

ATHI-PATRA RUGA: OF GODS, RAINBOWS AND OMISSIONS

EXTENDED GUIDE

ROOM ONE

The first room of the exhibition consists of seven selected artworks from Athi-Patra Ruga's series *The Future White Women of Azania* (2012 - 15). Throughout his career Ruga has created avatars to inhabit, through which he feels empowered to confront social and political injustices. These characters enable Ruga to make artworks about subjects he could not otherwise find ways to address.

The avatar of *The Future White Woman* stands at the centre of the series displayed in this room. Cocooned in multicoloured balloons, the race, biological sex and gender of this character remains ambiguous; a universal figure despite their title, one chosen on the basis of otherness by the artist - who identifies as a black man.

The Future White Women are the 'first citizens' of Azania, the surreal and richly detailed realm of the artist's imagination. This territory is a safe space where Ruga can playfully challenge and question the conventions of the real world through performance, videos, photographs and handwoven tapestries. It is here that he questions categories of identity such as nationality, race, gender, sexuality, masculinity and femininity, to highlight the traumas and injustices of their misuse and abuse.

For anti-apartheid activists of the 20th century 'Azania' was an alternative South Africa, based on equality and sameness rather than difference, a nation for which to strive for. Ruga's Azania offers a utopia in the tradition of allegorical social commentary, interrogating the construction of the post-apartheid nation state and the veracity of Archbishop Desmond Tutu's description of South Africa as 'The Rainbow Nation', a phrase intended to encapsulate a national unity and equality, instead of division across society.

The name Azania originally emerged in the Greco-Roman world in reference to the semi-mythical lands of East Africa. It is here that Ruga situates his Azania in

the map *The Lands of Azania (2014-2094)*. With regions suggestive of current politics and biblical sin, it appears far from a nation of harmony and peace. In the heraldic device found in the tapestry *Azania in Waiting 2008-2009* the German motto 'Nihil Reich' or 'no realm' attests to the fantastical nature of utopia, the literal translation from Greek of the word being 'nowhere' or 'no place'. Here the Future White Woman is accompanied by a sabre-toothed zebra, the improbable hybrid that serves as the national animal of Ruga's Azania.

These ferocious creatures are encountered throughout the series and feature prominently in the large tapestry *Convention... Procession... Elevation*, where the Future White Women sit astride them. Foregrounded in the scene is The Versatile Queen Ivy, current absolute monarch in a long non-dynastic line of versatile queens of Azania, an avatar Ruga describes as a mash up of Rihanna and Lady Godiva.

The origins and complexities of Azania's matriarchal society are explained in depth through Ruga's narration of the film *Public Service Announcement*, a state sanctioned broadcast.

Elsewhere, in the photograph *Miss Azania 2019* we encounter uZuko, Azania's beauty pageant queen, posing in a cane chair and surrounded by shrouded figures, the mysterious and highly respected coven of the Abodade who choose and mentor Azania's versatile queens.

The tableaux photograph *Night of the Long Knives I* depicts The Future White Woman in formal procession, saddled upon a sabre-toothed zebra and accompanied by the Abodade. The title of the work refers to the apartheid era myth that predicted violent insurrection by the black majority at the abolition of the system.

In *A Vigil for Mayibuye* three Future White Women are seated amongst dense, gilded foliage. They are gathered in watchful observance over those migrants on the move within Africa and around the world. *Mayibuye* is a Xhosa word that means "to return" or to "urge something to come back".

ROOM 2

The second room presents seven artworks from Athi-Patra Ruga's series *Queens in Exile* (2015-17).

The series is a continuation of the artist's Azanian Saga. It follows the exile of his avatar The Versatile Queen Ivy from Azania and her journey across the oceans to found New Azania, a truly ideal land, free from the exclusionary systems and narratives that beset Old Azania; a place where the value and agency of all individuals - past and present - is recognised.

This series takes the idea of exile as a political ban from one's homeland but also as a metaphor for exclusion. Referencing figures from South African history such as Sarah Baartman, the Xhosa prophetess Nongqawuse, reverend and composer Tiyo Soga, pop singer Brenda Fassie, activist Simon Nkoli and Ruga's own grandmother; he highlights those who are often omitted from public memory, commemorating queer and female histories.

In the tapestry *The Glamoring of the Versatile Ivy* the Versatile Queen is depicted before exile. A powerful figure, she is seated and dressed in armour as if for battle, accompanied by the disrobed figure of The Elder of Azania. This avatar is the storyteller and diviner of the future of Azania, his presence a premonition of great change. The Elder (modelled here by Ruga) is the only man in Azanian society, held in captivity by the Future White Women as a living reminder of patriarchy. In his time in Azania his body has transformed, feminising and maternalising in unity and fellowship with his captors.

In *Selfie of a Walking Wound* Ruga introduces the avatar of the Walking Wound, a character wrapped in linen bandages who represents the unresolved traumas of past injustices - and the erasure of those histories that exist in parallel to the dominant structures and systems. The Walking Wound's face is a canvas onto which others are projected and remembered. Here, The Walking Wound bears the features of The Versatile Queen Ivy, doomed to exile.

The tapestry *Escape to the End of History* depicts the long and tortuous route into Terra Incognita undertaken by The Versatile Queen and the unknown nations and peoples she encounters. As also displayed in *The Lands of Azania*, Ruga's map making only gives loose reference to Western constructs of time and space. His cartography re-shapes and re-names land and oceans, collapsing chronologies in order to highlight the oppressive nature of colonialism.

In *Inganya Indoda Kum* The Walking Wound, in the guise of The Versatile Queen Ivy, is pictured in mid-crossing. She holds the head of The Elder, taken into exile as a momento of Old Azania. *Somagawaza: Queenz Herald* depicts the termination of this journey and The Versatile Queen Ivy's triumphant arrival in New Azania. On arrival this figurehead for the New Azania has transcended their previous form, now bearing the likeness of the artist, seen in the portrait *Versatile Queen: A Transhuman Proposal*.

The film *Over The Rainbow* features Ruga performing as The Versatile Queen Ivy and The Walking Wound. Dressed magnificently in a silk dress adorned with crystals, The Versatile Queen contemplates memorials to exile – among these, a single protea flower, symbolic in the popular imagination with change and hope, and Ruga's grandmother's apartheid era identity pass. Pop Singer Brenda Fassie's lyrics from her 1986 hit 'Weekend Special' features in the sound track – an allusion to the status of contemporary African Art in the West. The Walking Wound is accompanied by a panoply of strange figures and 19th century Xhosa meditation songs composed by Reverend Tiyo Soga. Upon Ruga's face other characters are projected and remembered in an act of repatriation.

ROOM 3

The third room of the exhibition presents works from Ruga's ongoing series *The BEATification of Feral Benga* (2017-), Ruga's monumental tribute to the forgotten Senegalese dancer and queer icon that explores memory, identity and embodied knowledge. A sought-after model of the Harlem Renaissance, who performed alongside Josephine Baker at the *Folies Bergère* in Paris in the 1920s, Benga is canonized by Ruga, in readiness for veneration throughout New Azania – all traces of the man having been banned in Old Azania as compromising the hyper-masculine view of the modern artist. The series is acutely concerned with the performance and consumption through art of African, male queer bodies – past and present.

The heroic sculpture *At the End of the Rainbow We Look Back* depicts Ruga's own body held in one of the poses Feral Benga adopted in a series of homoerotic postcards created for the *Folies Bergère* c.1930. Adorned with crystals, pearls artificial flowers and three female breasts, Benga becomes an embodied icon of reverence for Ruga, redolent of his role as progenitor and provider.

The Body as a Sight for Contemplation depicts Benga undressed and in a seductive and titillating pose, observed by a shadowy Caucasian figure reflected in the mirror behind him. The tapestry suggests an uncomfortable, transactional relationship between the two protagonists.

In the tapestry *Ismanje-Manje and Her Double-Edged Sabre* The Walking Wound poses in the guise of Benga in a 1930 photograph by the New York photographer Carl van Vect, where he holds a primitivist sculptural head. Ismanje-Manje means 'Modern' in the Zulu language. *Votive Portrait of Feral Benga* also originates from a photographic portrait of Benga by van Vect. Pictured in 1937, Benga is untypically in a state of full dress, posing as himself – portrayed as neither eroticised or exoticised.

In *Apparition: Head of a Prophet* Ruga places himself in Benga's clothing, suggesting a connection and embodied understanding between himself and his antecedent. Only Benga's disembodied head is pictured, his and Ruga's bodies having become indistinguishable.