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BRUSSELS LARGER AFRICAN ART CONTEMPORARY KERN

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present

THE HURT OF DARKNESS

BAYUNGA KIALEUKA

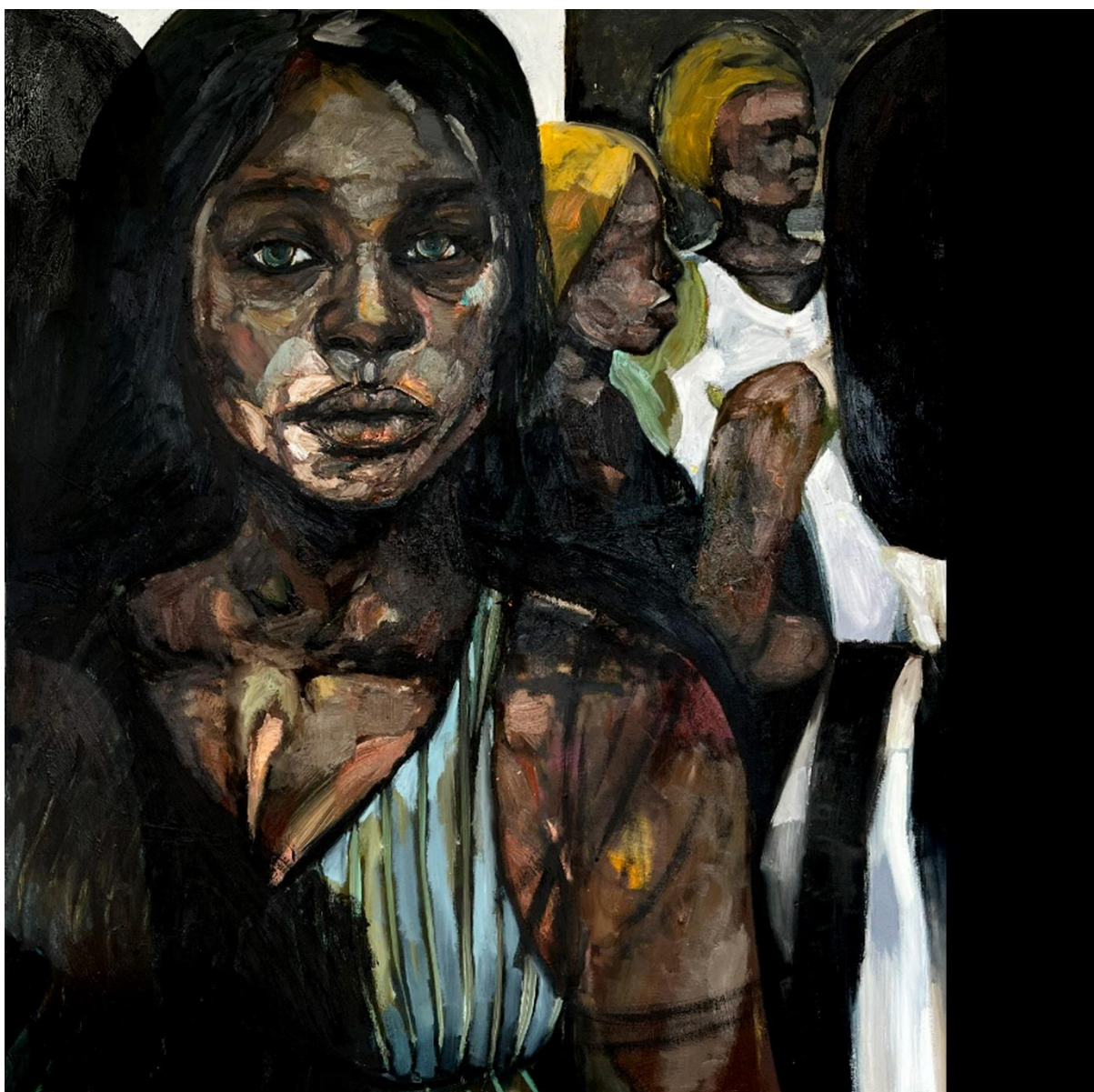
15/09/23 – 31/10/23

BAYUNGA KIALEUKA
(DRC / USA, 1974)

List of Works

(Prices in EUR, excluding VAT, Transport & Insurance)

valid during the exhibition



BAYUNGA KIALEUKA

THE HURT OF DARKNESS

15 SEP - 31 OCT 2023

LES ARTS DU SOLEIL - 20, PLACE DU MARCHÉ - 1227 CAROUGE

VERNISSAGE - VENDREDI 15 SEPTEMBRE À PARTIR DE 17H30

BLAACKBOX

X

AS
LES ARTS DU SOLEIL

THE HURT OF DARKNESS

On the periphery of a now overcrowded panorama of contemporary African black figuration that is opportunistically drifting into market-induced neo-colonial pastiches of Westernized iconography, overwhelmingly disconnected from the political relevance that legitimized the genre in the United States of America where white hegemony still hangs high on almost every museum wall, the painted expressions of Bayunga Kialeuka appear as salvatory poems of a new age, each image replenishing the soul long before revealing its true identity.

The Congolese-born American painter is not trying to seduce us by appealing to our own knowledge of European art history. His artistic concern lies humbly rested on a long tradition of folk art from the USA, evenly preoccupied by the depiction of the lives of everyday people coming from as many origins as the stories they narrate. There is a certain *saudade* transpiring from the works of Kialeuka, for they evidently transcend the medium. Thick earthy oil impastos and never-ending shades of colour form the characteristics of his technique of overworking the surface until the energy of the expression he is after finally emerges. In this new series, we are intentionally lost. Apart for one open exterior scene titled *Poto* (2023), dropping a *nuit américaine* on what may well be the outskirts of Kinshasa, DRC, the characters in all these pictures could just as well be living anywhere else, from South Carolina to modern-day Marseille.

If there is a sense of sorrow, of hurt for lack of a better word, that steams out of this ensemble of large canvases, it is because they are all inspired by the artist's recent experience of his father's passing. The central compositions here depict Kialeuka's memories of the one-week funeral rites which took place in Kinshasa. And if the various mourning venues soon become a pretext to jump into the crux of *social expressionism*, as redefined by the artist, there is a unifying underlining gravitas that can be traced back to that moment of loss, to the act of remembrance, as illustrated in the darkly dynamic communion exhibited in *Procession 2* (2023).

Yet, that loss seems to be universally expanding beyond the personal recount, for it aims to represent a much wider sense of unease, a hypocrisy, a madness, an absurdity, which fare us slowly towards the modern masterpiece of Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), also taking place in the Congo, at the turn of the twentieth century.

The famous novella speaks of these themes and many more within the context of a hollow, futile, contradictory, and dying Western imperialism. In it, we follow Marlow, in 1899, sailing up the Congo River to find Kurtz, an almost mythical ivory trader whose efficiency the whole colonial system seems to depend on. No need to sum up what happens next, as you will recall *Apocalypse Now* (1979) by Francis Ford Coppola, an originally 3.5-hour film (the 2001 *Redux* version is the one to watch) loosely inspired by *Heart of Darkness* but set during the Vietnam War. Marlow is now Willard, played by Martin Sheen, a US soldier sailing up the Mekong River to find renegade Colonel Kurtz, a.k.a. Marlon Brando, a disillusioned madman, symbol of the system which rests on his shoulders of power and violence. In both these masterpieces, the narrative line is a trojan horse to dress a panorama of human nature in times when the world has gone upside down.

What Kialeuka represents in these eleven paintings is a society that has been dehumanized, where each gender seems inescapably isolated, despite some contrarian compositions. While observing *Avenue Kitambo* (2023), it transpires that behind their resolutely Western corporate attires faceless men appear as one, symbolically blind if we are to interpret the closed eyes they exhibit, akin to a lost generation who the artist suggests might have foregone its chance to stand out, to lead. All the while the woman to the right gazes afar, projecting into the future. As often in his work, the artist shows us proud women, standing strong, often alone, their faces marked by the challenges of life. No skin tone is ever uniform, no epidermis smooth, for Kialeuka's faces are rough and unforgiving, like the words of Jacques Brel describing the men and women in *Ces Gens-Là* (1965).

It is important to contextualize this new ensemble within the artist's practice. Kialeuka's work over the past decade has followed the logic of what he has labelled the *Trilogy of the Perpetual Migrant*, which is freely articulated around three chapters taking place in the USA (Miami, Atlanta, New York), Belgium (Brussels) and the Democratic Republic of Congo (in Kinshasa mostly) respectively.

This narrative structure follows the artist's point of view, one that is informed by his multiple homes, his three beating hearts. Born in DRC, raised in the USA, Bayunga Kialeuka later lived and worked in Belgium, before his 2021 return to the Miami art scene as both artist and curator. More importantly, these three geographies present him with a unique narrative space to explore his artistic language and philosophy of *social expressionism*.

While the term is not his, for it was previously used to describe the work of Jacob Lawrence and before him, other artists of the *Harlem Renaissance*, Kialeuka investigates further these two combined notions. *Social*, because his work is concerned with depicting the contemporary societies he evolves in, their identities, gender divide, and social construct. And *Expressionism*, as an unavoidable formal language best translating raw emotion, and the depths of the human condition. Undoubtedly, Lawrence's works seemed more in dialog with those of the German artists of *Die Brücke*, and Kialeuka's with those of the school of Viennese expressionism, but fundamentally both traditions aim for the same study of emotional vibrancy.

Core to Kialeuka's own brand of *social expressionism* are the socio-economic systems which most of us willingly endorse, the rules defining how we relate to each other. His characters act as so many puppets in his plays of inequality and dehumanization. But despite these many disillusion, the song remains full of hope and beauty. Gently relying on a long-established painting tradition of human contradiction, the artist further blurs the lines between grace and ugliness, at times almost invalidating these very notions being opposites. In *Hervé na Vero* (2023), behind the smile, a background male figure fills the frame, symbolically blocking any escape from a world still obstructed by too much patriarchy - or just flip that point of view and imagine a whole different narrative.

To rebound on some of the unintended analogies with *Apocalypse Now* I drew earlier, and the great cinematography of Vittorio Storaro on Brando in the final scene which everyone remembers as "*The Horror! The Horror!*", pay closer attention to *Mwasi ya Pigeon* (2023) and how this woman's face emerges from the shadows. There is beauty hiding in the darkness, waiting to be revealed, Kialeuka seems to suggest. His counterpoints between light and darkness, as in *Bolingo* (2023), are almost constant throughout the show, bringing nuance to our social interpretations of the drama at play in these compositions.

In the Americano-Congolese artist's oeuvre, the perseverance of women usually goes hand in hand with the failure of men to take their responsibilities, an open criticism of generations blaming their

lack of betterment on a system that is resolutely set against them. Although colonialism and racism are still regrettably and justifiably at the heart of contemporary debate, Kialeuka wants to draw our attention back to the individual, for any solution must start from there. The context of his father's funeral presented a personal and beautiful metaphor for depicting a generation of men failing to take action.

Through all his subtle constructive criticism, which could also be described as a hint to action, Bayunga Kialeuka also creates an atmosphere of nostalgia and empathy. His male characters are not beasts of violence and machism, merely humans looking for their place. The female protagonists in his works are never idealized versions of his truthful encounters. As an artist, or an observer as he likes to describe himself, Kialeuka uses *lookism* to make his puppets more or less attractive, however, beyond the many theatricals he relies upon, nests a profound yearning for dignity and togetherness which remain elusive despite their place at the top of the world agenda. *The Hurt of Darkness* thus plays a part in reminding us to conceive giant human leaps one story at a time.

Klaus Pas

September 2023



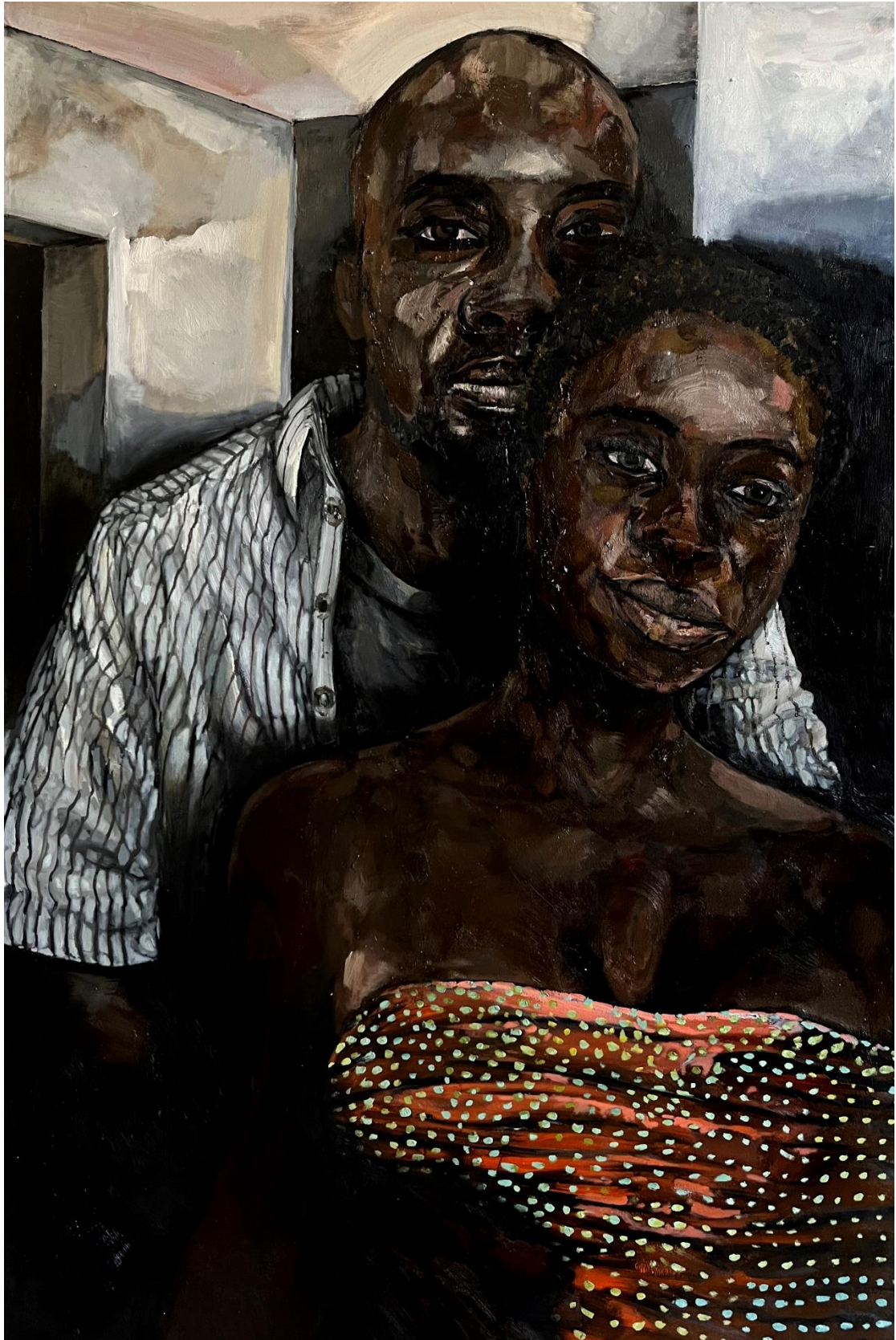
Procession 2 (2023)

Oil on Canvas – 152.4 x 122 cm – EUR 6'500



Mwasi Kitoko (2023)

Oil on Canvas – 152.4 x 122 cm – EUR 6'500



Hervé na Vero (2023)

Oil on Canvas - 183 x 122 cm – EUR 8'000



Papa Nsimba (2023)

Oil on Canvas - 183 x 122 cm – EUR 8'000



Poto (2023)

Oil on Canvas – 152.4 x 122 cm – EUR 6'500



Mwasi ya Pigeon (2023)

Oil on Canvas – 91.4 x 76.2 cm – EUR 4'000



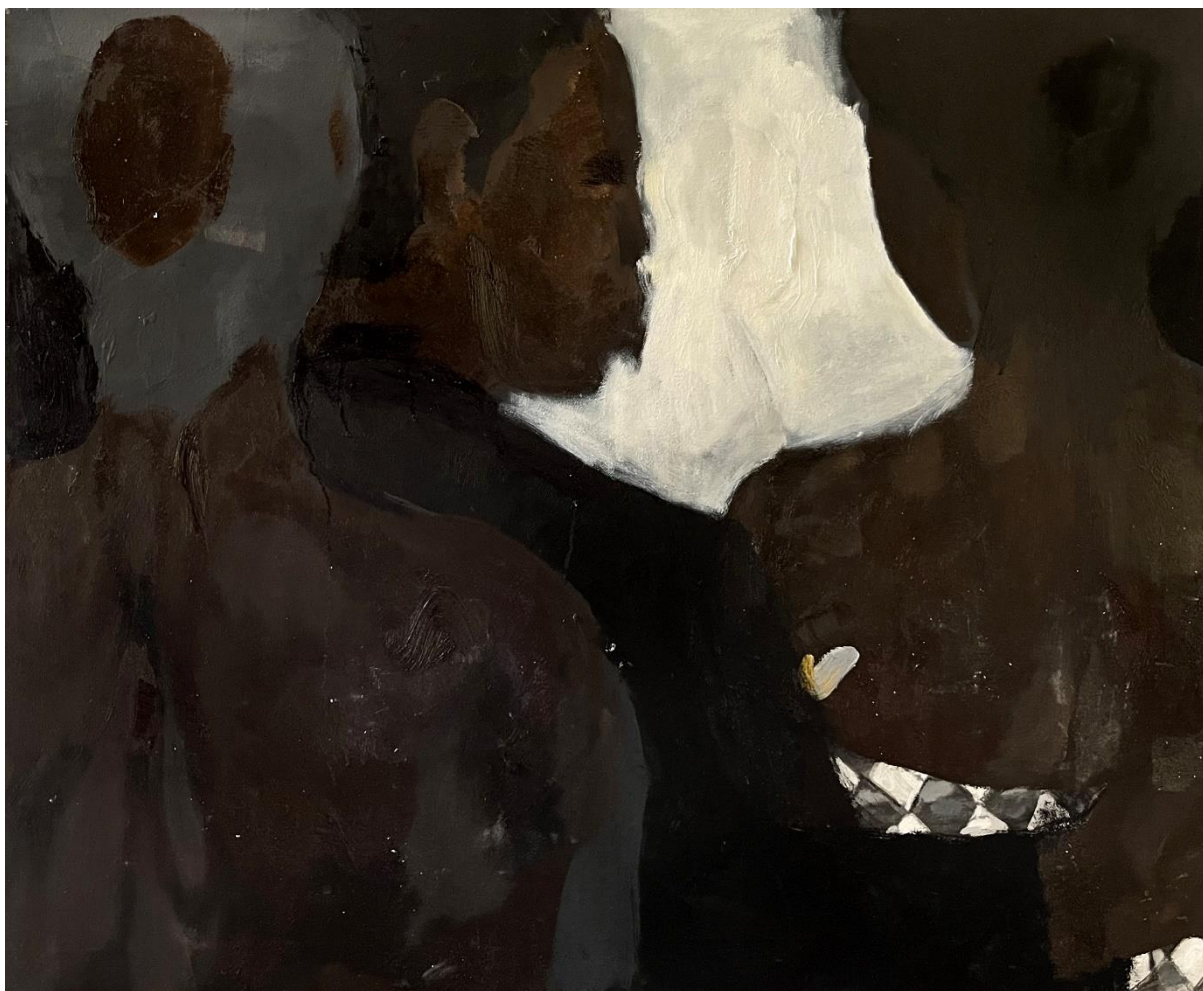
Papa Solda (2023)

Oil on Canvas - 151 x 105.4 cm – EUR 5'800



Avenue Kitambo (2023)

Oil on Canvas – 122 x 183 cm – EUR 8'000



Espace Fifi (2023)

Oil on Canvas – 91.4 x 111.8 cm – EUR 4'500



Kitambo (2023)

Oil on Canvas - 122 x 122 cm – EUR 5'800



Boling (2023)

Oil on Canvas - 183 x 91.4 cm – EUR 6'500



A Congolese born narrative painter, curator, and mural artist, Bayunga Kialeuka grew up in Miami (USA), where he worked as an artist before moving to other US cities, all the while variably travelling to DRC. His work focuses on themes of social realism, investigating society through the prismatic lenses of economic ecosystems, race and cultural identity.

While in the USA, the artist started working along the lines of classicism and modernism to represent his immediate urban surroundings, focusing on the African American context. From his point of view as a perpetual immigrant, Kialeuka's work translates how Black America is still subdued by these three dimensions of poverty, racism, and communitarianism. In this light, his paintings strive to restore the pride of those he sees as inescapably second-class citizens.

Bayunga Kialeuka currently works on an ensemble of portraits and figurative depictions of protest, domestication, and status in Kinshasa (DRC). This expanded series further compares the hierarchical temperament of Kinshasa (indigenous Kinshasa residents) at home and abroad to scale concepts of escapism and utopia in the face of pauperisation's stigmas. Currently living and working in Brussels (Belgium), the artist's drawings and paintings now start shaping a triangular representation of contemporary pan-Africanism aiming to deconstruct our accepted understanding of wider African history to make place for new perspectives into how Africans and Afro descendants are shaping a truly global society.

Having painted numerous large murals as a way to engage with contemporary history and local society in the USA, Kialeuka also worked as a curator and producer of art exhibitions. His compositions are technically influenced by various painters, photographers, filmmakers, writers, musicians, and philosophers alike. Among them are Palmer Hayden, Moké, Tupac Shakur, Claude Brown, Franco Luambo, Lucian Freud, Romare Bearden and Eric Monte.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

The Hurt of Darkness Les Arts du Soleil x BLAACKBOX | Geneva, CH 2023
The Silent Violence of Souls, Kloser Contemporary Art | Antwerp, BE 2021
WAY STATION by Bayunga Kialeuka, Chapelle Boondael | Brussels, BE 2020
BKS Pop-Up, Urban Collective Gallery - The Moore Building | Miami, FL, USA 2016
Stingy Brim, Old Dillard Museum | Ft Lauderdale, FL, USA, 2014
Before Nights Falls, WDNA Jazz Gallery | Miami, FL, USA, 2011
The Tree, Stash Gallery | Miami, FL, USA, 2010
Bayunga Kialeuka, North Dade Regional Library | Miami, FL, USA, 2006
Urban Knights, The Gallery @ AHCAC | Miami, FL 2001

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

Strange Fruits – Homage to Purvis Young African Heritage Cultural Arts Center | Miami, USA 2023
Afritopia La Maison Commune x BLAACKBOX | Brussels, BE 2021
Arts Congo Eza Parc de Bruxelles | Brussels, BE 2020.
Congolisation, Pianofabriek | Brussels, BE 2019.
Art for Rights - Canvases of Courage, Convention Center | New Orleans, LA, USA, 2016
Jazz in the Gardens, Dolphin Stadium | Miami, FL, USA, 2015
Rostros, Galleria Decap | Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, 2015
Trespass, Mar Mar Arts Studio | Miami, FL, USA, 2008
A Day in the Life, Mar Mar Arts Studio | Miami, FL, USA, 2006
The Low Down + Dirty Art Show, Objex Art Space | Macon, GA, USA, 2005
Night of a Thousand Arts, Artopia Gallery and Studios | Miami, FL, USA, 2003
Salon Noir, Saint Thomas University Gallery | Miami, FL, USA 2003
Outlaw Art, Gallery 21 | Miami, FL, USA, 2002
Oscar Thomas Memorial Exhibition, The Gallery @ AHCAC | Miami, FL, USA, 2000
A Tribute to Jackson Pollock, The Schacknow Museum of Fine Arts | Fort Lauderdale, FL, USA, 2000

CURATORIAL PROJECTS

Kiro Urdin – Ancestor African Heritage Cultural Arts Center | Miami, FL, USA, 2023.
ART on PAPER African Heritage Cultural Arts Center | Miami, FL, USA, 2017.
Reconstruction, BKS Curatorial Project, Miami Dade Main Library | Miami, FL, USA, 2016
A Bike Ride with Purvis Young, BKS Curatorial Project, Amadlozi Gallery | Miami, FL, USA, 2016
DragonFly, BKS Curatorial Project, Amadlozi Gallery | Miami, FL, USA, 2015
Beside the District, BKS Curatorial Project and Mar Mar Arts, |Miami, FL, USA, 2010
KIN-Art, BKS Curatorial Project, | Miami, FL, USA 2014
Art Africa, BKS Curatorial Project, Urban Collective, | Miami, FL, USA, 2011
Trespass, BKS Curatorial Project and Mar Mar Arts, | Miami, FL, USA, 2008
Praise House, The Gallery @ AHCAC | Miami, FL, USA 2004
Night of a Thousand Arts, Artopia Gallery and Studios | Miami, FL, USA 2003

MURALS

The Privilege of History Law Studies High School | Brooklyn, NY, USA, 2010.
Social Traps Law Studies High School | Brooklyn, NY, USA, 2010.
All Services Entail Tender Loving Care and A Listening Ear Black Veterans for Social Justice | Brooklyn, NY, USA, 2010.

Turning Point MS 219s | Miami, FL, USA, 2009

This Too Shall Pass Rikers Island Correctional Facility | Brooklyn, NY, USA, 2009.

The Perfect Equilibrium of Nature Tillary Park Foundation & The Urban Assembly School of Music | Brooklyn, NY, USA 2009.

Don't Trash NYC Container Project Mos Carting | New York City, NY, USA, 2008.

South Brooklyn Brooklyn Youth Consortium, Coney Island | Brooklyn, NY, USA, 2008.

Reaching New Heights Trust for Public Land | Brooklyn, NY, USA, 2008.

Incarcerated Minds Rikers Island Correctional Facility | Brooklyn, NY, USA, 2008.

COLLECTIONS

Fondation Gandur pour l'Art | Geneva, Switzerland

The Pas-Chaudoir Collection of Modern and Contemporary Art from Africa & the Diaspora | Antwerp, Belgium

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