

Forbes

Culture Under Surveillance, Photographs By Zoe Leonard and Kayode Ojo

[Clayton Press](#), CONTRIBUTOR Opinions expressed by Forbes
Contributors are their own.

"I take pictures of what moves me. Sometimes it's beauty — the waterfalls, the ocean. Things that fill me with awe. Sometimes it's gathering evidence, spying on our culture."

Zoe Leonard

In a jewelry box-sized project space (literally 13.5 x 9.6 feet), Laura Hunt, an archivist at Paula Cooper Gallery and aspiring curator, has paired a single photograph by Zoe Leonard with 10 photographs by Kayode Ojo. The Leonard photograph, one of a series of black and white photographs of medical curiosities that Leonard took in European museums and printed in the 1990s, succinctly underscores the artist's orientation to observation—"about being present in and having a certain perspective on, the world around me." For Leonard, photographs exist as documents, that provide a way for us as human beings to order the world, so that we can "consume it or rule it or hang on to it in some sense."



Zoe Leonard. Wax Anatomical Model with Pearls. 1990.

Wax Anatomical Model with Pearls (1990) captures the kind of things that interest her. She recalled:

I saw a picture of the anatomical wax model of a woman with pearls in a guidebook on Vienna. She struck a chord in me. I couldn't stop thinking about her. She seemed to contain all I wanted to say at that moment, about feeling gutted, displayed. Caught as an object of desire and horror at the same time. She also seemed relevant to me in terms of medical history, a gaping example of sexism in medicine. The perversity of those pearls, that long blond hair.

The photograph is the centerpiece of the north wall, and is a reminder to see *Zoe Leonard: Survey*, a retrospective at The Whitney Museum of American Art.

As for specific photographic matter, there initially seems to be an awkward incongruity between Leonard's and Ojo's pictures. But there is a

genuine connection between the artists' choices, observations, and truths.

"When people look at a photograph, they believe it. We believe that it exposes reality. That a portrait can show someone's true character. If you see a picture of something, you believe it really happened that way. Pictures are proof."

Zoe Leonard

Kayode Ojo, the son of two Nigerian professors, was born in Cookeville, TN in 1990. Like Leonard, he is documenting what he sees—family and place. It is an austere show that triggers the memory of Leonard's 2016 exhibition at Hauser & Wirth, where she showed pictures of her refugee family following World War II as part of the Polish Diaspora.

On the east wall are four biographical pictures taken at his parents' house in Tennessee in 2009 while he was a student in NYC. The artist is sort of present, but he is more observer than actor. An image of a goldfish bowl atop an obviously well-thumbed Bible seems to come from an intercultural warp, mixing PetSmart™ and Jesus. More personal is Ojo's self portrait, where he partly obscures his face with a Big Gulp®-type plastic cup, the kind found in American gas stations and convenience stores. This is paired with a picture of his brother Moyinoluwa, a Yoruba name that means, "I praise god." (The artist's first name—Kayode—means, "God has brought joy.") Moyinoluwa semi-hides behind a tee shirt pulled up over his nose. Yoruba identity and heritage in small town Tennessee is the new, evolving, here-to-stay American culture.

Mrs. Ojo (2009) dominates these four homestead, hometown photographs. A black paper silhouette of the artist's mother is scotch-taped to a board and propped up against a partially exposed vase of artificial flowers. It is simultaneously surreal and funereal, weird and funny. (It takes a minute to realize that Mrs. Ojo's long eyelashes are really eyeglasses propped on her nose.) Google the artist's signature on the silhouette, and you discover it was done made by Paul Contin, "a

member of the Guild of American Papercutters and [who] can do detailed life-sized or profile silhouettes in seconds." This is everyday Americana.

On the west wall, Ojo is working in a new context, following his 2012 graduation from the School of Visual Arts. There are five photographs documenting gallery and museum exhibition after parties. Visually, they are not that far removed from Weegee's classic party pictures, depicting both uptown (*Beautiful Uptown People*, 1946) and downtown (*Rent Party*, ca. 1956) scenes. The images are presented in pseudo-Gaudi-esque silver frames of ambiguous taste and origin. The images themselves suggest *The New York Times Style* pages: impromptu moments that Ojo captures of his artist peers dancing, talking and performing for each other, documenting a moment in contemporary millennial culture. This is distinguished cultural surveillance in the age of iPhone and Instagram.

The pairing of Leonard and Ojo is unexpected but rather ingenious. Leonard has always asserted her individualistic eye on culture. Here her work is shown with a young artist pointing and shooting, collecting information in an Instagram-enabled culture which at times seems media oblivious to media's omnipresence.

Zoe Leonard and Kayode Ojo at Paula Cooper Gallery through April 15, 2018.

<http://linnpress.com>

Clayton Press