

## IMBAMBAS: UNSETTLED FEELINGS OF OBJECT AND SELF



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Vibrant strips of fabric and thread are assembled into graphical textile compositions that hang alongside cracked monochromatic portraits and photographs of lush landscapes and stark architectural details printed onto cotton sheets. Angolan artist Janeiro Jano's first solo exhibition with Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery entitled *Imbambas: Unsettled Feelings of Object and Self* takes its departing point from the term *imbambas* (from the Kimbundu language) which refers to things such as furniture and luggage that have an intrinsic and uncanny relationship to the body and self. While the artworks are aesthetically diverse incorporating different materialities and contexts, they share a powerful physical presence that resonates through time and space to present a profound contemplation of the object's role in the construction and reinforcement of cultural identity.

Jano's artistic investigation is typically ignited by a question relating to notions around his own conflicted and prescribed identities in relation to his cultural heritage and wider questions around colonial subjectivities. This investigation drives an in-depth process of research in which the artist refers to multiple archives, including his own photographs and an archive that documents photographs taken by a missionary group from the US who came to Luanda (where Jano grew up) and built churches around the city. "The presence of the church is heavy where I come from," explains the artist. "To me, these buildings refer back to the hybrid identity of my people while also commenting on the perverse process of colonisation, which I still find unsettling." This latest series of work features a photographic triptych entitled *SDC 004* in which the facade of a church is juxtaposed alongside an image of lush, green fern leaves and a photograph of a figure standing within a desolate building, dressed in a white colonial costume. The photographs are printed onto cotton rag, connoting a strong bodily presence both in terms of its universal relation to clothing and to historical labour, specifically the cultivation of cotton in Africa. By employing cotton as his canvas, Jano reclaims the textile cultures lost to Portuguese colonial practices – which were designed to homogenise and accelerate

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assimilation into colonial 'order' via Christianity and extractive wage labour – while also reflecting on his complex heritage and the culture of the Ambundu people.



Elsewhere, Jano invites a more intimate perspective. The work entitled *Nap Nap (Imbamba)*, for example, depicts a pair of shoes abandoned at the edge of a tent. The leather of the shoes in the photograph holds the shape of their owners' feet, conveying an absent or spectral presence, which is further complicated by the artist's own relationship to the object. While Jano took the photograph in Egypt, the dynamic, scattered position of the shoes recalls the artist's fond memory of his grandfather leaving his shoes near, but "never on" the doormat. By printing the image onto white cotton, Jano once again points to a bodily presence while also leaving space for the viewer to form their own relationship to both the represented object (the shoes) and the artwork.

In a similar way, the larger textile works, in which the artist creates abstract collages composed of cloth, rope and printed photographs, have a dual relationship to the body in the sense that they function as both deconstructed clothing and 'Mponda' – traditional belt-like cotton bags used to store daily items as well memories as represented by notes and photographs. Stitched together in bold graphical compositions, the fabrics appear taut, baggy and folded; they're diverse in colour, texture and opacity once again reflecting a sense of hybridity while also playing with depth and spatiality. This engagement with negative space is fundamental to Jano's practice and extends to the rooms in which the work is presented. He sees his works as not only interacting with and thus, activating the space, but also making visible its intrinsic materiality. In this way, the space becomes – like the Mponda, shoes, fabric or churches – both an object with its own form, character and context as well as a container for the artworks and our bodies.



As such, the exhibition not only presents a series of uniquely striking artworks but also curates an experience of the uncanny in which the viewer is invited to consider how the objects that we use, wear and carry bear relationship to cultural histories and hierarchies.

*Imbambas: Unsettled Feelings of Object and Self* runs at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery until 5 February 2022.



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