



Syowia Kyambi

Concave (2024)

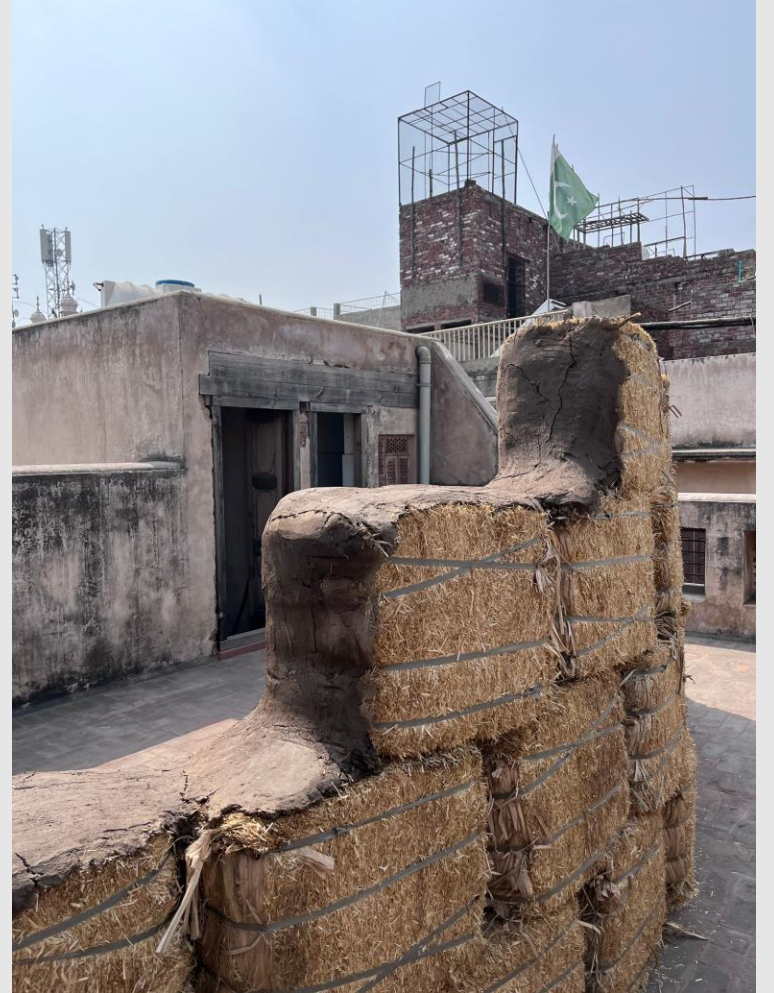
soil, dung, straw bales
200 x 18 x 500cm approx.

A gently curved wall constructed from straw bales, manure, and soil. A small window punctuates the top left corner. The convex side reveals the exposed bales, while the concave surface becomes my canvas for a performance lecture. This sculpture emulates the essence of home; not as a fixed space, but as a process in flux. Through the lecture performance, I share fragments of my life and the various spaces, both real and imagined, that I've built. Grounded in raw, organic materials, this form remains an open vessel, embodying a continuous desire to keep building and evolving.

Lahore 2024

Villingen Schwenningen 2025







Origins (2022)
digital collage print on flag fabric, oil pastel drawings on silk screen printing mesh & sound
dimensions variable / 36 panels each 350 by 145 cm & 7 different Kaspale Ancestor drawings

Origins evolves as part of a series of work involving an avatar named Kaspale (both male and female and neither); a socially critical trickster character used to intervene or inscribe themselves in different political and cultural contexts, architectures and activities. Developed as an external instrument by Syowia Kyambi in 2018, it has continued to grow into multiple iterations and narrative forms. Kaspale destabilizes not only presumed ideas of home and origin, unsettling temporal taxonomies heavily reliant on binary genealogies. Kaspale is both ancestor and descendant; intruder and native; anthropomorphic and zoomorphic; alive and dead. At once trickster and truth teller, Kaspale emerges at different points on a map that in many ways leads to deterritorialization. In this work, Kyambi continues to explore the many lives of Kaspale now directed inwards, towards the origin of the character and persona with whom she has been building a make-believe world of past-futures and intricate (im)possibilities. Kyambi invites her audiences into a world that is metaphoric where mangroves offer themselves to both Kaspale and the audience as a pointer to the multi-dimensional nature of both time and space. Mangroves, at once boundaries and extra-territorial map-nodes, are an exemplary indexing to a move away from a singular root-identity and implore us to instead follow the multiplicities, interconnections and assemblages that rhizomatous root-systems offer. Kaspale's ancestors emerge as pastel drawings on transparent fabric suspended within the immersive installation in which the digital collages of mangroves form kaleidoscopic scenes along the route. While not present in the space, Kaspale breathes through as a reminder of both aliveness and rest. Kaspale is an ever-growing and changing organism seen here as a descendant in search of old family histories that seem to lead into worlds that refute a single origin story. Kyambi's *Origins* invites us to think-with and think-like the mangrove; in this world, everything is extra-territorial. There are no limits to what might happen here.

Neo Musangi, Contact Zones exhibition text

Museum for Applied Art, Frankfurt 2022 – 2023 / Nairobi Contemporary Art Institute 2023





Parts of the Brothers (2020)
earthenware ceramics, red ochre and graphite powder
45 x 40 x 65cm



Parts of the Sisters (2020)
earthenware ceramics 50 by 50 by 55cm

Kaspale's Ancestors (2020 – ongoing)
assortment of mediums currently including ceramics, aluminium, dhow wood, oil pastel and chalk drawings

Kaspale needed some company. The trickster figure I developed to navigate complex and challenging subjects continues to be a methodology I use for intervening in spaces and places, offering mostly satirical commentary on burdensome or difficult-to-digest matters. Over time, however, the work was becoming harder to bear and process, and I found myself thinking more about multidimensional time and communal support structures and as a result started to create Kaspale's ancestors kin that exist across all time dimensions and can offer a form of support when Kaspale is tired or simply wants more fun and company. This ongoing process has grown into a fictional archive in which I craft mythological family members, currently including the Ancient Ones, Primordial I, II, III, and Parts of the Twins, Parts of the Brothers, Parts of the Sisters and Distant Cousins.. This imaginative journey prompts me to ask questions about time, the timeless nature of these characters, their companionship, and the presence of family or kinship. My exploration of Kaspale's Ancestors continues through the use of ceramics, aluminium, and recycled dhow wood.



Kaspale's Playground (2020)

projections, mosquito net material Kaunda suit costume, white cotton dress, children's chair, Kenyan flag, metal bucket, water, Kaspale's puppet, yellow yard wooden suitcase, earthenware ceramic mask, red ochre, golden glitter, string, sound.

work exists in form of, film, performance, installation & multiple channel video / dimensions variable

Towards the end of 2019, I was reflecting on my upbringing in Kenya and the experience of growing up under Daniel Toroitich Arap Moi's 24-year presidency. It struck me that Nyayo House, the government office for Immigration services was conceived in the year of my birth, 1979 and subsequently constructed in 1983. Nyayo House holds dual significance as the site for obtaining identification documents and managing immigration matters, as well as a harrowing symbol of the Kenyan government's use of torture during Moi's regime. I revisit this history through my work Kaspale's Playground. The performance installation seeks to reclaim both the remembrance and the narrative of this history, free from the constraints of a purported collective national memory. Kaspale the playful trickster character, a tool of intervention alongside their puppet and shadows, symbolically deconstructs Nyayo House and its history while paying homage to the poignant mothers' protest of 1992. In a desperate bid to secure the release of their sons detained in Nyayo House, these brave mothers resorted to stripping naked in Uhuru Park – a space that continues to serve as a hub for contemporary protests. The symbolic power of this act rendered the police present powerless, as it is a curse in Kenyan society to see a woman who is a mother naked.

Spazju Kreattiv, Valletta 2022 / Fracatti Theatre Amsterdam 2022 / Kikker Theatre, Utrecht 2022 / ICA, Cape Town 2022

The Nairobi Contemporary Art Institute 2023 / Museum of Contemporary Art Skopje 2024





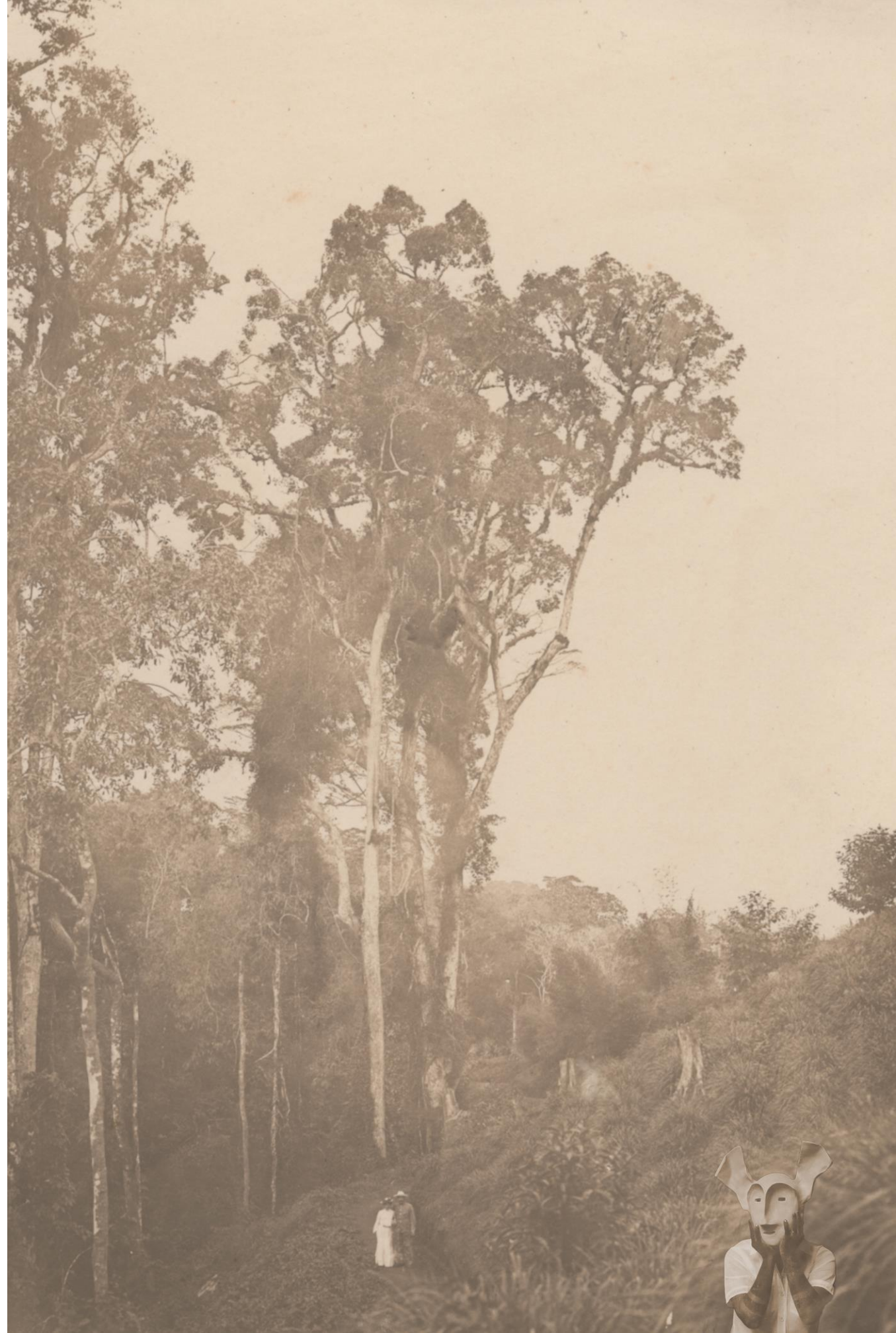
Kaspale's Archive Intrusion / The Post Card Series (I-IX) (2019)

digital collage, using MARKK Museum archive photographs
15.24 by 10cm

The idea of Kaspale was birthed during a residency at the MARKK Museum am Rothenbaum, Hamburg in 2018 in connection to an exhibition, Amani: Auf den Spuren einer kolonialen Forschungsstation/ Amani: In the footsteps of a colonial research station (2019-2020). The project facilitated a residency in Amani Tanzania, a colonial research station that is still operational today which I visited. However I also asked and thankfully received time at the ethnographic museum in Hamburg as I was reluctant to reproduce violence by extracting material from Tanzania for this exhibition project without tackling the problematic treatment of contemporary African art, its position and relationship with ethnographic museums, a European construct. In the Markk Museum there is a lecture room still in use for teaching and what was used to teach the first lessons in ethnography and race classification in the early 1800. The images used in the front cover of this document is when I first created Kaspale and 'we' were snooping around in the lecture hall climbing on desks, lying around, 'playing' while I was exploring the character, where Kaspale's cheekiness and coy witty gestures were developed. I had to 'produce something' for the exhibition and I was allowed to duplicate photographs from the museum's archive as a result Kaspale intruded into this archive, reinserting themselves inside of photographs produced by zoologists, Julius Vossler and Dr. Stuhlmann in the late 1800 and early 1900 during their time in Amani Tanzania. Kaspale's Archive Intrusion is reinserted into the MARKK museum archive. Kaspale disturbs these images, disrupting the urge for the audience to be nostalgic over this period.

View [link](#) to evolution of Kaspale map created for my solo exhibition at NCAI in 2023

MARKK Museum, Hamburg 2019 / The Nairobi Contemporary Art Institute, Nairobi 2023



Kaspale's Archive Intrusion / The Vortex II-IV (2019)

digital photo collage

62 by 122cm (I) / 78 by 122cm (II-IV)

The Vortex series connects to a deeper realm of the archive. No longer able to see the zoologists' photographs, Kaspale's Archive Intrusion, The Vortex goes beyond the archive and arrives to a space of timelessness. Kaspale exists in a realm not bound by time nor space, it's neither here nor there, neither present nor past.

Dakar Biennale, Senegal 2022 / The Nairobi Contemporary Art Institute, Nairobi 2023







The Green Gold (2019)

rusted mild steel, sisal, paper, ink, glass bottle, nails, video projection with sound
157 by 54 by 7.5 cm

A triangular, corked glass container holds hair-like fibrous strands of the *Sansevieria trifasciata*, commonly known as the "mother-in-law's tongue" which shares familial ties within the Asparagaceae family. I extracted the fiber confined in a plant pot in the front entrance of an art gallery in Mérida, Mexico, 14,800 kilometers (9,200 miles) away from Machakos County, Kenya, where my great-grandmother wove her wares, mats and baskets, with rope made from this particular family of plants. Its counterpart, the braided sisal rope, also part of the Asparagaceae family, was transported between 1892 to 1893 by Richard Hindorf, a German colonial agricultural scientist, who brought 1,000 sisal plants from Yucatán, Mexico to Tanga, Tanzania. Establishing colonial sisal plantations in East Africa. The title of the work, *The Green Gold*, references the immense economic value sisal once held in Mexico, where it was known as "I'oro verde", weaves together themes of colonialism, labour, power, the enduring presence of ancestral and ecological influences, and the entangled relationships between plants, people, and the forces that shape our shared histories.

MARKK Museum, Hamburg 2019 / Museum Europaischer Kulturen, Berlin 2022-2024 / Landesmuseum, Dortmund 2024 - 2025

1964-2018 (2018)

two Kaunda suits, wood, ash glue, push pins
200 by 189 by 5.5cm

The Kaunda suit represents an idea around how an ideology has been shifted over time, and how an identity changes. What interests me is the transformation of this uniform/suit/costume. The Kaunda suit used to represent ideas around the independence era on the African continent. It was an expression of freedom. An expression of being able to be a businessman. A way for upper-class citizens to share their roots with the working class. A way for presidents to say to the people that they are part of their people, or that they are together with the people. The Kaunda suit was a powerful symbol that spoke of leanings toward socialistic ideologies. It was a way to say, "Here I am! I am free! Here I am and I am my own man! Here I am, I am my own country now; here I am, I am with my own people now; I am together with my people!" The name Kaunda suit was coined after Kenneth Kaunda, the first president from Zambia, which gained independence in 1964. A lot of the first presidents on the African continent wore this suit as a symbol. Fast track to 2018 and the Kaunda suit is reduced to a uniform. A status of employment. Employees of shopkeepers in downtown Nairobi wear it and it has become a bus driver's uniform for private schools. The grey Kaunda suit is no longer revered, the Kaunda suit of 2018 is a symbol of indentured servitude. The sociological significance of the Kaunda suit from 1964 to the Kaunda suit of 2018 is miles apart. The sad reality is that the grip of colonialism is still awake and at work.

Galerie Mitte im Kubo, Bremen 2018
SAVVY Contemporary, Berlin 2022-2023





I Have Heard Many Things About You (2016)

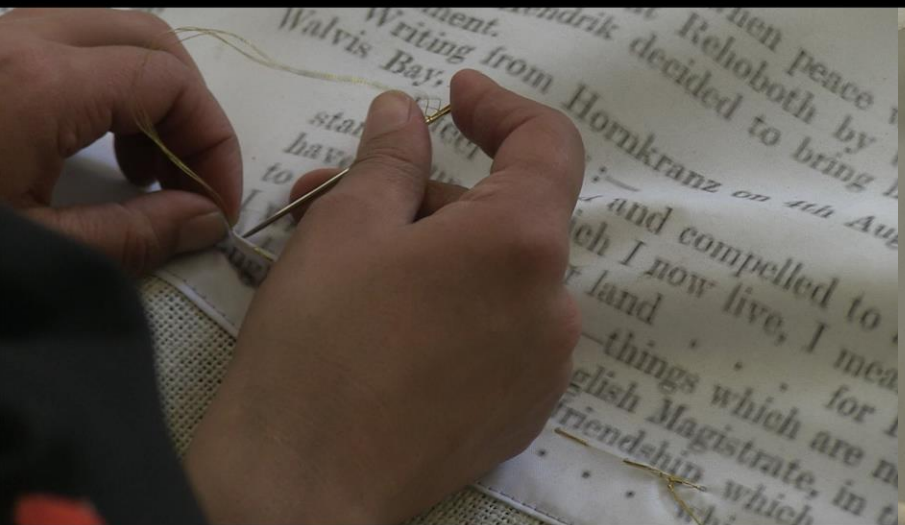
rope, weighing scales, fabric, gold string, Herero commemoration dress

performance duration 4 hours and 30 minutes

installation dimensions, 3 by 14 by 3.2 meters approx.

The curator of the Städtische Galerie Bremen, Ingmar Lähnemann, commissioned me to create a site-specific work for the exhibition *Kabbo Ka Muwala: The Girl's Basket: Migration and Mobility in Contemporary Art in Southern and Eastern Africa*. This travelling group exhibition was staged in Harare, Kampala and Bremen. My contribution responded specifically to Bremen, the birthplace of Adolf Lüderitz, a German merchant and the founder of "German South West Africa." The performative element of *I've Heard Many Things About You* consisted of a 14-metre-long, hand-stitched patchwork of fabric. The photographs on it are primarily from the Mohamed Amin Foundation archive, set alongside a British report documenting German atrocities in Namibia. This document strongly references letters written by Hendrik Witbooi, whose correspondence was central to my process. Witbooi, one of the nine chiefs of Namibia, who strongly resisted colonial rule and was persecuted by both the British and the Germans. During the performance, I wear a contemporary Herero dress, worn today to commemorate the genocide and walk through Bremen. Beginning at the ethnographic Übersee-Museum, I move through the railway station, into the city centre, past the Bismarck monument and nearby church, into Böttcherstraße, a landmark tourist area whose buildings were largely constructed between 1922 and 1931, financed through colonial exploitation. I continue across the bridge and into the contemporary gallery.

Before the patchwork is installed, I use golden thread to highlight selected texts or references that I consider important for viewers. Once hung, the piece's components cannot be fully seen, echoing our histories and the impossibility of grasping a complete or coherent narrative. The installation is suspended using weighing scales and a hangman's-noose tying system, allowing the veil-like structure to evoke the form of a ship. [*I Heard Many Things About You*](#)





Rose's Relocation (2015)

Digital Photo Collage

28.2 by 38.2cm

Rose's Relocation is a series of five digital photo collages. To create these collages, I worked with two sets of photographs and blended them into each other. The first set features Rose, a fictional character I created for the performance installation *Fracture (i)*. The second set consists of black and white photographs I took in rural Kenya in 2010 during the process of creating *fracture (i)* which are the fictional memories of Rose's mother's home. While preparing at Fonds Régional d'Art Contemporain Lorraine, Metz for *Fracture (i)* which was part the exhibition *Body Talk: Feminism, Sexuality and the Body in the Work of Six African Women Artists*, I was able to take Rose out for a walk. Photographer Diana Pallas documented this process. I then superimposed these images with the photographs I created of Rose's memories of her mother's home to evoke the psychological disruption that often accompanies life in the diaspora.

The resulting digital collages show Rose moving through the town, layered with visual fragments of her mother's home. While living abroad is often viewed as an achievement, it can also be burdensome, provoking feelings of isolation and loss and overwhelming responsibility particularly when ideas of success are shaped by materialism rooted in capitalist ideals. This framework is tied to a communal value system 'back home' that can create both violent and vulnerable circumstances.

Iwalewahaus, Bayreuth, 2015 / Nairobi National Museum, 2016 / Goethe Johannesburg, 2017 / Goethe Windhoek, 2018 / Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne , 2024



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Fracture (i) (2011)
 Installation & performance using fabric, sisal, projections, ceramics, paint, photographs, dresser, mirror
 8 by 14 meters

These works by Syowia Kyambi document a body of installation and performance work, known as [Fracture \(i\)](#) (2011). These performances think through the contemporary afterlives of British colonialism in Kenya and speculate on possibilities for personal and collective, as well as mental and structural, transformation. Kyambi wears this costume made from sisal, which she constructed using the Kamba weaving method, conventionally employed for making kiondo's (local handwoven bags). In doing so, the outfit juxtaposes the discredited transgenerational knowledges sedimented in these Kenyan handicraft traditions with the historical materiality of colonial sisal plantations.

These colonial plantations, besides intervening in and disrupting local ecologies, disenfranchise black Kenyans by dispossessing them of their land and their political and economic power. Covering her head while stepping on clay vessels filled with red paint as a stand-in for blood, Kyambi's performance allegorises the intertwined structural, epistemic, and ecological violence wrought by these colonial histories, using the specificity of her gendered body to transmute their reverberations into the present day. Greg Hilty, Matter As Actor exhibition text.

Kouvola Art Museum, Kouvola, 2011 / Fonds Régional d'Art Contemporain Lorraine, Metz, 2015 / Konsthalle Lund, 2015 / WIELS Contemporary Art Centre, Belgium 2015 / EVA International Biennale, Limerick, 2016 / (displayed entirely sisal costume only) Lisson Gallery, London, 2023





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Artist Portrait

