

**Grace Ndiritu's invitation to 'shamanic journeys' wins Jarman award**

by Elizabeth Fullerton



'I'm always looking for what we have in common as people' ... a still from Black Beauty. Photograph: Grace Ndiritu

The art world is finally catching up with British-Kenyan artist Grace Ndiritu. She has long incorporated shamanic ritual and meditation in her art, which has healing at its core and spans film, painting, textiles, performance and social practice, but her interest in esoteric ideas was never taken seriously. "I was doing all this spiritual stuff at art school and people used to bully me and make fun of me," she says. "It was really hard. I had a secret double life because nobody got it."

Now, however, with the Covid pandemic and the rise of social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter, care and healing are the issues of the moment and Ndiritu is in demand. She has worked with museums on restitution of looted objects, decolonisation and reactivating the "sacredness" of art spaces, often using shamanic performances. "If I'm asking people to go on a shamanic journey, I've done loads of them," she says, "so it's not a superficial thing, it's a real thing."

Journeys of the mind are at the heart of the two compelling films for which Ndiritu has landed the Film London Jarman award – the art film equivalent of the Turner prize. In *Black Beauty*, an African model promoting a beauty cream on a desert fashion shoot has a hallucinatory vision of herself as a late-night talkshow host in conversation with the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges.

The second film, *Becoming Plant*, follows six dancers as they take magic mushrooms for a group therapy experiment. A voiceover by a psychiatrist talks about the mind-expanding properties of psychedelics, their potential for treating mental illness and their co-opting by big tech to boost workers' productivity. "My work is really about human transformation," says Ndiritu. "In *Black Beauty*, we're inside the model's mind having this vision and in the other film they're going on a shamanic experience and we're watching from outside, but having the voiceover telling us what might be going on inside their heads."



Grace Ndiritu. Photograph: Steve Smith

Both films hinge on juxtapositions. In the first, the inane advertising speak (“saving the Earth is now officially sexy”) is contrasted with the deep conversation between the TV host and Borges around climate, migration, mankind’s interconnectedness and the multiplicity of time. In *Becoming Plant* the naked dancers move organically, imagining themselves as plants within the stark industrial architecture of a former military base – a reference to the US military’s controversial experiments with hallucinogens on soldiers in the 60s.

In terms of format, though, the two films are quite different. *Black Beauty* hypnotically melds the factual and imaginary in a nod to Borges’s complex works of metafiction. Ndiritu talked to climate scientists, anthropologists, geneticists and Indigenous activists during a residency in Patagonia, and much of the discussion with Borges is informed by that research. The fashion shoot is set in the late 1970s, when “people still have some hope of change, they still believe in government, the UN and the pope”; it then time travels to 1983, at the advent of the home computer, before returning to the 70s for the final scene. Ndiritu takes a playful approach to history, correcting some of its mistakes such as the failure to award Borges the Nobel prize for literature, and putting her own views in the author’s mouth.

“Borges does channel some of the things I say, like the idea that I’m always looking for what we have in common as people, and being in different times simultaneously,” she agrees, “but if you read his ideas about stories within stories I feel like he would appreciate it.” In a further twist that would surely have tickled him, viewers have apparently been asking to buy Borges’s “new” novel *Painted River* discussed in the talkshow, so convincingly are fact and fiction interwoven in the film. “People keep saying ‘I’ve been Googling the book, but I can’t find it,’” she laughs.

*Becoming Plant*, with its soundtrack by London musician and DJ Gaika, is more like an experimental documentary crossed with a music video – Janet Jackson’s *Rhythm Nation* was an inspiration, as were the spiritual teachings of the Armenian mystic Gurdjieff. There’s something brave and touching about this temporary community of dancers coming together to free their minds against the backdrop of a mounting mental health crisis – all the more because it was filmed during the pandemic.

The film ends with the dancers getting dressed as they come off their trip and “get ready to return to late capitalism where the body is exploited as a machine”. Ndiritu has a strong respect for plants and their powers. “Plants get exploited by pharmaceutical companies and turned into pills but they all have spirits,” she says. “Ayahuasca, for example, is a female spirit that has a particular personality. If she wants to give you a bad trip, you’ll get a bad trip.”

Esoteric beliefs, shamanism, activism – these are in Ndiritu’s DNA. She grew up between rural Kenya and working-class Birmingham; her mother, a nurse who retrained in truth and reconciliation studies, took her on anti-apartheid marches. Ndiritu trained in textile art in the UK and attended De Ateliers art school in Amsterdam where she was taught by Steve McQueen, Tacita Dean and Marlene Dumas.

In 2012, she decided to go off-grid. “It was so freeing to throw everything away and just have these two bags,” she says. For the next six years she lived with forest tree-dwellers in Argentina, permaculture communities in New Zealand, in Thai and Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, and the Findhorn New Age community in Scotland. She even started her own community in 2017 called the Ark Centre for Interdisciplinary Experimentation.



Borghesian ... filming Black Beauty. Photograph: Grace Ndiritu

Ndiritu gave up this nomadic existence in 2018 to launch her fashion and economic research project Coverslut (currently in the British Art Show in Plymouth), where customers pay what they can for items made with young artists and migrants. Throughout, she has sought to transform art institutions through her ongoing body of work Healing the Museum, begun in 2012. Her show The Healing Pavilion opens this week at the Wellcome Collection in London.

To cynics, Ndiritu's belief that art and spirituality together can change the world may seem naive, but she has achieved concrete results. Her 2018 performance in Brussels, A Meal for My Ancestors, brought UN, Nato and EU parliament officials together with refugees and activists. The experience prompted a Foreign Office participant to start a thinktank and write a briefing paper on climate refugees for the EU parliament. "That is the ultimate aspect of what I think art can do," Ndiritu says. "That's the meaning of art to me."

Grace Ndiritu: The Healing Pavilion is at the Wellcome Collection in London from 24 November to 23 April 2023.

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