

It has to be Beautiful

On his first visit to the capital, South African artist Athi-Patra Ruga talked to CCQ's Ric Bower as he walked through the streets of West London, whilst Gástón van Mülders photographically documented his encounters with residents and tourists.



Athi-Patra Ruga presents the body as a hybrid construct, free from inherited ideological and geographical constrictions, through the creation of provocatively costumed personae and intoxicatingly rich tapestries. Both of these approaches put in an appearance at the recent group show *Broken English* at Tyburn Gallery. Ruga was recently included in the Phaidon book *Younger Than Jesus*, a directory of over 500 of the world's best artists under the age of 33. So how old is he?

Athi-Patra Ruga: A lady never gives that away! My birthday is on the 9 March, the anniversary of Biggie Smalls' passing away, the Notorious B.I.G. I was 13 when it happened. I was like, 'Shit, Notorious has just fucked up my birthday!'

RB: They say what you get into at age 13 stays with you...

A-PR: Part of my meditation is to revisit those days and try to syphon some energy from them.

RB: What got you started anyway?

A-PR: My father used to take us in the back of his van to the theatre, to see protest plays. I think my parents knew that the world was going to change, so they started preparing us for it. I remember going to see *Asinamali*, by Mbongeni Ngema. My dad, for the first time, entertained swear words, within the context of art. I realised then that it would be okay to express my capricious self through art. Then high school happened. My education was split between the Republic of the Ciskei and the Republic of South Africa. So I was this kid who was raised in a Xhosa animist tradition in Ciskei, then I'd cross the border to go to school in South Africa. Corporal punishment was officially banned in South Africa, in 1986, but people continued to use it. It was a violent time and that violence was transposed onto the kids. The South African education system was still run by people who were from conscription days. They couldn't deal with a kid with an afro, who listened to Megadeth and played a mean piano.

RB: You were beaten up a lot as a kid?

A-PR: You know, I think about that a lot. There's violence in my work. I'm the last of ten kids. My parents weren't really disciplinarians, but my older sisters and brothers were in the streets, throwing rocks and burning tyres and that violence came into the house. My mom was a midwife, so we never got to see her. We became this sibling family and the violence of the streets became its economy. That violence followed me into high school, where rugby, the Anglican religion and the English language were introduced to me through violence.

RB: Technique wasn't what you wanted?

A-PR: I fucking hated it. I wanted to read fashion history. I got kicked out in my second year. They had to ask me back, because I got nominated for some big award, but why would I want to do their shitty syllabus when I was doing fashion week? I really hated the fact that in South Africa, then, it was the generation that thought black fashion students were only expected to learn technique and work in a factory. I bunked school constantly to hang out with these older artists in Johannesburg.

RB: And when did things begin to change?

A-PR: As a teenager, I went to Belgravia Art School in East London [South Africa]. The teachers were cuckoo. They made me think, 'Fuck, I'm an artist and it's okay for me to be gay'. I remember being given this book on Hockney, which showed how he painted his friends, how he made his life his material. That was an epiphanic moment for me. The school taught me to understand art history and fashion history – both of which I was really interested in – and appreciate how different genres can collide. One of my first teachers told me that I shouldn't have to choose between the genres because 'choosing is for beggars'.

RB: Young creatives often agonise over going one way or another.

A-PR: That decision was made for me when I got a scholarship to the Gordon Flack Davidson Academy of Design in Johannesburg. They only focused on technique there, though, with almost no fashion history

RB: How do you see creative education developing in the future?

A-PR: I believe in mentorship; the atelier. The artist who learns from a community has a responsibility to open up their studio. A lot of solo gallery artists feel that interns will cramp their style, which is an insecurity born out of academia. I have come through this tradition whereby I would sit and learn under others, so it's easy to open up my studio, because I know that I am, and must be, in an exchange with other people.

RB: Because you were denied the education you wanted, it made you strive for it harder, I suppose?

A-PR: I really appreciate what I have now. I look at kids who have just graduated and walk into my studio; they're too cool for school. From the outset I tell them, 'This is school, bitch!' Over the time they spend with me they have their preconceptions challenged. —>

Mainstream art education still comes from old ass white dudes talking about old ass white men, though. Where are the women artists, man?

RB: I hear you are a fan of the early 20th century South African painter, Irma Stern?

A-PR: Ah, my love affair with Irma Stern... Her work is a feast for the eye. When I first opened a book on her, I was completely disarmed by her lines and by the power of her gestures. You can see, in her work, the way she looks at things. She would paint black skin so beautifully... In some ways, that was the reason the 16-year-old Athi moved to Johannesburg and started hanging around with artists. I talked about the beauty of Irma Stern to these contemporary South African artists and they would look at me in astonishment and say, 'What? But she was a colonialist!' She bore witness to a particular time though, and it is still a part of our heritage. She was racist, it is true. She never gave names to black subjects, whereas her white subjects would be 'Doctor this' or 'Mister that'. It raised important issues for me, as I was starting to move towards working with tapestry and portraiture. Who has the power? Is it the artist's ego? Is it the technique that delivers the image? Or is it the person being represented? I love that tension and, whatever her politics, she was such a great colourist. You can't take that away from her.

RB: South Africa reacted to her very negatively when she first exhibited there in the 1920s.

A-PR: That was because she was a woman artist and she was using a technique that was not Sunday painting. There's always a certain bitter sweetness when you learn about your South African history.

RB: So when did you 'come out' then?

A-PR: I've never had to come out. Gayness was the political liberation struggle for my generation in South Africa. So I'm gay politically, but I'm also a same-gender-loving man. I never had a reason to come out until I started seeing 'coming out' on national TV. As a country we'd just opened up, so there was this idea that you had to come out as a political statement. My parents knew I was a flaming queen from day one. I remember the

day I decided to do what I had seen other gay folk do on TV. I walked up to my dad and was like, 'Dad, I'm gay.' My dad was like 'So, out of 10 kids, you are the one who has to tell me what you get up to in the bedroom'. I felt like such an idiot; he brought it down to such a base level. I realise now that the whole thing that led me to coming out was really an imported standard from the West. This, within an increasingly hetero-normalised gay culture, creates problems that are connected to the opening up of martial law, adoption and property law. I am worried that this hetero-normalisation betrays the cheekiness of queer culture. It is that cheekiness that stimulates our desire for liberation.

RB: Is the sense of difference what motivates you to create work?

A-PR: At times, yes. For a work I did in response to a poster released in 2007, in Switzerland, depicting two white sheep kicking a black sheep, called *Even I Exist in Embo*, I dressed up as a big ball of hair. I tried to react to such outrageous xenophobia in a cheeky way. The title of the work is derived from Poussin's 1637 pastoral painting *Et In Arcadia Ego*. It is ironic that Switzerland is the epitome of Utopia for some people. I also started reacting to other xenophobic actions; one instance, where a young woman was brutalised for wearing a mini skirt in 2008, for example.

The body is the other battleground. I was a really overweight kid, so I always had my own body issues. When I do performances now, I lose weight, I gain weight, I prepare for them in the way that an athlete does. Even if I'm going to be sitting down for 20 hours, I prepare myself physically.

RB: So your work emerges from tension and injustice?

A-PR: When you're talking about a city or a sovereign state, the conversation must eventually turn to autonomy. I started climbing churches to react against the idea of sovereignty over space: after all who has the right to name a space and who can claim it exclusively? I started just climbing motherfucking things; it was the only way I knew of reacting. There's one video where I climbed a Universal Church of God building; it's out there on the internet somewhere.

RB: You're exerting control, through performance, where otherwise you might be quite powerless?

A-PR: I need to clarify that it is in my civilian, non-performative form, where most of the real trauma of life is absorbed. For self-preservation, I choose to use avatars to communicate through, because if I was to try to deal with my country's history, my own sexuality and all of these difficult things, without a guise or cloak to hide behind, I think I'd just dematerialise. We all live double lives. We are characters that live behind fences and when we come out, we come out as different people.

RB: In terms of performance, are there people who you look to? Leigh Bowery, perhaps?

A-PR: Leigh Bowery was one true queen, for sure. But before we talk about that, let's look closer to home. Remember I come from an animist background where one has to put on the paint and hide the eyes to transcend into another world, into a performative space. Before we go for Leigh, let's talk about my own backyard, because performance in Africa is boom! It's not other. It's an extension of our everyday life, there to help deal with the struggles that come from many, many bullshits.

RB: The work you present is dirty, complex and connected.

A-PR: Yeah! And you can feel it. There is a *duende* that comes with camp; once you get into it, you get thrown from one labyrinth to another.

RB: What is the relationship between your performance and the tremendous physicality of the objects you create? You have spoken about your hands-on involvement; the process of dying wool, seeking tactile connection with the material. What is the connection between the two arenas: the performance, which occurs and then is gone; and the object, which you have built and with which you have an ongoing relationship?

A-PR: It's all in me, like a lost condom, and I've lost a few. My performances began in fashion school. I started wearing my creations after someone questioned whether a male fashion designer should be exerting control



p48&49: *Collaborative portraits of Athi-Patra Ruga with White City inhabitants, Gáston van Mülders with Francesca Donovan, photographers assistant* for CCQ, 2015.

p51: *Proposed Model of the New Azanian, Athi-Patra Ruga*, 2014. Wool, thread and artificial flowers on tapestry canvas, 300 x 178 cm. © Athi-Patra Ruga, courtesy of Tyburn Gallery.

p52&53: *Hoochi Burlesque, Athi-Patra Ruga*, 2007. Intervention, Hillbrow, Johannesburg, South Africa. Photograph: George Mahashe and Athi-Patra Ruga studios cc.

p54: *The Future White Woman of Azania, Athi-Patra Ruga*, 2012, performance still, inkjet print on cotton rag, 80 x 100cm, edition of 10. © Athi-Patra Ruga, courtesy of Tyburn Gallery.

p55: *Lands of Azania (2014–2094)* (detail), *Athi-Patra Ruga*, 2014. Thread on tapestry canvas, 200 x 180 cm © Athi-Patra Ruga, courtesy of Tyburn Gallery.

over a woman's body. I was like, 'Take it easy, it's only fashion', but it did make me think. It challenged me to start wearing my clothes and go into dangerous areas, because they don't have art in those spaces. In South Africa, avant garde drag performance traditionally ends with being kicked out or with being arrested. I thought, 'Fuck that, I grew up on the streets, if someone wants to come for me I'll take off my heels and fight!' I would go into these dangerous spaces then and the first thing that would happen would be people would look at me and laugh... There's nothing more comforting than someone laughing at you when you think the motherfucker is gonna hit you! Then they would ask why I'm doing what I'm doing and I would tell them: "To bear witness to the times we live in." That's the textbook answer to the question of being an artist, —>

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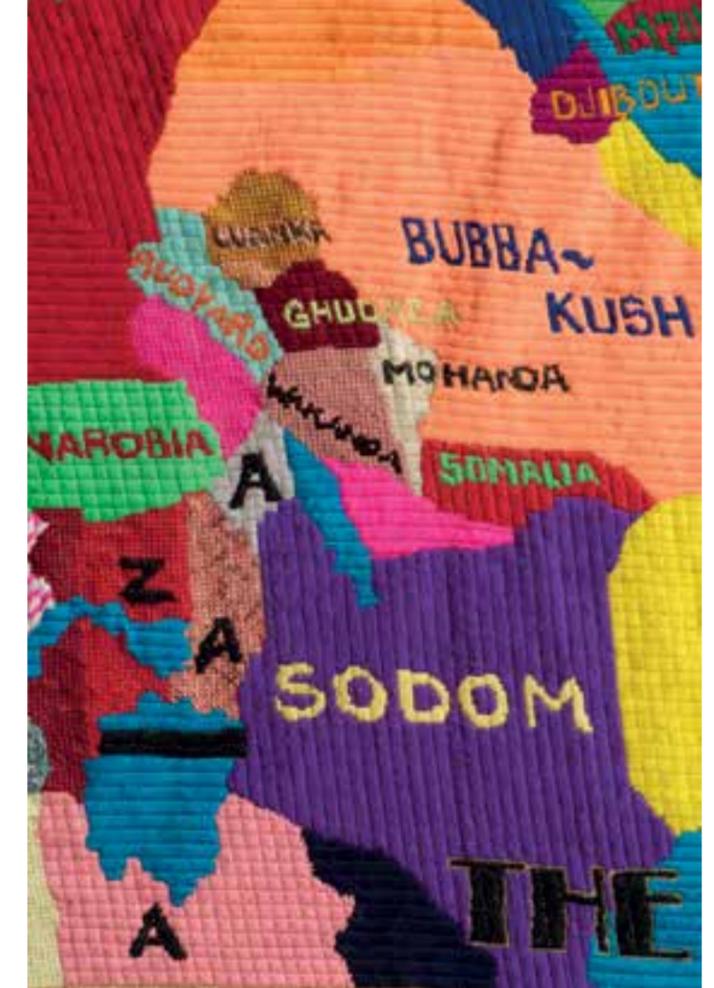
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but what I really do it for is to purge these spaces. There's a moment of grace when these questions are asked within a space, in spite of the prejudices that are present. All of our education, all of our experience; the travel, the reading and we are shown up by people who don't have all that, but who show you grace. They engage with your work very directly. That's when the art is made, in that moment of grace. I always want to hold on to it. I tried to by moving into print. I would bring a photographer with me when I performed, but I'd see the audience react to the camera in a different way, so this created a dilemma. To answer your question, when I make tapestry, I insert my performative self into these arcadian landscapes, these utopian dreams.

RB: Tell us about *Miss Congo*. Why do you invent characters for yourself?

A-PR: I invent a character every time I feel I need to answer something that is tough for me to understand and engage with in civilian mode. *Miss Congo* was the first character I ever invented to deal with these dark, prejudiced spaces. When the World Cup was announced in an ever-changing Johannesburg, rents were raised like crazy and people were being kicked out onto the streets. People in the Northern suburbs were saying, 'Oh that place is dangerous, you can't go there'.

I was living in the Northern suburbs at the time and I wanted to test their prejudices and mine. I would go into the city and perform in these spaces dressed to the nines. I was asked to go to Kinshasa, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, to perform *Miss Congo*. It was an opportunity for me to create and then break new prejudices in a space I'd never been to.

I went to the Congo with all these beautiful looks: tracksuits I'd made myself, beautiful high-waisted dresses; Very nice, very *Miss Congo*! This was the first time I had travelled outside South Africa. I arrived as *Miss Congo* wearing my Burberry high-cinched dress, my safari hat in the same beige and big shades. It's the DRC in December and I walked off the plane straight into a heatwave. Boooooom! It blew me away. I just thought, 'Get me outta these things!' So poor *Miss Congo* started her performance the moment she stepped off the plane by throwing a hissy fit in customs. In South Africa things are efficient, but not in the Congo – I was humbled pretty quickly mind.

In Kinshasa, things had really gone to shit. The roads didn't work. Electricity didn't work. You only got water for an hour a day. I began these performances in amongst the raw sewage in the streets and these great mounds of rubbish that had built up over years. *Miss Congo* with her lovely clothes explored those juxtapositions. The video was made because I wanted to tell this story, otherwise *Miss Congo* would

have just been there as an intervention without an audience. Being there was shocking; an awakening. That's when I first saw myself, and what I did, in a wider African, continental context. In spite of all the rubbish and dereliction, there is still a culture of the body in the Congo with body-building and there's even a dandy culture. These guys would be living in a shack and wearing their *Commes des Garçons* and carrying Gucci bags. The whole idea of adding 'Miss' to a country name is that the body becomes a landscape. After all, so much of war is fought on a woman's body.

RB: You have an ongoing project called *The Future White Woman of Azania*. Tell me, would Azania be a great holiday destination?

A-PR: Most definitely! By law, you have to jazzercise to music from the late '80s. As long as you feel you're fully freakish, there is no need for a visa. You must go and check it out. Tell the guy at customs that you have a penchant for losing condoms and he will take you straight to meet the consulate. *The Future White Woman of Azania* is a thing that I had to create to deal with a tension between me and the academic world... It's so very male! Most of the curators I work with are women. I think we gravitate towards each other. I just wanted to create a land, Azania, that's like, 'Fuck you, we don't need your patriarchal shit!' In my

culture there's a *sangoma* – a traditional faith healer – who has to put on white lime powder. When I was going through initiation I had to put on white lime powder, because this makes you invisible to bad spirits, so it is used as a way of transcending. The *sangoma* is usually called 'the white person' and most *sangomas* are women.

RB: Adorno argued that art should make us unhappy. Was he right?

A-PR: God no! It has to be beautiful, it has to be disarming, it has to bring a person to their knees and just be humble at what they're looking at. I believe in humility when approaching art and it's tough to find that attitude—**CCQ**

Athi-Patra Ruga's work was shown as part of Broken English at Tyburn Gallery, St Christophger's Palace, London. The gallery is dedicated to international contemporary art and is currently focussing on art from Africa.

tyburngallery.com
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