

**Profile:** The artist's multimedia practice – the subject of a current exhibition at The Approach in London and a solo show at New York's Swiss Institute later this year – conjures spectres that evade the violent spotlight of representation  
*by Eric Otieno Sumba*

# Sandra Mujjinga



**T**he story of how Sandra Mujinga came to be an artist who works with textiles is a beautiful one. Her mother studied fashion, but she preferred working in other, better-paid sectors, though she never lost her creative interest. By her own admission a quiet, shy child, Mujinga recalls enjoying – and being very good at – drawing. At one point, she even considered becoming an illustrator – after she watched Disney’s *The Lion King* (1994), when she was six, and became curious about how it was made. But she never really knew that art could be a career. ‘My aim was to be an architect, so I applied to study architecture with my friends, but they got in and I didn’t.’ When she explained her interests to her teacher, she was encouraged to consider Lund University’s Malmö Art Academy, where she was accepted. ‘It does feel like an accident because I was raised to think about practicality. Yet, here I am making garments, but I am not working in fashion.’ Most of the clothes Mujinga makes are hardly wearable, not to mention utterly impractical. Manifestations of the various amorphous forms of Mujinga’s imagination, her creations are either freestanding, floating or draped over mystical anthropomorphic figures to intriguing effect.

The discreet white swoosh on her black sweater indicates Mujinga is keeping it athleisurely at home in wintry Oslo, from where she joins our video call. She has just finished installing work for her solo exhibition ‘Spectral Keepers’, at The Approach in London, via FaceTime. Initially due to open in January, the show has

been postponed due to COVID-19 restrictions. She seems relieved that it is done and that it was easier than expected; she was able to leverage prior experience to give detailed installation instructions for her shape-shifting figures. For the last few years, the artist has been dividing her time between Berlin and Oslo, coinciding with a fundamental change in the way she works. ‘I have tried to collaborate with other people more, and Berlin has always been really good in terms of networking: it is where I’ve met all the people that I’ve been working with over a long period of time.’ The COVID-19 crisis has signalled a return to Oslo, which, with its robust support for artists, remains an ideal base for plotting ambitious projects. ‘I often didn’t have the patience to wait for the types of conversations [in Oslo] that I wanted to be having,’ she explains. ‘It was easier for me to find them in other places, like Berlin.’ Now, however, she believes there is scope for engagement in Oslo – although not without limitations, since the Norwegian language is, as she puts it, ‘quite young with regards to talking about Blackness’.

In Berlin, Mujinga found social media useful for connecting. If that failed: ‘I went to events and approached people like a sleazy model agent. I’ve stopped people in clubs to ask them about being part of my art projects.’ However, the artist is aware of the growing criticism of the proliferating anglophone art bubble in Berlin that often accommodates people like her at the expense of non-English-speaking and/or German BIPOC artists and

**Previous page**  
*Mítáno*, 2020, tulle fabric, cotton fabric, nylon thread, threaded rods, wire clamps, cellular concrete, 276 × 92 × 34 cm.  
All images courtesy: the artist, The Approach, London, and Croy Nielsen, Vienna; photograph: Lewis Ronald





## Mujinga's work critiques the violence of representation – what it means to be in the spotlight as opposed to moving in the dark.

**Opposite page**  
*Clear as Day*,  
2017, performance  
documentation,  
Norwegian Sculpture  
Biennale. Photograph:  
Audun Severin Eftevåg

**This page**  
*Flo*, 2019,  
installation view,  
Vleeshal Middelburg,  
2020. Photograph:  
Gunnar Meier

art workers, who may be deemed insufficiently 'international'. (As recent projects by Berlin-based artist Moshtari Hilal and 11th Berlin Biennale participant Sinthujan Varatharajah have pointed out.) Still, Mujinga sought out the *Afrodeutsche* community that initially drew her to the city, though it is now among those most likely to be displaced by a rising number of exclusively anglophone galleries, cafes and concept stores, which ignore that, besides German, Turkish, Arabic and Russian are also widely spoken.

Interested in the evolution of Mujinga's work, I ask about her use of disparate media – photography, performance, video, sculpture – and materials ranging from delicate fabrics to rubber inner tubes to plastic. Her ideas, she tells me, take shape through different media simultaneously: 'The way I create the surfaces of the

fabrics by painting layer upon layer of PVC, like a skin of plastic waste, relates to my approach to editing videos.' To illustrate her point, she refers to her performance *Clear as Day* (2017), in which she explored wearable sculptures: the idea of humans as hangers that shape and influence the fabric's movement. The garments worn by the performers are strikingly similar to the ones worn by the large-scale sculptural figures in her later exhibition 'Midnight' (2020) – albeit smaller and more brightly hued, in flame oranges and fluorescent greens. In 'Midnight', the absence of human bodies lends the clothes an eerie flatness: the influence of shadow theatre on Mujinga's sculptural forms is clear. At the heart of her work, lies an implicit critique of the violence of representation – what it means to be in the spotlight as opposed to moving in the dark or feigning opacity to avoid misrepresentation.



Having trained in textual sculpture at Vienna's Academy of Fine Arts as part of her studies at Malmö, Mujinga also developed her photography and video practices as a means of documenting her performances. Mujinga finds herself drawn to what she terms 'sculptural video'. 'I try to capture the dimensionality of whatever I portray in my videos' she explains. 'For instance, to create the hologram video *Flo* [2019], I used the Pepper's ghost technique [an illusion in which the image of a brightly lit figure, out of sight of the audience, is reflected onto the stage], thinking about our digital footprints.' From the outset, Mujinga resisted making work that audiences would simply stand in front of, consume and then move on from: she wanted her art to be immersive and even mentally choreographed how people would move around each piece.

In *Human Archipelago* (2019), Nigerian-American author Teju Cole writes: 'Time is a landscape. Here and there a few place names, like keys placed on light-sensitive paper. Bright day, strong shadow.' I recall his poetic musings as Mujinga tells me about her childhood. Although the notion of Afropolitanism has been contested since it was first popularized by the author Taiye Selasi in her 2005 essay 'Bye-Bye Babar', it lends itself well to Mujinga's upbringing. Her childhood was one in which, to quote Cole again:

'Citizenship [had] nothing to do with nationality. And the reality of citizenship [was] independent of any documents issued or withheld by the state.' Against all odds, Mujinga was raised to be at home in the world. Born in 1989 in Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), she migrated with her family to Norway at the age of two, where she was schooled until her family relocated to Kenya when she was a young teen. 'My mom wanted us to have this feeling of not always being the Other, not always existing in that relation. So, she moved us out of Norway for a few years, and I'm very happy she did.' Mujinga's family lived in Nairobi for three-and-a-half years. She initially attended the small Christian Norwegian community school before embarking on the difficult transition to Kenyan schooling. 'I was home-schooled for a while because I failed the admissions test for the Kenyan school and eventually had to start a class lower. That period of my life shapes me today, because it was normal to wake up at 4am and study before getting to school at 7am ... Just having to persist.' But there are also fond memories. As well as enjoying visits from relatives from the DRC, she immersed herself in Nairobi's youth culture, especially music, moving in the same circles as the Longombas, a Kenyan musical duo of Congolese descent who were huge there at the time.

**This page**  
'SONW', 2019–20,  
exhibition view,  
Bergen Kunsthall.  
Photograph:  
Thor Brødreskift

**Opposite page**  
'Spectral Keepers',  
2021, exhibition view,  
The Approach,  
London. Photograph:  
Lewis Ronald

**Mujinga's practice is a process of thinking with her hands and experiencing whatever comes: 'facing its essence'.**

She realizes that the experience changed her. 'Back in Norway, I would finish my homework while the teacher was handing it out and submit it immediately. And the teacher would say: "Oh, no: that's for next week; calm down!" I was really hungry [to learn]; I even wrote extra essays.' Losing both of her parents within two years of each other while still in her teens made Mujinga extremely focused on her journey, and she quickly embraced independence as the eldest sibling, flanked by her brother, sister and a couple of half-siblings. At art school, the academic consensus was that she was 'just doing her thing'. 'I've always been very preoccupied with and into my practice, but it hasn't been about recognition; rather, about insistence. That feeling when you say something, then someone asks: "Oh, what are you saying?" And you repeat it until they're like: "Ah." Then you say it again and again and again.' It has been a process of thinking with her hands and intentionally experiencing whatever comes: 'facing its essence', as she puts it. She has found inspiration in fiction and theory. 'Someone who has carried me quite a lot is Octavia Butler. Her works have been important to me because she wasn't afraid to decentre the human, which has aligned well with my own thought process. Zach Blas's *Queer Darkness* [2015] was also significant and served as an incentive to read Fred Moten and, more recently, Frank B. Wilderson III's *Afropessimism* [2020].'



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**Sandra Mujinga**





For her show at The Approach, Mujinga has produced four new sculptures in near-transparent green tulle, which can be bunched and layered to become opaque. Inspired by the head coverings of medieval beekeepers, the forms, like some of Mujinga's earlier sculptures, are steeped in green light. The creative process behind these new sculptures echoes the production techniques she used in *Flo*. Both works reflect Mujinga's thinking around the phantoms that haunt contemporary humanity – from the ones we create with our digital footprints to the lingering spectres of colonialism and environmental destruction. Mujinga is keen to explore whether the appearance of several of these ghosts at once is parsed as dramatically dystopian or, rather, as an unremarkable unveiling of our constant ephemeral companions. In a nod to the disturbing modalities of data-capture technology and Mujinga's propensity to character-build backwards from shreds and fragments, each of the new sculptures features a basket, which serves as an interrogation of the mechanisms of capture.

'This goes back to opacity and transparency,' Mujinga tells me when I question her about the issues that recur in her work. Her performance *You Are All You Need* (2019)

touched upon the 2002 eruption of the Nyiragongo volcano in the DRC. Instead of discussing it directly, two performers, playing the roles of artists from the future, discuss why they disappeared after the seismic event, which one of them may have caused. 'I've been thinking about whether I can at all appear as I wish to appear in this world. Or if there's an impossibility to that,' she says. 'This is why it's so important to me to pursue practices and engage in discussions – as *Afropessimism* reminded me – that do not have solutions.' **END**

**Opposite page**  
*Ghosting*, 2019,  
soft PVC, denim,  
acrylic paint, oil  
paint, glycerine,  
threaded rods and  
rod couplings,  
dimensions variable

**This page**  
*Camouflage Waves*  
1–3, 2018, inkjet print  
on film, soft PVC,  
grommets, threaded  
rods, 1.9 × 1.3 m

**Eric Otieno Sumba** is a writer and contributing editor of *Griotmag*. He lives in Frankfurt, Germany.

**Sandra Mujinga** is an artist and musician. In 2020, she had a solo show at Vleeshal Middelburg, the Netherlands. 'Spectral Keepers', her solo exhibition at The Approach, London, UK, is on view until 18 April. Later this year, she will have a solo show at the Swiss Institute, New York, USA. She lives in Oslo, Norway, and Berlin, Germany.