

# Kresiah Mukwazhi

## *Ndakangavara*

kaufmann repetto is pleased to announce Kresiah Mukwazhi's first solo exhibition at the gallery, opening concurrently in Milan and New York, presenting two new bodies of work titled *Ndakangavara* and *Nyika irikure nezuva*. Her latest production stems from the artist's research exploring themes of gender, exploitation, and colonialism, with a particular focus on the power of the patriarchal gaze and the woman's body in contemporary Africa.

Mukwazhi's engagement with marginalized communities, particularly femme sex workers in Harare, Zimbabwe, informs much of her work. For the past decade, she's addressed issues of gender-based violence while simultaneously channeling and celebrating feminine energy to reclaim women's rights and sexual freedom.

The exhibition in Milan titled *Ndakangavara* - a Shona expression which translates to "I am glowing" - is inspired by the complexities of identity and the concept of transformation, with a particular focus on how women navigate societal expectations in a world that often misjudges them. Quite a common phrase amongst women in Mukwazhi's immediate society, *Ndakangavara* is used to describe a life changing for the better, "to experience positive change" as the artist puts it, but has become increasingly more associated to the practice of skin bleaching and its damaging effects. The "glow" has recently evolved from a spiritual and metaphysical enlightenment, to a literal whitening of the body, in an attempt to adapt to non-black conventional beauty standards. For decades, the import of the Global North's ways and lifestyle has harmed the struggle for self-empowerment that women have to face in African culture, on top of the pressures already deeply rooted within its male-dominated community.

Fostered by patriarchal cultures, traditions, and belief systems, social control over women's bodies extends to expectations regarding behavior and dress codes. In Zimbabwe, the display of women's underwear holds significant meaning, usually considered controversial or even taboo when worn in a revealing manner - the wearer is judged based on concepts of purity and eligibility. Mukwazhi faces this misogynistic narrative by engaging directly with these culturally charged objects. She works with hundreds of secondhand used bras sourced from charity donations, often smuggled to be resold illegally within her own country, carefully deconstructing each piece before stitching and stretching the straps over frames. The resulting artwork reflects the many women whose bodies have worn these garments, carrying the traces of their past owners - both physically and energetically - also serving as a tribute to the countless women who have lost their lives to violence.

For Mukwazhi, however, *Ndakangavara* is a body of work created to highlight the unexpected beauty found in what would otherwise be unfortunate realities, re-defining and re-appropriating the word, tracing it back to the original meaning of positive change, expanding it to an anti-capitalist, anti-colonial and anti-patriarchal perspective. Throughout her life, Kresiah Mukwazhi has consistently

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fought to break the taboos that hang over the people of her homeland, through videos, performances and paintings, with an enormous bravery and commitment. This effort is conveyed in the authentic form of Mukwazhi's art, materialising her personal experiences in her work. Her large textile collages like *Unsupervised* and *Nyika yenyama nemweya (The Universe of Flesh and Spirit)* are created from scavenged materials found in local flea markets and second hand stores, piecing together typically feminine apparel and lingerie: cheap, synthetic, brightly coloured fabrics, often printed with tiger and leopard patterns, or trimmed with lace and tinsel. It's the garments one would encounter in Harare's bars and streets, carrying the intimate lives of the women who wore them, telling the stories of women mercilessly exposed to the sex trade without any protection or rules since early age, yet still finding a way and reason to "glow" through their own resilience.

The female body itself thus becomes both a haunting curse that bears the scars of abuse and exploitation, and a powerful blessing towards emancipation and self-determination once its energy and sexuality are embraced. Mukwazhi chooses to acknowledge the former, but especially focuses on the latter. The women portrayed in her canvases lay in daring poses, at times naked, intertwined in acts of soft eroticism, or wearing instruments for battle like the boxing glove in *The unrest of Movado*. All of her works ultimately carry a spontaneously positive spirit, upholding the female body - her own, first and foremost - as a site for resistance and as the host for a sacred power that women are destined to wield.

Kresiah Mukwazhi was born in 1992 in Harare, Zimbabwe, where she currently lives and works. She has been the subject of several international exhibitions, including: Nottingham Contemporary (2023); Secession, Vienna (2023); Zimbabwean Pavilion, 59th Venice Biennial (2022); Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg (2022); South African National Gallery, Cape Town (2020); Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (MOCAA), Cape Town (2019); SAVVY Contemporary, Berlin (2017); The National Gallery of Zimbabwe, Bulawayo (2016), among others. Her monumental bra strap mural is currently shown at Museum Ludwig, Cologne, as part of the fourth iteration of the Schultze Projects curated by Yilmaz Dziewior.