

# 10 Southern African Artworks Fusing Art and Science Fiction

The idea that science fiction can be meaningfully applied to an African context was introduced to mainstream audiences by Neill Blomkamp's 2009 blockbuster *District 9*. Beyond the limits of genre cinema however, sci-fi tropes have also proven to be a rich source of inspiration for a number of Southern African artists - a method of examining ideas of identity, space, politics and history. We check out 10 of the best film-makers fusing art to science fiction.



Athi-Patra Ruga, 'Invitation...Presentation...Induction', 2013, Wool and thread on tapestry canvas, 300 x 175 cm © Athi-Patra Ruga, courtesy of the artist and WHATIFTHEWORLD

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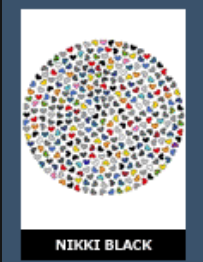


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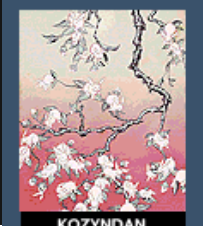
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## Athi Patra Ruga | Invitation...Presentation...Induction (2013)

With 'The Future White Women of Azania Saga', Athi-Patra Ruga presented a sci-fi realm that was strongly revealing about how history and power struggles are mythologised and understood in the present. Employing a wicked sense of humour and Afropop sensibilities, Ruga's Azania is a vivid future world inhabited by outlandish creatures such as the 'future white women', whose bodies are made of colourful balloons and legs are clad in bright pink stockings, sabre-toothed zebras and humanoid creatures covered from head to toe in colourful flowers. Depicting a violent clash between these characters, *Invitation...Presentation...Induction* (2013) simultaneously parodies the battle iconography of commemorative history paintings and the epic conflicts of 'space opera' for perpetuating a romanticisation of the violence of war.

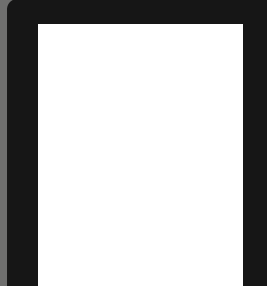


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Bridget Baker, 'The Botched Epic Attempt to Escape the Maiden', 2005, lambda print, 180 X 180 cm, © Bridget Baker, Photography: Sarah Nankin, courtesy of the artist

### Bridget Baker | The Botched Attempt to Escape the Maiden (2005)

With her *Blue Collar Girl* series, [Bridget Baker](#) aimed to subvert passive female roles through performing a number of daring feats under the mantra of 'only you can'. *The Botched Attempt to Escape the Maiden* takes this project out of any real-world settings and locates her character into a decidedly more fantastical realm. Drawing a parallel between patriarchal hegemony and the oppressive dystopias of science fiction classics such as



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*Logan's Run* (1976) and *THX 1138* (1971), Baker recasts her heroine into a similar role as that of the (male) protagonists in those films. Here, the idea of the 'maiden' is reimagined as an oppressive, slime-covered organic prison cell, preventing the heroine's motorcycle escape with massive constricting hooks.



*Chad Rossouw, 'Parklands: Fairview Crescent', 2013, C-print, 40 x 90cm © Chad Rossouw, courtesy of the artist and Brundyn+, Cape Town*

### Chad Rossouw | Parklands: Fairview Crescent (2013)

In his *Parklands* series, [Chad Rossouw](#) recalls the 'unbearable bleakness' of the suburb of Table View in Cape Town where he grew up - a childhood defined by parks filled with bone-dry grass, rusted play apparatus and gigantic devil thorns. Through the addition of a crashed space ship, Rossouw references the hopelessness of sci-fi desert planets such as Tatooine in the *Star Wars* franchise. Instead of disrupting the landscape, the abandoned, rusting craft seems to blend right in. The series describes an experience of childhood spent waiting for a call to adventure which seemingly never comes, as if trapped in the first stage of Joseph Campbell's monomyth.



Cyrus Kabiru, 'Macho Nne 05 (Westgate)', 2014, Pigment Ink on HP Premium Satin Photographic Paper, 150 x 120 cm ©Cyrus Kabiru, courtesy of the artist and SMAC Gallery

### Cyrus Kabiru | Macho Nne 05 (Westgate) (2014)

Associated with a movement in art which has become known as 'Afrofuturism', [Cyrus Kabiru's](#) *C-Stunners* series of photographs depicts the artist wearing an array of complex, futuristic glasses which he has fashioned himself from discarded trash in his hometown of Nairobi. The act of wearing the C-stunners becomes transformative for the artist, leaving 'Cyrus' behind and transcending his limitations by becoming a hybrid cyborg. Through the emphasis on eyewear to achieve this transformation, Kabiru's images recall the VISOR worn by Geordi La Forge in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, using optical technology to surmount his physical body's blindness.



*Gerald Machona, Still from 'People from Far Away', 2013, HD Projection, 15 minutes © Gerald Machona, courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery*

### Gerald Machona | People from Far Away (2013)

In this stirring video artwork, Zimbabwean artist [Gerald Machona](#) looks at ideas of xenophobia, otherness and the struggle to locate a sense of self while in a foreign place. Dressed in a spacesuit fashioned from decommissioned Zimbabwean currency, Machona's 'Afronaut' tries to make sense of the strange planet which he has crash-landed on. Flipping the sci-fi trope of the 'uncharted planet' on its head, Machona presents mundane settings such as the supermarket as the alien landscape. That these environments are most likely familiar to the viewer, serves to assert the Afronaut's alienness to the viewer. Through this, Machona's work draws attention to the relativity of the idea of an 'alien' and the struggle to be empathetically understood on one's own terms.



*Kiluanji Kia Henda 'The spaceship Icarus 13, Luanda', 2006 ©Kiluanji Kia Henda, courtesy of the artist and Galleria Fonti*

### Kiluanji Kia Henda | Icarus 13 (2008)

With *Icarus 13*, [Kiluanji Kia Henda](#) presents a tongue-in-cheek depiction of a fictionalised Angolan space program aimed at reaching the sun. Drawing parallels between the colonial impulses of modernism and the drive to 'boldly go where no man has gone before', Kia Henda humorously recontextualizes images of modernist Soviet relics in Angola into documentation of the program's successful launch. The sprawling monument to the memory of Agostinho Neto (the first President of independent Angola) is re-imagined as the space shuttle Icarus 13, while an incomplete cinema becomes the Centre for Astronomy. Although the outcome of the mission is omitted from the canonical narrative, the double-reference to hubris and poor luck in 'Icarus 13' does not bode well.



Mary Sibande, 'A Terrible Beauty is Born', 2013, Digital pigment print, 110 x 321.5 cm ©Mary Sibande, courtesy of the artist and Gallery MOMO

### Mary Sibande | A Terrible Beauty Is Born (2013)

Mary Sibande's work took a startling new turn in her 2013 [Standard Bank Young Artist Award](#) exhibition 'The Purple Shall Govern', as Sophie (the protagonist throughout her *oeuvre*) transformed into a creature sporting a winding mass of purple tendrils. With clear visual similarity to the nests in the acclaimed *Alien* franchise and Sarah Kerrigan's transformation into the 'Queen of Blades' in the *StarCraft* video game series, Sophie takes on the role of hybrid queen to a species of adoring purple beings. Crucially, the transformation is one of empowerment, casting aside any connotations to domestic and political servitude that Sophie previously faced to become a being of exultation.





*Michael MacGarry, Still from 'Will to Power', 2006 - 2010, HD video on Blu-ray, 14 minutes  
©Michael MacGarry, courtesy of the artist and Everard Read*

### Michael MacGarry | Will to Power (2006 - 2010)

*Will to Power* is a short film by Michael MacGarry depicting the assassination of an archetypical revolutionary-hero-turned-dictator during a public appearance. Without the opening sequence, the narrative would be a relatively straightforward look at the act of assassination as one of silencing, censorship and forcing of change within a political system. Through the simple but ingenious addition of a sequence at the beginning of the film which depicts a spaceship landing in the ruins of Great Zimbabwe, things become decidedly more complex. Suddenly the question of the identity and motivations of this nameless extra-terrestrial sniper becomes immensely more complicated and perplexing. Who is she? What vested interest could she possibly have in Earth's politics?

### Neill Blomkamp | Alive in Joburg (2005)

Before *District 9* took the cinematic world by storm in 2009, the concept behind [Neill Blomkamp's](#) biting sci-fi social commentary first took shape in a short 2005 film entitled *Alive in Joburg*. Sharing the same premise of a critically damaged spacecraft floating above Johannesburg, the film serves as a prequel of sorts to *District 9*, looking at early interactions between the apartheid government, citizens of Johannesburg and the alien 'prawns'. Through these sci-fi metaphors, Blomkamp is able to take a critical look at the racist othering inherent in segregation, xenophobia and nationalism, particularly towards refugees.



*Pieter Hugo, 'Chigozie Nechi. Enugu, Nigeria', 2009, C-print, 152.4 x 152.4cm ©Pieter Hugo, courtesy of the artist and Stevenson*

### Pieter Hugo | Chigozie Nechi. Enugu, Nigeria (2009)

Nollywood (as the Nigerian film industry is affectionately referred to) remains an epitome of African success stories. Unconcerned with Western measures of production values and narrative structures, it has risen to become the second most prolific film industry in the world (behind Bollywood and ahead of Hollywood). Supernatural elements such as ghosts, the undead, vampires and demons are recurring themes, fusing visual elements of

Western sci-fi/horror with motifs taken from local folklore. Travelling to Nigeria in 2008 - 2009, [South African](#) photographer [Pieter Hugo](#) assembled a team of actors and assistants to imagine striking images that exemplify the frenetic and surreal energy of these Nollywood productions.

*By Tim Leibbrandt*




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