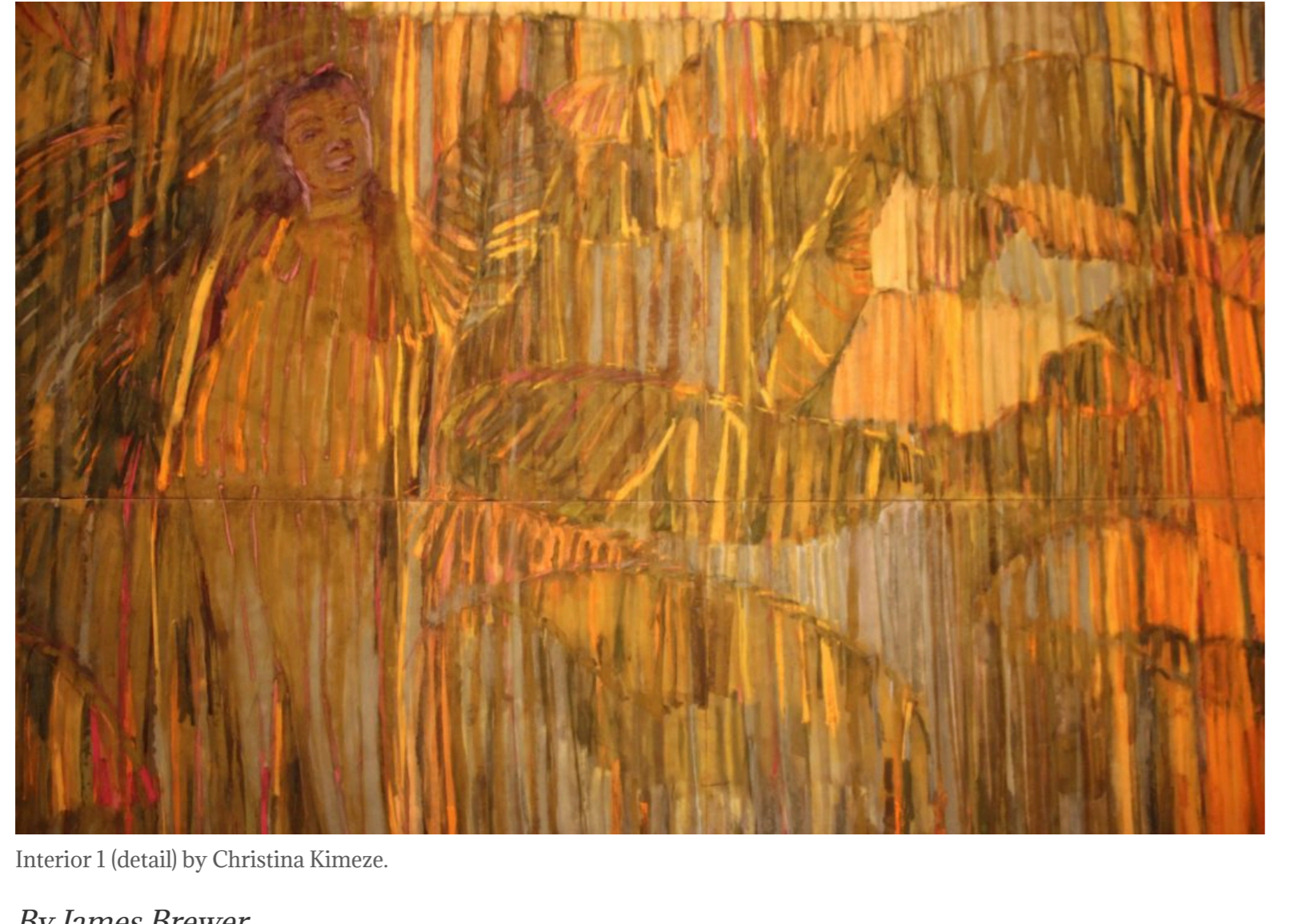


'Soulsapes' - Dulwich Picture Gallery exults in landscapes of joy

April 5, 2024



Interior 1 (detail) by Christina Kimeze.

By James Brewer

Landscape paintings have had centuries of prominence through Euro-centric eyes. Now an exhibition in London is transforming the genre through the refreshing lens of the African diaspora.

Dulwich Picture Gallery's **Soulsapes** presents artists with African and Caribbean links who are uninhibited by the legacies of colonialism, and who seek acknowledgement of deep cultural and family bonds. They draw solace from attachments to lush tropical and subtropical environments, informing their vision of the world.

Through more than 30 richly expressive contemporary works **Soulsapes** explores how the artists use painting, photography, film, tapestry, and collage as a beachhead to themes of belonging, memory, and joy.

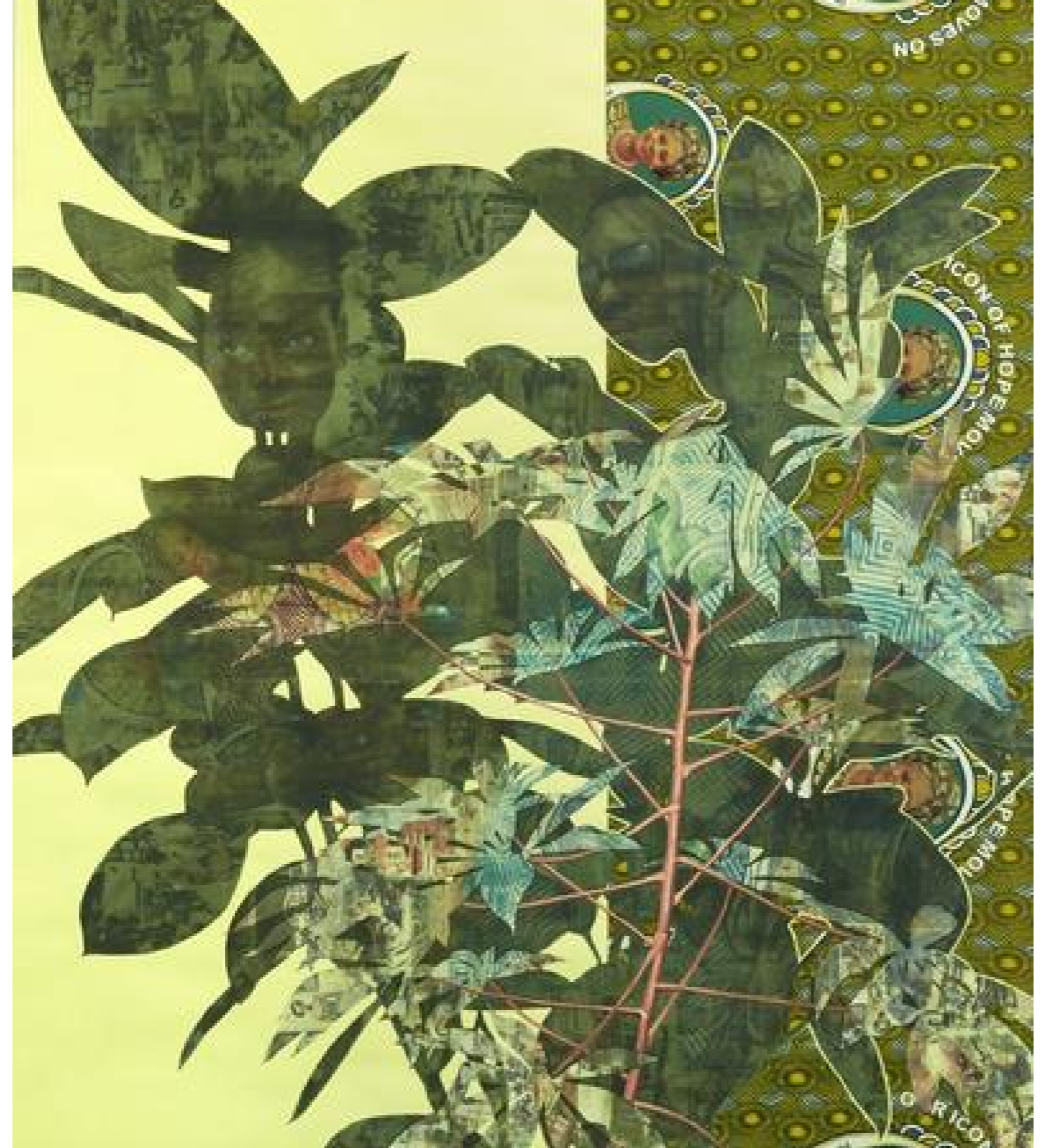


Unforeseen Journey of Self-Discovery, by Kimathi Mafafo.

The show's momentum derives not from pure landscape, but from how artists appropriate the natural world to express personal histories and the sense of identity.

It is a thoughtful introspection within nature that resounds among others with Christina Kimeze, a London-based artist who has contributed one of the most compelling of the exhibits. She endows the rich quietude of internal lives with intriguing substance.

In Christina's large canvas *Interior 1* a woman emerges as if in a dream from or through a screen created by linear brushstrokes blending her into the setting, a golden and semi-transparent swathe of luxuriant foliage. The artist's control of light and warm colours suggests an intimacy with the story on the page and potent emotion.



Cassava Garden, by Njideka Akunyili Crosby.

Completed in 2022, *Interior 1* is made with oil, pastel, and oil stick on an unusual base: suede matboard. Christina often eschews traditional canvas in favour of this matboard with its distinctive tactile quality and a soft, diffused effect. By crushing pastels into the surface, she achieves a powdery vaporousness, so that her figures transcend the physical. The solitary beings in her images represent not loneliness, but the undeclared calm that people can experience in their internal lives. The sultry atmosphere she evokes in her work reflects her family's origins in Uganda.

Christina is attracting increased international attention in the art scene. Her exhibition in Paris in mid-2023 with White Cube gallery was aptly entitled 'Something other than the World might know'. She was part of The Great Women Artists residency in 2022 at Palazzo Monti, Brescia, and has been included in group exhibitions including in Michael Werner of London; at Buckingham Palace; and at Borgo Pignano Royal Drawing School, Volterra, Italy. Those accolades came in the same year that she completed her postgraduate degree from the Royal Drawing School in 2022, receiving the Sir Denis Mahon Award to support her work and a solo show.



On Episode Seven, by Kimathi Donkor.

A striking tapestry, hand and machine embroidered by the South African artist Kimathi Mafafo, shares the joy of the black female embraced by nature. In *Unforeseen Journey of Self-Discovery* a woman appears almost dancing from a billowing white muslin veil, into a luxuriant, vivid environment. The lush vegetation in this work from 2020 is for the Cape Town-based artist a stark contrast to the relatively arid surroundings of the diamond-mining city of Kimberley, in Northern Cape province, where she was born.

Kimathi ascribes the genesis for her artistic trail as being the daughter of a watercolourist, and granddaughter of a skilled embroiderer: she has said that she "paints with thread." Her recent solo exhibitions have included, in 2024 Ebullience at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London; in 2023 Wandering in the Unknown World, Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, Berlin; and in 2022 Kgolagano - A Covenant, with Ebony/Curated in Cape Town. She has passed on her skills by launching an embroidery society for Cape Town women.



Mumbi's Return, by Kimathi Donkor.

A lush multimedia piece, *Cassava Garden* by Njideka Akunyili Crosby, treats of the collision of cultures. It brings in painted elements with images of magazines, pictures of Nigerian pop stars, and extracts from family photo albums to make a hybrid cultural identity. She says that her works may include too the remnants of British culture evident in Nigeria. Njideka, who was born in Enugu, Nigeria, and lived in the country until her late teens, now lives and works in Los Angeles.

Paintings of nature, characterised as *Idyll* series (2016-2020) show Black subjects amid the gifts of nature, characterised as *Black Joy*. He says that the paintings "celebrate tender and contemplative moments shared by families and friends as they enjoy serene meadows, lakes, mountains, forests, rivers, and beaches together. As an artist who has often focused on 'the struggle', these works represent hopeful visions that honour what the fulfilment of black liberation might sometimes feel like – even if only fleetingly."

Born in the English resort town of Bournemouth, Kimathi Donkor is of Ghanaian, Anglo-Jewish and Jamaican heritage. As a child he lived in rural Zambia and the English west country. He is Reader in Contemporary Painting and Black Art at the University of the Arts, London. His participation in exhibitions has included the 15th Sharjah Biennale (2023), War Inna Babylon at the ICA, London in 2021, the Diaspora Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale, 2017, and the 29th São Paulo Biennial in 2010.

The Dulwich exhibition is curated by Lisa Anderson, who is managing director of the Black Cultural Archives dedicated to collecting, preserving, and celebrating Black history, and founder of Black British Art. Lisa, whose family is from Jamaica, recalled its fields of corn and its fruit trees, and said: "At a time when global consciousness has been profoundly attuned to the precariousness and power of the natural world in our lives, I hope this exhibition will challenge perceptions of our relationship with nature."



Curator Lisa Anderson

Jennifer Scott, director of the Dulwich gallery, said: "Soulsapes marks a new approach to landscape art. Featuring some of the greatest artists of our day, it's an exciting opportunity to re-present the genre within Dulwich Picture Gallery, the home of the celebrated European landscape masters of the past."

Captions in detail:

Interior 1 (detail), 2022. Oil, pastel, and oil stick on suede matboard. By Christina Kimeze.

Unforeseen Journey of Self-Discovery, 2020. Hand and machine embroidered fabric. By Kimathi Mafafo. Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery.

Cassava Garden, 2015. Acrylic, transfers, colour pencil, charcoal, and commemorative fabric on paper. By Njideka Akunyili Crosby. © Njideka Akunyili Crosby. Courtesy the artist, Victoria Miro, and David Zwillner. Photo: Robert Glawacki.

On Episode Seven, 2020. Acrylic on canvas. By Kimathi Donkor. Courtesy of the Artist and Niru Ratnam, London. Photo: Kimathi Donkor.

Mumbi's Return, 2019. Acrylic on linen. By Kimathi Donkor.

Soulsapes is at Dulwich Picture Gallery until June 2, 2024.

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