

People

‘We Are Told That This Is a Trend’: How Sandra Mujinga Navigates the Mixed Emotions of Being a Black Artist on the Rise

The rising star will be among the younger generation of artists in the Venice Biennale this month.

Kate Brown, April 11, 2022



Sandra Mujinga. Photo: Chai Saeidi

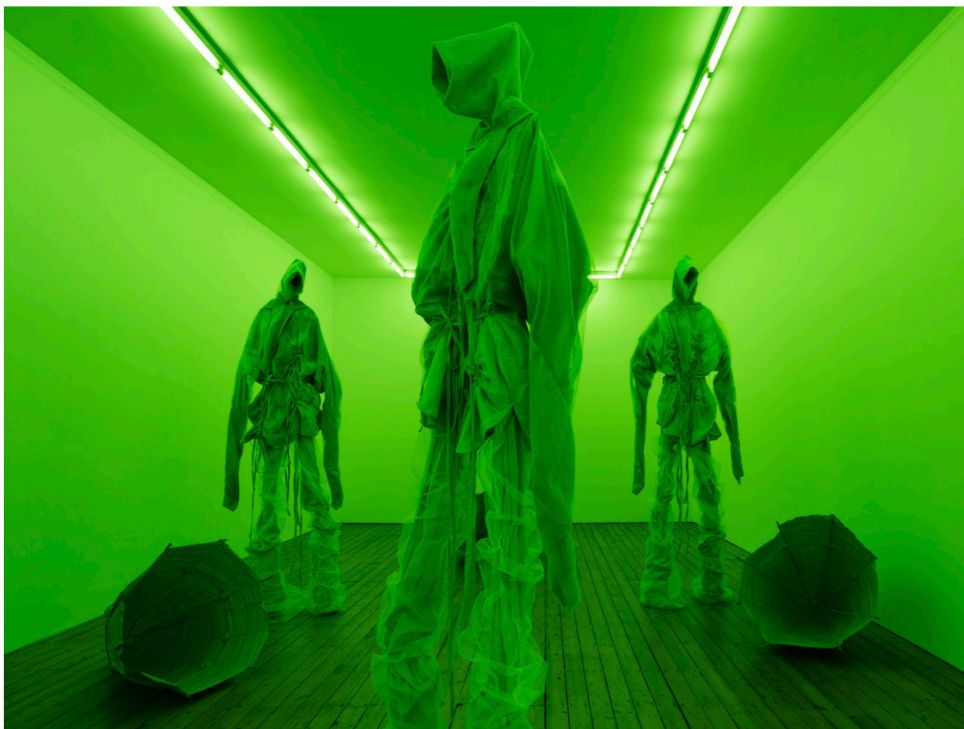
In Octavia Butler's 1987 book *Lillith's Brood*, aliens genetically merge with humans, whose wars have ravaged the Earth, to create a new life form that's something other than human.

What does that new being look like? That's the sort of question that circulates in the mind of Congolese-Norwegian artist Sandra Mujinga. When we met over a video call recently, she was at her studio in Oslo—and I realized we were not totally alone. Over her shoulder two draped phantom-like companions towered. They were works in progress. While we spoke, Mujinga occasionally pulled on a piece of stretch cotton she was working into a woven piece.

"I am interested in world-building," she said. "I have always insisted on being many things at the same time." Indeed, alongside being an artist, she is a DJ, a writer, and garment maker, all of which factor into her performances.

"When I started working with art I did not have these ambitions to fit into the art world or to get a gallery within a set amount of time," she added.

But her materially innovative work, which poignantly speaks to Black representation, surveillance in society, and post-humanist and Afrofuturist ideas, has found an eager audience. Currently, she has a solo presentation at the Munch museum in Oslo, and will have solo exhibitions at Malmö Konsthall in Sweden and the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin later this year (the latter is part of the Preis der Nationalgalerie, the prestigious prize for art in Germany). Mujinga won the award last year.



Installation view of "Spectral Keepers," The Approach, London, 2021. Photo by Plastiques. Courtesy the artist and The Approach, London.

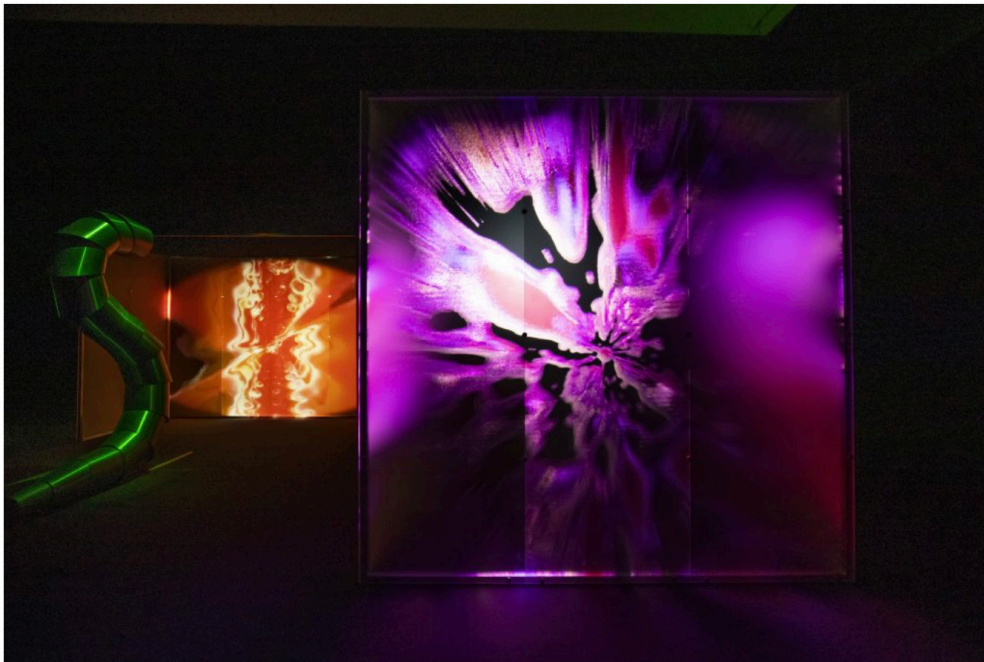
Mujinga will soon head to Venice, where she will show at the biennale's main exhibition with 200 other artists, many of whom are female and speculate on the future.

"I am very excited about it," Mujinga said. "Cecilia [Alemani] is really hands-on, and I always appreciate curators where you can speak about concepts but also practical aspects, like what nail to use."

Born in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mujinga grew up with her parents and two siblings in Oslo, which was not always easy.

"There is this notion in Norway, which I find quite terrifying, of being a 'good person.' Norwegians are obsessed with 'goodness,'" she said. "When something threatens that image, you enter a dangerous territory."

The Black Lives Matter movement has helped catalyzed more direct and honest conversations about the realities of the Black experience and discrimination, which had previously been understood as solely an American problem.



Sandra Mujinga, installation view of "Solo Oslo" at Munch Museum in Oslo, 2022. Photo by Ove Kvavik. Courtesy the artist, Croy Nielsen, Vienna, and The Approach, London.

Norway's racial homogeneity was one reason that, when Mujinga was 12, her family relocated for a time to Nairobi. "The older I get, the more I understand my mother's decision to move—she wanted to give us this experience of not always being visibly the Other. Even in Kenya, though, it was very clear that we were Congolese," she said.

Moving to the more international city of Berlin, Mujinga still found the art world very white. "I find more diversity outside of art spaces," she said, through the music scene especially. In Berlin, she connected to other Congolese people by way of her hair dresser.

The desire to free herself from societal strictures flows into her work. Across her performances and videos, the notion of invisibility appears often. Mujinga describes the term as a space of freedom. "Invisibility is also a space for rest," she said.



Ghosting (2019). Installation view of "Witch Hunt," Kunsthal Charlottenborg, Copenhagen, 2020. Courtesy the artist, Croy Nielsen, Vienna, and The Approach, London.

Her best known pieces are her large textile sculptures, hooded shadowy figures that stand tall in the room. They don't have faces and their intentions—if they have any—are inscrutable. Their presence is powerful, gentle, mysterious, and a bit ghostly.

At the Neue Nationalgalerie Prize, for example, one group of figures, titled *Reworlding Remains*, appear like titans, composed of carefully arranged dark textiles hanging on steel. In another gallery, a draped form called *Sentinels of Change* looks like the hull of a ship or a dinosaur carcass, basked in an eerie green light. Everything trembles on the edge of being anthropomorphic.

Whether the works incite ominous feelings or awe depends on the viewer. Mujinga said her works explore the ways people project their ideas onto ambiguous subjects. “I am drawn to the fact of a figure just standing there, just taking up space and existing. What happens then?” she said. “People project things onto that figure. I have received—just by wearing a hoodie as a Black person who does not have long hair—the idea of being a fearsome Black man. Me just existing prompts such a projection onto me.”

She quotes the author Claudia Rankine: “Because white men can't police their imagination, Black men are dying.”



Sandra Mujinga, *Sentinels of Change* (2021). Installation view of “Preis der Nationalgalerie,” Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, 2021. Photo by Jens Ziehe. Courtesy the artist, Croy Nielsen, Vienna, and The Approach, London.

We discussed the “rush” to correct the absence of Black artists in long-exclusive spaces. “There are not yet the structures to perhaps support the person or keep them safe there,” Mujinga said. “I almost freak out when people tell me that I am ‘the first Black woman’ being invited... Because that means there is a reason why there has not been anyone before me.”

The constant talk about the art world’s hyped moment of racial awareness is unpleasant. “I think quite a lot about mental health and how to still have this confidence, because we also can be told that this is now a trend,” she said. “How does that affect your productivity when you have to have that in mind?”

She hopes that museums will do more to accommodate Black perspectives in museums and galleries long term, not only by way of exhibitions and programming, but also by hiring more diverse staff.

“A Black woman who worked at an institution came up to me once and said, ‘I want to see the art you are making when you are 60.’ That was a really beautiful comment for me,” she said. “Black artists should grow old, too.”

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