

Art does not need another hero

This year's Berlin Biennale poses important questions about otherness, power, violence and patriarchy.

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2018's biennale is an intimate affair, with just 46 artists and five venues [10th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art]

What would European and North American collections look like if institutions, curators, and acquisitions committees did not have myopic visions? This year's Berlin Biennale, titled *We Don't Need Another Hero* (referencing Tina Turner's iconic anthem), gives audiences a glimpse into what that might look like.

The Biennale's title reminds us that there is no need for a saviour to "correct" or redirect how we see art, and who we see in art. Artists from the global south have long been producing aesthetically and technically remarkable and politically astute work; this is just Germany's chance to host it.

Gabi Ngcobo, the current Biennale curator, and her team of co-curators - Yvette Mutumba, Nomaduma Rosa Masilela, Moses Serubiri, and Thiago de Paula Souza - stressed that the works in this biennale should not be read solely via the lens of post-coloniality or race and identity politics.

This is clearly not a loud, "[Empire Strikes Back](#)" kind of exhibition. Nothing about this biennale seems defensive or finds it necessary to demonstrate its worth. It is the position of strength that Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka articulated, back in the 1960s, by saying: "A tiger doesn't proclaim its tigrity." "



Curatorial team of the 10th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art (left to right): Thiago de Paula Souza, Gabi Ngcobo, Nomaduma Rosa Masilela, Yvette Mutumba, Serubiri Moses [F Anthea Schaap/Berlin Biennale]

But the curators recognised that they will have to guide the audience away from reading the artists and their works in a reductive manner. This desire is apparent in the team's curatorial statement, which positions the Biennale as a "conversation with artists and contributors who think and act beyond art as they confront the incessant anxieties perpetuated by a wilful disregard for complex subjectivities."

This term, "complex subjectivities", signals towards the fact that we are assigned a reductive, racial identity only because this is the prevailing and dominant way of categorising people in the geopolitical west. This is why we have all been taught the politics and ideology of race.

When we move about in different geographical and socio-political milieus, our persons may be read and positioned differently. We may even have the opportunity, if the host society is going through a generous moment, to offer a more complex reading of the self - a reading we may be able to negotiate, challenge, and use to change our own self-view as well, given the intellectual, aesthetic, conceptual, and conversational material.

The 2018 Biennale is an intimate affair, with just 46 artists and five venues, most works housed in three main homes: Akademie der Künste (ADK) in Berlin-Tiergarten, KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin-Mitte and the Center for Art and Urbanistics (ZK/U) in Berlin-Moabit.

The Biennale gives installations remarkable amounts of space. By not overcrowding artworks, it gives audiences time and space to contemplate. The artists' origins, or the list of nation states to which they owe allegiance, is not mentioned on artwork labels.

This allows one to engage with the work, rather than attach it to one's preconceived notions about the identity of the artist.

Ngcobo made a strong choice in spending the show's €3 million (\$3.5m) budget on 30 new commissions, including several short films that debuted during the BIennale's opening week.

The strength of those original works is juxtaposed with works of artists who have passed away, including the powerful works of the late Cuban-born artists Belkis Ayon and Ana Mendieta and South African Gabisile Nkosi, who was killed by her former partner.

The army of a megalomaniac

At ADK, Firelei Baez's works greet visitors as they enter the exhibition rooms. The two large acrylic guache-on-paper works depicting individual soldiers and armies, their green and brown khaki fading into sun-bleached, apparently empty landscapes.

One of the larger works, "Index (given the ground one has to actively look away)" shows, in the foreground, a soldier with his back turned to observers, pointing a curved sabre - a grim reaper's scythe, positioned in the stylised fencer's pose - towards a shadowy set of silhouettes in the distance.

They, over there, are an unidentifiable mass of an inconvenient other, in a valley adjacent to mountains, which may, in fact, be a city of tents created for the displaced. The soldier's back is erupting in glowing flames, oranges and yellows, and spewing a cloud of thick smoke that rises to the left of his body.

It reminds us of the images of oil wells set on fire as the Iraqi army disintegrated and retreated when US and allied forces attacked them in 1990. But there are no identification marks on the soldier to align him with a particular nation; his back is turned to us, so we cannot recognise him by face.

The trim on his uniform and the washed out, mottled greens and browns of the uniforms and helmets on the figures in an adjacent large-scale work tells us that these are men doing the work of some powerful nation and its leaders - it could be any megalomaniac who has sent this army to conquer and access resources, convinced that he is in the right.

Cautionary tales on violent patriarchy

In one of the largest rooms of ADK, La Consagracion I, II, III (1991) - an impressive black, white, and grey-scale triptych of collagraphy works, akin to altar-pieces - and nine other smaller works by Belkis Ayon are on display.

Ayon tells a story centring on Sikan, the sole female deity in Abakua - an all-male Afro-Cuban religious fraternity. Sikan serves as the origin of power and magic for the Abakua

(having been told their secrets by a mystical fish that she had trapped) who was sentenced to death as punishment for divulging her forbidden knowledge to her fiancé.

It is a mythology that the artist - and atheist - was drawn to, as a tale that rings true for our particular moment in history as well: a powerful woman who is the original translator, channel, and repository of magical powers, but also serves as a cautionary tale about the limits of her power within violent patriarchy, should she threaten its order.



Heba Y Amin's work engages with the violence wrought by patriarchal megalomaniacs, writes Jayawardane [The Master's Tools I, 2018, courtesy Heba Y Amin]

KW Institute for Contemporary Art contains a wealth of paintings, including nine "kangas" by Lubaina Himid, titled *On the Night of the Full Moon* (2018). Himid's kangas are dedicated to poets Audre Lorde, Maud Sulter, and Essex Hemphill, and include brief excerpts from their works.

The lines of text she includes in each of these paintings - the Swahili proverb "much silence has a mighty noise", and the less proverbial statements such as "Don't let loneliness kill us" and "Champagne has ceased to be drunk out of slippers" signal a resigned reflectiveness, as well as a reminder of what is essential for living.

At ZK/U, there is a wealth of video works and mixed media installations by Dineo Seshee Bopape, Heba Y Amin and Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa. There are also 14 works by Tony Cokes. Each one of these works is worthy of deep engagement, and more than one viewing. They reveal layers to the narrative that the respective artist has embedded, using technology, text, and experimental visuals.

Bopape's film, which did not yet have a title at the time of screening, is one of the most powerful, moving works at the Biennale. It is based loosely on the court transcripts of a 2005 rape trial, "*Khwezi vs J Z*", where a woman we then only knew as "Khwezi" (an alias for Fezekile Ntsukela Kuzwayo), took the then-vice president (and later president) of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, to court, charging him with rape.

Zuma was acquitted in 2006, after claiming the sex had been consensual. In the aftermath of the trial, Khwezi faced such horrific threats from Zuma's supporters that

she was forced to seek asylum in the Netherlands. She died from HIV complications in 2016. The script of Bopape's stylised film is based loosely on the statements each person made on the dock.

It begins with two people in conversation, seated on opposite ends of a sofa, with the elder man (Bopape cast a grey-haired white man with craggy features) asking the young woman (Khwezi) odd and sometimes greasy questions, which make her confused and increasingly uncomfortable.

But he follows those untoward comments with, "I knew your father," and says that he regards her as a "daughter", and we see Khwezi relax. Much of the sound is sped up or slowed down dramatically so that his voice either sounds like a cartoon squeak (we think this is a ridiculous, embarrassing uncle), or an ominous, deep-throated monstrosity (we realise that such uncles are not as funny and innocent as they may seem).

The sound and visual distortions also mimic the ways in which events during a violent encounter are often difficult to decipher and at times misrepresented. The last frames of Bopape's film show Khwezi alone, wearing the "khanga" or cloth wrap that she had on the night of the assault - which Zuma claimed, at the trial, was an invitation to sex, despite the fact that she had told him that she was not interested in men, and was a lesbian.



In one of the largest rooms of ADK, La Consagracion I, II, III (1991) - an impressive black, white, and grey-scale triptych of collagraphy works, akin to altar-pieces - and nine other smaller works by Belkis Ayon are on display. [Belkis Ayon, installation view, 10th Berlin Biennale, ADK/Timo Ohler]

In the last frames, we see her making breaststroke motions with her arms, as though she is pushing through a thick, viscous, resistant mire. Her face has a blank expression; it is neither determined to reach a shore (there is none) nor passive.

She merely looks resigned to this labour. What is certain is that she is utterly alone. Bopape's film - though referencing events specific to South Africa - traces the ways in which those who find the courage to expose the nation's most beloved constructs or powerful figures as a lie, are violated, silenced and ultimately ejected from the nation's narrative.

Heba Y Amin's work also engages with the violence wrought by patriarchal megalomaniacs, all in the name of the nation - but in a more playful way, which nonetheless reveals the violence of those actions.

In her installation Operation Sunken Sea (2018), Amin references grandiose, unrealised plans devised by the German architect Herman Sorgel in the 1920s to drain the Mediterranean and connect Europe with Africa.

Amin says interest in this crazy idea was piqued by a 1905 novel, Jules Verne's *Invasion of the Sea*, where the plot included "comprehensive proposals to move the Mediterranean and flood the Sahara." She adds, "After that book came out, many other proposals were presented by different colonial powers."

In the video installation, Amin acts as the ruler of a fictional nation, one among nine other political leaders, each making impossible promises - each involving water and mineral resources - to their country.

For her part, she promises to initiate a "large-scale infrastructural intervention that proposes to sink the Mediterranean Sea" and relocate it to the Sahara - this time, the plan intends to benefit the African continent: to deliver justice, end "terrorism" and the migrant crisis, feed millions, and even provide fish.

Her grandiloquent, utopian speech sounds totally bonkers, and may possibly come across as a tasteless joke to those who are not well versed in the history of the region. But the script of her speech meshes together actual texts of speeches made by eight dictators and megalomaniacs from the past and the present.

Amin combines passages from the speeches with lines from Nikita Krushchev's speech from the opening ceremony of the Aswan High Dam which the Soviets helped fund, and Gamal Abdel Nasser's "language and behaviour regarding the nationalising of the Suez Canal, as well as the way he stood up to colonialism".

She notes that she particularly enjoyed including Abdel Nasser's phrase, "'If you don't like our behaviour, you can drink the sea' - which is a commonly used Arabic phrase to suggest that 'we don't care about your opinion'".

Notably, we also find traces of US President Dwight Eisenhower in Amin's video. Under him, the CIA also tried to get in on the "drain the Mediterranean Sea" game - they proposed that it be moved "into a giant sinkhole in Egypt called the Qattara Depression".

She found the material in a declassified file, where the CIA claimed it would be a "spectacular" and "peaceful" operation that would "distract" Abdel Nasser, "who they believed had communist tendencies (for collaborating with Khrushchev)".

CIA officials further noted that the plan could bring peace to the Middle East. Apparently, they planned to make the Sahara more arable, and then move all the Arab Palestinians there. Eisenhower ultimately rejected the proposal, only because it was too expensive, but Amin's use of the CIA text in her speech ensures that we realise that megalomania is not something that is solely the reserve of some far-away, banana republic dictator.

Mario Pfeifer's *Again / Noch einmal* (2018), a two-channel video installation commissioned for the Biennale, examines one of Germany's recent wounds - a court case that revealed Germany's pervasive, underlying xenophobia towards migrants.

In July 2016, in the former East German state of Saxony, four men dragged an Iraqi refugee with a history of mental illness and epilepsy out of a supermarket, beat him and tied him to a tree using plastic ties purportedly for displaying "chaotic, threatening behaviour".

The police later established that the man entered the supermarket trying to get help using a pre-paid phone card. The men who were eventually charged with beating him claimed that they were acting out of "civic courage". The Iraqi man never had the chance to testify against the attackers, as his frozen body was found in the woods one week before the trial.

To tell the story, Pfeifer uses the conceit of two strangers - an attractive, tall, slim black woman, and a white German man - meeting at the checkout till. In an attempt to initiate conversation, the man asks the woman: "Where are you from?"

The film then morphs into a sort of talk-show/performance for the audience, with the two strangers - consumers from the supermarket with two different racialised identities - presenting the "facts" of the case, showing footage from various re-enactments of what happened in that supermarket, and what could have happened - had someone intervened in a different sort of way, and offered to help this lost, frightened, and unbearably lonely young man separated from his family.

The camera cuts from the two interlocutors to scenes from the reenactment, to grainy CCTV footage from the supermarket, then finally to a group of people seated together like a focus group.

From them, we gather different viewpoints, musings, and conclusions. They debate whether the actions of the German men who beat the Iraqi immigrant were indeed an act of "civil courage", as they claimed, or they were nothing more than a violent, vigilante mob.

Several of them repeatedly say that they would not step up to help if they see a similar instance, given what happened.



Mario Pfeifer's *Again / Noch einmal* (2018), a two-channel video installation commissioned for the Biennale, examines one of Germany's recent wounds, writes Jayawardane [Courtesy of Mario Pfeifer/ photo: Timo Ohler]

This film, though didactic at times, with an overly wrought conceit (the two interlocutors serving as narrators from opposing sides of experiencing what it is like to inhabit Germany, leading and teaching the audience), drew a large crowd of visitors in the opening week of the Biennale.

They stood in small groups and on their own, focused on the unfolding narrative - something very few films managed to accomplish during an opening week. Perhaps they realised no cultural event, at this moment in Europe and North American history, can be considered a legitimate reflection of the zeitgeist, if it does not include works like Pfeifer's, which address the fraught nature of having a "complex identity".

The questions Pfeifer addresses seemed especially pertinent, given the fact that the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, which expediently uses a "women's rights" agenda to capitalise on fears about "violent" and hypersexual immigrant men, organised a march through the heart of Berlin's heavily immigrant Kreuzberg district on the Saturday of the Biennale's opening.

Again / Noch einmal shows us that layers, enrichments, complications to one's identity may mean that one's life is expendable, and one's execution an inconvenience to be erased by blaming the complexity itself - rather than the refusal to read it.