



Khadija Saye, *Limog*, 2017, silk screen on vinyl, 24 1/8 x 19 3/4". © The Estate of Khadija Saye.

## Khadija Saye

236 WESTBOURNE GROVE

More than seventy people perished in the Grenfell Tower blaze of June 2017, when a fire began in a fourth-floor apartment and, owing to the building's treacherously inflammable exterior cladding, rapidly spread to engulf the entire social-housing tower. Among the dead was British Gambian artist Khadija Saye, at home with her mother on the twentieth floor, presumably obeying the firefighters' advice to stay put until help arrived. Only twenty-four years old when she tragically died, Saye was "on the cusp of something special," as London Member of Parliament David Lammy said at the momentous unveiling of "Breath is Invisible," an on-street exhibition of nine poster-size self-portraits. At the time of her death, six photographs from this series were on view at the recently opened Venice Biennale Diaspora Pavilion, where she was the youngest participant.

In Venice the photos were small-scale tintypes, framed behind glass; they felt distant, like postcards. Here, posthumously enlarged mostly to life size, silk screened on vinyl, and attached to a building facade a fifteen-minute walk from Grenfell, their impact was profoundly transformed. Saye pictured herself interacting with selected objects often drawn from her parents' religious practices, from prayer beads (*Kurus*, 2017) to incense pots (*Andichurai*, 2017). Her selected items resist straightforward decoding, however; Saye took sustenance from traditional spiritual rituals but also from popular culture. RuPaul, with his message of self-acceptance and transformation, was a hero. Beyoncé's acclaimed 2016 album *Lemonade*, with its meditative celebration of black women, was perhaps obliquely referenced in Saye's *Limon*, 2017, in which a cluster of artificial lemons, their color darkened by the distorting tintype chemistry, conceals the artist's face. Saye's eye twinkles through the mass of discolored plastic fruit as if watching through a mask. She seems both a real person and a timeless, almost allegorical figure of self-possession, absorbing the multiple sites of her history: the British colonial past, her Gambian heritage, twenty-first-century London. Lemons also serve in cleansing rituals, and Saye explained that she was reminded of another rite of purification, baptism, when seeing the developing plate immersed in the darkroom's wet chemical baths. Wearing headgear suggestive of both Rembrandt's floppy hat and African women's headdresses was one more way for Saye to display her extraordinary gift for bringing together widely diverse cultures, traditions, religions, and geographies in succinct and evocative portraiture; the art-historical genre was capable of "announcing one's piety, virtue, soul and prosperity," she wrote.

"The black body in art has rarely been seen still, without a job, in protest of nothing," Antwaun Sargent has written with regard to Lubaina Himid's art; in a similar vein, Saye's dignified and mysterious stillness contributes to the works' startling impact. The artist looks older than her age in these photographs, which seem to migrate across time: belonging to the future Saye who would never be, and to a nineteenth-century imperial past that continues to haunt the present—most Grenfell disaster victims were ethnic or national minorities. Saye considered this series "the search for what gives meaning to our lives and what we hold onto in times of despair"—an endeavor surely shared by many, more urgently now than ever.

In the wake of this summer's toppling of a statue of slave trader Edward Colston into Bristol Harbor, debates have raged around the form and future of British monuments. This understated public artwork cut through the heated rhetoric. Without bombast, and with elegance and quiet respect, "Breath is Invisible" paid tribute to a story and to an artist—represented on her own terms—who must be remembered.

— Gilda Williams