

Frieze

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Gerald Machona's Afrophilia



BY IAN BOURLAND

15 NOV 2018

Exotic flora and tentative 'Afronauts' speak to a sense of alienation, but throughout the artist's work runs a current of optimism



Over the past five years, the multimedia artist Gerald Machona has developed a range of projects that elaborate the material and thematic tropes of Afrofuturism. While recent films such as *Black Panther* (2018) elaborate a fusion of ancient technology and visionary utopianism that traces a straight line back to Sun Ra, earlier instances of Afrofuturism emerged in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, when it seemed evident that there was no room in the United States for its black citizenry. For Zimbabwe-born Machona, the afro-utopia is still a distant dream. Instead, he envisions a present animated by what is now termed 'afropessimism', and what he himself dubs 'afrophobia', as in the series of photographs 'Love in the Time of Afrophobia' (2016).



Gerald Machona, *Ndiri Afronaut (I am an Afronaut)*, 2012, decommissioned Zimbabwean Dollar, foam padding, fabric, wood, perspex, rubber, plastic tubing, nylon thread and gold leaf. Courtesy: the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg / Cape Town

Machona moved to Cape Town, South Africa in 2006, where he has honed in on the local manifestations of afrophobia. His early work was driven out of realization that 'there was a need for me to talk about my foreignness and my experience related to the conversation around xenophobia, to create counter-narratives about the identities African foreign nationals were forced to occupy.' The 'Afrophobia' pictures speak to this dissonance in subtle ways, although the images themselves plainly refer to traditions of dowry or bride wealth. A large colour print that centres on Machona and his now partner, dressed sharply in white, apparently on the day of their wedding and standing amid a small herd of cattle. In the case of many southern African societies – Machona identifies as Shona, his partner Zulu – the groom-to-be must come to terms with the parents of the bride, typically by offering heads of livestock. A Holstein skin also appears in *Your*

Silence Will Not Protect You (2018), fully veiling a figure under siege by delicate, richly hued flowers. Taken together, these signs are a codex to Machona's broader practice, with its various investigations of exchange across borders real and imagined – or, more precisely, the ways in which value itself is always unstable, always a site of negotiation and contestation.



Gerald Machona & Sethembile Msezane, *Love in a time of Afrophobia II*, 2016, Epson hot press on perspex with gold gilded frame, framed: 137 x 189 x 3cm

Chinese firms have been purchasing large tracts of land in Southern Africa in search of precious metals and rare earth minerals, even as young Africans conduct clandestine extractions of their own – a theme Machona explores in his filmic depictions of hard-scrabble illegal gold mining in Zimbabwe, and, more abstractly, in wall-mounted compositions like *What Lies Beneath the Land* (2018), a subterranean maze of gold, like a gilded ant farm, that has been carefully assembled through the folding and treating of decommissioned bank notes. In Zimbabwe, long riven by hyperinflation, the quest for metals is the only rational response to an economy where money is scarcely worth the paper on which it is printed. It is also Machona's primary sculptural medium, and he bends and weaves it like a textile, as in the series of 'Afronaut' space suits composed of the bank notes (complete with blacked-out bell jar helmets) that he produced in 2012 and donned in a series of filmed performances, plodding through city streets as if in a hazmat crew.

Vignettes from this video also depict this alien explorer collecting specimens in the landscape of the Western Cape, including what appears to be a fragile desert flower.



Gerald Machona, *Poinciana (Madagascar)*, 2018, glass, copper and decommissioned currency, 50 x 15 x 15 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg / Cape Town

The protea, now a South African emblem, once carpeted the Western Cape, where it was often uprooted to clear arable acreage. In 1976, it was adopted as a symbol of collective identity during a nadir in the country's internal and external relations. In 'Greener Pastures', Machona's recent exhibition at the Goodman Gallery in Cape Town, such flowers – which, like his 'Afronaut' suits, he folds and assembles from respective currencies – appear in bouquets placed under bell jars and in found vases with Ikebana precision. *7 Colonial Powers* (2018) assembles the national flowers of European states (fashioned from each country's own paper currency) that divided the

African continent into colonial spoils in the winter of 1884–85, while the blooms in *BRICS* (2018) represent 21st century economies that operate as neo-colonial powers, and – in the case of China – have a substantial domestic population of African-born workers. As South Africa reckons with post-apartheid equity, urban areas such as Johannesburg with large immigrant populations from other parts of Africa are suffering a surge of reactionary xenophobia, which has spilled over into violence. Machona's exotic flora and tentative 'Afronauts' speak to a sense of danger and alienation, even among communities that share a colonial history and whose fates have long been intertwined.



Gerald Machona, *Survive*, 2018, video still. Courtesy: the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg / Cape Town

As Machona told me recently, the antidote is a praxis built on afrophilia, the 'love of African cultures, people, and diaspora.' Certainly, there is a current of optimism throughout his work: new relationships are forged, tradition and memory are renegotiated, trauma is balanced by regeneration, and even the Afronaut ultimately removes his helmet and disappears into the crowd. Other works, such as *Cannabis Sativa (Stateless Immigrants)* (2017), suggest human colonization of extra-terrestrial surfaces, places where different sorts of flowers – in this case, medicinal cannabis – can be cultivated and flourish. Ultimately, for him, 'decolonization is not necessarily erasing or getting rid of colonial thinking but finding newer ways of thinking not fixed in our legacies. What are you able to create to help us move away from these toxic ways of thinking we've inherited?'

Main image: Gerald Machona, Untitled (Influx III) (Triptych), 2016. Thumbnail image: Gerald Machona, Live long and prosper (detail), 2018, Epson hot press on perspex, 1.2 x 1.2 m. Courtesy: the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg / Cape Town

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