



## BODY OF LAND: TRANSFORMATIVE PORTRAITS OF AFRICAN DIASPORIC FEMININITIES

The exhibition *Body of Land* investigates the visual representation of black women. It puts together the work of two emerging artists from Scotland and Kenya, connecting absence and presence, the material and the transcendent, symbols and history. It is a search for identity and for the visual idea of the African woman. Sekai Machache explores her Zimbabwean roots, incorporating spiritual influences to create dramatic and ethereal portraits that transform preconceived visual references. Awuor Onyango builds a visual representation of the African diaspora with collaborative portraits that focus on the multiple identities of black women in Scotland. The works of Machache and Onyango navigate the reclamation of African women's place in history and culture, and therefore complement each other visually and conceptually.

Sekai Machache creates portraits that invite the viewer to form a new catalogue of visual associations. In each series, she plays with symbols, light and colour to guide us through abstract rituals in a search of the self. Her photographs highlight the absence of light, creating suggestions rather than a presence, a search for what is not known. The characters she photographs, however, are very much there. They assert their presence by performing for us, the viewers, inviting us to see each scene. In *Red Aspect*, for example, this absence-presence emanates movement. As if she was on a stage, the woman portrayed in the picture dances, and we watch, hypnotised by her energy while she is lost in transcendence and in the physical control of her movement. This image is part of the series *The III Aspects of She*, in which Machache uses the black female body as a vessel for the forces that govern the universe, for the divine. By reimagining the concept of the divine feminine in this way, Machache recreates the collective visual memory of black women and challenges western religious symbols and power.

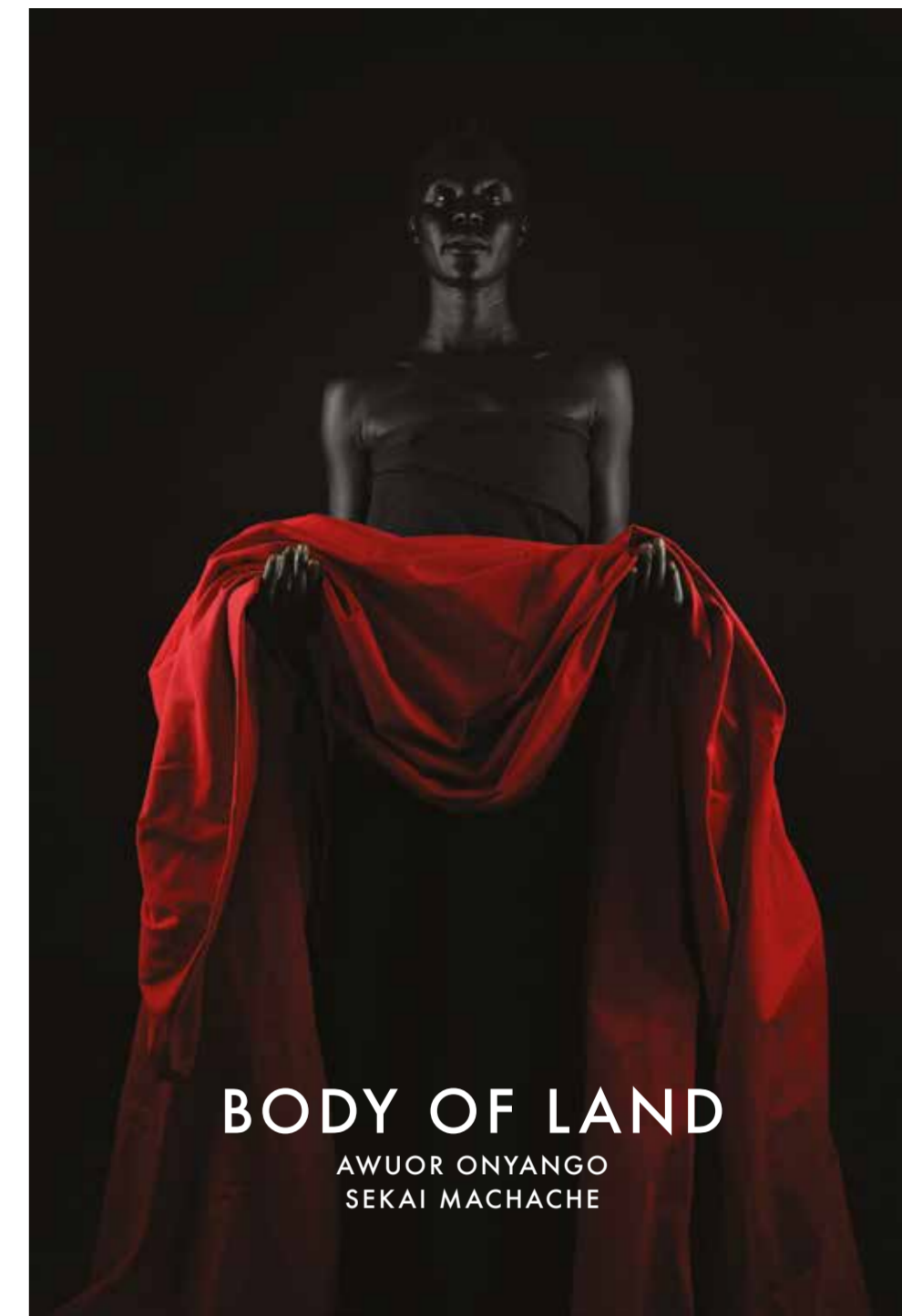
Sekai Machache builds on a tradition of black feminist art that resists the male gaze by questioning established visual representations that objectify and hyper-sexualise the black female body. They have also challenged the erasure of black women in accounts of history and in visual culture. Like Machache, Carla Williams in the US, Maud Sulter in the UK, Zanele Muholi in South Africa and Aida Muluneh in Ethiopia pose similar questions in regard to the agency of women from the African diaspora.

Kenyan artist Awuor Onyango explores similar conceptual ground. They have a deep interest in understanding the visual memory and representation of the African woman. In the series *Memorituals*, they collaborated with African women living in Glasgow to create a new visual language that builds on strong colours, African fabric patterns and symbolic elements to explore the African feminine beyond stereotypes. Onyango was inspired by Luo Mythology to create 'rituals of memory', in which the photographs are only the material part of a self-exploration shared between the photographer and the sitter. The portraits show empowered women who have chosen how they want to be seen. The image *Adura II*, for example, portrays a pregnant woman sitting naked with her legs crossed and eyes closed, facing the viewer. Part of her face is covered in golden paint and the drawing of a yellow sun behind her creates a halo around her head. This is a woman who is in control. Her body language and discarded clothes on the floor suggests that she owns her body, her actions and her desires while her closed eyes suggest a meditative state, one that invokes a natural, divine power.

Onyango's analysis of female representation and the reconstruction of memory invokes early work from Clarissa Sligh, in the US, Lindeka Kampi, in South Africa, and, like Machache, Aida Muluneh. In the latest series *The World is 9*, Muluneh, like Onyango, created strikingly colourful and surreal scenes in which to place the female subjects and challenge western visual expectations.

*Body of Land* is an exhibition that explores the power, visibility and femininity of black women. The transnational approach Sekai Machache and Awuor Onyango take connects an international community of black women in the use of photography as a tool for collective healing.

Camila Cavalcante



## BODY OF LAND

AWUOR ONYANGO  
SEKAI MACHACHE



**Camila Cavalcante** (she/her, b.1983) is a visual artist and researcher focused on photography, feminism and activism. She is the author of *For the Lives of All Women*, a bilingual book about the experiences of illegal abortions in her home country of Brazil. She completed an MA in photojournalism and an MSc Applied Gender Studies from University of Strathclyde. As an artist, she has exhibited her work in the UK, US, Netherlands, France, and Brazil, and has taken part in Art residencies in Mexico, Brazil and the UK. She was nominated for *100 Heroines in Photography*, by the Royal Photographic Society, in 2018. She is also a board member of the Scottish feminist organisation Engender.

camilacavalcante.com

**Awuor Onyango** (they/them, b.1990 in Kenya) lives and works in Nairobi, Kenya. A writer, artist, filmmaker and photographer, their practice is concerned with exploring politics of the personal, the Black African feminine, the gendered leanings of society, the archetypes and psycho-social role of the queer and various socio-cultural implications of 'African-ness'. Recent exhibitions include 'School of Anxiety' at Jo'Burg Art Fair, Johannesburg 2017; 'Appropriation and other practices' HBK Braunschweig 2018; 'A Celebration of Queer Love' and 'Genesis: Autonomous bodies' both at Iwalewa Haus in 2018. In 2018 Awuor undertook a residency through Focas Scotland which was hosted by Street Level Photoworks.

awuor-onyango.format.com

**Sekai Machache** (she/her, b.1989) is a Zimbabwean-Scottish visual artist and curator based in Glasgow, Scotland. She is interested in the relationship between spirituality, imagination and the role of the artist in disseminating symbolic imagery to provide a space for healing. She is the recipient of the 2020 RSA Morton Award and the 2021-2023 Talbot Rice Residency Programme. She works internationally and recently undertook a cross-cultural project in Brazil. Solo exhibitions include: *The Divine Sky, Projects 20*, Stills, Edinburgh (2021); *Invocation*, Instituto Moreira Salles, São Paulo (2018); *A Breadth Apart, Sharing Not Hoarding*, Black Lives Matter Mural Trail, Dundee (2020). She is a founding and organising member of the Yon Afro Collective.

sekaimachache.com

1. *Black Aspect: Nyama Yake* © Sekai Machache
  2. *CJ III* from the series *Memoritual*, 2019 © Awuor Onyango
  3. *Red Aspect: Mweya* © Sekai Machache
  4. *Nina III* from the series *Memoritual*, 2019 © Awuor Onyango
- Front cover: *A Silent Gifting* from the series *Ritual Manifestations*, 2019 © Sekai Machache  
Back cover: *Monifa II* from the series *Memoritual*, 2019 © Awuor Onyango  
Poster side left: *White Aspect: Zamani* © Sekai Machache  
Poster side right: *Nina I* from the series *Memoritual*, 2019 © Awuor Onyango

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