

Decolonising Africa — in high heels

Cape Town-based artist Lhola Amira's video documenting her journey to Ghana has been selected for the Loop Barcelona art fair, writes Valeria Geselev

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Cleansing: Cape Town-based artist Lhola Amira's high-heel journey across Accra ended in the ocean. Picture: SUPPLIED

Coming late to the independence party, South Africans tend to look for inspiration in countries with a longer post-colonial record. In pan-African circles, Ghana is fetishised as a freedom role model, being the first sub-Saharan country to be set free from colonial rule.

This sentiment, powered by the fact that Ghana celebrates 60 years of freedom in 2017, motivated the mysterious and provocative Cape Town-based artist Lhola Amira to visit Accra.

After 10 days' exploration and months of postproduction, Amira presented souvenirs from her Ghanaian experience in a constellation at SMAC Gallery in Stellenbosch.

It was her first solo exhibition at home. After numerous residencies on three continents, Ghana was her first destination in Africa.

Entitled Looking for Ghana and the Red Suitcase, her work included an extended series of photographs, a video and an installation. She worked with Ghanaian artists while documenting her journey.



Artist Lhola Amira's high-heel journey across Accra ended in the ocean. Picture: SUPPLIED

"Through this visit, the artist tackled her own ideas of decolonialism," Amira states in the accompanying text.

The video was indisputably the heart of her constellation — beating, bleeding, looping and pumping the gallery halls with prayer-like sounds — the work of Ghanaian musician Eli.

After the show was taken down, the video lives on. It was recently selected to take part in Loop Barcelona, a platform devoted to moving-image practices in contemporary art. Loop, to be held on May 25 and 26, is an annual art fair established in 2003, the first to be devoted exclusively to video art.

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In her 11-minute video, Amira walks across Accra in six-inch heels for six hours. Wearing her signature earth-brown jumpsuit, navy blue turban and carrying an ishobaa, she journeys as slowly as high heels demand, from a minibus taxi, to a motorbike cab, via the market, to the ocean shore. She is "looking for Africa in Africa".

The heels make the journey harder, symbolising her femininity. Gender politics are as close to her heart as postcoloniality. "Black womxn are superheroes. We see black womxn anywhere in Africa with a baby on the back, walking barefoot, carrying tons of stuff on the head, working hard," she explains in text accompanying her video.

"In almost every ad we see about capitalism, they speak about working hard and working smart. It's a lie — 'work hard and it will pay off' — it's bulls***," she says.

"Black people have been working hard all their lives.... Black womxn are superheroes — they raise kids to become amazing human beings from scratch, from sitting in some street corner and selling fruit or food," Amira says. In a red journal, she wrote notes during her visit to Ghana.

One of those is a prayer she was saying to Yaa Asantewaa, a celebrated queen in the history of Ghana who led a rebellion against British colonialism. "This revolution is in the wombs of black womxn. We have been pregnant for decades."

Amira's Ghanaian pilgrimage is shot in sepia — an interesting choice to mute the colourfulness of West Africa, which might be confused for celebration. Every shot by Ghanaian filmmaker Wanlov Kubolor is stunning. It can be paused at any point — and become a striking photograph.

The big picture is not as pleasing as the visual and audio aesthetics. It is probably the opposite of tourism videos. Amira looks determined, but sad. "You think I am sad? Listen to Nina Simone when she says, 'The world expects me to be sad because I am black'.... I am not sad child, I am troubled by what has happened and continues to happen — troubled because I am imagining Africa in the wake of it all," she says.

A shore piled with waste, neglected buildings, a huge poster of Kwame Nkrumah, heavy foot traffic on imagined pavements, flags, a man lying on the side of a road — her journey through Accra ends as she enters the ocean.

"It is a troubled cleansing. As Nayyirah Waheed would write, 'We return to each other in waves. This is how water loves'." Floating in the water are the infamous black plastic bags, Accra's answer to the nonexistent sewage system. "There is a relationship with the West in the pollution ... but this is not voluntary love."

Did she find the decolonial dream in Ghana? "Ghana is still in love with the coloniser, whether they want this affair is something else altogether." Yet, she presents her audience with an honest disclaimer: "Lhola Amira remained a visitor during her time in Ghana, seeing and experiencing only a small collection of the lifestyles possible in the

country. Looking for Ghana and the Red Suitcase should not be seen as a summary of an entire country."

But the video makes a valuable contribution to the current decolonisation discourse. It serves both as a complex answer to the romanticised branding of the African struggle for freedom and a practical example of historiography without the western filter; historiography that has no choice but to look forward.

"The only Africa we get to see is written by white anthropologists, captured through a white gaze. I can't be nostalgic about the past, because that past is engineered by oppressors. I have this nostalgia about a future I do not know. It's important to imagine Africa alongside breaking her," Amira says.