

2.B

1
The Geometric Ballad of Fear, 2019
inkjet print on paper,
100 x 120 cm each

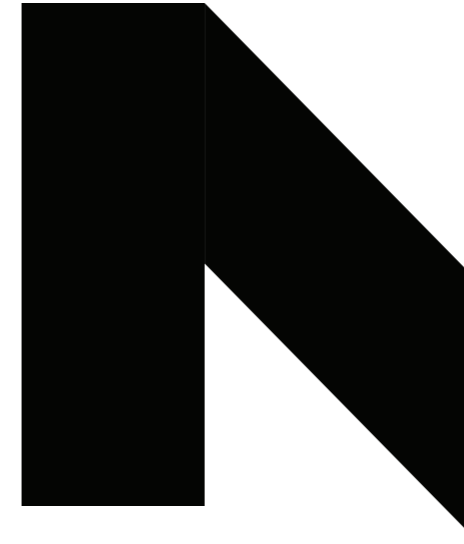
2
Paradise Metallic, 2014
multi-channel video,
duration 24'40"

*Dutch and French translations of the English text in
the video are available at the entrance of the room.*

2.A

3
Mare Nostrum (Black Birds), 2019
inkjet print on paper,
225.5 x 403 cm

4
The Isle of Venus, 2018
bricks, statues, condoms, boxes,
speakers, photomontages



KILUANJI KIA HENDA

21.02.20
→ 28.06.20

Film screenings

In collaboration with Afrika
Filmfestival, M hosts three film
screenings, preceded by an
introduction and followed by a
discussion led by a guest speaker.

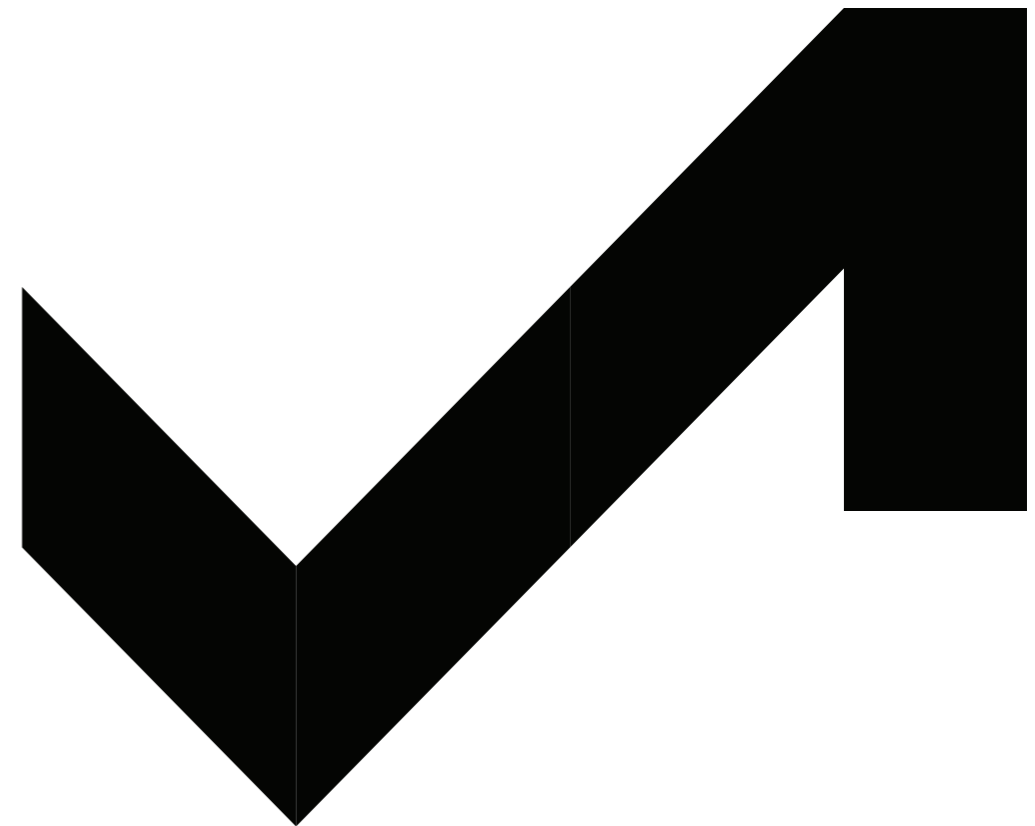
Information and registration:
mleuven.be/afrikafilmfestival

12.03, 20:00
Another Day of Life, 2018, 1h25 min
Animated documentary about the
Angolan civil war (Best European
Animated Feature Film, European
Film Awards, 2018)
Guest: Eric Goossens, producer of the film

16.04, 20:00
*The Foreigner's Home – Toni
Morrison at the Louvre*, 2018, 56 min
Documentary about the vision
of author Toni Morrison and her
exhibition at the Louvre
Guest: Lyse Ishimwe,
founder of *Recognition*

30.04, 20:00
Do Outro Lado do Mundo,
2016, 52 min
Documentary about intercultural
love stories set in Angola

Guest: Artur da Costa, representative of
the Angolan community in Belgium



KILUANJI KIA HENDA

Kiluanji Kia Henda (°1979, Luanda, Angola) explores issues of today's society in a unique and engaging manner, encouraging critical thinking. His work encompasses a wide range of themes such as politics, identity and the complex relationship between Africa and the West, often evoked in a poetic or satirical manner. The artist mostly uses photography, video and installation, all of which are present in this first Belgian solo exhibition.

Having grown up in Angola during the civil war following the independence, Kia Henda's art is grounded in the history of his country. It is also the outcome of a worldwide journey, as foreign influences have been shaping Angola for centuries, from Portuguese colonisation to today's Chinese-built cities. This global aspect pervades the artist's work, exposing the power dynamics between countries and continents, including the various tools used to assert supremacy.

While he started out as a self-taught street photographer, Kia Henda outgrew his initial documentary approach and developed increasingly universal storylines. Subverting history and interweaving elements of fiction into fact gave rise to new creative possibilities, displaying humour and irony. This is how the artist came to found an imaginary organisation called *O.R.G.A.S.M. (Organisation of African States for Mellowness, 2011-2013)* and present photographic evidence of an Angolan space mission to the sun that never took place (*Icarus 13, 2008*).

At M, the artist shows both recent and earlier work in two galleries. While the art on display takes on very different forms, the works share a startling quality, prompting us to interrogate what we see and look beyond appearances. The political undertone becomes manifest when we begin to perceive contemporary themes: migration, exclusion and the relationship between nature and culture. As geopolitical references are rendered suggestive and forms tend towards abstraction, the questions raised by Kiluanji Kia Henda acquire a universal, timeless dimension.

Curator: Eva Wittocx

THE EXHIBITION TAKES PLACE IN GALLERIES 2.A AND 2.B.

2.A *The Isle of Venus, 2018*

In the midst of the city, the artist presents us with an island, albeit an industrial one, with its concrete blocks echoing the buildings outside. A siren call attracts our attention as we encounter the island's inhabitants, small white statues. Their colourful appearance and smooth texture contrasts with the rough surroundings, adding a touch of gaiety and playfulness to the grey ensemble, named *The Isle of Venus*. The title is borrowed from a canto of *The Lusians* by Camões, Portugal's famous epic poem celebrating Vasco da Gama's explorations. Camões' mythical isle invites Portuguese sailors to a feast of love with ocean nymphs.

Kiluanji Kia Henda's island proves to be rather less welcoming, and the title ironic. The siren call turns out to be the Angolan song *Monami* about a mother lamenting the loss of her child, a haunting rendering of grief and powerlessness punctuated by bursts of white noise. The statues' bright colour comes from condoms (*camisas-de-vênus* in Portuguese), markers of separation and sterility. Underneath this protection, replicas of famous sculptures in European art history can be identified, such as the Venus of Milo and David. It is not an isle of love, but a barren fortress we are facing, a rising wall of bricks safeguarding its treasures.

A place under lock and key surrounded by the sea, the questionable wish to keep monuments and, by extension, European arts and culture 'untouched and unspoilt'... What we witness here raises questions about the stance adopted by some European countries towards migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea, when they are considered as foreign elements to be kept out.

On the gallery wall, a series of photographs repetitively hints at the inherent danger. Black rectangles obliterate parts of the sea, alluding to meaninglessness and death. The presence of these rectangles can also be interpreted as a form of censorship. Our position between the unattainable island and the multitude of blacked-out, yet all too significant pictures is an invitation to take a stand.

2.A *Mare Nostrum (Black Birds), 2019*

At first glance, this monumental composition strikes us as abstract, with its range of monochrome squares and irregular pitch-black surfaces. Upon closer inspection, we recognise a mountainous landscape in the background. With its creases and folds, the natural scenery contrasts with the seemingly artificial black forms, evoking black birds or their shadows. Surprisingly, these black silhouettes were not integrated into the images by means of digital editing. In fact, what we see are large pieces of black fabric laid out on white saltworks, photographed by the artist in the Camargue, a Mediterranean wetland in France.

The attempt at integration of a black entity into a white landscape is rich in symbolism. It alludes to migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. Seen in this light, the salt marshes come across as insurmountable mountains, halting an element perceived as foreign. The crosslike colour spectrum ranging from white to black includes different shades of grey, inviting us to reject a dichotomous view of the world.

The title of the work prompts further reflection. The Latin term *Mare Nostrum* ('Our Sea') was used by the Romans to qualify 'their' Mediterranean Sea, thereby asserting ownership over a natural element. It is also the name given to a year-long naval and air operation launched by the Italian government to control migration. As is often the case in Kiluanji Kia Henda's work, the historical reference functions as a commentary on a contemporary issue, encouraging us to question nations, borders and the resulting tensions.

Entrance 2.B *The Geometric Ballad of Fear, 2019*

In this photographic series, geometric motifs cover seaside scenes, receding into the background. While the monochromatic colour scheme has a unifying effect, it does not suffice to lessen the contrast between the artificial surface and the natural world it separates us from.

The seaside snapshots were taken by Kiluanji Kia Henda during a residency in Sardinia. By digitally altering the images and applying a repetitive decorative pattern, he turns the island into an unreachable place, with the black and white photography heightening the sense of unbridgeable distance.

With the migrants' crossings in mind, the gridlike pattern gains new significance. Seen in this light, the natural border marked by the Mediterranean Sea is rendered impassable by man-made bars, reinforcing the island's inaccessibility.

These bars are not less present because we know them to be absent in nature. Are the most deeply entrenched borders not always a product of the mind? The fear alluded to in the title refers to the emotion accompanying a dangerous journey. At the same time, it denounces one of the driving forces behind the human decision to draw up and implement boundaries that are essentially mental.

2.B *Paradise Metallic, 2014, duration 24'40"*

Dutch and French translations of the English text in the video are available at the entrance of the room.

In this four-channel video installation, the artist's earliest work on display at M, we are invited to join a mysterious figure introduced to us as 'The Man with the Shovel' on a journey punctuated by visions and awakenings. Or is it one long dream? In this visual tale, it is hard to draw the line between fact and fiction. The Man with the Shovel follows his imagination without question. From the outset, his purpose is clear: build his ideal city in the middle of the desert.

In a first attempt to mark his territory, The Man with the Shovel traces a circle in the sand. These tentative borders disappear into the desert. A second attempt involves the erection of a brick wall, literally built according to human measure. This proves not only unsuccessful but also destructive. In the end, The Man has his assistants construct a metallic structure, modulating the landscape 'according to his desires'. The highly graphic construction is revelatory in its emptiness, retaining a virtual quality.

Have we just witnessed a duel between man and nature? The struggle for power dominates this allegory. *Paradise Metallic* invites us to reflect on the consequences of trying to impose something without taking reality into account, in this case a man-made construction inflicted upon the desert. The metallic skyline rising from the sand symbolises futuristic cities at odds with their environment. These artificial settlements are easily replicated, a copy-and-paste property emphasised by the visual multiplicity on the gallery wall.

Dubai comes to mind as the archetype of this kind of urban planning and architecture which has spread throughout the world. Kiluanji Kia Henda witnessed the phenomenon first-hand in Luanda, his hometown in Angola, where the Chinese-built satellite city Kilamba long remained a ghost town. Angola also served as an inspiration for the artist on another level. The tracings at the beginning of the video and the outlines of the construction are reminiscent of traditional Sona drawings (ideographs in the sand), highlighting the artist's appropriation of local elements to tell universal stories.

BIOGRAPHY

Kiluanji Kia Henda (°1979, Luanda, Angola) lives and works in Luanda and Lisbon. Recent solo shows include *Something Happened on the Way to Heaven* at MAN in Nuoro (2020), *Concrete Blues* at Jahmek Contemporary Art in Luanda (2019), *A Ilha de Vênus* at HANGAR – Centro de Investigação Artística in Lisbon (2018), *A City Called Mirage* at the International Studio and Curatorial Program (ISCP) in New York (2017), *In the Days of a Dark Safari* at Galeria Filomena Soares in Lisbon, Goodman Gallery in Cape Town (2017) and *Self-Portrait As A White Man* at Galleria Fonti in Naples (2010).

Kia Henda has participated in group exhibitions at numerous institutions, amongst which Zeitz MOCAA in Cape Town (2019), Tate Modern in London (2019), MAAT in Lisbon (2018), Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris (2016), the National Museum of African Art – Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. (2015) and the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao (2015). His work was shown at the Gwangju Biennale (2018), São Paulo Biennale (2010), Venice Biennale (2007) and Luanda Triennale (2007).

In 2017, Kia Henda received the Frieze Artist Award. He presented his work *The Fortress* in the Somerset House courtyard (London) in 2019. The artist won Angola's National Culture and Arts Award in 2012. His work can be found in many public and private collections, including Tate Modern (London), the Museum of Modern Art (Warsaw), FRAC Grand Large – Hauts-de-France (Dunkerque) and Pérez Art Museum (Miami).