In Rezaire’s work, prehistoric West African landmarks stand for enigmas of the past and future.
Most things are better experienced alone. In the lower ground floor of Copenhagen’s Den Frie Centre of Contemporary Art, I am sans loved one, tour guide, fellow gallery-goers, mobile signal or Wi-Fi. French-Guyanese artist Tabita Rezaire’s solo show, ‘Mamelles Ancestrales’, is all of mine. That doesn’t feel like a glutinous thing to say: the way the exhibition has been fashioned – a circle of re-created Senegambian stones and a 40-minute essay film projected on the floor’s centre – makes it feel like something to view alone, unobstructed. Rezaire’s regard for the Senegambian stones, a 750-1000 CE West African landmark protected under the UNESCO World Heritage List, is based on the theory that they are among the earliest examples of prehistoric astronomical observations. Rezaire’s film, Earth Line / Skye Eye, meditates on ‘pace theory, astro-archeology and African cosmological understandings’ – a speculation on the anatomy of the celestial and the powers underpinning an ancient society.
Twelve pillars are illuminated by spotlights. When cross-referenced with images of the real stone circles, Rezaire’s appear more triangular in shape and, also, smoother in texture, perhaps because they are of European derivation. Still, a transcendental mood is summoned when I encounter the reenacted megalithic circle. It feels like an ancestral shrine or a mythical diasporic arena designed for connecting with a bygone civilisation. A series of smouldering questions fogs the space: who made the monuments and why? Were they used as ritualistic burial grounds or, as Rezaire wants to believe, as tools to observe the universe? The film, which feels like an esoteric documentary dressed in Tumblr clothing, takes us through these questions. Specialists contemplate the meaning of the pillars, while also sharing their suspicions on space, time, spiritually and the enigma of death before very screenshot-friendly galactic backdrops. Superimposed atop stills and
clips of a zoomed-in blazing-red sun, earth and asteroids, are interviews with villagers, artists and astronomers.

In one clip, a villager discusses how to interpret the alignment of stars: ‘When we see a group of stars forming a ball in the sky, it marks the rainy season.’ In another clip, a scientist says of the stone circles: ‘I believe the organization could potentially mirror certain constellations.’ These proclamations are human; inevitably slippery in their simplistic understanding of the macrocosm, but cerebral, too, and steeped in research, experience, education and insight. It’s not an easy task to present archaeological methodology as something worthy of recreational viewing, but the ¶lm grips in a way that is redolent of an evening spent in a YouTube ‘related video’ black hole, as the algorithms drag you into the multiplex of a peculiar subject.

Tabita Rezai, Earth Line / Skye Eye, 2019, video still. Courtesy: the artist

Britain’s Stonehenge, Avebury and associated sites have better PR than most African and non-western megaliths, so it’s always good to shift focus from the celebrities to the small-time wonders of the world. But part of the appeal of such phenomena is that they can’t be explained. Earth Line/ Skye Eye’s attempt to set truths in stone is an unresolvable pursuit, but an admittedly spirited adventure, since speculating about the unknown is at the core of human consciousness.
‘Tomorrow’s power requires us to master space and AI,’ an expert declares. The show is as much about prophecy as it is about history. In the age of the hot take, the exhibition’s dedication to deep discovery is refreshing. To describe Rezaire’s marrying of African practices and philosophy with technology and science as Afrofuturistic would be too easy. Why categorize the work of black artists using the few reductive boxes that exist for them? We can put taxonomies aside and simply circle the work until another satellite enters orbit.

*Tabita Rezaire, ‘Mamelles Ancestrales’ runs at Den Frie, Copenhagen, until 18 August 2019*