

People

## ‘I’m Proposing Many Ways of Seeing’: Artist Kapwani Kiwanga on Unearthing Buried Histories to Imagine the World Anew

The artist is a nominee for the prestigious Prix Marcel Duchamp.

**Kate Brown**, August 20, 2020



Kapwani Kiwanga. Photo: Bertille Chérot.

The Canadian artist and former academic Kapwani Kiwanga has been based in Paris for nearly a decade, but her work is rooted in the world at large.

Her minimal artworks, which span film, audio, sculpture, and installation, vary greatly in size, shape, and medium, but each is bound to Kiwanga’s research-intensive practice, in which she digs up events or historical footnotes from places such as Rwanda, Tanzania, or the US state of Virginia. Each work, whatever form it take, results from carefully mined historical research.

Kiwanga tries to create new ways of seeing and understanding places and events, some of which are poorly visible to begin with. “I am not trying to restate what we know,” she tells Artnet News. “I am trying to build beyond it.”

On the heels of shows at the MIT List Visual Arts Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and at the Serpentine Gallery in London last year, the artist is now in the midst of putting the final touches on her solo show at Formerly Known as Witte de With in Rotterdam, which opens in September. She is also in the midst of conceiving a three-chapter show at the Haus der Kunst in Munich that begins in October, after which her works will be on view at the Centre Pompidou, as she is one of four nominees for the prestigious Prix Marcel Duchamp.

I met Kiwanga at a safe distance on a leafy terrace in Berlin to talk about the natural world and politics, how flora can be a witness to history, and what she is planning for her solo exhibitions this fall.



*Flowers for Africa: Nigeria* (2014). Courtesy the artist and Courtesy Galerie Jérôme Poggi.

**You studied anthropology before attending art school. Your work does seem to be very informed by an interest in science and academic research. Could you speak a bit about how that slightly unusual education informs your artistic work?**

It's just kind of life, right? I still do love research. I really respect people that can dedicate themselves to one domain and go deep into it, but I think I'm too impatient and academia itself wasn't for me. I was interested in too many different things. When I finished school, I thought I'd do documentary filmmaking, but I realized that it was too limited for me. I felt like trying something different, so I applied for this postgraduate program, "La Seine" at l'École des Beaux Arts in Paris. It labeled itself as a research program, and it was good but I did not really find my feet there. I did another postgraduate program in the north of France that was known at the time for "new media." Over the last year of that second program, I committed myself to trying to make art, and I've been lucky that I've been able to keep on doing what I want to do.

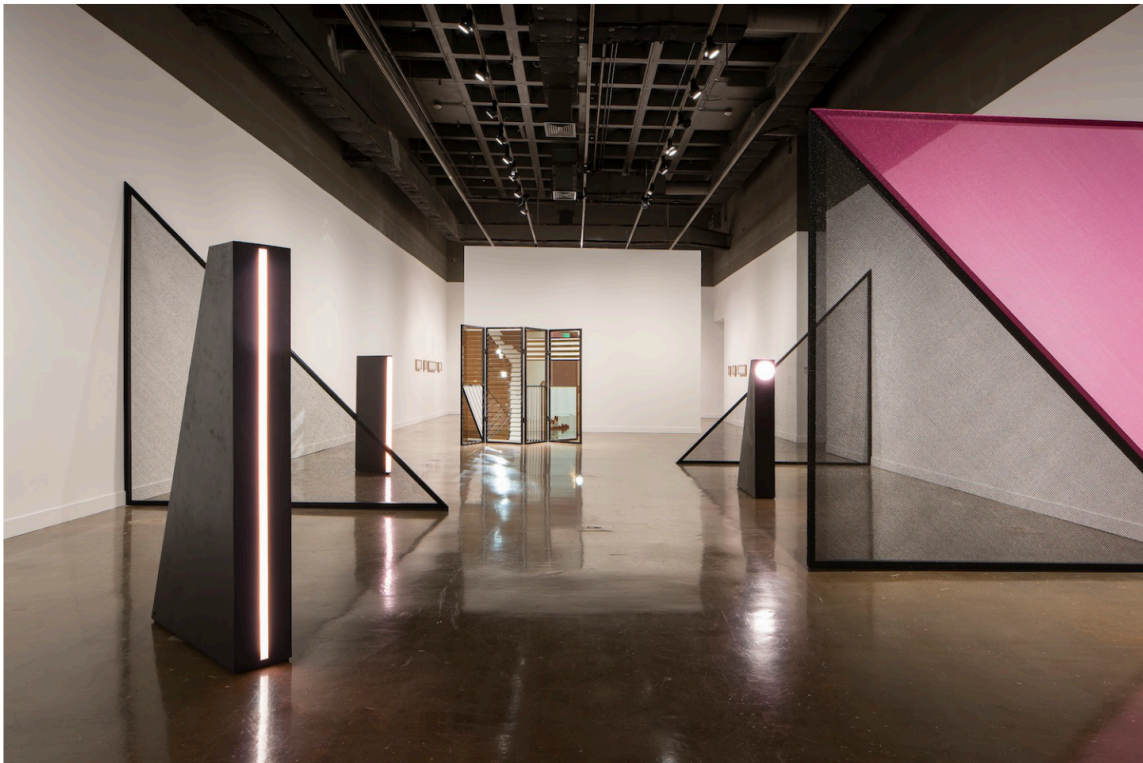


**The focus of your artworks has a meandering geography. You've made work that has investigated histories of Tanzania, the US, Suriname, to name a few. How do you come to land on certain countries of interest?**

There are multiple ways in which that can come about. It can occur through a conversation with somebody or my stumbling upon a historical anecdote. Sometimes, it is just a matter of where I am invited to do my work. I am always trying to understand where I'm standing, the history of the place that I'm in. I often try to do a metaphoric archeological dig and then that will land me in a place. That's what research does, it takes you somewhere where you did not know you were going to go. Geography is important, because I am usually trying to look as wide as I can and see how there may be intertwined histories and repercussions in different parts of the world emerging from the same politic or way of being at a particular time.

**While the research behind your work is very specific, the language of your sculptures is quite open-ended.**

When I make an artwork, I'm trying to be in dialogue with the visitor, and I am proposing a way of seeing, or many ways of seeing. I leave it open to people to take from it what they want. I will be quite loyal to the research I've done, but it doesn't mean that the people that are experiencing it necessarily have to have that. It's an open invitation somehow for people to spend time with an idea as opposed to being presented with a discourse. There are other platforms that can do that, and that is not what I want to do with my work. Different people come to the work with different cultural, historical, or social baggage and so there are different nuances in the works which one person will experience that another will not.



"Safe Passage" at MIT Cambridge. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Tanja Wagner, Berlin. Photo: Peter Harris Studio.

**You've said you're seeking "exit strategies" in your work—routes which offer a way around or through typical road blocks in culture.**

I'm not trying to restate what one knows. I'm also trying to see what ways to get past what we know. To do that requires very simple things like just looking at it differently, or just even looking at it for the first time. And it's about being able to sit with it long enough that you can allow yourself different ways beyond it. These "exit strategies" are very personal but they can be collectively experienced as well. It's not completely revolutionary, but being aware of one's body in relation to power and to space, that can be an invitation to think of an exit strategy.

For one my first exhibitions in 2014, I was looking at ethnographic collections and the Maji Maji war in Tanzania. I'd spent time in the ethnographic museum in Dahlem, Germany, at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, and I had been in Tanzania to look at different museums, to do research and meet with people in different locations. At that point in time in art, I had seen a lot of work related to similar subjects that was showing a lot of objects from ethnographic collections. It was this kind of bulimic and fast-paced approach of showing objects. It was working quite well for a lot of artists, but for me personally it was quite disturbing, especially after having been spending this time in these collections looking at 500 iterations of one particular spear. I felt like this object-based approach was repeating a colonial appropriation. My exit strategy for that, personally, was to work the opposite way and to not represent these easy, seductive objects—though I was aware that could work really well and tick all the boxes. I decided to work with absence. Presence and absence are, of course, two sides of the same movement of power and energy, and of objects being in one place and not in another. My exit strategy at that point was to not reproduce that aesthetic, which I think adds more power to this colonial continuation of colonial thinking and to try another way. I think we can do better.

**What feels more important to show?**

Power and asymmetries of power are not static. There was a sculpture on view at my show *Under the cover of darkness* in 2019 at Tanja Wagner called *Jalousie*, which is an example of this. It was made with a two-way mirror, so one had the experience of being observed when standing on one side and being the observer when standing on the other side. It's a simple expression about the idea of identities shifting in context. I think it is important to be sincere about the spectrum of abuse and entitlement. In one situation, you could be the person who could be saying that something is unfair and in another situation you could be the person who is imposing your power over someone else. It's never such a simple dichotomy. The question of power asymmetries is probably the idea that pushes me most in my work.

At the same time, it doesn't make any sense to me to reproduce something which we already have. I don't feel the need or pressure to be incredibly original or groundbreaking, but what is important is to take what I have, which is mostly from the past, and say, well, if we want to talk about this now, how can we conceptually, politically, and formally break away from legacies that do not work anymore?

*Flowers for Africa*, an ongoing series that I began in 2013 is an example of reframing historic moments as well. Because the images that the floral arrangements are based on are archival, it means that it is always reinterpreted and rethought each time a floral arrangement is made. Each time it is remade, it is different depending on the florist, the budget, what flowers are available. So, this historic moment, this proof gets watered down so we then just have to listen and sit with it, and read it from where we are now.



*Flowers for Africa: Rwanda*. Courtesy the artist and Courtesy Galerie Tanja Wagner, Galerie Jérôme Poggi, and Goodman Gallery.

**Like with *Flowers for Africa*, you often incorporate natural elements into your work, yet it doesn't seem like you're particularly married to the beauty of nature as such. It seems like it is more of an entranceway to get to some other place.**

The flower arrangements were witnesses to a moment in which an African nation came into its own. All the organic or geological material I use, I see all these materials as witnesses. When I think about archiving and documenting, which are important themes in my work, I am trying to find different ways to do that which we have not activated as much as we could. I am quite frustrated with text and image as the main witnesses or documents of a past event. I think the natural world is a different kind of witness to human history and it can help us think about documentation in different ways. The materials I use are always chosen for their historical or political importance, its never simply because I love their materiality. I'm not a sculptor's sculptor in that way. It often starts instead with their being intertwined with human social history and economic history.



**Your work at FKA Witte de With in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, which opens in September, is also looks at the epistemologies of flora.**

The plants are all replicas in some way. I will show paper plants that are a model of a peacock flower, which was used in the Caribbean and South America as an abortive. When African slaves were brought in, if they didn't know this already, they acquired this knowledge from the indigenous populations. Using the peacock flower in this way was a way to gain control over their own reproductive powers. But I am reconstructing this plant paper, which refers to a moment in Victorian England when upper-middle class and wealthy women would make paper flowers as a hobby—because it was something that was deemed acceptable for them to do. These would adorn their homes. This work is a way of looking at two different spaces, and two estranged but related and dissimilar women's histories.

Another work draws from Dutch researcher Tinde Van Andel, who has been studying the introduction of red rice into both Suriname and Virginia, US, a grain that would have come from West Africa and been brought over via the slave trade. This particular type of rice was integrated into clothing or into hair to allow one to be self-sufficient if they were to escape slavery. These grains have been reproduced in ceramic by a local artisan and they are being woven into a tapestry. This hidden rice becomes an invisible seed bank of sorts for possible future communities.



Kapwani Kiwanga *Semence* (2020). Ceramic replicas of rice grains of variety *Oryza glaberrima*. © Photo Lisanne Ceelen- Courtesy the artist and Goodman Gallery

**How was it conceiving and creating two major exhibitions—both at FKA Witte de With and also at Haus der Kunst—in the midst of lockdown and so much social and political tumult?**

Everything was pretty much settled beforehand. And what I wanted to talk about—questions of resistance and rebellion and creative refusal—were already embedded in my work for a while. Yet for my show at FKA, because I was looking specifically at African Diasporic histories, I felt like I had to respond to the moment that we were in, which was different than when we started talking about it. Otherwise, I think I have always been trying to produce work that offers a way forward into a more just society or a way of being, regardless of location or history. So, I just keep on going. There's not much that changes for me apart from being asked to respond to things like the renaming of things or the removal of monuments, which I think is not really for me to provide a sound bite on. There are a lot of activists who have a lot to say and who have a considered discourse and concrete action points to comment on these topics. Of course, how I live and how I think about the future has changed, just like everybody else. But, you know, how I am thinking about my work has not changed drastically.

**Can you share a bit about what you are planning at the Haus der Kunst? That architecture of the Haus der Kunst is a lot for artists to wade through, I can imagine.**

Yes, but I don't think one needs to respond to everything. I think that there's been a lot said about that building. Giving power into the same discourse is, again, not where I want to place my energies. So hopefully I will open it up to something else, and give way to the natural history behind it, which has always been in communication with the building and actually precedes the building and perhaps redirect attention from it for a time. Then the next artist will come and direct the attention in some other way.

It's not completely settled, but the show should unfold in three chapters. I hope to integrate the English gardens—which is one of the largest of this kind in Europe and one of the first public parks. It remains to be seen whether we can do what we are hoping to do in this last chapter, which brings together my interest in natural history, botany, and architecture together, and how that threads into politics.

I've learned through my research in Munich Nazi architecture of which Haus der Kunst is exemplary is in general really devoid of any plants or nature. It is very mineral, full of stone. I hope to bring a softness into the space and make it more permeable. As you come in and you have the swastika above you, it is a visible reminder of a particular use of power. The misuse of power is often invisible although no less dominating and violent, arguably even more so. So, for me, navigating that space as opposed to navigating the streets, it's different, but it is not that different in terms of strategy. There is an archive about the building and its history and the institution's team really gives space to artists to explore the history of the building and its use. But the gardens remain more interesting to me.



# KAPWANI KIWANGA: BREAKING DOWN WALLS TO STEP INTO NEW BEGINNINGS

Byron Armstrong

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Magazine



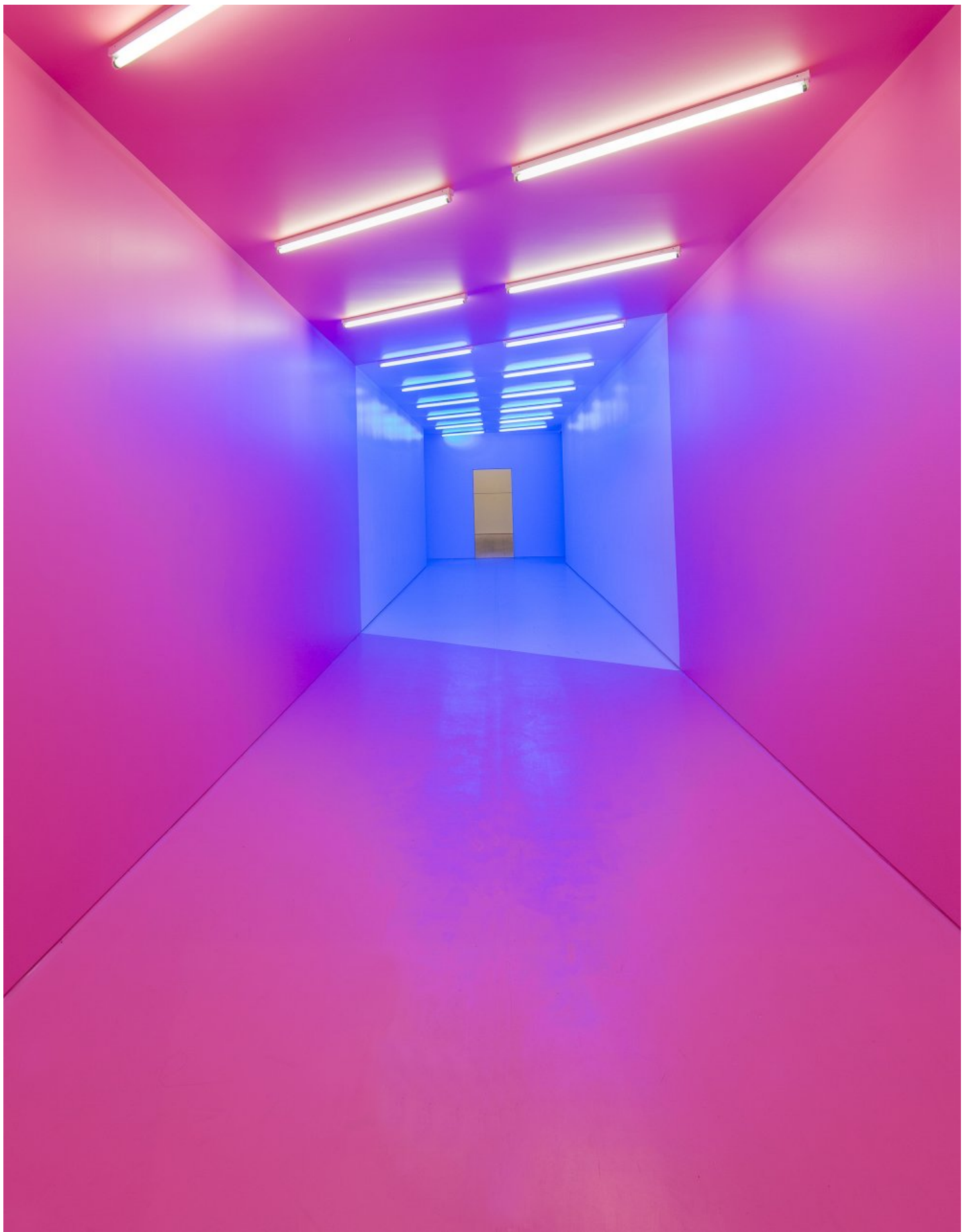
Kapwani Kiwanga with her work *Simple Enclosure*, 2018. Paint, wood, glass and drywall, dimensions variable. © Kapwani Kiwanga / SOCAN (2021). Photo: NGC

It is no surprise that people have ascribed horrible fortune to 2020, choosing to throw it away like worthless ephemera, while looking forward to 2021 with fresh hope. Between a stubborn global pandemic, raging civil unrest, uncertainty about the economy and new models of

employment within an already rapidly changing world, the word “stressful” feels too lazy to describe the past year. The media catchword of the day, “unprecedented,” sounds too feeble an attempt to describe the human abandonment of office buildings towering over desolate streets, or the adjustment to the physical and virtual architecture of laptop screens, socially distanced meetings and grocery store lanes. I prefer, like the two-faced Roman deity *Janus* (for whom January is named), to look backward while also looking forward. Art, at its best, does the work of looking back, while looking ahead to new beginnings, and describes it in a way that words oftentimes cannot.

Hamilton-born Kapwani Kiwanga is a multidisciplinary artist whose work analyzes the ways in which we interact with one another as society, cultures and individuals, while examining the power imbalances within those interactions. Kiwanga is the 2018 winner of the Sobey Art Award and presented her works *Simple Enclosure* and *The Primer* at the National Gallery of Canada that year. Speaking of the project that included those works, as well the earlier *pink-blue*, she describes the exploration of “disciplinary architecture,” historical and current, and how “colour and light were used to control bodies and create barriers, which are sometimes physical but also psychological.”

The *pink-blue* installation, shown at The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery in 2017, appears as a bright hallway divided into halves through the usage of two distinct colours. Baker-Miller pink, meant to have a calming effect on the body, and blue neon lights, originally purposed by public spaces to discourage intravenous drug users, lead to a projection room utilizing a more harmonious combination of the same pink – the last room also includes olive green, beige, white, and assorted images.



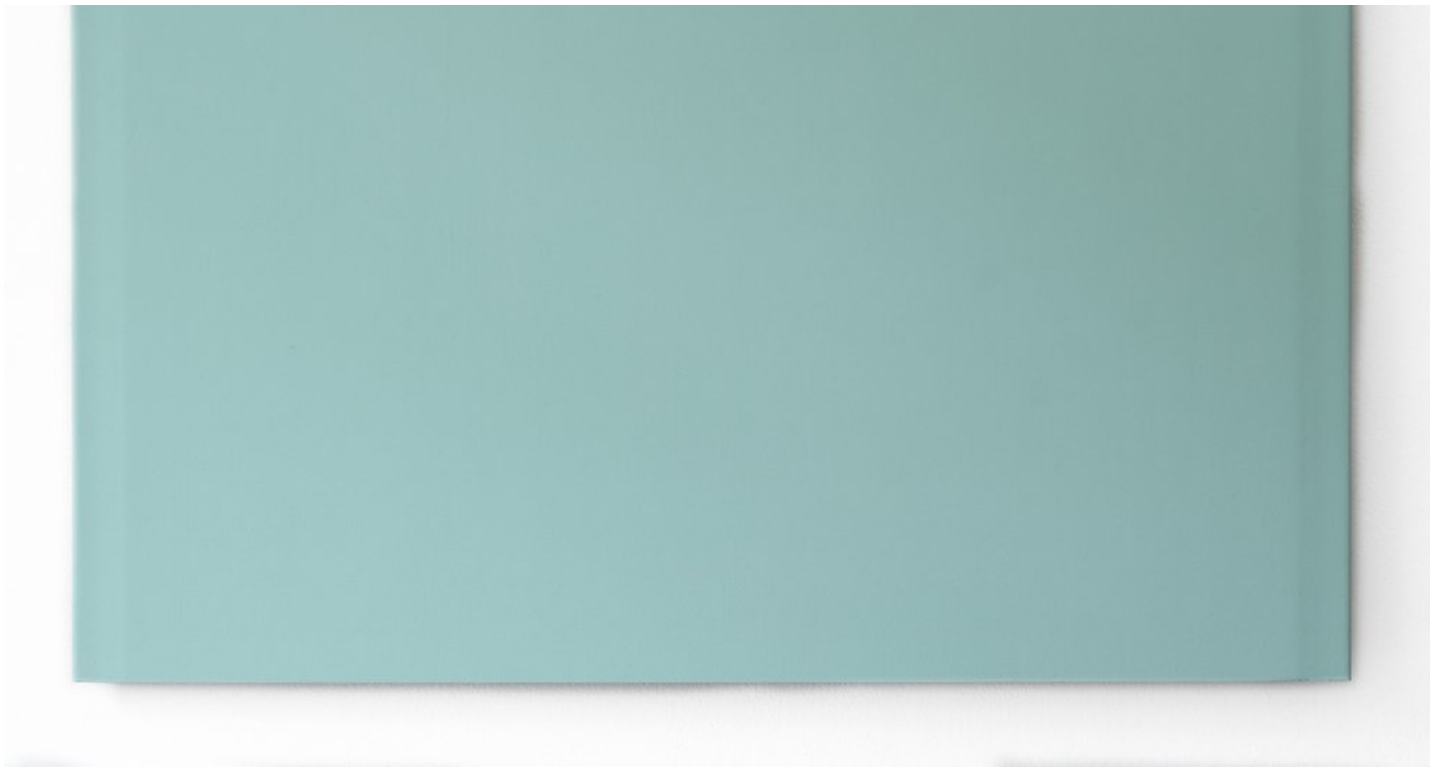
Kapwani Kiwanga, *pink-blue*, 2017. Baker-Miller pink paint, white fluorescent lights, blue florescent lights, variable dimensions. Courtesy of the Artist, Galerie Jérôme Poggi - Paris, Galerie Tanja Wagner - Berlin. © Kapwani Kiwanga / SOCAN (2021). Photo : Toni Hafkenscheid, installation view Power Plant, Toronto

Thinking about *pink-blue* specifically in relation to last year, it is impossible not to think about the tangible and intangible barriers exposed by the pandemic, as well as structural and social imbalances within society. COVID-19 has created invisible, yet invasive barriers between individuals at the risk of their physical wellbeing. Within bricks-and-mortar structures, long-term care homes, hospitals and even our own dwellings, we have found ourselves trapped within the limitations of these constructs. Depending on the power imbalances affecting your socio-economic status in society, those structural confines have proven to be either calming “pink” sanctuaries for the privileged who work from home in single-family units or dangerous “blue” environs for those deemed “essential” with low wages, crowded public transit and domiciles. As we look forward to a vaccinated world of post-COVID euphoria, I have to wonder if we will continue to see our individual privileges or continue to applaud the people who don’t have them.

*Linear Painting #4: Weyburn Mental Hospital*, part of Kiwanga's *Linear Painting* series, is part of the Gallery’s collection. These two-toned paintings presented on panels of drywall are meant to evoke the separation of social groups and societal hierarchies in relation to institutional spaces. The colours here – a pale grey (neutrality) and a light turquoise (calm) – take on a different meaning within the historical context of their usage in a notorious psychiatric hospital, now closed, in Weyburn, Saskatchewan. Taking the liberty of relating it to COVID-19, it again becomes a representation of amorphous barriers that marginalize members of our society. I think of “essential workers” without sick days or living wages, forced to serve the more privileged, while living in communities hit hardest by the pandemic. The black lines cutting through the centre of each painting, meant to act as a force of division between the colours, are lines that could just as easily represent socio-economic, racial and even geographical divisions, alluding to certain areas with higher rates of infections: the ratio of calm to neutrality being relative to which end of the line you fall on.







Kapwani Kiwanga, *Linear Painting #4: Weyburn Mental Hospital (Weyburn, Saskatchewan)*, 2017. Paint on drywall sheet, 250 x 125 cm. © Kapwani Kiwanga / SOCAN (2021) Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Tanja Wagner, Berlin

In 2020, the global movement under the banner of Black Lives Matter pushed against the physical, emotional and psychological barriers denying access and equitable human rights to a people. Kiwanga, herself a Black woman artist, has chosen to centre her work around this idea of barriers – both visible and unseen – and their effects on the human psyche. In discussing her 2017 solo exhibition, *A wall is just a wall* at The Power Plant, Kiwanga explains that the title was a line from former Black Panther Assata Shakur's poem *Affirmation*, in which the activist/poet states: "*If I know anything at all / it's that a wall is just a wall / and nothing more at all. / It can be broken down.*"

Kiwanga's two-channel 12-minute sound installation *500 ft*, also in the Gallery's collection, is an audio work taken from that show. In the work, the artist recites colour theory and behavioural science alongside more subversive information, such as a transcript from a 1931 Paris International Conference on Colonial Urbanism that considered "500 feet" the safest distance to maintain between Indigenous populations and European colonists. Distance is the appropriate word to describe the events of last year in more ways than one. However, when

considering the globalization of the Black Lives Matter movement and the scale of protests calling for a societal reckoning, though the imposed spatial distance between us has grown, is it too optimistic to presume that perhaps the empathetic distance is closing?

New Year's resolutions are arguably well-intentioned exit strategies for a year that has left us wanting. In the NGC video filmed for the 2018 Sobey Art Award, Kiwanga describes the exit strategy within her work as, "Moments where the visitor can look differently or untangle themselves from structures of learning that create unequal relationships, but also moments that allow one to think about the future in a different way." It would be easy to be misanthropic about last year, while being ecstatic about this new one, but Kiwanga's work shows us that there is light both within, and at the end of the tunnel. Visible and invisible structures that exist to keep us safe, and systemic man-made barriers that exist to keep some of us confined.

Kapwani Kiwanga's practice speaks to the uncertainty of a new beginning, with all the opposing realities of life that lead to an unknown destination. To see each other outside the prism of artificially generated perceptions, stay the course through what sometimes seems like an endless corridor of conflicting emotions and negative behaviours, and to continue breaking down the walls that keep us caged and lead to nowhere; to see the future in a different way.

After all, a wall is just a wall.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Byron Armstrong is a Toronto-based writer whose work centers on the intersection between art, society and politics. He is the Assistant-Editor for ByBlacks.com, the leading independent online magazine for Black Canadians, and his work has appeared in The Globe and Mail, ELLE Canada, NOW Magazine, and NUVO.

BY CARINA BUKUTS IN PROFILES | 27 OCT 20

## Kapwani Kiwanga's Afrofuturist Garden

This year's Marcel Duchamp Prize winner looks at knowledge that has fallen through the cracks



'On December 8, 2058 the United States of Africa came into being,' states Paris-based artist Kapwani Kiwanga in her lecture-performance *Afrogalactica* (2011–ongoing). In the piece, she imagines herself as an anthropologist from the future who lectures about Afrofuturism and the crucial role its ideas played in creating a federation of African states and the United States of Africa Space Agency. In *Afrogalactica*, archival research meets speculative thinking, fact meets fiction; this understanding of history as creative and mutable is central to the artist's practice, which challenges Eurocentric narratives of colonialism.



Kapwani Kiwanga, *Afrogalactica*, 2012–ongoing, performance documentation. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Tanja Wagner, Berlin

Spanning film, sculpture and installation, Kiwanga's art is not limited to a specific medium but draws from her training as an anthropologist. Take the bouquet series 'Flowers for Africa' (2012–ongoing), for which the artist researches archival images of events commemorating the independence of African countries. In these works, liberation from colonial power is not commemorated through official documents or historical photographs but through seemingly minor details: the flower arrangements created for these occasions. A set of white and red gladioli represents Algeria's independence from France in 1962 (*Flowers for Africa, Algeria*, 2014), while an arch of eucalyptus leaves recalls the declaration of the Republic of Rwanda in 1961 (*Flowers for Africa, Rwanda*, 2019). Kiwanga reinterprets the bouquets in collaboration with florists, places them on white pedestals and then lets the flowers decay over the course of the exhibition, composting the piece afterwards. By using floral arrangements as a means of remembrance, Kiwanga questions which objects become part of cultural memory and reflects on strategies of forgetting.



Kapwani Kiwanga, *Flowers for Africa*, 2012–ongoing, installation view, Prix Marcel Duchamp 2020, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. Courtesy: the artist, Galerie Poggi, Paris; Goodman Gallery, London/Cape Town; and Galerie Tanja Wagner, Berlin; photograph: Aurélien Mole

Another piece that intertwines botany and history is *The Marias* (2020), on view as part of Kiwanga's current exhibition at Kunstinstituut Melly (formerly known as Witte de With) in Rotterdam. Comprising two paper sculptures mimicking peacock flowers, the piece interweaves histories of knowledge, oppression and resistance that undergird women's work with plants. In Maria Sibylla Merian's *Metamorphosis insectorum Surinamensium* (1705), the German naturalist describes how enslaved African women in Suriname (then a Dutch colony) used peacock-flower seeds as an abortive. Kiwanga's reconstruction of the flower in paper sets the emancipation of oppressed women in the Global South in the 18th century in relation to Victorian women creating paper flowers as decoration.





Kapwani Kiwanga, *Flowers for Africa*, 2012–ongoing, installation view, Prix Marcel Duchamp 2020, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. Courtesy: the artist, Galerie Poggi, Paris; Goodman Gallery, London/Cape Town; and Galerie Tanja Wagner, Berlin; photograph: Aurélien Mole

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Kapwani Kiwanga, *The Marias*, 2020, installation view, formerly known as Witte de With, 2020. Courtesy: the artist; photographer: Kristien Daem

When entering Munich's Haus der Kunst, it's almost impossible not to recall its troubled past as the Nazi's former House of German Art, where modern art was denounced and ideological propaganda praised. Unlike many other artists participating in the museum's exhibition series 'Der Öffentlichkeit' (The Public), Kiwanga decided not to go down that road; instead, her show emphasizes the gallery's close proximity to the English Garden, a public park in Munich. 'Plot' is a series of three interventions that will unfold over the course of the next six months, in which Kiwanga aims to draw a connection between the interior and exterior.



Kapwani Kiwanga, 'Plot', installation view, Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2020. Courtesy: the artist and Haus der Kunst, Munich; photograph: Jens Weber

In the first chapter, which opened this month, three huge, semi-transparent curtains cover the middle hall in gradients of pink, green and blue. As we navigate the gallery, the colourful landscape splits into individual environments that house groups of plants set in inflatable futurist sculptures. The curtains are a tool to both construct and deconstruct space. Cutting between the hall's marble columns, the installation dismantles the gallery's monumentality while also creating chambers that hold life. Although not immediately apparent, the sculptures reference 19th-century Wardian cases: sheltered glass containers that allowed foreign plants to be transported over long distances and survive in polluted environments. Here, however, the plants breathe the air of the museum and the Wardian case-inspired sculptures become a display, linking the colonial importation of plants with that of looted artefacts. As in other works, Kiwanga reinterprets historical objects to find new strategies of preserving knowledge that has fallen through the cracks. By creating works that continuously shift our perspectives like a kaleidoscope, Kiwanga not only presents alternative ways of coming to terms with the past but possible futures.

Kapwani Kiwanga is an artist based in Paris, France. She was awarded the Marcel Duchamp Prize 2020. [The accompanying exhibition](#) at Centre Pompidou, Paris, is on view until 4 January 2021. Her [solo exhibition](#) at Kunstinstituut Melly, Rotterdam, runs until 14 February 2021. ['Plot'](#) at Haus der Kunst, Munich, is on through 24 May 2021.

Main image: Kapwani Kiwanga, 'Plot', installation view, Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2020. Courtesy: the artist and Haus der Kunst, Munich; photograph: Jens Weber



## CARINA BUKUTS

Carina Bukuts is assistant editor of *frieze* and is based in Berlin, Germany. She is editor-in-chief of *PASSE-AVANT* and a member of AICA Germany.

## TAGS

[Kapwani Kiwanga](#), [Haus der Kunst](#), [Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art](#), [Centre Pompidou](#), [Carina Bukuts](#), [Profile](#)



## ‘Those Cracks Which Allow Things to Grow out of Them Are Interesting to Me’

As her commission for the first Frieze Artist Award in New York is unveiled, Kapwani Kiwanga speaks to curator Adrienne Edwards



*In 2018, Kapwani Kiwanga was selected as recipient of the first Frieze Artist Award at Frieze New York 2018. The Paris-based artist proposed to realize an open-air installation exploring freedom of movement and architectures of exclusion. Curated by Adrienne Edwards of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Frieze Artist Award forms part of the fair's non-profit program and is supported by the Luma Foundation.*

**Adrienne Edwards:** You studied social sciences, and in particular, anthropology. I'm interested in how these fields or their methodologies have influenced the kind of research impetus in your work.

**Kapwani Kiwanga:** They definitely have. I think research is something I enjoy doing, as an act. Making is something that I like as well, but research – I get really excited about that.

**AE:** What does that look like for you? What does it entail?

**KK:** The ideal is me going into a place where I can open up a box that hasn't been opened for a while, and looking at archives that people may not have looked at, at least for some time, or spending time in a library. But it also means going out and chatting with people. So if it's a particular history that I'm interested in – I'll go to sites that hold that history and talk to people and get a sense of how they remember it, or [talk] to people [who] were actors in a moment.

So [my research often entails] meeting people, but [it] also [involves] being with books and articles – ideas. I engage with the ideas first, and then I go out and meet people to open those theories out and make them more grounded in the lived world, so different knowledges or languages to speak about history are in dialogue. I think anthropology is somehow always with me in a couple of ways. Partly because it was such an uncomfortable tradition to be studying – because of its history – but also, the complexity of it – which happens in life all the time – is that it was also the only place in the university where I felt I could look at cultures, histories, and experiences that were not only “occidental” or “Western.” So it was this conundrum of studying in a tradition that is a partner of colonialism – an enabler or forerunner of colonialism – but it was also a place where I could get closer to people and histories that were of interest to me. So that’s something I navigate constantly (I think a lot of us do). So that’s always with me – the difficulties of that formation or education, but also the construction of archives.



Kapwani Kiwanga, *Shady*, 2018. Commissioned for Frieze Artist Award, supported by Luma Foundation. Installation view at Frieze New York 2018, Randall's Island Park, New York City. Photo: Mark Blower. Courtesy: Mark Blower/Frieze

**AE:** Because history is something that is so eminent in your work, what do you tend towards in terms of histories? What are some of the central narratives or events that have really preoccupied you thus far? And have you seen them shift over time, or do you feel like there's been a kind of consistent concern that you've been mining in different ways and from different perspectives?

**KK:** I think there are some things that are consistent. There are two threads of inquiry that run through my work. The first would be *belief*, and the other one – which is very nebulous – would be *histories that are not heard enough*. These relate in some ways. Belief, for me, is very broad, and can range from religious to spiritual to political to ideological beliefs...it's a spectrum, right? It's just one of these forces that motivate us as individuals and as communities – believing in something and acting out of that belief. So we create cultures



out of that, we create objects out of that, we create wars out of that, we create violence out of that. Belief is a core interest for me, and that harks back to social sciences but even more so, to comparative religion. I think one can sense that in my work. And belief also touches on philosophy, right? It's a philosophy which is not always seen as such. For example, when I was in Benin, looking at the roots of voodoo, I was exploring that as a philosophy, particularly with Ifá and Ifá divination. Coming back to my background in anthropology, this idea of belief engages with philosophies which are non-Western (although one must ask why it is that these philosophies are not always recognized as such).

And the idea of less-heard histories is something that is important for me to explore for my own person, to be able to navigate through this world. I think as a younger person I was looking for alternatives, things that I had not seen broadcast. I sought these out through the ways I choose to live – traveling, meeting different people, creating communities. I wanted to share alternatives – those things that were not widely represented or that had platforms or the means to be heard more widely. I think this thread feeds back to the first one I mentioned, the idea of belief. Having these examples of past histories, of resistance, of unheard or less-heard stories speaks to a belief that people create things regardless of being recognized; just out of necessity. So this feeds into the idea of belief: believing that one can circumnavigate certain structures which are not healthy for an individual or for a community. Those cracks which allow things to grow out of them are interesting to me.





Kapwani Kiwanga with *Shady* (2018), her commission for the Frieze Artist Award at Frieze New York 2018, supported by Luma Foundation. Photo: Mark Blower. Courtesy: Mark Blower/Frieze

**AE:** I'm really intrigued by the fact that you use the term "belief" instead of something like "mythology." It would be interesting to think around the distinction between those two things, only because, I think about Glissant's work concerning history with a capital "H," and how that functions as an authorized mythology. Whereas, myth has a completely different kind of function in relation to how we experience culture on a vernacular level; it has this power to operate on an almost subterranean level, right? And that because it's not written, but typically circulates orally or is embodied. There's something interesting here (that maybe we can't resolve, but I'm interested in thinking it through) about different modes of embodiment.

**KK:** Exactly. It's funny how the body has, for me, up until now, come through language. I do some performance, primarily lecture-performances, which are based around orality. My physical body in space is always mediated through my voice, that's how I mark a space or hold a space, at least that's how I've worked up until now. I see mythology as another coded language, another register, or stylistic footprint. And, pedaling back to anthropology, one of the constructive things anthropology created – and that I've found feeds into my practice – is the reflexive opening up of text, where scholarly texts were written in a more experimental style. I found that quite stimulating.

**AE:** Like in the 1960s?

**KK:** And the '70s. There was a plethora of writing forms; an openness. For me, mythological language is one register which operates individually on one – perhaps subterranean – level, but it also occupies another level between people and groups. Political language may be another one (this too can be mythological). And all of those different registers come together in this idea of belief, right? So I think the mythological is probably speaking more to a spiritual or a symbolic idea that can operate in different ways. Myth is very linked to ritual – like daily ritual, or something that's linked to equinoxes and cycles in the natural world, or through life or societal milestones.

**AE:** It's a kind of sustaining force.

**KK:** Yes, and it speaks to a time before (well, "time before" ...I don't really adhere to that organization of time). If we go back to voodoo and other cultural expressions – languages were created specifically for a ritual. So there is a coded or secret language which is used only for that. You need to learn this language and of course learning the language is a physical thing too. We know about the plasticity of the brain, and how different paths are created through learning a language, so how does that readjust your brain? The language that one uses changes how you see. There are other artists who have focused their work on language. This is not my focus, but embodiment up until now has come, for me, through language. But then there's something just in being in a place; going to different places that interest me historically, socially, politically, and being able to be there physically – it's another way of creating experience or resonance from a place. This occurs beyond language.



Kapwani Kiwanga, *Flowers for Africa: Tunisia*, 2015, protocol of assembly and display to guide the reconstruction of a floral arrangement consisting of cut flowers, dimensions variable. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Jérôme Poggi, Paris. Collection of the Nomas Foundation, Italy. Photo: © Aurélien Mole

**AE:** That's amazing, it's great, you're right on the path. It's interesting, you talking about language, and these different modes of language, and even containers for its expression brings me to a question around visual language. Because you work in many different ways – video, performance, sculpture, installation, painting – how do you know when an idea needs to be expressed in a specific form? Not to think about it in a binary way, but I'll pick the extremes because I think it illuminates something. On the one hand, you have these really beautiful, minimalist, abstract works (in the kind of traditional sense of thinking about Donald Judd, Anne Truitt, that kind of concern for color and form), and then you have your video works, or your use of flowers, like the way a flower or an arrangement of flowers can stand in for something. I'm interested in how you determine what forms your visual language takes in relationship to these ideas. (This may also be a question about opacity, and the way opacity functions in your work.)

**KK:** I mean, it's a lazy answer somehow, but it kind of comes to me. I don't want to reproduce this idea of divine inspiration, it develops, I think; I don't know the direction, going into it. I'm with my documents, I'm with people, I'm listening to people, I'm reading people's ideas, and there will be a moment where there will be a key that just opens things up for me. And that can happen sooner, although usually, it's later than I'd hoped. The history or the material that I'm wading through presents itself and I'll know that there's a history of that actual material that also is there.

With the flowers, it's this idea of really trying to look at history through the non-human, for various reasons. To speak very specifically about *Flowers for Africa* – I was looking through archival images of independence ceremonies, or negotiations that lead to African states becoming independent or becoming new countries or reconfigured countries. And I realized that I'd seen a lot of these kinds of images



before – images, mostly of men, shaking hands at particular moments (particularly the '60s and '70s), and there was an aesthetic of representation around that time which I wasn't interested in reproducing. I was thinking: what could be another way to think about these moments? There were probably other ways to remember that independence, or moment. Again, it came around to this idea of the unseen or unheard. So in the images, I chose the flowers that acted as witnesses to that transition of power. They were often nearly out of frame, so it's a question of *cadre* and *hors cadre* (frame and out of frame). This speaks to my interest of what's treated as not central.

And then there's the flip side of that with other works, where sometimes there are the central narratives that we know, and that I think we need to think about again in a different way. So although not knowing it at the time, it is a little clearer to me now. It's abstraction – taking out these flowers and allowing them to stand in as one thing – because I think representation doesn't always push one enough to think differently. But the same (and different) strategies happen in my linear paintings when I've taken colors from historic architectural sites and used them to make minimal paintings.

One of the important points for me is how one feels in front of or next to or around a space – so seeing those flowers wilt away, or knowing they're going to wilt...I imagine myself or the audience in front of that situation.

**AE:** And when you install them, they're fresh flowers.

**KK:** They're fresh flowers.

**AE:** And then over the course of time they die and decay in the installation, and are left there to do that.

**KK:** And then they're returned to the earth if they can be.

**AE:** So is there an afterlife once the show ends?

**KK:** There's a protocol which states all organic material should be composted. There is often that element of care in my work. In some past work, there have been plants which are there to do a lot of things – similarly to the flowers – to stand in, to reference, to open up to other peripheral or maybe non-human witnesses, or forms of knowledge. But they demand that we take care of them. So people have to engage with the work in a really simple way: they have to water it, they have to keep the insects from destroying it. The plants grow, and then they're distributed after the exhibition. I try to push against seeing and walking away – which engenders gaze-come-possession. I think it goes back to something that we've talked about, that the image itself is not enough. So, there's an experience that I want people to have, a feeling, which is embodied.

**AE:** That's very interesting because it points to something I wanted to ask you about in relation to the proposal for *Shady*, for the artist award. When I saw that work, it made me track back to a different element of your work, which is about this question of eliciting something from the viewer. This relates to the kind of sensual dimensions of the work of art. If we go back to the core tenets of aesthetics and what aesthetics are, it's just about a sensual encounter, right? And so I was thinking about this in relation to the flowers; I was thinking about the role of time and duration as a kind of material force in the work that is not always obvious.

**KK:** Yes, but it's there.

**AE:** I think the African flowers somehow makes it clearer, or more explicit, but it's in all of these works.

**KK:** Yes, time is a material in and of itself. Perhaps it comes from working with my first creative medium; documentary film. In film, you work with rhythm and time in that way. In my installations, there are sometimes audio pieces, and I also try to craft time in the space itself. There's a historic time, of course, there's a past, our present, and often a future that's somehow imagined, which is talked about through the documents of the past, imagining where we are now. So there's an over-folding of time which I often try to bring in. And that again goes back to the questioning of whether we construct time as linear or not. I would not say there is cyclicity, but there are a lot of different inter-foldings of time.

**AE:** *Shady* seems like it's an expansion. Have you worked on a sculpture of this scale before?

**KK:** No, not of that scale.

**AE:** So it's thrilling in that regard.

**KK:** Absolutely.

**AE:** But in some ways, the experiment with the material – at least, some aspect of the material – started with an exhibition you did at Goodman Gallery. Can you talk about how you came to this material? What it looked like then as compared to what you have planned for the public art, large-scale version of this idea?

**KK:** So this is again one of these things that we're working on in ways that we're always continually evolving.

**AE:** Was that your first show with the Goodman Gallery?

**KK:** That was my first solo show with them, I've done a couple of group shows with them before. The show was called 'The Sun Never Sets', and for that exhibition in October past I was thinking about land and the colonial project. I was thinking about settler colonialism, the appropriation of land, particularly in South Africa, how in different townships access and division of land was created. And I was working through these explorations through different works. But the agricultural dimension of colonialism really came back at one point, and I wanted to address that. The shade cloth speaks to something I'm interested in looking at, the colonial project as a global experience. So not just referring to South Africa, of course, but I was thinking about agriculture in South Africa, and that material was able to speak to that, as a contemporary technology that's used to continue a longer project, which has been taking plants, organic material, from one place to another, creating microcosms in which they can exist.





Kapwani Kiwanga, *The Sun Never Sets*, 2017. HD video, installation view at Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg. Courtesy: the artist

**AE:** Extracting.

**KK:** Extracting. But agriculture is about unnatural production, right? So that's what it is. We put in extra water, which in and of itself is unnatural. But I don't want to make this about some kind of binary – natural or unnatural, good and bad – it's not as simplistic as that. I'm interested in looking at how different technologies are used to enable this on a scale which itself enables capitalism and capitalist extraction of resources from one land to another. Wardian cases from the Victorian era (if I'm not mistaken) are similar; it's the same mindset, but our technology has changed, right? I'd seen shade cloth used in Canada. I spent part of my childhood in a city where the larger region was quite agricultural. On a return visit a few years ago, I was driving around, and I saw these large black shade cloths, and when I asked what they were, I was told it was ginseng. I was surprised: ginseng, what's ginseng doing in southern Ontario? And it just made me think again of the land we were on, particularly in that area in Canada. There still are ongoing tensions between the First Nations community there, the Six Nations in particular, and the proposed developments that have happened in the Haldimand area. And so the use of this shade cloth recalls different things – the technology may have changed, but the gestures, the acts, the mindset have not. So that was my interest in the actual material – it opened up all these things for me in talking about the worldwide experience of colonialism. I'd chosen South Africa to work with the black color of the shade cloth, because, politically, I think it means something very, very strong there (especially in this white gallery space), and so I wanted to work with black in that context. And the pieces were all on the wall, so they were supported by a wall and they were coming off the wall with these very simple brackets which allow them to kind of lean off the wall. So it creates a space of volume by using the wall as a surface, or as a support. But they're very lightweight, so there's this kind of tension between a volume that is quite substantial but is also very fragile. That happens in my work in different ways, through the flowers or other things.



**AE:** Do you think of them as wall works? Sculpture? Painting?

**KK:** I call them wall works. They haven't come off the wall enough to be sculptures, yet they are somewhere in between, right?

**AE:** Yes, they have volume. In terms of a way of being able to navigate around them...

**KK:** You can't do a 360 though.

**AE:** No, you can't do a 360.

**KK:** You could do a 180.



Kapwani Kiwanga, *Shady*, 2018. Commissioned for Frieze Artist Award, supported by Luma Foundation. Installation view at Frieze New York 2018, Randall's Island Park, New York City. Photo: Mark Blower. Courtesy: Mark Blower/Frieze

**AE:** You could definitely do a 180. It reminds me of Sol Lewitt's early experiments from the '60s, like '61, '62. When you looked at that work, if you were standing directly in front of it, it looked two dimensional, but the moment you bent to the side, you'd realize it was volumetric, that this thing was extending out towards you. So this is very interesting in terms of playing with perception.

**KK:** That's definitely what was in that. If you turn a couple of degrees around the fabric itself, the weave changes, it captures the light in



a different way. Over-layering (which I have worked with on with some pieces) can sometimes cause a *more* effect, so there's this interesting layering that can happen, and opacity and visibility is part of that. So, the difference between the first wall pieces in South Africa and what we're proposing for *Shady* is this ability to have a 360-degree experience. We're working with the idea of changing perspective and positionality – wherever you're positioned will change how you see the work. That's something that I'm interested in working with generally, so that one thinks about their perspective and how it can change. It pushes against a binary of one side or another; one can be on both sides.

So, for the Frieze Art Award, I was interested in working on this idea of the 360, being able to walk around, to navigate in a different way and on a scale which evokes a wall but is also fragile. One's body is confronted with what appears to be a barrier, but the porosity of the material calls forth hope or a belief that there are also ways to filter through. One can see them as huge filters, right? They filter out light, but they let some in. One sees the structures that hold the material itself. These frames are made of a solid material; they're steel. It's industrial, it speaks to the large scales of visible borders and barriers and hints to those that are invisible, but it's undeniably a rigid structure to encounter. Then you have this material, that if one really wanted to push through it, they probably could. But that's also punctuated by moments in the design where open spaces appear. So there are these different levels, maybe evoking images of infiltration, passing through or circumnavigating. One can circulate around the whole thing, and also walk between different layers of the fabric; one can circumnavigate this whole structure, bypass and go through. So it's a formal call to these acts which I hope people will enact in different aspects of their lives if they so choose. And the color was of interest to work with as well, not just stick with the black as I had in South Africa. Beyond a question of layering and opacity was the question of how the different colors interact with one another, what they become when they're layered on top of each other.

**AE:** What colors will you use for the artist award commission?

**KK:** I'm limited to what colors I can use. It's important to note that the shade cloth I am using is used for agriculture. There's a red and a blue, which are each meant to filter out different parts of the light spectrum to promote growth. This technology creates environments which allow for continued extraction from the land through monocropping. So one can see this as another place where capitalism and colonialism intersect.

**AE:** What you've proposed is also very phenomenological. The height is four meters, so one has to comport oneself in relationship to the object. You experience the work in relationship to its scale, which can be overwhelming. Yet, perhaps this ability to see through it proposes something else. This is a recurring tendency in your work in terms of phenomenology and the relationship to the body.

**KK:** I'm interested in materials which are familiar yet somewhat unknown. So, with the shade cloth, we think we've seen it before, because of similar weaves used in construction sites or elsewhere, but this fabric is specifically used in the agricultural sector. Moving through the city or traveling to more rural areas, I observe things happening around me and materials used on the ground, so my choices of materials are not purely coming from an interest in matter or form (although I am sensitive to these aspects too). I'm primarily interested in materials because of how they are used socially and historically.

**AE:** I think the only other question I had was about the extent to which the research you've done – or even experiences you've had like traveling to Tanzania – has influenced the way in which you're thinking about *Shady* or this body of work. If there's a correlation there?

**KK:** I think when traveling to Tanzania I became interested in another material I have since worked with: sisal. Traveling through rural Tanzania (where part of my family still lives) and seeing large plantations of sisal, they're quite impressive, I mean as an aesthetic

experience, driving through rows and rows and rows, it's monumental. But more interestingly, if you look back at the history of that material, one can trace parts of the political and economic history of that particular country. And again, sisal and shade cloth both remind us that settler colonial land use functions by taking land from which to extract for commercial capitalist ends.

*Kapwani Kiwanga (b. 1978, Hamilton, Canada) lives and works in Paris France. Kiwanga studied Anthropology and Comparative Religion at McGill University in Montreal before taking part in the program La Seine at the École nationale supérieure des Beaux Arts de Paris. Kiwanga's work was recently on show as part of 'Stories for Almost Everyone' at the Hammer Museum (Los Angeles, 2018) and in the 2018 edition of the Glasgow International (2018). Other exhibitions include solo shows at Musée d'art de Joliette (2018), Esker Foundation Contemporary Art Gallery, Calgary (2018), The Power Plant, Toronto (2017) and South London Gallery (2015); and group exhibitions at Tate Liverpool (2017) and Portikus, Frankfurt (2017), among others. Kiwanga's performances have been presented at Documenta 14, Athens (2017), Momentum 9, Oslo (2017); FRAC, Champagne-Ardenne (2015), Tate Modern, London (2014) and Centre Pompidou, Paris (2014), among others.*