

Picturing That Which Has Not Been Imaged: The Photograph Upended in Owanto's "La Jeune Fille à la Fleur" Series

Emily Shoyer

Abstract:

Contemporary lens-based artist working within the African diaspora Owanto (b. 1953, France) activates photographic portraiture as source material to address the effects of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). In her series "La Jeune Fille à la Fleur" (2015), Owanto re-appropriates colonial photographs from a family photo album of women engaged in ceremony and revealing their circumcisions. She also affixes a hand-crafted sculptural element to the photographic image, filling the void of the wounded genitalia with a flower.

This paper addresses the wary yet poignant representational strategies Owanto mobilizes in order to raise awareness of the trauma of FGM. In revealing her affected subject position in relation to the original colonial photographs, Owanto rejects the nature of the photograph as an objective document while activating the tension between the real referent of the violence and trauma of FGM within the image and her subjective meditations on the practice. In this way her works slip between the personal and the political, merging the inherent theatricality, or intentionality, of both art and activism. Through the series, Owanto has upended the subjectivity of Roland Barthes' punctum and its ability to deconstruct trauma and turned it into a transmissible activist aesthetics of care. She gives the endlessly complex post-colonial and global issue of FGM a powerful and essential visual presence, one that it has never had before.

Keywords: Photography, Female-Genital-Mutilation, gender, art, trauma