

Kapwani Kiwanga: Layer Upon Layer

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[See table of contents](#)

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STRATA
CENTRE CLARK
MONTREAL
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The exhibition *Strata*, lately installed at Montreal's Centre Clark, is Hamilton-born, Paris-based artist Kapwani Kiwanga's first Montreal solo show since attracting international attention. Previously exhibited in Germany, *Strata* comprises a tricky, freewheeling, reflexive examination of the interplay between people, materials and time, which touches upon geology, geography, history, prehistory, paleontology and cuisine. Notably short on simple aesthetic pleasures, this exhibition is made to order for the most thoughtful, patient gallery-goers.

Upon entering the installation space, the visitor to Centre Clark confronts an array of sounds and images. Three large, rectangular Plexiglas sheets are suspended from the ceiling, each serving as a screen for a rear-projected slide image. A narrative audio track plays continually, and also appears as text on a couple of video monitors. Meanwhile, a second audio track of operatic music is synced to a video projection of illuminated cave interiors on the rear wall.

The central Plexi image shows a layered dessert cake on a cake pedestal, a single slice removed and ready to serve on a small plate. The cake is unappealing—all whipped cream and gluey fruit bits—like old, faded photos from 1970s dessert cookbooks, such as you may still find in second-hand stores. Projected onto the left-hand Plexi is a yellow-gold formation of what may be shale or some other sedimentary rock, with a pen laid atop it; and at right, the leaf of an ancient fern, fossilized in stone. These latter two images also seem quite faded, as though projected from old slides.

The first audio track—rather difficult to make out—features a female voice narrating (in English) a play with four characters. A geologist seeks a tunnel under the Strait of Gibraltar, a mythic cave connecting Europe and Africa, and regrets the loss of a pen. A baker measures and



Kapwani Kiwanga. *Strata* (Technicolor), 2016. Installation, colour video with sound. Photo: Paul Litherland.

mixes cake ingredients fastidiously, attuned to the interplay of substances and its effects upon crust and crumb. A sailor considers how maps, impressions and myths about the sea have changed across the centuries. A fossil, finally, reflects on how it came to rest in a museum cabinet—displaced, orphaned—and considers its uncertain origins: Australia, Africa, maybe Antarctica.

The concerns and themes of these four characters and the three Plexi images play into and about one another. The geologist's specimens, for instance, once comprised the floor of the sailor's sea. Though ancient, the layering of those sea-floor sediments is as particular as the baker's art, or as the pages of an ancient (cook)book. Like the museum fossil, separated from its earlier life by a long interlude wedged between rock strata, the geologist's pen looks forward to a comparable eons-long interment, before it may again write new stories. In the map-shapes of Africa and South America, the sailor sees a similarly long, rocky embrace, now tectonically broken. And so on.

Nearby, the narrative appears in text format (in French) on two video monitors—but the monitor text is out of sync with the audio narration, adding further layers to the whole.

The rear-wall video projection, behind the Plexis and slide projectors, plays intermittently. It depicts a cave interior, with stalagmites and stalactites illuminated in purple, red, blue, and green, shot from various angles—some rare footage, perhaps, of that Gibraltar cave-tunnel.

Accompanying the cave video—and thus similarly intermittent—is the installation's second audio component: a recording of Purcell's "When I Am Laid in Earth," from his *Dido and Aeneas*. The opera is a story of travel, and of love, between Aeneas, a Trojan warrior, and Dido, a Carthaginian queen—yet another broken continental embrace.

The installation chamber layout is unusual: the three Plexiglas panels form a kind of screen separating the room into two sections; as gallery-goers enter the smaller section, they must step past the Plexi panels to access the remaining two-thirds of the space. Strangely, you get the sense of having transgressed a limit, like the theatre-goer who, returning from the washroom, loses her way and finds herself backstage during the performance. Seeing the three projections on Plexi from behind, together with the intermittent cave projection and music, only heightens this effect. Shouldn't there be a wizard behind a curtain here, somewhere?

Eventually the visitor will turn to the slide projectors on their pedestals. Looking more closely, each projector contains just the single slide, which makes sense, as each panel shows only a single projection. Missing, however, is the familiar ratchet of the advancing carousel: k'che k'che k'che. There is only the windy whirr—surprisingly loud—of the projector fans, an approximation of white noise pushing throughout the room, inhabiting moments of sound and silence alike.

The result is a sort of conceptual blur or "fuzziness," suffusing the installation. In a world—and indeed, an art world—so often enamoured of high fidelity, such a misstep can only be read as a gesture. The aural "fuzziness" is an occlusion, which interferes with the function of the (other) audio media, such that concentrating upon and following the

narrative of the four characters is actually quite difficult. In this context, the faded images and the out-of-sync text on the video monitors appear newly relevant.

Why would the artist create this intricate interplay of characters, stories and ideas, and then cast a veil over the whole affair? With a background in research (anthropology), Kiwanga surely understands not only the practice of research, but also its limits. Today we tend to view science and knowledge according to the eponymous Enlightenment metaphor of illumination in darkness. In practice, however, the researcher paddles about in waters that are often quite muddy indeed. The geologist trades in timeframes so vast they are practically meaningless to human cognition. The narratives historians produce of antiquity are often dubious, pieced together from elusive scraps. The astronomer and the particle physicist contemplate the limits of perception—the very farthest and tiniest—yet even the most advanced lenses seem to yield only further questions.

Perhaps knowledge itself is not unlike these other processes—geological, gastronomical, etc.—into which the artist here delves: the laying-down and peeling-back of layer after layer. Everything is in motion, and though it may be certainty that you seek, instead you will find contingency, sediment and noise.

Edwin Janzen is a writer, editor and interdisciplinary artist working in digital print, video and artist books. Born in Winnipeg, he completed his MFA at the University of Ottawa. Janzen currently lives and works in Montreal.