ART

Wrapped in the Spirit of Transformation

Through site-specific installations, Basil Kincaid's "Shamans Death" utilizes textiles to ponder metamorphosis.

Mallory Nezam July 1, 2019

382 Shares

Installation view, "Shaman's Death," pt.2 Gallery, Oakland, CA (all images courtesy pt.2 Gallery)

OAKLAND, Ca. — Moving through a Basil Kincaid show sometimes feels too intimate to witness, like you shouldn't have been allowed in. Kincaid spills his guts onto the walls — *are you really being invited to take part?* You are. In his latest exhibition, "Shamans Death" — a solo show at pt.2 Gallery in Oakland, California — Kincaid's embrace of both fear and fearlessness is ever present, indicating how key his trust of the viewer is to his practice. Kincaid embraces all sides of these emotions, but his work needs you to be there to receive these efforts, to hold them, to allow him to find himself through your bearing witness to the sacredness of his chaos. As such, navigating this exhibition feels equally like an exercise in disarming oneself.

In "Shamans Death," Kincaid's work fills the room. Four large amorphous quilts, "Don't Go, Please Stay Till Morning;" "Daydreams Take Shape;" "Your Heartbeat Inside of Me;" "Feel and Heal," bulge, stretch, and hang off of side walls. The individual quilts remind me of fetal shapes, twisting, turning, and becoming in the womb. One large installation, "Cocoon," spreads like a web or tent in the back corner of the gallery.

Basil Kincaid, "Don't Go, Please Stay Till Morning," 2019 in *Shamans Death*. 50 x 61 x 9 Inches.

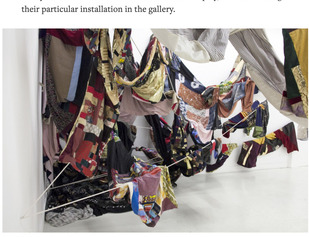
Through this body of work, Kincaid tells a story of rebirth, not of death or destruction as the exhibition title suggests, but of what is blooming anew. The individual strips of fabric act as pieces of his past. Some swaths even contain screen-printed images of his former artworks. There's a mixture of textures, colors, prints, cultural references, and degrees of wear. These pieces come together to create something that is wholly distinct from the previous lives of its elements, but pays homage to its process of becoming. In some places the seams are tenuous, like divisions not quite healed, where in other places, they're tightly bound, making what seemed like two or ten feel like one.

One work, "Cocoon" acts almost like a pillow fort — a childhood practice Kincaid still loves. In one Instagram story, fellow artist Muzae Sesay captures Kincaid napping inside "Cocoon" during the installation week. Held by string and clothespins, it offers an intimate place to convene — a tent where visitors can wrap themselves up in secrecy, tucked into hiding under its folds. Yet it also beckons strangers to bump up next to each other as they crane their necks to look up. The viewer's gaze naturally journeys upwards to take in the work's many layers.

Detail of "Cocoon," 2019. Dimensions variable.

What pulled me in the most was the lush, dark underbelly of "Cocoon," with its ground layer of silk that to me, recalled charcoal. If you step back from the installation, it appears to be offering an embrace with arms outstretched. But as I moved closer and discovered this hidden inner layer of darker colors and lavish textures, I began to wonder if it gestured to the spiritual overtones suggested in the show's title. A "cocoon" is an embrace, but it is also the site of death, of transformation. In various shamanic traditions, fire and the act of burning is sacred, a process of release and a site of growth. The name of the piece suggests that it is also a site of metamorphosis. The artist speaks openly in public talks and social media about how he has transformed through the processes of creating artworks; "Cocoon" also feels intended to invite the viewer to turn inwards, as well as to prompt us to consider what we need to let go of to grow.

Within "Shamans Death", Kincaid's works are arranged to dance off the walls and into the gallery space — they interact with the viewer. His quilts are no longer displayed flush against backdrops as they were in previous exhibitions, but are now increasingly working their way off the wall. You can almost imagine one of the quilted sculptures lifting off when you're not looking, or the installation twirling around when you turn your back. The works feel free to move and play, liberated through their particular installation in the gallery.



Detail of "Cocoon," 2019. Dimensions variable.

The gallery's owner and curator Brock Brake gave Kincaid the freedom to take over the front room of pt.2 and create very site-specific installations. As a result, Kincaid spent nearly a week inside the gallery arranging "Shaman's Death" and interacting with artists as they came through the building (pt. 2 also hosts studio spaces). The curatorial flexibility and trust may have afforded the artist the space to explore these playful arrangements of artworks.

Kincaid speaks explicitly about the spirit of transformation that is palpable in the show; "I am focusing my intention on developing emotionally, physically, mentally, and spiritually," he writes in his artist statement. "The materials used here are intimate materials from my life. They house the memory, the sweat, the eye rain, and pain from this phase in my journey, and in their reconstitution comes to mirror my new 'body.'" In his eyes, what it means to be is really a process of a constant reconstruction. Some of us move around never knowing that we can undo or restitch. Kincaid reminds us that, at any moment, we can always reconfigure.

"Shamans Death" is on view at pt.2 Gallery in downtown Oakland, CA through July 5th.

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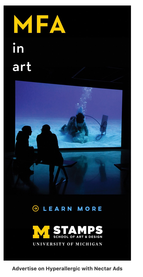

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