

Frida Orupabo



Hours After

'The beginning is always the body'

Frida Orupabo and Elvira Dyangani Ose

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EDO: I want to start talking about something that is very critical for your practice, and that is your use of Instagram as a laboratory, a collection of memory, a kind of archive, as well as a way to make this visible to the public. I was saying to you last time we spoke that sometimes I feel scared to go to your Instagram, and we will explore your use of imagery that is violent, that talks about aggression inflicted on bodies, on individuals, people who are part of your repertoire, your icons. It has been critical for me to follow your Instagram feed to understand how much that has a say in the way that you elaborate the work we experience in exhibitions.

FO: I started on Instagram in 2013, if I am not mistaken. So it has been going on for a long while now, and if you go way back you'll see mostly personal images of me and friends, images from everyday life. And then it gets less and less private – or not less private, but there are fewer and fewer images of me, my family and friends, and more and more videos, images and texts that I have found online. It was important for me to create a space where I could gather everything that was significant for me. I have a terrible memory, so my Instagram feed is also an archive that I can revisit, to remember. It is a source (among many others) for

my collages. It has also functioned as a safe space for thinking out loud, and to find my own voice.

EDO: You were observing how Instagram has been conceived to represent the self in a very particular way. There's a sort of stream of thought that gets captured in an instant. It's a moment of archive but also this sense of being a thought-capture, a reference, a memory, that all of a sudden is retained through that journey. And of course as we go into critical moments of pain, of sorrow, of collective mourning, aspects of that – a sense of aggression, of violence towards bodies, towards collectives, towards cultures, certain cultures and certain communities – are also visually there. That's why I found it so touching, so poetic, because it reflects my own experience of the world, and in a way the best artists, musicians, poets and books are those that make us feel a sense that we have been there. That, in a way, we have jumped into a different kind of existence that has somehow come into realisation in the moment we are confronted with that aesthetic experience. With a sense of deep enjoyment, a sense of complete embodiment, right?

FO: Absolutely. And that's why I took back what I said about it not being personal because it is highly personal still. And it is like you said: I can go back and remember where I was in that moment, in that time – emotionally, spiritually, physically. There are also many places that I don't like to revisit. In many ways, it is a place filled with images

that speak to one another; it's a diary, it's my life. Spending time on Instagram used to be the same as spending time in an apartment alone. Maybe some neighbours observed you, but it didn't interfere with your mission or thoughts. Getting more followers has changed that a bit. There are multiple narratives, and we have different ways of interpreting the images that are put together. I still enjoy this process, even though I dislike Instagram more and more. It has changed so much since I started in 2013. Then it was very simple, you didn't have to see what you didn't want to see. Now it's almost like watching television, with advertisements popping into your face. It distracts from the rhythm of being there and creating.

EDO: It's interesting that you mention the disruption to narratives because this practice is very much about storytelling. At times your pieces can feel like a self-contained narrative, and also a disruption of something else. Could you take us through your creative process, and also your intention with storytelling?

FO: In general I spend a lot of time online.

EDO: Hahaha, you can say it! We like honesty here.

FO: I seldom use images from books or physical archives. I go online and gather things that I like and put them in a file for later use. I often use Google, Tumblr or Pinterest. For instance, for the

exhibition *Hours After*, I have been very interested in labour, pregnancy, women's bodies, the treatment or mistreatment of the body today and historically. So this is what I have been looking for. When I feel ready I will start to work on the collages. Forcing it is never a good idea.

Alongside that I will usually play around with different images on my phone that might end up on my Instagram. It can be a narrative or just a bunch of images that speak to a feeling. The focus is not only on the subject (or subjects), it's also very much on the shapes and colours. Often there can be a conflict between the message and the aesthetic.

EDO: And is this conflict a need to create ambivalence?

FO: No. The ambivalence that I'm interested in will always be there. It's more that the message or narrative can be very strong, or important, but if it doesn't go aesthetically I can't put it out.

EDO: There is something that always haunts me when I see your works live, which I have done on two occasions. It also happens when you see them online, or reproduced in print, but when you see them in person there is something haunting that takes me back to my first lessons in art history and the way that the characters in paintings look at you. There's something very specific in your choice of a certain gaze in your collages. I feel like the agency of the people that you bring together through the

collages resides mainly there. There are always certain choices where our gaze is returned to us. I wonder if you can talk a little bit about that.

FO: Most of the images come from colonial archives, but I also use images from other sources, even paintings sometimes. When choosing images I am looking for resistance or some type of tension, especially in the way a subject sees, or stares. It forces you to stop. Resistance can also be seen in a position – how people sit or stand, how they dress, how they hold their hands.

EDO: I feel like, in a way, you are liberating them from an inherent pain, a violence that the images already contain. Somehow this is promised in the work ...

FO: There's something about removing the subject from the context and everything attached to it. The subjects are placed, they are undressed or dressed – they are defined from the outside. There's also something very familiar about the stare that I recognise from my own upbringing – you know, being brought up in Norway in a predominantly white society, in a white family (except for my sister). I felt for a very long time that I was unable to speak. The only thing I had was my eyes and my anger. Anger is a form of resistance. It sends out a message to your whole body that something is wrong – that what is being done towards you is not OK, even when you remain quiet as an oyster. And so this is

what I recognise in many of the images from the colonial archive – the anger and the quiet resistance.

EDO: Can you elaborate a bit more about your upbringing, and how that narrative of the self comes to this persona or character that you create through your practice? The understanding of a certain kind of Blackness or 'otherness'. I was thinking as you were talking about what it means to see oneself being seen. The life experience of a Black man, a Fanon. This closeness to an observation of the other. Seeing oneself, as you said – how that has somehow marked not only your understanding of Blackness but your understanding of the human, which is something that you have also emphasised. Do you want to take us through this journey?

FO: The city my sister and I grew up in in the late 1980s and early 90s was predominantly white. I remember being obsessed with images of Black people because of their absence. We hardly saw any images and when we did they were often racist, sexist ... So the importance of visuals was created in me at a very early stage. At first I just collected images. It was not until I got my first computer that I started to manipulate and make collages. Before that I mostly painted and drew.

It was important for me to create visuals where the subjects looked back, which was a direct response to my own life and experiences – to the feeling of being determined, given an identity that I didn't understand or agree with. There is this clash

between the internal you, how you see yourself, and what is projected on you from the outside. I'm interested in what that does to you as a human being.

When I had my own daughter I went back home to collect some old children's books I used to have when I was a toddler. I remembered them as sweet but when I opened them and started to read I was shocked. Most of them had some type of racist content. Books, songs and television shows that I used to read, sing and watch were filled with racist content. You know, it's everywhere, and when you realise that, you get a perspective on what type of environment you lived in, and you ask the question, 'how did I survive'?

EDO: Maybe your work is your way to survive.

FO: Yes, I believe my work has been and still is essential.

EDO: You want to free your characters from a certain idea of Blackness that is imposed on them. I wonder if you could elaborate a bit more on that, how your gesture towards that occurs in the work.

FO: I am interested in creating complex narratives – sometimes you can have several narratives alongside one another and they could be conflicting. The same thing with identity: it's important for me to create identities or subjects that break with what we are used to seeing or hearing. I was talking to someone the other day

about Blackness and identity, and I was reminded of Kathleen Collins who speaks about the importance of going against mythical characters. I'm obsessed with that. We want to fight against these stereotypes so much that we sometimes end up creating superhumans, or saints. For me this is not reality, this is not who we are; at least not who I am. We have both good and bad, ugliness and beauty, and for me that is more interesting to look into.

EDO: You feel like we recall a sense of tradition, we engage with ancestry in a different way – is there something like this in the formulation of those mythical moments of creation? You think that our origin or our world might offer a path that was denied to you in the sense of how your identity was imposed through your upbringing? Whereas now, somehow you are searching for the journey in your own terms?

FO: I don't know, that's a difficult question. What I'm doing is exploring through the visuals. I'm exploring things that are going on on the inside and things that I experience around me. I am trying to make sense of it and to see the connections, often without coming to a final answer. I just know where I don't want to go.

EDO: Where don't you want to go?

FO: I don't want to create or reinforce stereotypes of superhumans, saints, strong women

who carry babies, men and whole nations on their back with a smile.

EDO: We've been speaking about the creative process that culminates in the collages, but there's also the display. I wonder if you can take us through what it means for you to confront the public with these images, to think about exhibition making as the framework in which these messages are delivered.

FO: You know, when I work I don't think so much. I don't think about the selection of images – it goes automatically. The initial process happens more or less on an intuitive level. I am more conscious when I am selecting the collages I will bring into a show or a gallery space. As mentioned, it has been important for me to show subjects that stare back at the spectator (although not all of them do). I want people to feel confronted – to question their own gaze, what it is they see and why; to make them more aware about themselves than the work. This means that I have had to get rid of my shyness and fear of speaking. Because what I want to accomplish with my work will never be given; it has to be named, defined and contextualised by me.

EDO: Let's go back to your show *Hours After* and some of the issues you mentioned, like labour. You are working on violence and aggression towards the female body, which is something very important to your practice. I wonder if you could take us through some of the thinking that made the new series possible.

FO: For me the beginning is always the body. I'm very interested in how we think about different bodies, especially the Black female body. And how the body is experienced at different times, in different situations, and stages in life. The new series came forth mainly because of my own experience with pregnancy and labour. It made me want to explore these themes in more depth.

I was interested in these topics prior to having my own daughter but I think what pushed me to do a whole exhibition was a need to explore my own experiences and unprocessed emotions linked to the new situation. It made me think more about motherhood and the expectations, the roles you are given and what you actually feel. It also made me go back and reread various articles about Black women's experiences with the healthcare system, especially with regard to pregnancy, labour and mistreatment – there are plenty of horrible stories and statistics. I don't think we have any statistics on this in Norway; this was mostly literature from the US. Anyway, around the time when I started working on my exhibition there were simultaneously lots of posts made by women on Instagram – about their own negative experiences with the healthcare system. I also had conversations with friends and family which made me question my own experiences even more.

For me the hospital was an unfamiliar domain. I felt that I lacked the tools to be able to judge and separate good, professional treatment from bad treatment due to my skin. For example,

how to understand the lack of eye contact with some of the nurses and doctors, and the lack of vital information and knowledge being passed on to you about you and your baby.

EDO: It's interesting that you mention this because I went through a process of insemination – full disclosure here! – and I am a single mom in a mono-parental family. There are several aspects that you've mentioned around not only the process of labour but also the carrying and, as you've said, how one should feel. What are the subjectivities, not only of the mother but also femininity? What is your definition of womanhood and how do you engage with it in your practice?

FO: Womanhood ...

EDO: Yeah, and motherhood. I remember that initial sense of uncanniness – there was something uncanny about seeing a foetus growing inside me. Also this realisation that there's the process of the longing to be a mom, the anxiety, the obsession to be pregnant, and then all of a sudden there's you and the baby and you are like, this whole thing is not about me. It's not about me.

FO: Yeah, the change is crazy, and the emotions are running wild. In my work you often see that the mothers seem quite distant. They are holding the baby but they are staring right at you or maybe past you. Some of the collages showing mothers together

with their babies feel almost hostile, turning you into an intruder once you enter the room.

I want to show loving and furious women and mothers. I believe this speaks to my own sentiments and experiences of being a mum and a woman. I am loving and furious. Things are complex and contradictory.

EDO: There's a comment here from Nkgopoleng Moloi that picks up on 'what you said about the power of the eye – the possibility of speaking with your eye when you can't use words'. Could you respond to that?

FO: I've never felt confident with writing or speaking. It's only through the visuals that I really feel liberated. I think about nothing and no one. I trust my eyes completely. For me the visual is my way of speaking and that's why it's difficult to speak about. There are so many ways to interpret or understand a work – most times I don't have a clear understanding of it myself – but that is also the beauty of it.

EDO: I love this possibility of challenging oneself about what is understood. If I hear what you are saying correctly, there is no right or wrong here. There's simply our perception of the work and the fact that it touches our personal memories, and that's why it has such incredible power. Perhaps what is important in what you do is that the labour of

learning and interpreting is on the side of the viewer. And being forced to do that is, I think, fundamental. Forced in the sense that sometimes it can be a punch in the face and sometimes it's like a poetic whisper. Right?

FO: Yeah. We were speaking about the way the subject is looking at you and, as you are saying now, challenging the viewer. I forgot to say that it also challenges people to position themselves. Not everyone will do that, but this is what I want, for you to see *you* more than to see the work, and to question what you see and why you see the things you see. To be white often means you will see yourself as neutral – with no position, no culture, no skin. This is a dialogue that I want to have, that we all have a position and we need to acknowledge that. That's when it becomes interesting, when you see that and acknowledge it.

EDO: One of the most interesting aspects of the recent anti-structural-racism movements is that it has become much more evident that, firstly, everyone is racialised and should be understood as such – that construct affects us all; and secondly, whiteness needs to be acknowledged in the sense that it established all the unconscious bias approaches within the structures that marginalise. So I feel like your work offers the viewer the possibility to understand how they are seeing, whether they see the other, the work, the artist behind the work, or themselves.



FO: Hopefully that takes place.

EDO: Let's end off with this question from my friend Khwezi Gule, director of the Johannesburg Art Gallery. He says, 'I am curious why Frida's palette is mostly black and white with a little bit of colour here and there. What does that offer, what does it take away?'

FO: Interesting question. Basically my collages are black and white because I use images from old archives. They are all in black and white or sepia. I haven't thought much about colour until recently – colour is difficult, both in regards to the aesthetics and what it might symbolise. It adds new meaning. For this show, *Hours After*, I have added colours for the first time. As mentioned, some of the subjects I've been working on are linked to pregnancy, labour, birth. And the use of light colours – light pink, light green – are associated with these things ... different fluids coming from the body, and I also find them to be colours that smell. I wanted that for the exhibition – to give it a sense of smell.

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