

Lungiswa Gqunta | *Sleep in Witness*

We are proud to present our first solo show *Sleep in Witness* by Lungiswa Gqunta (b. 1990) at AKINCI. Gqunta is a sculptor living in Cape Town, South Africa, who works across assemblages, installation, performance and printmaking. The exhibition traces the intangible world of dreams as a space of learning where extraordinary, overlooked and discredited places of knowledge are illuminated. This is reflected in the installations belonging to *Zinodaka*, 2022 and to *Ntabamanzi*, 2022, the mesmerizing video work *Rolling Mountains Dream*, 2021, as well as the textile works *Instigation in waiting I & II*, 2023. A large part of the installation *Ntabamanzi* can be seen this summer in the exhibition *New Horizons* at the Centraal Museum, Utrecht.

'I like to create environments' Lungiswa Gqunta states in an interview that was conducted for the occasion of her eponymous solo show *Sleep in Witness* at the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds last year. When visiting one of her shows, it becomes clear what she means. Gqunta transforms a room so that beauty and violence exist simultaneously and history meets the present.

The artist examines the enclosures imposed upon African knowledge systems and sees this deprivation as a symptom of colonial history and conquest. In spite of this, dream worlds, ancestral faith and other belief systems became places where there is room to preserve, guard and create new languages and wisdom. In *Sleep in Witness*, this intangible world becomes visible.

The exhibition opens with *Zinodaka*, an installation that considers the faith and belief systems of Black ancestors as spaces of knowledge and information. Its floor of cracked clay and sand is proof of something living, not necessarily human but something ancient. It investigates how soil interacts with people, how it changes form under people's weight, how certain paths emerge. This landscape, along with glass rocks that appear like water, offer an appeal to consider sources of knowledge that have often disappeared, been cast aside or discredited as non-existent.

One of the cruel legacies of the apartheid regime is the criminalisation of Black aquatic spiritual practices and the curtailment of water-based ways of acquiring knowledge in South Africa. Throughout history, the ocean shifted from being a space for cleansing and healing to a geographical location. *Ntabamanzi* is not a reaction to this brutality, but rather a display of a new consciousness and alterity — a state of being different or other — that exists in spite of this historical wound. Made from barbed wire wrapped in fabric, the wall piece *Plant Study II* engages with the gallery like a drawing with wave-like forms. Wire has dual properties and is a familiar material to Gqunta. In her childhood it was found around the house, it was part of a home. She remembers how laundry was draped on the wire to dry. At the same time, razor wire is a very harsh material that is used to demarcate a space, to create exclusive spaces that keep certain people out and keep other people in.

Gqunta positions dreams as a response to the enclosures imposed upon African knowledge systems and a space from which new knowledge for living emerge. She explains how she dreamt about a giant wave, like a tsunami, that she could walk through as if you were walking through mountains. This dream kept coming back and is an inspiration for much of her work in this exhibition. As is the case for the video work *Rolling Mountains Dream*.

"Between the rolling mountains and the riverbeds lies a place of healing and remembering. With the body rolling through the land trying to remember while in a dream, the river offers a place of pause and healing to the body and its continuous labour. These bodies of water that exist as a river and a bath with healing qualities in the form of oils and or plants are there to create a presence of calmness within the space and a moment of stillness for the viewer. This multi-sensory landscape is a look into the labour of remembering in a place that is intangible and continuously evolving."

The two textile wall hangings *Instigation in waiting I & II* were made during a residency in Dumbarton Oaks, Washington DC where her fascination was seized by an abandoned greenhouse. Only a few Aloe plants were left, clinging strongly to what was there, unwilling to move. The work reflects Gqunta's thought process during this time. For greenhouses and botanical gardens, plants are removed from their natural habitat and people, to be controlled and possessed by their conqueror. This is another way in which the colonial past reveals itself.

Much can be read in the title *Sleep in Witness*. You don't have to be awake to witness things. We sleep to acquire knowledge and the world of dreams can be a fruitful source. It also refers to a silent witness embodied as water being the archive of a persisting collective grief. This exhibition invites you to think about our individual and collective presence in this space as a potential moment of reinvention.

The exhibition text is based on the original text by Nombuso Mathibela for *Sleep in Witness* at the Henry Moore Institute.

Lungiswa Gqunta (1990, Port Elizabeth) is a visual artist working in performance, printmaking, sculpture and installation. From 2019-2021, Gqunta was in residence at the Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten in Amsterdam. Gqunta has also obtained her undergraduate degree at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in 2012 and her MFA at the Michaelis School of Fine Arts in Cape Town in 2017. In addition to her practice, Gqunta is one of the founding members of iQhiya, with whom she participated in Documenta 14 and Glasgow International.

Recently, Gqunta has had a solo exhibition at the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, UK (2022) and at the Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main, DE (2021). Recent group exhibitions have been at Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin, IT (2023); Liverpool Biennale (2023); Centraal Museum Utrecht, NL (2023); Palais de Tokyo, Paris, FR (2021), Centraal Museum Utrecht, NL (2021 – 2022) and Marres House for Contemporary Culture, Maastricht, NL (2021).

She has participated in the Manifesta 12 (2018) and the 15th Istanbul Biennial (2017) and has also been included in the group exhibition 'Not a Single Story II' at the Wanas Konst Museum in Sweden. She has been actively involved in the South African art scene, having exhibited with both the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary African Art and the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG), as well as held two solo exhibitions, Qwitha (2018) and Qokobe (2016), with WHATIFTHEWORLD gallery in Cape Town, SA. In 2019, AKINCI presented both her installations 'Feet under Fire' and 'Sleeping Pools' within the exhibition 'Heroines Now' (2019).

Her work forms part of the public collections of the MMK Frankfurt, Kunsthal Zurich, Centraal Museum Utrecht, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, The University of Cape Town and Zeitz MOCAA.