

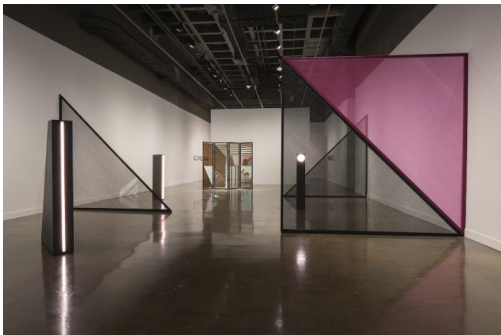
HYPERALLERGIC

ART

Sculptures Confront the Brutal History of Racialized Surveillance in the US

On view at MIT List Visual Arts Center, artist Kapwani Kiwanga's *Safe Passage* features powerful meditations on antebellum "lantern laws" and *The Negro Motorist Green Book*.

John Pyper March 25, 2019



Kapwani Kiwanga, *Safe Passage* at MIT List Visual Arts Center (installation view) (2019)
(All photos courtesy List Visual Arts Center)

CAMBRIDGE, Massachusetts — In 1920, a Jamaican woman named Satyra Bennett moved back to her parents' house in Cambridge, Massachusetts from Detroit, Michigan, where she had recently given birth to a son and gone through a divorce. Taking up a linotype job with a local paper, she went to church often and applied for

American citizenship. In the meantime, she quietly helped revolutionize the experience of travel for people of color. If you look closely at "Greenbook (1961)", one of the works featured in artist Kapwani Kiwanga's latest exhibition, *Safe Passage*, you will find the printed address of Bennett's Cambridge home, which she offered as a safe haven for African-American travelers during the Jim Crow era.

On view at MIT List Visual Arts Center, *Safe Passage* considers the long history of American race laws through the broad global lenses of diaspora, colonialism, and surveillance. Thanks in part to her multicultural upbringing — she grew up in working-class Canada and spent time with her father's family in Tanzania —

Kiwanga offers a refreshing multifaceted perspective that, in concert with her sculptures, doesn't allow us to define our history as an accidental or unique local condition.



Kapwani Kiwanga, "Greenbook (1961)"

"Greenbook (1961)" is the most topical of the four works on view in the exhibit. It's a suite of 21 framed prints drawn from the 1961 edition of "The Negro Motorist Green Book," which was also the subject of the 2018 Oscars' tendentious Best Picture winner. Published from 1936 through 1966, this guidebook was designed to help African-American

drivers stay safe during their travels through the violently racist Jim Crow south: it listed restaurants, gas stations, lodgings, and other facilities that were relatively friendly to African-Americans in an era of legal racial discrimination. Kiwanga chose to make prints from the guidebook's 1961 edition, because it coincided with the year that groups of civil rights activists, called Freedom Riders, rode buses to the south to protest segregation. Rather than presenting every original entry in the Green Book, the artist included just the listings' addresses and state names, which range from Maine to California, illustrating the ubiquity of virulent racism across the nation.



Kapwani Kiwanga, "Glow"

Kiwanga's newest series of sculptures, called "Glow", reflects on the antebellum surveillance tactic of "lantern laws," which were instituted in northern cities in the 1700s and required black, indigenous, and mixed-race enslaved people to carry candle lanterns after dark. These laws might be considered the 18th-century equivalent of stop-and-frisk, in that they made it much harder for people of color to walk around freely in public without being questioned (or worse). The sculptures consist of four geometric forms covered in textured black stucco; each is around the average height of a

standing adult and embedded with a single LED light. Two of the lights are dome-shaped; the other two are rods. The lights disappear only when viewed from certain angles and evoke lanterns glowing in the darkness, offering a potent metaphor for the end of privacy and the persistent power of the surveillance state.

Another sculpture, “Jalousie,” looks a bit like a Sol LeWitt wall drawing, except it’s made from two-way mirrors and steel. (“Jalousie” is the term for a patented type of louvered window that allows for airflow without being completely see-through.) Resembling both a hand-held lantern and a privacy screen, this object continues the surveillance state metaphor: the viewer can stand on either side of the two-way mirror’s intelligence-gathering divide.



Kapwani Kiwanga, “Jalousie”

All of Kiwanga’s featured works were provocative, but the one that I found myself thinking about for weeks afterwards was “Greenbook (1961).” What immediately struck me while looking at the Massachusetts addresses featured in these framed prints was that two of the addresses were near my home in Cambridge. One address is only a few houses away from mine, and the children that live there go to my child’s school.

I had to find out more. After leaving the exhibit, I went down a research rabbit hole, communicating with the [Cambridge Historical Commission](#) in hopes of uncovering the history of

these local Green Book listings. It turns out both of the listed addresses in Cambridge were private homes of families who volunteered to provide safe havens for African-American drivers.

Mrs. Satyra P Bennett of Mead Street was one of the two homeowners who listed their addresses. Through my research and that of the Cambridge Historical Commission, I learned her amazing diasporic story. She was born in Jamaica, as was her father, William Pearson, who was pastor at St. Paul AME church in Cambridge. His father had been taken to Jamaica as a slave. After

being educated in Jamaica, Pearson was freed and sent to Oxford for his education. After being ordained as a pastor, Pearson had a few short posts in the United States that ended with his appointment to St. Paul.



Kapwani Kiwanga, "Greenbook (1961)"

It's always amazing how many stories are hiding in plain sight; it's just a matter of finding the right sized lens to reveal them. By studying some seemingly inconsequential detail in a given narrative — such as a single Cambridge address in Kiwanga's "Greenbook (1961)" — one can follow various consequences right

up to a global revolution. Many of the Boston addresses listed in the Green Book are feet from where 20th-century African-American artist Allan Rohan Crite lived and painted his famous "Tire Jumping in Front of My Window."

But, what to make of these locations now? Should we place a plaque at their locations to mark their intimate personal histories on the impersonal street? I'm not sure we should commemorate them like that. These addresses are still ours, still here, and still in the present tense. But we should tell their stories, even if it takes an artist from Canada to reveal them.

[Kapwani Kiwanga: Safe Passage](#), organized by Yuri Stone, is on view at MIT List Visual Arts Center (20 Ames Street, Bldg. E15, Cambridge, Massachusetts) through April 21, 2019.

MORE FROM HYPERALLERGIC