

SANDRA MUJINGA

ALIEN BODIES

Words by Geoffrey Mak



Fashion always obscures the body. It places the body at a certain remove, occluding the known into the terrain of the unseen. For Sandra Mujinga's performance *Clear as Day* (2017) for the Norwegian Sculpture Biennial, the artist staged a performance in the format of a runway show: ten Black models walking in orthogonal lines across a courtyard, wearing looks designed by Mujinga. Women sport tops with pink elongated sleeves draped to the floor, or what looks like apple-green scarves draped over the head and running down the length of a body. One model wears a dress with a kimono collar and voluminous, ruffled sleeves in dusty blue. These clothes render the Black body as other, unfamiliar, exotic, foreign, yet at the same time—because this is working in the vernaculars of fashion—chic, aspirational, lush, desired.

Should the Black body be represented as relatable, legible, or even human? On the one hand, representing the Black body as intelligible is a vie for inclusion, yet runs equal risk of detection in a racially biased surveillance state, psychographic data capture, and market commodification. There are advantages to invisibility: survival by confusion strategy. Legacies like Afrofuturism imagine alternatives—alien bodies that work in the opposite direction by embracing and exacerbating otherness. Influenced by speculative writers such as Nnedi Okorafor and N. K. Jemisin, Mujinga's worlds are populated by foreign bodies. In her 2020 solo exhibition "Spectral Keepers" at The Approach gallery in London, towering humanoid figures populate the space doused in chroma key green light (a color that signifies, in filmmaking, absolute potentiality). Four sculptures appear like emaciated figures from a dystopian future. The stick-thin giants wear ruffled trousers with transparent PVC layers, and long,

Drawing from Afrofuturism and fashion, Sandra Mujinga (Congolese, b. 1989) investigates the biopolitical condition of the Black body in today's urban scenario. Her work is part of the New Museum Triennial, on view through January 2022.

oversized hoodies rucked with dangling string. At once, the hoodie references the garment so often seen as the target of urban racial profiling, but blended with the punk-Baroque aesthetic associated with the New Romantics.

Born in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1989, Mujinga was interested in fashion from a young age. Her mother studied fashion, even if she went on to work in more practical professions. Mujinga told *Frieze* of her own work, "I am making garments, but I am not working in fashion," indicating how her work follows where fashion exists outside traditional institutions: the dance floor, social media. As a DJ who often scores music for her own works, she brings her work to the context of the club, where queer and raced bodies often revel in fashion for bursts of visibility and play. (That last decade's underground club music was so often described as "post-apocalyptic" tracks with Mujinga's otherworldly alien bodies.)

Her latest work *Worldview* at Swiss Institute features an eight-hour video of a lake flanked by mountains that, at first glance, appears to be a stand-still photograph. Though closer inspection would reveal small figures—part cyborg, part alien—moving about the landscape, both in plain sight but evading surveillance. This vantage point decenters the human, an aesthetic perspective Mujinga draws from Octavia E. Butler's fiction, a recurring influence on her work. The landscape was shot from a valley in the Norwegian fjords at Gudvangen, recognizably this world, yet populated by humanoids from an imagined future. It's a speculation augmented onto the present, opening up futures and possibilities for today's dystopian realities.

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Image courtesy of the artist and The Approach, London.

