

Grace Ndiritu Heals the Museum

A mid-career survey at S.M.A.K, Ghent, posits a new spiritual museology in which we connect to art beyond just representation

BY ELLA SLATER IN EU REVIEWS , EXHIBITION REVIEWS | 24 APR 23



Grace Ndiritu’s mid-career survey, ‘Healing the Museum’, presents spirituality as the impetus for an alternative museology during a time defined by ecological crisis and global conflict. Last year, the International Council of Museums redefined the museum as ‘a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society’, reorientating the focus solely from autonomous objects to people and community. Ndiritu’s project, grounded in more than 20 years of shamanic studies, posits non-Western, radical methodologies – approaches long excluded from European institutions.



Grace Ndiritu, *Labour: Birth of a New Museum*, shamanic performance inside *The Temple*, 2021. Courtesy: Nottingham Contemporary; photograph: Scene Photography

The exhibition opens with the two-channel film *Black Beauty: For a Shamanic Cinema* (2021), a hallucinatory vision of deep time – a concept of a geological timescale with no beginning or end. Here, the late Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges participates in a fictional late-night television discussion with a Black model, Alexandra Cartier. Although the imagined talk show occurs in the 1980s, its participants discuss South American climate change, pandemics and colonialism. In turn, the film mediates the inextricability of the past, present and future. It is also an oblique depiction of the symbiosis between art and spirituality that this exhibition presents.

Ndiritu's projects often take the form of socially engaged workshops and actions. For example, *Plant Theatre for Plant People* (2021–22) – commissioned

for last year's British Art Show 9 – consists of costumes produced by Aberdeen locals in an eco-activist community workshop. The union between art and ecology exemplifies the idea of the institutional infrastructure as a conduit for change. However, presented here as a residual collection of hand-painted placards and pipe-cleaner headdresses, the work falls somewhat flat. Ndiritu seems to posit that protest is an invitation to connectedness, but how can artists retain the energy of activist ephemera once the participants have dissipated?



Grace Ndiritu, *Arrested Development*, 2003, video still. Courtesy: the artist

I am more moved by the intimacy of a series of lo-fi short films produced early in Ndiritu's career ('New Global Performances', 2003–04). In *Desert Storm* (2004), for instance, the artist writhes atop a world map in a trance, barely covered by a semi-sheer cloth – a comment on the commodification of the Black female body. Below, scrolling captions of the names of countries including Afghanistan, Iraq and Sudan, allude to social and political conflict. Ndiritu's presence and sense of raw emotion make witnessing the films a profound experience.

The exhibition's centrepiece is *The Temple* (2022), a modernist wooden enclosure housing an encyclopaedic display of the artist's textile works and other items from S.M.A.K's collection. The significance of this curation – a result of Ndiritu's animistic ontology – lies in the dialogue an artwork has with the objects surrounding it. For example, a small screen showing Joseph Beuys's famous performance *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974), in which the artist lived alone alongside a coyote for three days, sits next to Ndiritu's *The Twin Tapestries* (2022) – textile replicas of photographs of all-white, predominantly male museum teams at the Wellcome Collection (*Repair:1915*) and Berlin's Ethnologisches Museum (*Restitution: 1973*). By placing these works in proximity, Ndiritu invites us to engage critically with Beuys's adoption of shamanistic practice.



Grace Ndiritu, *Black Beauty*, 2021, film still. Courtesy: the artist

In an accompanying exhibition text, curator Ann Hoste compares Ndiritu's expansive practice to *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the total work of art. In 'Healing the Museum', Ndiritu creates a space where art extends from its frame to its surroundings. She suggests that, through her new spiritual museology, in which we connect to art beyond just representation, we fork a road to inclusion and – importantly – reparation. The scope of Ndiritu's work is broad, and its aims are radical. But she seems to be offering a solution: a redemptive path for museums based on the very practices they have long excluded.

Grace Ndiritu's 'Healing the Museum' is at S.M.A.K, Ghent, until 10 September 2023.

Main image: Grace Ndiritu, Plant Theatre for Plant People, 2021, British Art Show 9. Courtesy: the artist and Aberdeen Art Gallery; photograph: Stuart Whipps