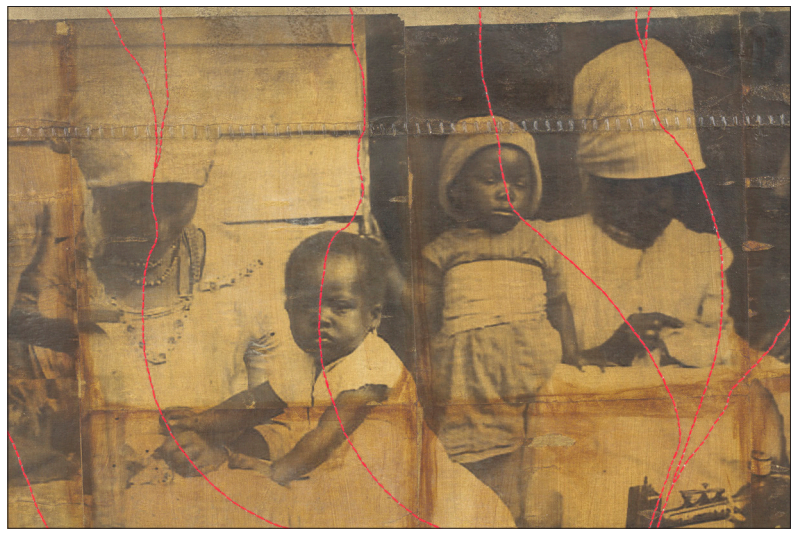

Photos: Tuli Mekondjo and Guns & Rain

the Weekender

Tuli Mekondjo Takes New York

• **MARTHA MUKAIWA**

On a late summer evening in New York, the floor of Hales Gallery becomes a site to connect with spirits.

Artist Tuli Mekondjo, dressed in a full patchwork skirt and a pristine doek, with her face painted white, kneels amid low mounds of sand as a candle burns and a cloven papaya floats in water.

Tuli Mekondjo's ancestors are in the air and on the walls. They look out from '*Oudjuu wo makipa etu*/ The burdens of our bones', the artist's North American solo debut on display at Hales from 10 September to 8 October 2022, featuring Tuli Mekondjo's remarkable reimagining of Namibia's colonial archive.

To summon those who came before her, Tuli Mekondjo's conduits are simple.

Fire to guide her to the realms of the dead.

Papaya, a sweet offering to the ancestors, a symbol of the womb and a memory of her late mother. The sand, a reference to the many unmarked graves of her ancestors whose stories span the brutality of Namibia's South African and German colonial rule.

"The silence of the south is extremely tumultuous. The land and the spirits of the land are awake," says Tuli Mekondjo, who created '*Oudjuu wo makipa etu*' in Windhoek after a research trip to the south in June of 2022.

"In Lüderitz, I was confronted with the trauma of our ancestors who perished, labouring as contract labourers, mining diamonds, building roads and railway systems, as well as digging for infrastructural colonial telegraph systems that only benefitted the colonial masters. Traces of these traumas are still out there, in the vastness of the land, in the wind, in the water, in the shifting sand of the desert," says Tuli Mekondjo.

"My time at Gibeon, Kolmanskop, Lüderitz and Shark Island highlighted the histories of violence and trauma of both the people and the land that were witness to the trauma of the Herero-Nama Genocide of 1904 to 1908."

In '*Oudjuu wo makipa etu*', Tuli Mekondjo sources images from institutional and unexpected archives, lifting scenes, faces and figures from the obscurity of old colonial postcards and ageing books before making them the centre of intricate mixed media artworks that seek to give her ancestors voice, acknowledge their trauma and subvert the colonial gaze in which they were originally captured.

Like Tuli Mekondjo's spiritual conduits, the elements of the self-taught artist's frames are intentional.

The gold of creeping plants in homage to her grandmother. The inclusion of embryos signifying the constant rebirth of colonial trauma. The presence of birds alluding to the presence of ancestors. Cloth representing the work of women who laboured in the colonial masters' homes as maids, washing, ironing and making beds. Embroidery, a way to bring this trauma within to the foreground.

Complex, deliberate and meshing the collective with the personal, which includes Tuli Mekondjo's own childhood in refugee camps in Angola and Zambia as Namibia fought for independence against South African rule, '*Oudjuu wo makipa etu*' was also in conversation with another group of ancestors in New York.

Tuli Mekondjo

The American Natural History Museum (NYC) houses the remains of eight Namibians who died during German colonial rule and genocide. Some of the remains have been identified as Ovaherero, San, Nama and Damara. The remains are not on display or accessible to the public.

"On the day of the exhibition opening, early in the morning hours, I realised the importance and my desire to go on pilgrimage to the American Museum of Natural History, to pay my respect and to honour our Nama, Damara, San and Herero ancestors who are kept hostage at this museum," says Tuli Mekondjo.

"From my hotel, I got into an Uber with my cameraman. I stepped into the museum, wearing my performance attire, and I walked to the 'Hall of African Peoples'. There is a display cabinet with artefacts from the Kalahari Desert."

Immediately drawn to the ostrich eggs, beads, bows and arrows of the San, Tuli Mekondjo begins to interact with the artefacts.

"I started doing a protest performance, singing songs from home, speaking in Oshiwambo/English, demanding and shouting 'give us back our ancestors that are here in your chambers ... Herero, Nama, San, Damara. They want to come home, to be buried in the desert'," she says.

"As I was shouting, pacing up and down at the cabinet, around this space filled with various artefacts from Africa, a crowd gathered and followed me around. The people took out their cellphones and started documenting the performance," she says.

"After a second confrontation from the security guard, we quickly made our exit in order to save our footage on the camera. It was quite an intense and spontaneous performance. After the performance, we got an Uber, I got back to my hotel, I rested, and I was in silence," Tuli Mekondjo says.

"In the evening, it was the official opening of the exhibition. I made my way to the gallery in good spirit. I put on my hybrid costume again, to do another performance of burning *imphepho*, cleansing, offerings and healing in honour of our ancestors who are still inside the museum."

Tuli Mekondjo's time in New York has a third prong, a showing at The New York Art Fair's The Armory Show, where some patrons gravitate towards her work.

"At The Armory Show, people were drawn to the work. They wanted to have a closer look at the textures on the surface of the canvases. They were curious, wanted to engage and to find out more about the colonial histories of Namibia," says Tuli Mekondjo.

"Some were surprised to discover that there are human remains from Namibia in their museum. I was incredibly touched to witness this kind of response to the work. The work spoke for itself and prompted discussions about colonialism, trauma and the strengths of Namibian men and women."

Four months later, Tuli Mekondjo has been nominated for the Norval Sovereign African Art Prize 2023 and is settled as an artist-in-residence at the year-long DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Programme. The artist has been exploring various archives, including the Ethnological Museum in the Humboldt Forum and Basler Afrika Bibliographien in Switzerland.

At both institutions, Tuli Mekondjo has considered sound memories of her ancestors talking, pounding mahangu, sharing folklore and singing songs of cultivation.

"I listened to voices of women singing from Caprivi and Kavango, voices from Rehoboth speaking Afrikaans, narratives of Herero men and Herero women singing songs of fertility. I heard Nama and Damara children singing at the top of their lungs. I listened to these voices and my soul ached, and yet I was in awe and admiration of our collective strengths and beauty," Tuli Mekondjo says.

"I have discovered that many fertility dolls, *ounona*, from Oukwanyama are being held hostage at Musée d'ethnographie de Neuchâtel in Switzerland. They belong to a private collection and they own the copyrights to these dolls," she says.

"How many more artefacts from Namibia are out there that we don't know of, scattered, stored in European museums and in private collections, from human remains, to baskets, jewellery and even the food we eat?" Tuli Mekondjo wonders.

"What are they still doing with the spirits and essence of our people?"

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