

## TULI MEKONDJO

Tuli Mekondjo (Angola, b. 1982) is a self-taught Namibian artist who works with embroidery, collage, paint and resin to create powerful works filled with layers of meaning. Drawing on colonial photographic archives and histories of the loss and erasure of Namibian cultural practices, Mekondjo's work explores history and identity politics. Dissatisfied with the dominant narratives about Namibia's past, she examines the country's troubled history in a quest for understanding, healing, and belonging.

UNSETTLED presents the work "Kombada yomeva onda valela / Upon the waters I'm spread out", which was inspired by the appalling events that happened on Shark Island. It was one of the five concentration camps in German South West Africa, where several thousands of Herero and Nama men, women, and children were murdered between 1905 and 1907. In her practice, the artist normally works with archival images of her ancestors. Out of respect for the dignity of the victims of 'Death Island', she has chosen to model herself for this particular work. Tuli Mekondjo thereby channels the pains experienced by her forebearers to share a message of generational trauma. The artist feels a strong connection with the people that died on Shark Island, and explains the title of the work as follows:

"Upon the waters I'm spread out" is in remembrance of the spirits that are roaming and hovering about Shark Island. I kept imagining the unknown souls that are resting beneath the waters around Shark Island, their bodies dismembered and in pieces thrown in their oceanic grave".

The bright red color of the embroidery stands out against the flat photograph transferred to the earth toned canvas, primed with mahangu grain – a food staple of the Aawambo people. The image of a skull refers to the deceased prisoners whose heads were boiled and skinned so their skulls could be sent to German universities for study. The swirly red threads above are a symbol for the prisoners' chains, while also referring to the umbilical cord. It ends in an embroidered placenta, a reference to our conception, time in the womb and the birthing of intergenerational traumas.

With this heavy, unsettling work, Tuli Mekondjo creates a space for healing. She places herself amongst her ancestors, bringing their story in a most humane manner while embodying the traumas she consciously and subconsciously bears. The sensitively painted floral motives in the background pay tribute to her forebears, while also symbolizing fertility and continuity. These plants call on the presence of the ancestors, for their assistance and guidance in the present. With the cotton threads at the bottom of the work, Mekondjo pays homage to the



ancient tradition of jewelry making of the Aawambo people, which she herself learned from her grandmother and wishes to keep alive. Lastly, confronting psychological and emotional wounds, the artist has stitched the canvas back together after having cut it in two. As an act of metaphorical confrontation with an unhealed past and a therapeutic process of healing, Tuli Mekondjo stitches the past and present back together.

Tuli Mekondjo lives and works in Windhoek. Her work has been exhibited at international fairs including 1:54 London, Investec Cape Town Art Fair and AKAA, Paris. She has participated in group shows in France (2020, 2021) and Germany (2022). Mekondjo recently was included in the much-applauded Phaidon publication "African Artists – From 1882 to Now". In 2022, she has been awarded a prestigious fellowship by the DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Program. Tuli Mekondjo is represented by the South African gallery Guns & Rain, who's director Julie Taylor wrote her dissertation on the artist (cf. "History, Gender and 'New Practices of Self': Re-interpreting Namibia's Independence War through the work of Tuli Mekondjo and Helena Uambembe", University of the Witwatersrand, 2021).

#### **SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS**

2019 The Project Room, Namibia

2016 "The Bellowing Mind" Franco-Namibian Cultural Centre, Namibia

#### **SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS**

2022 Investec Vape Town Art Fair, group Show, Guns & Rain, Cape Town

2021 THREADS, Duende Art Projects, Antwerp, Belgium

2021 "Un.e Air.e de Famille", Musée Paul Éluard de Saint Denis, Paris

2021 Frac Nouvelle Aquitaine, MÉCA, France

2021 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair London, UK with Guns & Rain

2021 African Galleries Now, Artsy, with Guns & Rain

2021 "Face-to-face", Traversées Africaines, Galerie Anne de Villepoix, Paris

2020 "The Borders of Memory" with Helena Uambembe, Guns & Rain, Johannesburg

2020 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair, London, with Guns & Rain

2020 ARCO Lisboa, Portugal, Online

2020 Investec Cape Town Art Fair, with Guns & Rain

2019 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair, London, with Guns & Rain

2019 Investec Cape Town Art Fair, NJE Collective

2019 "Suffrage", Women's Group Show, Guns & Rain, Johannesburg



2018 Future Africa Visions in Time, Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies and the Goethe-Institut Namibia  
2018 FNB Joburg Art Fair, NJE Collective  
2016 Collective at the Art Market, Group Show, Budapest

### **EDUCATION & RESIDENCY**

2022 DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Program