

Artist Statement

The latest visual series by Kenya Mzee is titled '*Onye Ji Onye N'ani Ji Onwe Ya*' - which translates from Igbo to English as '*He Who Holds Another Down In The Mud Must Stay In The Mud To Keep Him Down*'. The visual series is named after an Igbo proverb first introduced to the artist through the writing of renowned African literary giant, Chinua Achebe.

The body of artworks emerging in the era of Post-Apartheid South Africa offers a potent critique of the current political climate in South Africa and more broadly, the African continent. Through the poignancy of *Onye Ji Onye N'ani Ji Onwe Ya*, Kenya Mzee adopts the role of both artist and activist, highlighting the painful truth echoed in the contemporary political landscape of Africans.

To fully appreciate these contemporary reflections, however, one must first delve into the tumultuous history of African politics, and more attentively, into South African politics that has historically been marred by deep-rooted inequalities, socio-economic injustices and pervasive political violence inflicted upon the minds and bodies of Black and Brown communities.

Many intellectual theories frame race, like gender, as a social construct. However, the notorious regime of apartheid, implemented by the South African National Party in the early 1900s, declared race as a scientifically valid biological category, thereby solidifying its doctrine of national racial segregation. Consequently, this resulted in stark racial divisions across political, social, and economic segments of society. South Africa continues to grapple with oligarchy, threats to human rights, rampant corruption and looting, despite becoming a constitutional democracy 30 years ago, to formally recognise the importance of human equality and the safeguarding of democratic principles.

This evolving struggle is a central theme in *Onye Ji Onye N'ani Ji Onwe Ya*. Drawing inspiration from African Literature writers, musicians and artists, notably Fela Anikulapo-Kuti's 1986 album '*Beasts of No Nation*', which responded to the injustices of his time through a critique of military corruption and indiscipline. The contemporary art scene similarly whispers truth to power.

In the context of current day South Africa, the fabric within this artistic narrative symbolizes what lies concealed beneath the surface - harsh realities masked by a veneer of unity. The artist utilises the ubiquitous yellow caution sign to serve as a stark warning against the dangers of a state run by corrupt, self-serving elites. This sign becomes an allegory for the perilous consequences of corruption, political desperation and insatiable greed, suggesting that such vices might lead South Africa toward the status of 'failed state.' The dark, soulless shadow-beast entity in the artworks represents the pervasive surveillance and control wielded by state 'powers' without a singular face, but rather encompasses capitalism, greed and wealth-hoarding, and the beast-like shadows of political leaders hovering over state resources, in constant search of opportunities to exploit the system and drain the lifeblood of citizens.

As with all her work Kenya Mzee aims, as she calls it, to 'go beyond the wall', enthusiastically welcoming constructive dialogue and discourse as a part of the work's legacy.

Biography

South African conceptual artist and Writer, Kenya Mzee, is a photographer and writer based in Cape Town, South Africa. Mzee has 10 years worth of experience in all levels of photography, in addition to on-set production, which includes pre-production, production and post-production. Moreover, Mzee has a solid background in events management, creative direction and social media management.

Education

In 2018, Kenya Mzee graduated with a Diploma in Film and Television, from the School of Film and Media at City Varsity, Cape Town.

Exhibitions

2024 - Sasol New Signatures, group exhibition of winning artworks.

2022 - *When Water Covers Your Head*, conceptual series, group exhibition, Youngblood Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.

2020 - *Art Connects Woman*, group exhibition, Zee-Arts Gallery, Dubai, UAE.

2018 - *Comply- Comply-Comply*, conceptual series, group exhibition, Youngblood Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.

2016 - 2017 - *Where is the Me in Media*, conceptual series, group exhibition, Erdmann Contemporary Gallery.

Accomplishments

2020 - South African Ambassador Art Connects Women, Dubai

2018 - Nominated by The Young Independent Nomination as one of the Southern African Development Community's (SADC) Top 100 Leaders in the category 'Trailblazer'

2018 - 'Shooting Star' Award from City Varsity, Cape Town Campus

2018 - Design Indaba Emerging Creative Class