

ArtSeen

Brandon Ndife: *MY ZONE*

By [Avram C. Alpert](#)



Installation view: *Brandon Ndife: MY ZONE*, Bureau, New York, 2020. Courtesy the artist and Bureau, New York. Photo: Charles Benton.

Had I seen this show in person, I might have written this review about the apparent contradiction between Brandon Ndife's rotting sculptures and the pristine Lower East Side gallery in which they sit. I might have interrogated whether the work functioned as an exposure of the seedy underbelly of an unseemly art market, or if it merely trafficked in the grotesque as a niche practice. But I did not see the work in person. No one did, besides its installers. The show was set to open the same day that Governor Cuomo ordered the closure of all nonessential businesses.

Such questions as I might have posed to the work previously no longer make sense. It is not just that my perspective has changed, or that the world has changed, but that Ndife's art has changed as well. It is simply no longer the

set of objects that it was before, although it might become something like them again. This is, in a sense, the theme of the sculptures anyway. They are mixtures of plywood, resin, foam, discarded plastic, broken ceramic, roots, and corn husks. They are somewhere between organic and inorganic, bending the distinction, showing that all things rot, even as all things can be preserved for a time. They reflect the tenuous balance of a life strung between stability and incipient devastation.

Part of what I think has changed, at least for now, is what it means for these works to appear in the gallery. Whereas they may have once signaled a juxtaposition between refuse and respectability, they now seem like ominous portents. The underbelly is not being exposed; it simply no longer is the underbelly. These spaces, like these works, are figures of decay frozen in time. It is a tragic question of how long they manage to hold on—a few months, a few years, or a few decades.

That Ndife calls this space “my zone” also might have meant something different to me once. In what sense, under normal conditions, is the gallery able to be the zone of the artist? Perhaps as something like a synecdoche—the show being a partial representation of a whole zone somewhere else. That would make sense of the partial objects we see here—split open cupboards, exposed views of decaying dishware. Everything here is a fragment of something else. But this again feels transformed. The objects no longer form a representational sliver of the artist’s total zone elsewhere, but rather function as a trope representing the decay in the world as we watch the acres of vegetables, gallons of milk, tons of meat, going to waste. “My zone” feels less personal and idiosyncratic and more like an open invitation for identification.

Transformation and decay are, to be sure, in the nature of things. In his philosophical poem of that title—*On The Nature of Things*—Lucretius noted that though this was always the case, to actually see decay was not possible: “Whenever things waste away, decayed by age, or cliffs beetling over the sea are devoured by the corroding brine, you cannot see what they lose at any single moment.” Sam Taylor-Johnson took up this challenge in her video still lifes, which showed slowly decomposing fruits



Brandon Ndife, *Modern Dilemma*, 2020. Birch, cast foam, earth pigment, AquaResin, resin, enamel, conduit cable, dish rack, ceramic plates, 48 x 27 1/2 x 21 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Bureau, New York. Photo: Charles Benton.

covered with mold before our eyes. Ndife's work may also now be showing the same thing, but, again, we don't know. The online viewing room reveals only the moment when the install shot was taken, not the process of the work. It may be well-preserved, or it may be beginning to rot.

This is, I think, the hopeful irony of viewing Ndife's work remotely. Even as it feels like a representation for the mass decay we experience, it is also, if only accidentally, a preservation of a time when decay still felt like a metaphor or imaginative exercise. It suggests a faint possibility that decay might be kept at bay, in a way that would be closer to how I originally imagined this show. Decay then was to be something we had to be reminded of and periodically exposed to, rather than something that has become the whole of who we are. But it is also a reminder that I write such words from a particular privileged vantage. There are those for whom "my zone" was always a site of refuse and reclamation, always a fragile existence in which the apocalypse of waste was the condition of the present. Perhaps the bifurcated meanings of Ndife's works—pre- and post-pandemic—will finally coalesce at this point. Then they can help us suture these private zones, help us realize that decay anywhere is decay everywhere, that I cannot be safe and well in my zone unless you are safe and well in yours.

Contributor

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