

INTERVIEW: KAPWANI KIWANGA/ THE ARMORY COMMISSIONED ARTIST

CROSSING BOUNDARIES AND CULTURES

Kiwanga's commissioned work centers on a photo from the UN archives

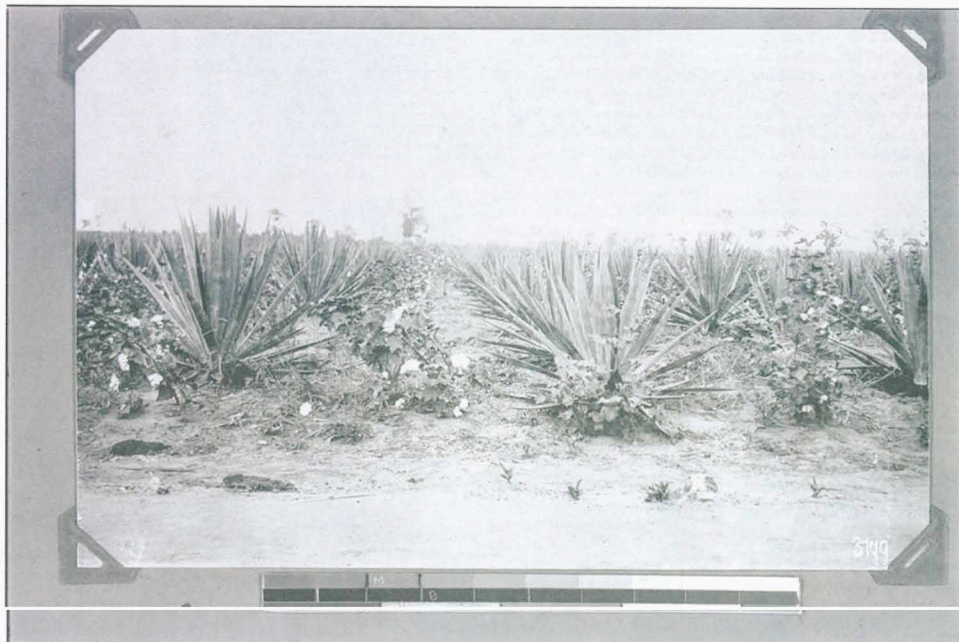
KAPWANI KIWANGA, THE Armory Commissioned Artist for the upcoming edition of the fair in New York (March 3-6), was trained as an anthropologist. But she chose not to pursue it academically and instead, used her training in diverse ways such as filmmaking, or creating contemporary, cutting-edge art. The juxtaposition of disparate disciplines in her training — besides anthropology, she also studied comparative religion at McGill University (Montreal, Canada) — is perhaps one of the reasons why she has succeeded in gaining international attention with her out-of-the-box work. Whether it is her performance titled "Afrogalactica – A Short History of the Future," (2011-2012) where she plays the role of an anthropologist from future who comes back on Afrofuturism, or her "Afrotunnel" project that refers to a hypothetical tunnel linking Europe to Africa via the strait of Gibraltar, that has been studied for a number of years but is yet to be realized, or her rule in 1905-1907 in what was then called Tanganyika or German East Africa, her exhibitions/ performances reveal an engagement with the subject that marks a paradigm shift in the understanding of Africa's position on the global stage.

Born in 1978 in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, Kiwanga followed up her education at McGill University with a program at École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Paris and was an artist-in-residence at the MU Foundation in Eindhoven, among other venues. Despite two BAFTA nominations, she is not just a filmmaker; Kiwanga surprises by the form her oeuvre takes every time she creates something new.

BLOUIN ARTINFO spoke to Kiwanga while she was giving final touches to her work in Paris, for her solo at the Armory. Excerpts from the interview:

Even though we would all like to witness the unveiling of your work at the Armory, could you speak about it to give us your perspective in creating it for this special commission?

Certainly. It's an installation comprising a large-scale picture, a video work and a few other things. The idea is rather simple. I've used an image from the UN archives. It's a Teddy Chen photo showing a detailed part of the office of the Secretary General in 1961 [Dag Hammarskjöld was the



A work from Kapwani Kiwanga's series "White Gold" that will on view at the Armory Show



Kapwani Kiwanga

Secretary General then], showing some furniture, gifts to the Secretary General/ UN. There's a gift from Nigeria, a leopard rug. Then there's the bust of Goddess Laxmi from India, two different art works — a stainless steel sculpture by D. Rivera [donated by the National Council of United States Art], and a Barbara Hepworth print. The Secretary General passed away two weeks after this picture was taken [he died in a plane crash along with some UN staff while on a peace-keeping mission to the Congo].

I have woven a video narrative around this picture, which opens up a discourse on diplomatic gifts — the idea of receiving and giving gifts and building networks. As I often do a lot of research for my works, I have tried to look at the

past and the present of things such as spiritual offerings, astrological traditions. So basically, the large image sets the scene for my work. It also reveals the context of relations between nations in 1961 and offers an entry point to a door to look at cross-cultures.

You were chosen as the Armory Commissioned artist by the curators of the African Perspectives sector – Julia Grosse and Yvette Mutumba – even though you were neither born nor raised in Africa, nor do you live there... Your thoughts on this subject?

I think it's for the fair to make decisions but I'm honoured at being chosen. But yes, I don't think about it too much.

Of course, African diaspora inspires me and a part of my family is from Tanzania but I'm not an African artist at all. I'm Canadian in terms of my birth, my upbringing... and my friends are Canadians, South Asians, Chinese.

I've grown up in a multi-cultural experience. I do not pose the question of identity too much. It also doesn't matter in the context of the fair because the curators have a global perspective and I too don't work locally per se but globally. I'm lucky to be chosen for this commission.

Could you share how your training as an anthropologist has helped you look in being a filmmaker/ artist and doing the type of work that you have become known for?

It's a big influence on my method because before I start anything, I do a lot of research of my own. I think I could never have practised as an anthropologist. I'm more into observing, about how we work as humans. I'm interested in the narrative language of form and the anthropological theory has made me interested in knowing how we construct these narratives.

How do you choose the best genre of art for any particular work that you create?

It's not a question of either/ or. These are starting points into the work, the idea. I cannot paint, I don't have that intelligence. For me, it's the content, the idea that guides me into the work. When I'm starting, I'm not clear about how the work will end. I think that's the greatest thing about art, everyone's unique.

Could you talk about the disappearing geographical boundaries in contemporary art as opposed to modern art which can be placed in a specific geo-

graphical location and is rather distinguished by it?

Each contemporary artist is different. It's not about global discourse or local perspective. It's about the experience that the artist brings to the work. If a lot of importance is given to micro issues, then the work becomes very specific to a region. I come from a small region in Canada but if you are open enough, then you are able to embrace ideas from far and wide.

How do you think the Armory Commission is going to help you as an artist?

I'm lucky and privileged to be given this commission. It definitely gives the chosen artist a lot of visibility compared to all other artists who would be participating. However, the curators have other special projects going on at the same time so that it is not just about one voice or one artist being better than the others but giving a platform to a variety of voices. In the end, however, it remains a special privilege to be chosen so... you wouldn't be talking to me otherwise. But how it will help you will ultimately depend on what you will make and share with the world.

—ARCHANA KHARE-GHOSE

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IMAGE COURTESY (FROM TOP): THE ARMORY SHOW; PHOTO BY VICENTE MUNDÓ/ THE ARMORY SHOW