

Tahir Karmali is a process-based, conceptual artist whose work spans printing, installation, sculpture, and photography. His interest in material and process is integral to how he communicates narratives centered around global environmental and socio-economic factors. This incorporates specially sourced materials to emphasise a narrative that exposes a raw emotional attachment to memory, both personal and collective.

His series PAPER:work investigates the materially simple yet conceptually complex existence of paper. Referring to nationality, boundaries, authenticity or legitimacy, paper as material is centred around questions of identity and belonging. In his works, Karmali uses photos, patterns, threads and quotations from documents of colonial and post-colonial Kenya, fusing their different meanings and purposes, thereby highlighting their complexity and generating a new interpretation and awareness of the materials.

His photographic series Jua Kali, meaning „glowing sun“ in Swahili, portrayed the craftsmen and workers constituting Kenya's casual economy. In his portraits, Karmali transformed the faces of these communities into surrealistic images of superheroes, adorned with their wares. The works were shown in the exhibition Jua Kali which travelled 2015 – 2016 internationally.

"I am an investigator of materials and vernacular design. Focusing on their underlying source – as currency, as markers of cultural identity, or as exploitable artifact - I am interested in transforming these materials into varying formats that are deceptive, as an art form, allowing the viewer to savour them as primary material before a layer of trauma slowly reveals itself."
– Tahir Karmali

"My work is based not only on my own physical experience of moving between borders, and globally diverse cultures but also on how certain elemental materials move through these same routes and are thus transformed per their use value in each space, including within the artworld." – Tahir Karmali

Tahir Karmali was born 1987 in Nairobi, Kenya. He finished an MFA in Digital Photography at the School of Visual Arts, New York, after completing a BBA in Marketing and Communications at Les Roches in Crans-Montana, Switzerland. Karmali was an Artist-in-Residence at Triangle Arts Association, Pioneer Works, Trestle Gallery, BRIC, all New York, and the MacDowell Colony, New Hampshire. In 2017, he was among the awardees for the „Forbes 30 Under 30“. His work has been exhibited internationally, at the Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts, New York, and the Trust Arts Centre, Nairobi, among others. Tahir Carl Karmali is an Adjunct Professor of Sculpture at Brooklyn College, New York. The artist lives and works in New York, NY, US.