pages was the first time I realised that much of what was deemed in my environment as 'juju' or witchcraft was traditional Yoruba spirituality. And that was paradigm-shifting for me, and in stark contrast to my Catholic upbringing.

Guardian Angel is really me working through that in real time. I don't have an answer, but it's just really leaning into all the contradictory swirl of emotions, both rational and the irrational that come when confronting religion, spirituality and history.

How does this work relate to your broader practice?

I'm a trained philosopher. I studied philosophy at Stanford at both an undergraduate and at master's level. And so I'd say my work is an extension of my training and every piece of

work that I'm building is a sort of philosophical argument or exploration. What I really loved about philosophy, and what I still love about philosophy is the fact that any argument, contrary to the way arguments often play out in our modern world right now, always considers very seriously the contradictory side to its thesis. In philosophy one is trained to lean into and admit the limits of one's understanding and knowledge. Similarly, my practice is of leaning into the unknowing across mediums and I do that with moving image and with music.

And how does moving image function specifically in your practice?

I have always been obsessed with timelessness. When I was younger I remember thinking that I needed to do something during my time on earth, worthy of being immortalised in history because I had a deep fear of being forgotten. As I have gotten older, I have cared less about being forgotten and more about forgetting. This is why I love the moving image, because it is a way of preserving a moment in time in the most magical way. That is what first drew me to my first video camera and what inspires me to make the work I do.

Does this work speak to or relate to any previous works that you've made, and is religion an area of exploration or something that you've looked at before?

Yes, my master's thesis was on Yoruba philosophy. I found that if one is to look at the philosophy of my people, then I must look at history, and we cannot look at our history without looking at spirituality. Religion has a part to play in that.

One day I was in class studying the Ancient Greeks and I had a striking realisation. Of course this is contested, but I realised that many of the other students could culturally connect to what we were studying in a way that I could not. It was deeply hurtful to me that I could study Philosophy for five years and not once study ancient African philosophy prior to the fight against colonialism.

Interestingly I felt deeply vindicated in my pursuit when I saw my surname on an unfamiliar title in a Lagos bookshop. I picked it up and found out that I have an ancestor who was a philosopher – Reverend E.M. Lijadu – he was a theologian who published a classic study on Yoruba mythology towards the end of the 19th century.

For my thesis, I looked at the work of wonderful Yoruba thinkers and philosophers such as Dr. Sophie Oluwole and Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí. It became clear to me that the religious arm of the colonial project in Nigeria is responsible for why a lot of the philosophical work we generated prior to colonialism has been dismissed as *esoteric* at best, but at its worst, demonic.

And can you talk a little bit about your process and perhaps if it connects with some of the ways you've used your research and background in philosophy and how those have developed in this piece?

In a philosophical sense, a lot of the artists I admire have always dealt with themselves first. And so I think that's what I'm trying to do with *Guardian Angel*, to deal with myself and the questions that I need to reconcile around spirituality. James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* is a huge inspiration in that regard.

Now in terms of process, I started with my personal archive. Three or four years ago, I felt the impulse to interview and film my grandmother, so I really began by sorting through my personal archives.

I also love to talk and generate within community, and so a big part of my research came from conversations with

the people around me. Speaking with friends, understanding the ways in which they reconcile, concede, ignore, run away or embrace their spiritual practice of choice or none. There is a real tension that comes up being a Nigerian colonised person, of trying to move away from the myopia of Western influence but unsure of what one is running toward. A huge amount of those conversations were with my collaborator Ngozi Olojede, with whom I worked on the concept and spatial design.

I see my film as a sort of collage, which my process mirrors. Some of the footage you see in the film is my personal archive – from a trip to Dakar from years recent and far in Lagos and with family here in London. The score itself, some of which I will be playing live, is made up of stitched together voicemails, songs discovered on Youtube and music I created myself.

Great, is it easy for you to describe how a person will experience your work?

I hope that this work prompts people not to ask each other, 'What are you (Christian, atheist, Muslim)?' but rather, 'What questions do you have? What questions will we always have? What are you afraid of and what makes you feel connected?'

I think that there is a certain comfort in discomfort I have and I enjoy it because this *comfort in discomfort* is more honest, and that is what I hope to share.

And how does the performative aspect to your work relate?

I am also a DJ and what I love the most about DJing is the unpredictability and the freedom to play based on or as a response to the collective feeling in the space, and Image Behaviour presented the perfect opportunity to integrate musical performance into my moving image work.

The ability to play aspects of my score live is crucial to the work as it firmly emphasises the point that the work is not a full stop but more like an ellipsis. It allows me to respond to the feel of the space in real time. The ephemeral nature of performance also mirrors the ethereal nature of my grandmother who inspired *Guardian Angel*.

I'd love to thank the incredibly talented women that I collaborated with on this project with: Ngozi Olojede, Mimi Koku, Ese Otubu, Omowunmi Ogundipe and Anne-Lise Agossa.

Kemi Lijadu is a multi-disciplinary Nigerian artist with a focus on the moving image. Lijadu's work explores collective memory across the Atlantic, diasporic music and family history. She graduated from Stanford University with a M.A. in Philosophy, where she focused on Greek and African philosophical systems. Her work explores the interplay within and between these two worlds.