

Martha Mukaiwa, *Tuli Mekondjo on the Brink of the World*, The Namibian, 15 July 2022



Detail of Tuli Mekondjo, *Mbada (My Mother's Wedding In Exile)*, 2020

The woman in Tuli-Mekondjo's studio exists below a layer of mahangu, resin and history.

She is bigger in Tuli-Mekondjo's rendering, magnified from a small sepia photograph in an old book of colonial-era German photography to around seven feet on a large canvas destined for Hales Gallery in New York where the artist will make her North American solo debut.

"There she is," says Tuli-Mekondjo, after flipping through a large tome she found at a second-hand bookstore and pausing on a photograph of a black woman in a headscarf and a billowy dress in front of a landscape dotted with tall plants.

"Sometimes when I look at these images, when I'm working, I sob. I start crying because they are just so intense,"

In the book, the local woman has no name. Simple captions call her a "Hottentotten Mädchen" (Hottentot Girl), an "Eingeborene" (native) in D.S.-W-Afrika (German South West Africa).

The woman's identifying details are lost to history but

Tuli-Mekondjo pulls such images across time to highlight their significance and to underscore the genocidal and wartime atrocities bubbling below such deceptively tranquil and posed photographs of Namibians living during colonial rule.

In her bright studio filled with natural light and other Namibians' art and peppered with the proteas that remind Tuli-Mekondjo of her late mother, the understated visual and performance artist is on the brink of a hard-won new chapter and the world.

In a few weeks, Tuli-Mekondjo will be departing to begin a prestigious DAAD Artists-in-Berlin residency that will see her living and working in the German arts hub for a year. In September, as a result of her landing representation with Hales, Tuli-Mekondjo will fly to New York from Berlin to open her currently untitled exhibition.

Just six years ago, after working on her art during slow afternoons at her job at a Swakopmund curio shop, Tuli-Mekondjo presented 'The Bellowing Mind', her very first solo at the Franco-Namibian Cultural Centre.

She sold almost nothing.

Self-taught and struggling, the artist took this early setback as a sign to try harder, research, experiment and expand her outlook.

Since then, Tuli-Mekondjo, who is also represented by Guns & Rain in South Africa, has somewhat shifted her focus from her personal history – which includes the artist’s birth in exile in an Angolan refugee camp during the Border War – to the collective and historical trauma of Namibian womanhood during the struggle for Namibian liberation and the Herero and Namaqua genocide.

In her work, which is largely mixed media incorporating image transfer, paint, resin, mahangu and embroidery, Tuli-Mekondjo mines traditional and unexpected archives to present an often overlooked side of Namibian history: the story of its women.

“My work is concerned not only with the beauty of Namibian women but also the strength. It looks at what we have endured throughout history starting with the genocide,” says Tuli-Mekondjo, who has exhibited in Belgium, Germany, South Africa, Côte d’Ivoire, the United Kingdom, France, Portugal and Hungary.

“It’s necessary because a lot of our history focuses on men, people like my father who were soldiers and not so much on my mother or the contribution and work of the women during the struggle,” she says.

“When you look at border war history, a lot of it is about men. But where are the voices of the women, of our mothers that gave birth to us in these refugee camps?”

Though Tuli-Mekondjo can’t say too much about her upcoming exhibition in New York, let alone allow any photography of the pieces, the artist can offer some insight into its themes.

“It’s really about the trauma of Namibia, not only of the people but of the land itself. I think that it’s important to incorporate the land because the land is a witness to our traumas,” she says.

“On some of the canvases, I have included the landscape and images of railway tracks. This points to the idea that you can go to the south of the country and alongside the railway tracks, there are actually graves,” she says.

“People were buried there. They were working and they died and they were just buried there. You go to Lüderitz and it’s the same,” the artist says.

“So I think this exhibition is about revisiting not only the women, but also the Hendrik Witboois, the men who also fought and put up a resistance during the genocide.”

To complete the 21 pieces headed to NYC ahead of her residency in Berlin, lately, Tuli-Mekondjo has been waking up at 06h00. She drinks one sweet cup of white coffee, takes a simple lunch at around 12h00 capped with a glass of wine and then works until around 01h00, listening to YouTube videos or podcasts on Lumumba or true crime.

The Thai and Indian fast-food menus on her fridge stuck next to a selection of experimental images of her art come in handy on long days during which she mostly stays in.

The night before, allowing a rare excursion, Tuli-Mekondjo attends a panel discussion about the 1904 genocide at the National Art Gallery of Namibia, where one of her works hangs in the foyer gallery. She leaves early to salvage some of her routine and because the content is heavy and inspiring and her canvases are calling.

In her studio next to the former The Project Room gallery, a portrait of her mother welcomes her home.

Tuli-Mekondjo credits her tenacity and ambition to the woman who raised her in Angolan and Zambian refugee camps and passed away when she was twelve. She keeps her close.

The artist transfers a treasured photograph of her mother to a sheer and experimental piece that filters the light in a window above her sewing machine and she does the woman proud.

Of the women she never knew, hidden in books that aren’t taught in schools and anonymously buried in dusty archives, Tuli-Mekondjo says this: “There is this demand from them. They demand to be seen. They were photographed a hundred years ago and then they were just taken into these archives.”

“I know back then it was literally only white people who had access to these images. We never had access to actually look at our ancestors, to actually look at these images and say: Wow, so much beauty, so much strength, so much perseverance and survival instinct. The gaze is also being shifted because they want us to look at them,” she says.

“They were photographed by Germans but now they’re asking us: What are you going to do about this history, about our trauma? Look at us. You. Now look.”