

Smack Mellon

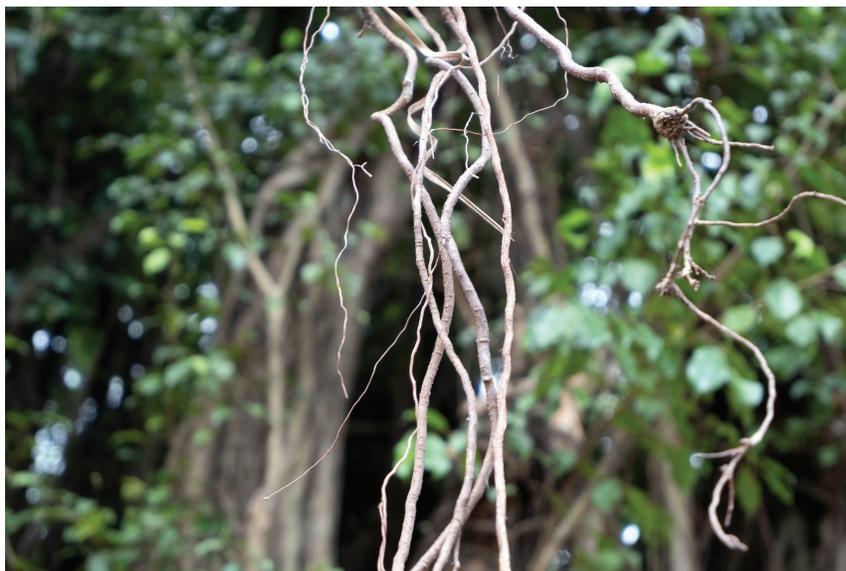
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Miatta Kawinzi, *Numma Yah*

[Gallery One]

September 28-November 17, 2024

Opening Reception: Sat. September 28, 6-8PM



Miatta Kawinzi, *Numma Yah*, 2024, process still. Courtesy of the Artist.

For this exhibition, Miatta Kawinzi brings together immersive sculptural installation, soundscapes, and moving image projections to reflect on root systems materially and conceptually. Informed by Kawinzi's Liberian cultural heritage, this work meditates on ideas around protection, inter-connectivity, embodied memory, and the lessons learned from plant life. The title is a Kolokwa (Liberianized English) phrase used to offer words of comfort, uplifting the necessity of creating spaces of soothing in the face of discord and disconnection. Born and raised in the US to a Liberian mother and Kenyan father, the work reflects the artist's ongoing process of research and diasporic reconnection.

The central installation envelops visitors in softness and light from above and below. A three-channel video installation unfolding across Smack Mellon's floor displays intimate looping footage of plant roots dancing and criss-crossing through overlapping projection beams. Overhead, a network of delicate sculptures made from hand-wrapping copper grounding wire in cotton thread cascade and weave between the gallery's historic columns. Two channels of sound play simultaneously in the space, reverberating and establishing a rhythm of holding through an original score of humming, thumb piano instrumentation, synthesizer, and song. The installation invites visitors to move through and experience it from multiple angles and vantage points, becoming part of its sensorial web and energetic flow.

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The gallery's large wall hosts a single channel video, *to trust the ground might free us (begin again)*, that meditates on the reach towards liberation as an ongoing process through the language of landscape and the body. Here the artist brings together still and moving imagery of New England forests, Liberian cotton trees and historic sites such as Dozoa (Providence Island) and Unification Park, the Atlantic Ocean, bodily gesture, sun beams, poetics, color fields, historic Vai language logograms, and archival findings, engaging the multiple resonances of landscapes as sites of refuge, sites of violence, sites of reparation, and sites of healing.

Echoes of memory embedded in geography extend to the gallery's waterfront location which is connected to the same body of water that has witnessed centuries-long cycles of displacement and migration between the US and Liberia, intertwined with histories of enslavement, the American Colonization Society (ACS) project of re-settling African-Americans from the US to Liberia, Liberia becoming the first modern African republic in 1847 after declaring independence from the ACS, more recent decades of devastating civil unrest and civil war in Liberia, and the continued economic exploitation in Liberia by western corporations which keeps local economies under-developed during an ongoing process of post-war societal rebuilding. The artist asks: how might we sit with the harshness of history while feeling towards and imagining more balanced futures, recognizing our richness as deeper than that which has been done to divide us? (*I will dig for you.*)

Here the artist turns to the poetics of the verticality of trees and the horizontalism of roots to bridge realms. Strong and often hidden from view, roots serve as support, central nervous system, and vibratory life force across place. As metaphor, they are ancestral connectors and have the capacity to reveal the embodied traces of a history's emotional landscape. In rhizomatic dispersal, they unite the singular and the collective, reflecting the transformative power in accumulation. To *reach* is to yearn, and in *Kolok-wa* also means to arrive. *Numma Yah* uplifts the power of linkage and reconnection, cultivating a space of soothing and regeneration from the traces of ongoing colonial imposition that are present both locally and globally. In insistence as resistance, what wisdom might we absorb from the persistence of plant life in any environment and circumstance to find and feel towards sources of replenishment, soft tendrils delicately yet sturdily linked? Rootedness can be a balm to fortify and nourish the mind, body, and spirit from an internal space through external tumult, illuminating rhythms of restoration and renewal.

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BIO:
Miatta Kawinzi is a multi-disciplinary artist, experimental filmmaker, and writer. Her work explores practices of re-imagining the self, identity, place, and culture through abstraction and poetics. Of Liberian and Kenyan heritage, Kawinzi was raised in Tennessee and Kentucky and has been based in NYC since 2010. Her work engages interior and exterior landscapes to illuminate themes of inter-connectivity, hybridity, diaspora, and queered temporalities.

Recent exhibitions include “Mami Wata Afrofuturism: 500 Years Back to the [Afro][F]uture” at the Houston Museum of African American Culture, TX (2024), “States of Becoming” touring with Independent Curators International 2022-27 and presented at Des Moines Art Center, IA (2024) and the Africa Center, NY (2022-23), “in pieces...” at PS122 Gallery, NY (2023), and “Soft is Strong,” solo exhibition at CUE Art Foundation, NY (2021). Kawinzi’s work has screened at the Pan African Film Festival with LACMA, CA (2023), Ann Arbor Film Festival, MI where she received the No. 1 African Film Award (2022), and New Orleans Film Festival, LA (2021).

Recent residencies include Residency Unlimited (NY), Smack Mellon (NY), and MacDowell (NH). She is a recipient of the 2024 Creative Capital Award, 2023 Harpo Foundation Grant, 2021-23 Jerome Hill Artist Fellowship, and 2021 NY Artadia Award. She received a BA in Interdisciplinary Art and Cultural Theory from Hampshire College and an MFA in Studio Art from Hunter College.

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