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Kiluanji Kia Henda, *The Last Journey of the Dictator Mussunda N'Zombo Before the Great Extinction (Act V)*, 2017.

Resin and Wonder: Kiluanji Kia Henda's 'In the Days of a Dark Safari'

Kiluanji Kia Henda

By **Tim Leibbrandt**
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It's no fluke that Kiluanji Kia Henda was the recent recipient of the 2017 Frieze Artist Award. There aren't many artists quite so adept at balancing complex investigations into African modernity and postcolonialism with such a wry and acerbic wit. Usually centred on the artist's home country of Angola, Kia Henda's inquiries are multifaceted and considered from a variety of perspectives, traits best encapsulated by previous pieces such as *Balumuka (Ambush)*, *Icarus 13*, and the phenomenal video *Concrete Affection – Zopo Lady*.

While leaving it to the viewer to draw certain conclusions from the rounded and informed discussions that his exhibitions present, it never feels like Kia Henda is passing the buck or eschewing a position. Put another way, he is particularly adept at nailing that elusive Barthesian idea of a *writerly* text (i.e. one that is completed by the viewer/reader's understanding of the work) in a meaningful, insightful and frequently entertaining way.

With 'In the Days of a Dark Safari', Kia Henda turns his focus towards the dual ideas of colonialism and African dictatorships and how these converge on projections of Africa as 'dark continent' and 'paradise lost' respectively. The exhibition is divided between two photographic series and a video work, the latter of which functions as the exhibition's cipher.

The twin photography series outline the exhibition's fundamental positions. *In the Days of a Dark Safari* depicts various museological taxidermy animal dioramas, with the critters covered in black shrouds. Equal parts absurdist and apocalyptic, the shrouds serve to draw attention to the staged

theatricality of the dioramas. They are visual riffs on the colonial idea of *darkness* as per Joseph Conrad: an othering agent which allows separation, distance and a sense of moral justification for all manner of imposed douchebaggery.

Kiluanji Kia Henda, *In the Days of a Dark Safari #1*, 2017. Inkjet print on cotton paper, 93 x 140 cm

The Last Journey of the Dictator Mussunda N'Zombo Before the Great Extinction is Kia Henda's critique on the further devastating effects of African dictatorships. In particular, their tendency towards raising the spectre of colonial legacies to account for their failure to restore an Edenic pre-colonial beforetime. Parodying Mobutu Sese Seko's penchant for donning leopard skin hats (read here as a signifier of ties to this fabled Eden), Kia Henda's dictator is all

bling, pomp and posturing. Cane in tow, he ostentatiously parades the dioramas searching offhandedly for Paradise Lost.

At times threatening to veer into territory well-trodden by Kudzanai Chiurai's *Cabinet* series in 2009, there is a sequential narrative that emerges throughout the photographs, culminating in *Act V* of the *Last Journey* series. Here both streams are conceptually vanquished pointing to the possibility of an ideal decolonial era: both the shroud of *darkness* and the Dictator Mussunda N'Zombo lie perished, mocked by a nearby antelope. Perhaps this is the great extinction to which the title alludes?

The decision to print the *Last Journey* series at 150 x 225 cm wasn't such a hot call. Presumably intended to maximize their impact (and selling price) they are noticeably stretched beyond the limits of their resolution and are chock full of pixellation artefacts. The *Dark Safari* series are printed at a more modest 93 x 140 cm and appear just dandy. Ultimately, both photographic series are lite and witty (and perhaps a bit repetitive), and are elevated and activated by the exceptional video work *Havemos de Voltar (We Shall Return)*.

Kiluanji Kia Henda, *The Last Journey of the Dictator Mussunda N'Zombo Before the Great Extinction (Act II)*, 2017. Inkjet print on cotton paper, 150 x 225 cm

The significance of the taxidermy becomes fully apparent in the video: both the preservation of historical moments and the embalming of animals require that you kill it, drain the blood and replace all viscera with synthetic resin dummies that preserve the surface by eschewing the living organism inside. The result no longer contains a soul but marks a 'demented desire to keep the past alive' (to quote the video's narrator).

Kiluanji Kia Henda, *Havemos de Voltar (We Shall Return)* [Film Still], 2017. Single-channel film, duration: 17'30"

We Shall Return tells the story of Amélia Capomba, a taxidermy sable antelope housed in the halls of an Archive Centre. Dreaming of the forest that lies beyond its dreary walls, Amélia longs for reanimation and escape. She is venerated daily by the museum's curator Mr Baltazar but is also the object of desire for Daniel Jianping, a Chinese businessman who wants to buy her as a decoration for the new nightclub which he has invested in. Her fate becomes tugged between soulless preservation in the purgatory of the Archive Centre or recontextualising as curiosity décor for foreign interests. Amélia of course has other plans involving an escape through a time machine (leading to a truly memorable sequence in the video).

Given these links to time-travel, taxidermy and decontextualized memories, the opportunity to read *We Shall Return* through the lens of Chris Marker's seminal 1962 science fiction short film *La Jetée* is irresistible. As a courtesy, spoilers for both Kia Henda's film and *La Jetée* follow.

Set in a radiation-drenched, post-apocalyptic future Paris, *La Jetée*'s nameless protagonist is a prisoner obsessed with his childhood recollection of a woman's face – and possibly of a man's death – on a jetty in Paris. It is this vivid memory which leads the scientists in the film to believe that he may be able to travel in time in order to change the past and alter their present. The narrative is spread between a beforetime (the peaceful Paris of the jetty memory), a cataclysmic event (World War III), and the shattered aftertime (Paris the irradiated wasteland).

Successfully time travelling on a number of occasions, *La Jetée*'s protagonist decides that he wishes only to remain in the past, escaping one last time to the jetty from his memory. In the film's conclusion, he is assassinated by fascist figures from the future (who have learned time travel from him). In his dying moments, he realizes that the man he saw being shot as a child was in fact his adult self being punished for his insubordination. Marker's multi-layered film is fundamentally a cautionary allegory of how unreliable and destructive idealized memories can be.

These concerns are instructive in accessing the events depicted in Kia Henda's video (and account for the wry reference to Agostinho Neto's titular poem in the video's title). Trapped in the purgatory of the Archive Centre, Amélia the antelope longs for her recollections of a thriving prior-existence in the forest. When she manages to return to the real forest, she is almost immediately shot and presumably

returned to the Archive Centre. For both characters, the return to their significant moment comes with the realization that it is in fact the moment of their death, creating a perpetual time-loop. Their nostalgic desire to return to this memory ultimately leads to the severing of their future.

By incorporating these themes through the video, Kiluanji Kia Henda asserts the devastating effects of longing for decontextualised dead memories, and how this is exploited by the agendas of the colonial, dictatorial and nationalist figures in his photography. Overlaying these complex narratives in an effortlessly accessible and enjoyably absurd presentation, 'In the Days of a Dark Safari'

Chris Marker, *La Jetée* [Film Still], 1962.

turns a incisive critical eye to the volatile muddles of the present with an optimistic glimpse towards a brighter decolonised future.

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