



Grace Ndiritu review – a shamanic journey into the ‘lower world’

Fri 3 Nov 2023, Charlotte Jansen

Kate MacGarry, London

Ndiritu’s ambitious art aims to turn galleries into spaces of healing. This new show, featuring pregnant women, trance-inducing drums and protest carpets is just a taster



A reckoning with western museums ... Healing the Museum by Grace Ndiritu. Photograph: SMAK 2023
Image Dirk Pauwels

A group of heavily pregnant women lie in a circle on the museum’s carpeted floor, their eyes covered, blankets pulled over them. A shaman dressed in a Mexican fringed floral shawl, feather headdress and Masai garments beats a drum in a lurching rhythm, erupting now and then into spontaneous shrieks. A carpet strewn with orange cushions invites you to take a seat on the floor and bear witness to this, as you listen to the women’s testimonies of visions they have experienced during a trance, induced by the drum, during a shamanic journey to the “lower world”. They speak of seeing fawns, eagles and wolves, and swimming through honey. Some of them encounter their unborn children.

This isn't a yummy-mummy group trying out some capitalist spin on an Indigenous spiritual practice – though, since we're in the heart of Shoreditch, you'd be forgiven for thinking it was. What you are seeing is a film – shot in black and white, projected in an enveloping scale – by Grace Ndiritu, a shaman and artist. The 11-minute film is an edited snippet of a real, two-hour-long shamanic performance entitled *Labour: Birth of a New Museum*, which was led by Ndiritu at Exeter's Royal Albert Memorial Museum in 2022. Casting herself in the role of Tawa, the sun spirit of Hopi mythology, Ndiritu offers a welcome for her in utero audience, and a warning about the perils of the earth they're about to enter.

The film loops, and the effects of the performance are left to percolate. But you can't expect enlightenment in 11 minutes. This is a mere glimpse into Ndiritu's wild and experimental methods, combining the spiritual practices she learned over decades living with alternative communities around the world, and her own politics, culminating in a reckoning with western museums, a project she began in 2012. *Labour* is a rare view on how Ndiritu uses shamanic performances – these usually take place in private – to foster new relationships between people, even the unborn, and museums.



Mother of invention ... *Labour: Birth of a New Museum* by Grace Ndiritu. Photograph: RAMM, Exeter, 2023, Photo Simon Tutty

As the performance ends and the space empties out, you realise you are sitting on an identical carpet to the one in the film. In fact, your posterior is parked on top of an image of a mother holding her infant, a member of the Drop City community in

Colorado, a US counterculture community of artists founded in the 1960s. Titled Motherhood, it is one of three giant circular “protest carpets” included in the exhibition that act as thematic fulcrums for the show.

The other two carpets bookend the film projection, like portals to the past – each is a digitally woven, blown-up reproduction of an archival photograph, the blemishes and taints of the original analogue pictures printed on to dense cotton, adding to their tactility. They are functional objects, intended for use during Ndiritu’s ceremonies, readings and performances, but they are equally elegant textile sculptures, each of the pictures picked purposefully to show the seemingly unbreakable cycle of oppression through time. Land Rights (2022) features an image taken at an Indigenous Australian’s protest in Canberra in 1972 and recalls this October’s Australian Indigenous Voice Referendum, a constitutional reform that would have recognised Indigenous Australian rights (it was rejected by an overwhelming majority). Hanging opposite is Women’s Strike (2021), reviving a jubilant image from a women’s liberation march in Washington DC in 1970. A placard thrown up in the foreground reads “Women of the World Unite!”



United we stand (and sit on a carpet) ... Women’s Strike by Grace Ndiritu. Photograph: Courtesy the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

Ndiritu grew up going to protests with her activist mother, and the family home was covered with images like this – the domestic and the political are both expressed in the protest carpets, with the soft power of gathering, sitting, conversing and listening. This is how real action and transformation might take place.

This is a succinct and generative show that gives a taster of Ndiritu's art – albeit tame and tiny when compared to the rest of her considerable body of work. She has gargantuan ambitions to turn art spaces into sites of healing, to use protests as critical thinking, and to make work according to deep time. But she still pays close attention to aesthetic details: the show's ecclesiastical atmosphere is carefully choreographed, down to a custom-constructed modernist bookshelf in dark wood to hold reading materials for the show. You only need to spend 20 minutes here sitting on the floor, cocooned in this microcosm of matriarchy, a temple to the divine feminine, to feel a little more positive. It's like a microdose of therapy for free.

Grace Ndiritu: Labour is at Kate MacGarry, London, from 3 November-16 December

This article appears online at [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com), 3rd November 2023

27 Old Nichol Street, London, E2 7HR
+44 (0)20 7613 0515 mail@katemacgarry.com