ART REVIEW

At MIT, Minimalism meets meaning

By Murray Whyte

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CAMBRIDGE — Kapwani Kiwanga is Canadian-born and Paris-based, though her new exhibition at the MIT List Visual Arts Center tells Boston something about itself. It is, I'm afraid, not flattering. She calls it "Safe Passage," and the implied terror — safe from what? — freights the chilly space with an implacable tension.

PETER HARRIS STUDIO

Kapwani Kiwanga's "Safe Passage" is at MIT.

More so, maybe, because no threat seems immediate. It's an austere scene, almost clinical, its objects crisply made, their arrangement weighed out in careful proportion: Four blocky forms stand upright, each fitted with a light source, adrift on a plane of polished concrete; a set of angular, transparent screens give the cavernous space a crisp sense of order; a louvered screen of mirrors, severe and ominous, stands in back.

To call the display minimal feels like calling the sky blue; as a student of that particular school of aesthetics, Kiwanga would surely get an A+. Or maybe not. "Safe Passage" is an acidic subversion of the Minimalist credo, in which form was its own end, the simpler the better. In the early 1960s, artists like Carl Andre and Dan Flavin called their work objective — as though anything could ever be — and Kiwanga calls their bluff.

Those glowing figures, painted black, are the least objective things you can imagine. With them, Kiwanga invokes Boston's late-18th-century "lantern law," which required non-whites — "Negroes, Indian and Molatto Slaves," wrote Boston town clerk William Cooper, in 1769 — to carry lit candles after dark if not traveling with a white consort. Each of the

four is a body moving through space, safe so long as their lights continue to glow. The echo here, of Flavin's light sculptures — Minimalist totems if ever there were one — seems clear, and so the canon of radical art turns back on itself.

Any good student of recent art history would know that Minimalism, and the wave of Conceptualism it begat, considered itself, with a certain smug self-satisfaction, to be subversive. For the urbane and privileged few, this was rebellion: the wry presentation of workaday forms as a counterpoint to Abstract Expressionism's cult of artistic genius and the sky-high prices it had come to command.

But into this by-the-book narrative Kiwanga levers some shame-inducing context. At almost the very moment that Minimalist artists were sharpening their own radical priorities in early 1960s New York, water cannons were clearing peaceful protests in the Deep South as the civil rights movement dug in. That the most transformative social moment of the 20th century had virtually no impact on the dominant art movement of the day feels telling, doesn't it? In literature, in music, and in film, the era's chaotic and often violent social upheavals fueled some of the most powerful, indelible cultural expressions of the 20th century, helping to define a generation at a crossroads, and in crisis.

"Safe Passage" captures both an ugly moment from the distant past, and what now feels like a far more recent departure point, where the contemporary art world detached from the messy fractures of a world in chaos and hived off to have conversations with itself. The walled fortress that Conceptualism built for contemporary art felt near-impenetrable for decades, though in recent years the cracks have started to not only show, but deepen.

Kiwanga chips away, and does her part. That big louvered form — jagged and inscrutable — evokes cheap window coverings, interrogation rooms, and architectural practicalities all at once. It's that last one that gets you: In the tropical south, louvered shutters let warm breezes in, while in the north, they keep freezing gales out. Making the journey, hot to cold, promised freedom to those willing to endure it; in the soft, reflected glow of Kiwanga's wandering forms, it instead looks like more of the same.

Ultimately, though, "Safe Passage" is about a moment, not so long ago, when high art opted out of a divisive national argument. To put a fine point on it, Kiwanga fills a back gallery here with an array of unassuming, typewritten pages mounted in crisp wood

frames. She makes a sly connection to another Conceptual art favorite: the typewritten page, language as a riddle that turns in on itself (the most famous might be Joseph Kosuth, who in the mid-'60s presented typed dictionary entries next to both the object it defined and a photograph of it).

Kiwanga's words instead live very much in the worldly perils of that very same moment: Taken from the "Traveler's Green Book" — the very same as in the Oscar-nominated movie — which listed gas stations, restaurants, and motels deemed to be safe for black motorists traversing the nation, state by state, Kiwanga's subtle dig feels telling, indeed.

The book was updated annually, and Kiwanga's choice of 1961 is by no means arbitrary. In spring of that year, the first Freedom Rides — blacks and whites traveling together by bus into the Deep South to test the Supreme Court ruling that mandated bus and train stations be desegregated — took place. As they descended into Alabama and Mississippi, mayhem ensued. Many were beaten, some jailed; a bus was set on fire and burned to a charred husk. In New York, that very same year, Walter de Maria built a plywood box with a slot to drop a small wooden ball inside (it was acquired by the Guggenheim), and Judd mounted a tin baking pan to a painted wood board (it was acquired by MoMA). Same country, two worlds. Kiwanga has redrawn the map so their paths finally cross.

KAPWANI KIWANGA: SAFE PASSAGE

At MIT List Visual Arts Center, 20 Ames St., Cambridge, through April 21. 617-253-4680, listart.mit.edu

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