

Sabrina Amrani is delighted to present *Kpodjito*, the second solo exhibition of Ishola Akpo at the gallery.



Kpodjito means “She Who Birthed the Leopard”, it is the traditional Fongbe word for the title known as “the Queen Mother”. Ishola Akpo’s practice have been exposing for many years the issues around the female figure. Women are implicit in the process of building traditional and contemporary societies in the spiritual, political, military and economic spheres. Nevertheless, they are regularly ousted and/or under-represented within collective memories. This exhibition is an homage to all women and their power, especially to those who have remained anonymous until today. By creating a space for dialogue and relationship between the singularities of contemporary women, and embodying these women of stature, Akpo questions the amnesic dimensions of official histories.

Akpo’s interest for the female figure and its representation starts initially with the revision of his family history, through the stories told by his grandmother, an intimate conversation that led him to develop later a body of work titled “Agbara Women”, which is part of the show. This body of work consists of a series of staged portraits of women dressed as African queens. Ishola subtly introduces in these portraits references to the colonization of the continent, as in the photograph “Akin V” that represents the Queen Njinga of Angola, wearing a Yoruba crown and sustaining in her hand an axe. The axe is a sculpture made in clay, produced in Vienna (Austria), as a reference to the French-Austrian queen Marie-Antoinette, recalling the influence of Europe on the queens and kings of the African continent. The works in the series “Agbara Women” serve as a symbol of both the resistance and the fragility of power.

Inspired by the figure of a forgotten queen of the Kingdom of Danxomè named Tassi Hangbé, the artist explores the reflection on the partial and biased dimensions of History. The energy deployed to silence the story of this emblematic figure, and her relationship with the Amazons - an exclusively female armed body - raises questions. The artist then explores, in the same movement, the memories and the heritage of African queens – Njinga (Kingdom of Ndongo and Matamba - Angola), Yalla Ndaté (Kingdom of Waalo - Senegal), Yaa Asantewaa (Ejidsu Kingdom of 'Ashanti Empire - Ghana). «In this dynamic, I am engaged in a research work of archives, considered as historical, imaginary and aesthetic resources. The invocation and linking of historical and memorial, real and fictional fragments draw the contours of a subjective and inclusive story. This project is thought of as a body of work in perpetual motion», the artist says.

Akpo also presents in this exhibition his latest body of work "Traces of a Queen", a series of collages which backgrounds are engravings from the 19th century, found in the archives gathered by the Fondation Zinsou (Benin). These historical materials were commissioned by the French press (Le Petit Journal) and published between 1890 and 1894, with the objective to illustrate the conquest of the Kingdom of Dahomey. Ishola Akpo manipulates these archives, by sewing onto the surface, with red and golden threads, the portrait of contemporary women. Akpo deliberately leaves the king or powerful men originally represented in the shadow. The artist alters the narrative and gives back to the women their position at the center of the History.

Ishola Akpo (b. 1983 in Yopougon, Ivory Coast) is a Beninese visual artist who lives and works in Cotonou (Benin). The artist experiments with the possibilities of digital mediums, while mixing modernities and traditions in his work, playing on different levels of reading to make plural metaphors. The border between reality and fiction, fixed identities and multiple identities, remains at the heart of his approach. Concurrently to the exhibition in Madrid, Ishola Akpo is representing his country at the 60th Venice Biennale, in the National Pavilion of Benin, for which he created a woven tapestry titled "iyálóde".

Kpodjito

Ishola Akpo

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