

WITNESS: AFRO PERSPECTIVES

by Federica Barrios Carbonell



Above: Nobukho Nqaba, *Untitled*; Following spread: Carlos Martiel, *Mediterraneo*. Courtesy El Espacio 23 & the Artist.

Witness: Afro Perspectives is an exhibition curated by Tandazani Dhlakama from Zimbabwe. With over 100 works by African and African Diasporic artists, the show highlights prevalent social issues—including systematic oppression, intergenerational trauma, syncretism, identity, and territory—in terms of the conceit and the role of the witness in situations of discrimination and marginalization. An impressive and inspiring way to kick off Miami Art Week, evocative pieces, including works by Tony Gum, Nobukho Nqaba, and many others, fill the walls of the space.

In this exhibition, visitors come to assume the role of the witness, each member of the audience made into a bystander as they encounter the various works, which introduces a double layer of significance to the dynamic of experiencing the show. Thus, each artist's unique perspective reorganizes the consequences of what it means to witness, and to be a witness.

Through his performance pieces, Carlos Martiel offers a deep perspective on the hardships experienced by members of the LGBTQ+ and immigrant communities. One of his two exhibited works is a video performance, *Mediterráneo* (2017), in which the artist lies in a clear box filled with water. In this context, he is spectated and closely examined by a group of white people. Through this performative act, *Mediterráneo* (2017), explores the experience that marginalized groups have of being constantly watched, and thereby othered by society. The dynamic evoked in this piece brings to light the role of the witness as the passive bystander in this process of observation and othering. It is the very act of witnessing that others the members of these marginalized communities.

South African artist Mikhael Subotzky focuses on the nexus of culture and justice, dealing with binaries such as social perception and personal reality, and the discrepancies that such a dynamic generates in the eyes of the public. In his photograph *Sunday Service*, Subotzky captures a decisive moment during the height of group prayer in a worn-down prison setting. Every man in the room is a person of color, signaling the deeply problematic and troubling ways social institutions regard race. And *Sunday Service* thereby humanizes a group of people that society's witnessing role has traditionally rendered subhuman. It serves to restructure and reclaim the function of the witnessing dynamic in what becomes the second stage of a two-stage process. The first stage of witnessing renders these people subhuman, by virtue of othering them, while Subotzky's work itself, as an example of second-stage witnessing, rehumanizes them in the very same process, but by applying it a second time in the context of artistic expression.

Tony Gum's work is inspired by Xhosa traditions and ritual ceremonies, such as *intonjane*, which are performed as rites of passage in certain transformative moments of a woman's life, such as marriage or motherhood. In her photographic self-portraits, Gum places herself in the shoes of a young girl who evolves physically and spiritually throughout the various life stages delimited by her native culture. Simultaneously, she exposes the historical events that shaped society's perception of the Black woman. By juxtaposing *intonjane* with stereotypically western practices, Gum invites questions about the cultural

stigmas towards young women. *Spilt Milk (Milk in Africa)* shows the artist with a traditional head wrap and white paint portraying a breast spilling over with milk. These visual elements bring our attention to white people's historical use of Black women to perform tasks like breastfeeding the children of their captors. It is thereby, in a single frame, able to narrate an archetypal story from the long and troubling history of the Black woman in Western culture. The witness, in this case, is exposed to an outdated narrative that should not persist, and the role of witness thereby assumes an aspect of responsibility that the viewer did not necessarily have prior to subsuming that role.

Unlike the other artists in the exhibition, Nobukho Nqaba uses the symbolism of her materials themselves to portray the hardships of a working-class African family. *Untitled* portrays a woman facing away from the camera in a bare, white space. Her identity is concealed entirely by bags made from repurposed blankets and overalls, materials that commonly get recycled in poor communities to create new items at no additional monetary cost. The heels she wears are made from the same textiles as the bags, showing how such materials are repurposed for utilitarian reasons, as well as aesthetic and performative reasons. They represent her circumstances and the demands placed upon her by those circumstances, illustrating the uncertainty of constantly having to seek comfort and security against adversity, and the unwillingness to sacrifice dignity. She performs her sense of dignity as well as her aesthetic sense through her

recycled heels, while simultaneously struggling to carry her burdensome belongings. This demand is placed upon her by the ever-expanding world of the occidental norms of the witness. But in this perseverance, we see how the performance of dignity is ultimately transformed into the actualization of dignity and how performance itself can therefore become cathartic.

Performativity can take many shapes. An artistic performance may be theatrical or physical, but from the



nature of these works, and the dynamic introduced by their treatment of the witness, we see how even a single image can come to embody all that is contained within the more narrow notion of performance.

The exhibition has been running since December of 2020 and will remain up for viewing throughout the spring of 2022 at El Espacio 23 in Miami, Florida. El Espacio 23 is a contemporary art space founded by well-known Miami art collector and philanthropist Jorge M. Pérez.



Above: Clockwise from top: Mary Sibande, *A terrible beast*; Tony Gum, *Spilt Milk (Milked in Africa)*; Kudzanai Chiurai, *We Live in Silence VI*; Sue Williamson, *That particular morning*; Mikhael Subotzky, *Sunday Service, Beaufort West Prison, 2006*;
Opposite: Nobukho Nqaba, *Untitled*, Courtesy El Espacio 23 & the Artist.