

Artist Grace Ndiritu: ‘Since the pandemic, people are more receptive to healing’

Shamanic performances are central to a practice that is both artwork and ritual

Charlotte Jansen MAY 6 2023

Grace Ndiritu kicks off her shoes and pads across a thick carpet. Soaring overhead is a walnut ply frame, whose structure, Ndiritu explains, was inspired by Native American sweat lodges and her grandmother’s adobe hut in Karatina, Kenya. We pass an elephant, kneeling on the plush flooring as if praying (a 1999 sculpture by Carsten Höller), and a large pyramid (a 1966 painting by Gerhard Richter, based on a found photograph).

Ndiritu, 40, refers to the structure as a “temple” and it is at the heart of her first mid-career retrospective, *Healing the Museum*, at the Municipal Museum of Contemporary Art (Smak) in Ghent. The pillars of Ndiritu’s practice of the past decade, ranging from feminism and ecology to activism and healing, are all present, but viewers are encouraged to move in all directions between them and create their own associations and trajectories. Enshrined in the temple, for example, are paintings from Smak’s collection by Marlene Dumas — a former teacher of Ndiritu’s — and Keith Haring, as well as Ndiritu’s own paintings, video and textile pieces. None of the works are identified in wall texts or labels, the idea being to prompt viewers to engage differently.

“I wanted to create an atmosphere that has a feeling of reverence but is also cosy, where you can come down into your feet and be grounded. It’s like getting into a bath,” Ndiritu says. “I think that’s what people feel when they come to my shows. Even the most cynical, rational person goes ‘aaaahh’ . . . That’s what I take joy in.” In the coming weeks, this reimagining of a museum space will also be activated by shamanic performances and meditation classes — important aspects of Ndiritu’s spiritual and art practice.



Grace Ndiritu's 'Healing The Museum' (2023) at the Municipal Museum of Contemporary Art, Ghent © Dirk Pauwels

“I began the museum healing work in 2012 because I felt museums didn’t reflect the outside world,” she explains. “I think of healing as a form of institutional critique.” Since then, Ndiritu has worked in European museums such as the Pompidou in Paris and Macba in Barcelona, leading staff on drum-induced shamanic journeys or holding visualisation or meditation workshops to stimulate non-rational thinking that might result in changes in the way they approach their work. Ndiritu also works to reanimate and remix institutional collections, such as in a current exhibition at the Fotomuseum Antwerp (Fomu) where she has displayed pictures without nameplates to dissolve hierarchical hang-ups and transcend overbearing histories. Also absent are any representations of people — a way to subvert the voyeurism and violence in photography’s history, in a city known as the first in Belgium to organise a human zoo in 1894.

It hasn’t always been easy for Ndiritu to temper cynicism. She grew up between Kenya and Birmingham in the UK, and discovered a spiritual impulse early on. “When I was a kid I would spend hours in my room lying down doing this kind of out-of-body meditation,” she says. “I’d float around and see things, and have all sorts of experiences. I think my mum thought there was something strange with me!”



'Plant Theatre for Plant People' (2021)

Since the death of her mother, a midwife and activist, when Ndiritu was 17, she has lived a mostly nomadic life, travelling and living in esoteric and off-grid communities, including the Osho ashram in India. "I'm an Osho fan all the way — I loved it there. I went to 'Humaniversity' there. You do this thing called the 'wow', where you do an emotion for half a day — half a day crying, half a day laughing, half a day screaming. And all the clocks are backwards. The idea is to push yourself against your boundaries. It was one of the healthiest places I've been."

When she returned to the UK, attending Winchester School of Art, "I had a hard time in art school, knowing all the problems in the world, I found it frivolous — my heroes were the Dalai Lama, [philosopher Swami] Ramdas, Mother Teresa... but no one was into activism." It was only at De Ateliers, the prestigious Amsterdam art school, that she found her place. "One of the teachers described me as an avalanche. It takes me a while to get going, but once I do I'm unstoppable."

Her teachers included Marlene Dumas, Steve McQueen, Tacita Dean, and Stan Douglas. Ndiritu developed a close relationship with her tutors, in particular Dumas. "She became a mother figure for me, she's always helped me out of scrapes."

A practising Tibetan Buddhist, Ndiritu began to introduce shamanism and meditation into her art practice in the 2000s but has experienced derision and even violence. In *Healing the Museum* there are costumes created and worn during a four-day workshop led by Ndiritu in Aberdeen as part of British Art Show 9 in 2021. “I taught ecological meditation with plants and then we did a protest on Aberdeen High Street. We were shouting ‘Save the mushrooms!’ and most people liked it — but we did get bottles thrown at us.”

More recently, however, Ndiritu’s methods have begun to be recognised, which she puts down to “the pandemic and the fact that people are more receptive to healing”. “I’ve been going on about these things for years but no one was interested. Now it’s like: ‘OK, we understand you.’”



‘Black Beauty’ (2021) © Grace Ndiritu

The entry point to *Healing the Museum* is a two-screen presentation of Ndiritu’s sumptuous short film *Black Beauty*, which won the Film London Jarman Award in 2022. In the 30-minute film, a fashion model (Aida Wellgaye) smokes cigarettes and interviews author Jorge Luis Borges (Emilio Linder) about poetry, the ecological crisis and the legacy of colonialism in Tierra del Fuego. Elsewhere, for a recent commission at the Wellcome Collection, she constructed a Zen Buddhist style “healing pavilion”. For this

she used wood from the controversial Medicine Man gallery, which was dismantled in November 2022 after years of debate about whether the display perpetuated racist, sexist and ableist ideas about medical history. In March, Kate MacGarry gallery announced representation of Ndiritu.

For the artist, the act of transformation — physical and energetic — is necessary and is possible by shifting the energy in people and in art objects. “Art’s important but it’s not the end of the world. It’s a very strange thing with the ego: people always think they make the work. But I believe I’m channelling it from the universe — it’s nothing to do with humans. It’s important to have a bigger picture.”

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