

EXPLORING THE ICEBERG

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IN HER WORKS, THE ARTIST GRADA KILOMBA DEALS WITH THE POST-COLONIAL CONDITION, TRAUMA AND MEMORY. SCHIRN MAG SPOKE TO HER ABOUT ASPECTS OF THE UNCONSCIOUS IN THE WORK OF JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT.

BY CARINA BUKUTS

Although you and Basquiat have different artistic practices, you both have one thing in common: You are both self-taught artists. Did that influence your work in a specific way?

That's a very beautiful question. I think it's a very magical status to be an artist, as you don't have to study to become one. You define yourself as one. Of course, there's a lot of knowledge and theory that is important to the approach, but I think the act of defining yourself as an artist is understanding your work as an artistic practice. When working with art, you are working with the unconscious, with images, associations, metaphors and symbols. Art evolves when you explore very deep down in this iceberg and leave the conscious. You enter this unconscious world and start working with all your memories, visualizations and associations, and how they relate to your social and political world, that's really when you begin to produce artistic work.

It's interesting that you are using terms such as "the unconscious" and "the iceberg," which is a model that goes back to Sigmund Freud. You also studied psychoanalysis yourself.

Yes, that's true. I was born and raised in the periphery of Lisbon where there was a lot of exclusion and poverty, and I was probably

one of the few black girls of the neighborhood who had the privilege of studying. Of course I wanted to do art, but it was important for my parents and the community to study something serious, which I understood. I was very passionate about psychoanalysis, so I studied that, but I very soon realized how one led me to the other.

Psychoanalysis is about the unconscious, and that's what it has in common with art. I started to work with war survivors and then began to write, and from this writing I became interested in storytelling. Finally, I was very interested in the visualization and staging these stories.



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In your lecture performances you create hybrids between academic knowledge and artistic practice. How did you develop this specific art form?

My artistic practice first started with lecture performances, but then I explored other formats such as stage reading, video and audio installations. I find it very fascinating to create hybrid works, and I don't want to work solely in one discipline. Also, when you look at it from a historical perspective and consider all the disciplines that have been created, they mostly objectify people in relation to gender, race and sexuality. There is a very small group of people who can work in these disciplines, so the stories that I want to tell cannot be told in those traditional disciplines. That's why we have the feminist movement, the queer movement or the black movement. They transgress those disciplines. For me, it was very important to break free from that and to explore the performability of theoretical and political texts, for example. They deliver a lot of knowledge, and it's important that this knowledge does not stay in the head but encompasses the whole body.

Talking about delivering knowledge: You also taught as a professor at the Humboldt University in Berlin for several years.

That was a great time! I loved working with my students, but there's one significant memory I also have about this time: Every day when I was going to my office I could see all those busts of white men and thought this is exactly the manifestation of knowledge production in the academia. You can only see the head, and the shoulders holding the head, but you cannot see the body. We are supposed to be disembodied theorists and are supposed to think only with our heads. This is very much reflected in the academy, where you are fixed in one discipline, create an object, that you study, describe and exhibit it. – You become the subject of that object. I saw the statues of these men surrounding me, and I find it pretty symbolic of how violently knowledge can be taught and produced. That's why I find it so urgent to create works that speak their own language. A story tells you how it wants to be told, and not the other way round, and as an artist you explore the embodiment of that story, in its various formats.

And that's also what Basquiat does?

Exactly. He writes when he is supposed to paint and he paints when he is supposed to write. What is supposed to be an object of the kitchen becomes a canvas. Everything is transgressed, and I think this rebellion is part of a process in which one tries to decolonize arts, decolonize the white cube and especially decolonize knowledge. I find that very fascinating and inspiring about his work. He transgresses the formats, the disciplines, the practices, and he creates a disruption in space, where everything seems to be outside its proper place.

This is not a surprise, because Black artists are bringing a narrative that never had a proper place in the 'white cube' before. This act of decolonization is central for me, as an artist. I do not only want to interrupt spaces with narratives that are usually not there; but I also want to have the freedom to explore new hybrid formats which do

not obey the norms of that ‘white cube’, to tell my own story. To tell new stories, we need new artistic languages, and this is something with which the audience can profoundly connect.

Your latest solo exhibition took place at the Goodman Gallery, in Johannesburg. What was it like showing your works, which deal a lot with trauma and post-colonialism, in a city like Johannesburg?

It was very intense and beautiful. It’s so significant, as a black woman artist, as a woman of the diaspora who lives in Europe, to show my work on the African continent. Especially in South Africa which, on the one hand, has a very painful history of oppression, but on the other also a very sophisticated history of liberation and political awareness. So, it seems the exhibition is in immediate dialogue with the audience.

The title of the show was “Speaking the Unspeakable.” What specifically does this refer to?

“Speaking the Unspeakable” was always in my mind when I worked on the show. It became a metaphor for things that we cannot speak about or for things for which we were never given a vocabulary. A history that became unspeakable, because it was erased from spaces, deleted from publications, removed from exhibitions. It’s a metaphor for trauma, for a history that is so dehumanizing that you cannot grasp it into words.

So you have all those different levels of what “unspeakable” can be, and also this very promising idea that chronologically we find ourselves in a time where we have to reinvent everything anew. The vocabulary we have been given is a very oppressive one, with which we cannot tell the stories we want today. We are this generation that has to be very experimental. I feel that we need to invent new images, formats, and words and define everything anew, to speak the unspeakable, because if I follow the traditions of the old disciplines, my story becomes unspoken. So the solo exhibition incorporates all

these ideas of transgressing these norms and exploring subversive narratives.

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That reminds me once again of Freud. After experimenting with different methods he came up with “the couch”: Freud would ask a patient to lie down, and by avoiding eye contact with the analyst the patient could speak freely about his feelings, so that the analyst could dig deeper into the unconscious.

Yes, that’s absolutely true. In Europe we sometimes have this dilemma that the audience tends to forget, because they do not have to remember. In the Global South, you remember, because you cannot forget. Freud said that the theory of memory is indeed a theory of forgetting. There is a fundamental difference when I exhibit my work in countries like South Africa and Brazil or in the North. It is a difference between remembering and forgetting.

In Europe the audience can easily visit an exhibition and become disembodied, as if they have nothing to do with its content. It becomes an intellectual choice to engage or not with feminism, queerness or post-colonialism. It is a privilege of not having to remember. I wonder how much of what Jean-Michel Basquiat is, as a Black artist living in a time of post-apartheid, surrounded by police brutality, struggling for representation and resisting isolation... how much the audience remembers when looking at his artworks. Not everybody necessarily feels this urgency, but when you are struggling with misrepresentation and invisibility it becomes more than urgent to engage with that, you cannot forget it, and this is something I also felt when exhibiting in Johannesburg or at the Biennale of São Paulo.

Basquiat was a recognized artist, but he still suffered from everyday racism. How important do you feel his success was for the recognition of African-American artists?

It was and still is very important. Art is not only a space of aesthetics, but also a space of politics. There's always the danger of commodification, the danger that his work becomes used as a caricature of what it is, the danger that his political dimension is erased. But, I look at his work and I see an artistic work that is highly political, an act of decolonization, whereby he is rebelling against fixed and proper disciplines.

Jean-Michel Basquiat embodied this rebellion not only in its artistic practices but also when it came to fashion too. He would wear expensive labels like Armani and paint with them in his studio, mocking the white cube. It's about disturbing places and creating these irritations. This is, for me, at the center of his work. It's so liberating to say that you don't follow that order, and this goes back to your first question. You can study art, but I think this is the one of the few professions where you can proclaim yourself as such, independently of what you have done or studied before. Also, because you can reinvent everything anew.

From 9 till 10 of June 2018 Grada Kilomba's works can be seen at the **10th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art.**

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