

BETWEEN DISTANCE AND DESIRE: AFRICAN DIASPORIC PERSPECTIVES

By Tumelo Mosaka

The exhibition, *Between Distance and Desire: African Diasporic Perspectives* imagines future itineraries for traditional African art objects by situating them within the global flows of contemporary Black aesthetics—where self-expression beyond coloniality becomes a provocation for innovative thought and where personal mythologies become a critical mode of inquiry into the representation of African identity. The term African art references vast and diverse artistic traditions from across the African continent and the diaspora. The array of cultural practices subsumed by this Western categorization is neither static nor monolithic. Emerging from theft of cultural patrimony during the colonial era, Western notions of African art are often marked by fetishistic and ethnographic frameworks. Today, such understanding of the visual, material, socio-political and spiritual cultures of the African continent endures. Indeed, the very category of “African” art did not exist in the precolonial period, nor did the word “art” itself translate directly into most African languages. Many traditional African art objects are intertwined with spiritual, and social functions that convey cultural values. Objects such as masks and sculptures are associated with rituals that manifest in various forms reflecting traditions of different groups. In some cases, objects represent ancestral spirits or mythical creatures serving to connect the physical world with the spiritual realm through symbolic and spiritual use. They play a vital role as a medium of communication, conveying cultural ideas through communal ceremonies such as initiation rites, funerals and birth rituals.

The forced removal of African artworks from their original contexts in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries and their subsequent commodification for Western markets structures the problematic that the artists in the show confront. Through processes of dislocation and fragmentation, ceremonial objects were displayed in museums and galleries—severed from the costumes, music, and movements that situated them in the social context of performance on the continent. This was an ontological transformation. Estranged and neutralized, such objects became exotic artifacts rather than living cultural enactments and were celebrated for their formal properties rather than their social functions. These maneuvers positioned African artistic practices as motionless “traditions” frozen in time upon contact with Europe. This viewpoint is misleading, obscuring not only the historical and ongoing evolution of African cultures but also the intracontinental exchanges that shaped the emergence of new practices alongside, within and beyond notions of tradition.

Rather than endeavor to restore these objects to their original contexts, *Between Distance and Desire* aims to reopen the question of African futurity as an operational strategy to transform representations of Black time and space. Working through life experiences of confinement and oppression, Black artists use traditional objects as archives to critically examine and challenge dominant narratives by recontextualizing historical narratives and highlighting experiences of Black people. In the exhibition, representations of distance and desire manifest through themes of longing, alienation and resistance as well as the conflict arising from personal desire to reconnect to past histories for self-identity. Featuring eight contemporary artists alongside artworks from The Soloviev Foundation, its artistic and curatorial interventions utilize modes of play and fantasy to highlight the interplay between traditional and contemporary practices from the Afrodiasporic world. The exhibition therefore takes a speculative rather than historicist approach. It reckons with the ongoing displacements of colonial modernity by resituating traditional African art within the sociopolitical dilemmas of the global present. The challenge

becomes, how might we narrate a different story, one that treats Africa as a subject rather than an object of modernity? What do these masks have to say about the issues Africa faces in the present, from urbanization and environmental crisis to gender inequality and racism? The artists represented in the show probe these and other matters with references from science fiction, history, and popular culture to create new visual narratives.

These works are inspired by African art forms, most notably the mask which traditionally carries collective cultural wisdom from generations that influenced modern culture. In *Between Distance and Desire*, a group of masks are displayed as a collective ensemble, which reanimates these masks for an alternative performance. This approach departs from prevailing art historical and exhibition conventions for traditional African sculpture that tend to itemize each object with an authoritative text recalling its original social context. Tradition shifts from something historically definitive to an unfinished and contested process of making meaning. In contrast to the normative signification of “mask” in Western culture, African masks reveal more than they conceal. They render visible material things that would otherwise be spiritual and imaginative. Consequently, these masks bear layers of internal and external attributes that reverberate in an ambiguous and contradictory fashion today. They have lived many lives, and this accumulation of histories is self-evident in this current display.

The exhibition also considers the lives of objects when they are not exhibited on museum or gallery walls, by displaying them within the shipping crates where they are stored and transported. Indeed, the technology of the crate is an often-elided dimension of African art history and a key infrastructural component in the care of art collections. The practice of crating artworks preserves these objects in time and space, yet simultaneously imposes a state of confinement and public invisibility, a kind of entombment that is extremely different from the way these objects were handled in their original contexts. Arranged together with Western antiquities and other non-European objects, these items might be said to enter the crate as culturally specific artifacts and emerge from them as so-called universal artworks. These storage containers preserve objects and are vessels for mobility that mediate possibilities of presence and access. They are specially designed and fabricated to accommodate the object’s precise dimensions, material, and weight. Many artworks spend most of their lives in storage in costly climate-controlled environments with a significant institutional footprint. This cultural expenditure on African artworks by Western museums and collectors is strikingly incompatible with their countries of origin within the capitalist world-system. The question becomes, preservation for whom? Using the crating system specifically designed to secure and economically transport valuable art, we can see how the lure of stewardship often reproduces colonial legacies of ownership and knowledge.

These curatorial propositions interlock with the contemporary artistic contributions, which pursue a range of formal strategies. The included artists raise doubt about prevailing visual conventions around the display of African art while putting forth alternative possibilities in a variety of mediums, including sculpture, photography, video, and performance. One key formal tendency represented in the exhibition is assemblage. Combining wood and natural fibers with industrial materials like plastic and rubber, vanessa german and Emmanuel Massillon create a paradoxical space of syncretic grandeur. german’s assemblages combine found materials with traditionally crafted objects to form protective ritualistic structures. She refers to these as “power figures,” evoking the nkisi nkondi sculptures historically produced by people in the present-day Democratic Republic of Congo. Treating sculpture as a process of transformation and healing, german scoured her neighborhood for objects to incorporate into her artworks. In her words, “I

surrender myself to the objects that call up to me.” Her three-dimensional collages transform these discarded objects into spiritual and contemplative sites. In a similar vein, Emmanuel Massillon assembles seemingly incompatible materials to instigate social critiques, repurposing vernacular phrases and objects to revisualize iconographies of antiblackness. His constructions often incorporate African masks and traverse the politics of gentrification, food insecurity, and medical injustice. Massillon alchemizes these histories into darkly humorous and texturally complex reconfigurations.

Another strategy pursued is figurative portraiture. Through their varied image-making practices, Robert Pruitt and Edson Chagas undermine fraught myths about non-Western cultural practices as estranged from modernity. Working in an Afrofuturist register, Pruitt uses draftsmanship to conjure speculative combinations of Black cultural references, merging the vernacular and the historical with the imaginary. His figurative paintings are at once fantastic, devotional, and mythological. In the works assembled here, gestures of covering, masking, and concealment predominate and suggest how masks can serve as agents of dissemblance and transformation. They shield and protect while activating new ways of moving through the world. By contrast, Edson Chagas interrogates the colonial dynamics of globalization through the photographic medium. In his series *Tipo Passe*, referring to a Portuguese expression for passport photographs, Chagas stages portraits of models wearing African masks and formal clothing. Where the passport photograph is officially designed to give state authorities an accurate visual representation of a subject to enhance security, here the masks obscure the faces of the sitters, obstructing their identification. In so doing, the work questions the legal frameworks that control the mobility of Africans outside the continent. Furthermore, by inserting the African mask into a contemporary sartorial context, Chagas interrupts the relegation of these objects to a distant mythological past. The work makes a powerful photographic argument for the syncretism of African and European history.

The question of performance animates the works contributed by Eblin Grueso and Nyugen E. Smith. In his performance video, Grueso reenacts a traditional ritual from his hometown of Santa María de Timbiquí, Cauca, Colombia. According to the custom, every January 6, the popular character “*El Bato*” (meaning the fisherman) goes house to house collecting food to redistribute to the poor. The ritual originally evolved from Catholicism and evokes Jesus's act of feeding the hungry. During the performance, we see Grueso assume the role of *El Bato* dressed in various fabrics, dry leaves, pots and pans, and a distinctive mask, prancing through the streets of Cali Valle where the performance took place. While dancing and vocalizing, he throws a metal pot at the doors and windows of family homes as if to gather their offerings, pouncing upon his “catch” once he has reeled it in. Grueso’s interpretation of this traditional ceremony in an urban context where it has faded due to capitalist development—particularly through the encroachment of the transnational mining industry into Colombia—seeks to acknowledge the survival of Afro-Colombian culture and its ability to adapt to the contemporary world. Smith, meanwhile, is inspired by the *lukasa*, or memory boards produced by the Luba people in the present-day Democratic Republic of Congo. *Big Chune-in (Through Memory)* is a visual-acoustic assemblage that commemorates the transmission of Afrodiasporic memory through sound, rhythm, and touch. *Lukasa* are handheld sculptural diagrams that conceptually map Luba’s history, geography, and political systems. By way of the sound devices used in reggae and dancehall music, Smith reimagines this technology, analogizing mixing and sampling with the *lukasa*’s mnemonic surfaces. Colorful knobs and wires combine with candles, sequins, beadwork, and hand-carved figurative sculptures, seeming to form a votive dashboard

for hypothetical ceremonies. A Luba mask from the collection incorporated into the piece serves as both witness and transmitter, gazing outward as if listening to and recording the frequencies for posterity.

Zizipho Poswa and Kim Dacres reconsider the aesthetic politics of monumental sculpture. Poswa monumentalizes traditional African objects of beauty and adornment into colossal ceramic and bronze sculptures. In her series, *Indyebo yakwaNtu* (Black Bounty), Poswa pays homage to the decorative combs and beaded bracelets worn by various pan-African groups throughout history. Finely decorated as prized possessions, “cisakulo” combs were worn by Chokwe men and women in what is now Angola, Zambia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to signal wealth and status. These combs were often gifted to women by admirers or husbands to mark important life events. “Isacholo,” on the other hand, signifies a beaded bracelet understood to bear healing properties, often worn by elderly Xhosa women to alleviate ailments. Passed through generations of women as family heirlooms, this jewelry encompasses a range of cultural, geographic, and matrilineal significances. The scalar augmentation of these treasured quotidian objects both feminizes the historically masculinist genre of monumental sculpture and reveals a spirituality implicit in the act of decoration. The work of Kim Dacres, on the other hand, transforms the rubber from recycled tires into emblems of Black femininity and mutuality. Collecting and disassembling the defunct wheels of cars, motorcycles, bicycles, and scooters, she embarks upon a complex path of shaping and layering these rubber elements into her singular figurations. Often assuming the form of busts, the sculptures obtain dynamic effects of lustrous coiling through the articulation of braided hair from the seemingly unforgiving rubber. By contrast, using chains, cassettes, and other metal bicycle components instills a sense of potential movement and tensile strength. Dacres’s use of rubber simultaneously evokes the horrific atrocities committed on the rubber plantations of the Congo under Belgian colonialism during the reign of King Leopold II. Correspondences between the intricate geometric grooves carved into the surface of the mask and the rubber tread of the recycled tires recontextualize the colonial past within contemporary material culture. The alluring and forbidding visual registers achieved by Dacres’s rough and glossy surface textures ricochet off this violent history.

The Senegalese poet and cultural theorist Léopold Senghor once wrote, “Everything sacred, that intends to remain so, must cover itself in mystery.”^[1] Senghor’s poetics of enshrouding and disguise can be understood as an organizational principle of *Between Distance and Desire*. The relocation of divination to an inscrutable region of consciousness and perception is historically in keeping with the original ritual functions of African masks, which facilitated a host of spiritual and social transformations. Rather than trying to uncover that which was concealed behind the mask, the exhibition embraces the multifarious concealments to convey new meaning. In an era characterized by globalization and digital interconnectedness, fostering and reimagining of African art and culture today relies on the creative acts.

Edson Chagas (b. 1977, Luanda, Angola) lives and works between Luanda, Angola and Lisbon, Portugal. His work interrogates the colonial dynamics of globalization through the photographic medium. Chagas studied photography at the University of Wales in Newport, London College of Communication, and Portugal's Escola Técnica de Imagem e Comunicação and Centro Comunitário de Arcena. In 2013, Chagas's *Found Not Taken* series was exhibited in *Luanda, Encyclopedic City*, the Angolan Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale, which won the Golden Lion for best national pavilion. Solo exhibitions have taken place at the Kunst Haus Wien, Vienna (2016); Instituto Camões – Centro Cultural Português, Luanda (2014); Belfast Exposed Photography (2014) and Memorial Agostinho Neto, Luanda (2013), in addition to two solo shows at Stevenson (2014 and 2019).

Eblin Grueso (b. 1994, Santa María de Timbiquí, Colombia) lives and works in Cali, Colombia where he studied Fine Arts at the School of Fine Arts. Grueso's artistic processes revolve around the question of how to redefine Afro-descendant peoples' ancestral memories of resistant practices through contemporary art. Exploring both rural and urban dynamics, he is interested in how capitalism – particularly the Colombian mining industry – and militarism have impacted the lives and customs of Afro-Colombians. He addresses these issues through sculpture, performance, installation, graphics, and video. The body is at the center of his investigations as a container of memory and transmitter of lived experience.

Kim Dacres (b. 1986, Bronx, New York) lives and works between Harlem and the Bronx. Of Jamaican descent and educated at Williams College and Lehman College, Dacres transforms recycled rubber into figural sculptures that pay homage to black aesthetics and her community experiences. She has exhibited nationally and internationally, including recent solo and two-artist exhibitions at UTA Artist Space in Atlanta, GA (2024), Charles Moffett in New York, NY (2023), Gavlak Gallery in Los Angeles, CA (2020) and Palm Beach, FL (2021). Dacres' sculptures are in the permanent collections of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA; the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, NC; the International African American Museum, Charleston, SC; and ICA Miami.

vanessa german (b. 1976, Milwaukee, Wisconsin) works across sculpture, performance, communal rituals, immersive installation, and photography to repair and reshape disrupted systems, spaces, and connections. The artist's practice proposes new models for social healing, utilizing creativity and tenderness as vital forces to reckon with the historical and ongoing catastrophes of structural racism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, resource extraction, and misogynoir. In 2022, german was awarded the Heinz Award for the Arts. Her work is held in private and public collections including the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR; the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City.

Emmanuel Massillon (b. 1998, Washington D.C.) is a conceptual artist whose multidisciplinary practice includes painting, performance, sound, and sculpture. His work delves into the intricate histories of race, identity, and culture, particularly concerning people of African descent. Massillon's upbringing in Washington D.C. shapes his artistic narrative, which challenges conventional norms and offers fresh perspectives on everyday life and politically charged subjects. His unique visual language is infused with street vernacular and visual puns, inspired

by African-American music genres like Jazz, R&B, and Rap, which he views as vital preservers of Black culture. His work is held in the permanent collections of the Baltimore Museum of Art, C21 Museum, and the Flint Institute of Art Museum.

Robert Pruitt (b. 1975, Houston, Texas) lives and works in New York, and received his MFA in painting from the University of Texas at Austin. His art practice centers on rendering large-scale figurative drawings rooted in a fictive ethnography. Through dress and adornment, he projects into those figures a juxtaposing series of symbols and material references from science and science fiction, hip hop, African-American culture and political struggles, and African traditional cultures to reveal a radical past, present, and future. He has exhibited his work nationally and internationally. He has received numerous awards and has been collected by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, among many others.

Zizipho Poswa (b. 1979, Mthatha, South Africa) lives and works in Cape Town. She studied surface design at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology and co-founded Imiso Ceramics with fellow ceramicist Andile Dyalvane in 2005. Poswa's large-scale ceramic and bronze sculptures are bold declarations of African womanhood. Her practice is a deep invocation of her journey and an homage to her Xhosa culture's spiritual traditions and matriarchal stewardship. Straddling figuration and abstraction, her anthropomorphic totems are characterized by an elliptical approach to form and bold colour choice. Poswa's work is in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Art Institute of Chicago, as well as important private collections.

Nyugen E. Smith (b. 1976, Jersey City, New Jersey) is an interdisciplinary artist primarily working in mixed media drawing, assemblage, and performance. In his practice, he is interested in world-building, informed by ritual, memory, language, history, and art-making processes that prioritize using previously used materials, the body, and play through the prism of Black cultural identity. Nyugen holds an MFA from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His work has been presented at the Pérez Art Museum, the Blanton Museum of Art, the Frist Art Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, the Newark Museum of Art, and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

Exhibition Curator

Tumelo Mosaka was born in Johannesburg and lives in New Jersey. He is an independent curator and the Mellon Arts Project Director with the African American and Diaspora Studies at Columbia University. Mosaka has worked within and outside museums exploring global transnational artistic practices, especially from Africa, the Caribbean, and North America. He has curated numerous exhibitions and held the position of Chief Curator for Investec Cape Town Art Fair, South Africa and at the Krannert Art Museum (KAM) in Urbana-Champaign, Illinois. Before joining KAM, Mosaka was the Associate Curator of Exhibitions at the Brooklyn Museum, NY. He curated important exhibitions such as *Infinite Islands: Contemporary Caribbean Art* (2007), and *Passing/Posing: Kehinde Wiley* (2004).