

HISIA/Emotion

Mwini Mutuku/Adrian Dahms

Doing away with the emotional management handbook handed to us as children, Mwini Mutuku and Adrian Dahms invite us to explore their respective emotional realms. Dahms' *Emotion Series* is an unflinching examination of the most perilous of human emotions: sadness and anger. Mutuku's *Frequency* is a quiet conversation with his audience about the affective terrain of being an artist. Together, they propel us, at a speed too high for comfort, towards empathy. First, with the artists, and ultimately, with each other.

What if we allowed our faces to reflect the full range of our emotions, particularly socially inconvenient ones? This is the question at the heart of the *Emotion Series*, whose subjects' sadness and anger confront the viewer with an unmitigated immediacy. The full fallout of their emotional detonation is contained by the size of Dahms' boards; the result is that the energy of the work is channeled directly at the viewer.

A deeply personal body of work, *Emotion Series* is Dahms' coming to terms with both depression and cultural mandates for controlling feelings. It is also a tribute to those who confront loss daily but cannot afford to show its emotional impact. The stakes are clear: if survival depends on one's ability to perform wellbeing, then there is no space for unmediated affective demonstration.

With this series, Dahms breaks the wall of emotional repression, for himself, but also for his audience. He challenges us to look beyond the emotional facades we meticulously construct to face the sadness and anger behind them. Through the painstaking and sometimes physically painful work of cutting and etching the boards to release the emotional state of his subjects, Dahms reminds us that the experience of grief and rage is itself painful, as is its concealment, and even its resolution.

Conceived as a reflection on—and a complement to—Dahms' work, "Frequency" is a meditation on the strategies we develop to survive our emotive spectrums. Mutuku's expressive *mise en scène* parallels the color and linear elements of Dahm's etchings. But whereas Dahm's pieces are explosions of affective rawness, Mutuku's series is a landscape in which emotions simmer just beneath the surface of social encounters carefully orchestrated to subdue them.

In *Frequency*, Mutuku invites the audience to experience the emotions an artist confronts in the course of an exhibition. The trepidation of welcoming visitors to the space. The oscillation between the distress of having too many people to talk to and the dread that no one will be interested enough in the work to want to talk. The tension of seeking - and release of finding - a small moment of quiet solitude.

Lest the audience dismiss these emotions as “mere anxiety”, Mutuku reminds us of the stakes in every piece. For the artist, nothing short of livelihood is at risk. It may be possible to chip away at the wall between artist and audience, but doing so requires a tremendous amount of creative, physical, and emotional labor from both parties. With a wink and a nod, Mutuku is saying here is the chink, *karibu*. But, not all at once. And, maybe, let’s talk silently.

HISIA is both a product of the artists’ emotional processing and its engine. Mutuku’s careful composition reflects the intentionality that characterizes his efforts to navigate and negotiate social interactions around his art. Dahms’ brisk cuts as he carves his subjects are a vehicle for his own anger and sadness. Emotions (and their regulation), the artists show us, are labor, and we can choose how we do this work.