



FONDATION
GANDUR
POUR L'ART

May 2022

Collection of African Contemporary Art and of the Diaspora

Walking Spirits IV, V & VI by Turiya Magadlela



© Turiya Magadlela Studio © Photo credit: Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer: Mathieu Bernard-Reymond.

Turiya Magadlela (Johannesburg, South Africa, b. 1978)

Walking Spirits IV, V & VI from the series *Inequalities*
2018-2019

Nylon and cotton tights, and sealant on canvas

Triptych, 120 x 120 cm for each canvas

FGA-ACAD-MAGAD-0002

Provenance

Blank projects, Cape Town

Private collection, Germiston

Artcurial, Paris, 15 June 2021, lot no. 194

Long, dark, and slightly transparent curves, seemingly superimposed, populate the canvases of artist Turiya Magadlela. These curves provide body and substance to a triptych that includes the works *Walking Spirits IV, V* and *VI* from the *Inequalities* series. This layering effect generates an impression of depth, gradually evoking the sense of an underground, a cave, or an abyss. Yet, in her works and in the *Walking Spirits*, Magadlela uses only a single material, albeit composed of different fibres: tights. Stretched over the surface of the canvas, mistreated, diverted from their function—that of an undergarment which covers the legs from the feet to the waist—the tights are pulled over the bare canvas stretched on its frame, sometimes fraying, until they form long, slightly curved lines. These are the result of a brutal gesture that evokes the violence inflicted on those who wear, or are made to wear, such tights.



A concrete material for abstract artworks

Both in her paintings and imposing installations,¹ Turiya Magadlela immerses the spectators in an array of textures and colours that are alternately bi-chromatic, multi-coloured, dark and cavernous, or joyful. Like the artists participating in the early editions of the Lausanne International Tapestry Biennials from 1962 onwards,² sparking a real revolution in textile artworks according to American curator Jenelle Porter,³ artist Turiya Magadlela uses the constituent elements of sculpture, such as volume, space, matter, balance, weight, and form. The abstract character of her “canvases” and installations immediately questions the gaze, and their texture invites viewers to reach out and touch them. Nevertheless, while artists from the 1960s inscribed their practice in a game and a constant exchange with industrialized society, creating bridges between art, craftsmanship, and industrial design, Magadlela questions instead post-industrialization, even planned obsolescence, with nylon tights being one of the symbols of this.⁴

The title of this series of works, *Walking Spirits*, refers not only to the body, its ability to move, and to the tights clothing the legs—limbs immediately associated with the act of walking—but also to spirits, or even to a spiritual dimension.

Concerning the Spiritual in Art is a seminal text on abstraction written by Wassily Kandinsky, himself considered one of the pioneers of this practice of the visual arts, which adopted shape and colour during the first half of the 20th century. In this book, Kandinsky established a theory on colour, associating their resonance with particular sounds. Of white and black, he says: “white [...] has this harmony of silence [...], like many pauses in music that break temporarily the melody. It is not a dead silence, but one pregnant with possibilities. White has the appeal of the nothingness that is before birth, of the world in the ice age. A totally dead silence, on the other hand, a silence with no possibilities has the inner harmony of black. (...) A nothingness without possibilities, a dead nothingness after the sun has gone out, an inner silence without sunshine or hope, this is the inner resonance of black.”⁵ Interiority and

¹ See in particular the installation done by the artist for the exhibition *Ubuntu, un rêve lucide*, curated by Marie-Ann Yemsi, at the Palais de Tokyo from 26 November 2021 to 20 February 2022
<https://palaisdetokyo.com/exposition/ubuntu-un-reve-lucide/>.

² See in particular Eberhard Cotton, Giselle; Junet, Magali; Rochat, Eric. *From tapestry to fiber art: the Lausanne Biennials 1962-1955*. Milano: Skira; Lausanne: Fondation Toms Pauli, 2017.

³ Porter, Jenelle. “Sympathetic Medium” in *Vitamin - T. Threads & Textiles in Contemporary Art*. London: Phaidon, 2019, p. 11. Furthermore, on the topic of the renewal of textile art, Jenelle Porter adds: “The radical shift from woven wall hanging to sculpture was played out against a backdrop of social and cultural tumult in North America during the 1960’s—the civil right movement, the women’s movement and anti-war activism—during which artists rejected prevailing orthodoxies.”

⁴ See also *Prêt à jeter*, documentary, by Cosima Dannoritzer, 2009, 74 minutes, produced by ARTICLE Z, MEDIA 3.14, ARTE France.

⁵ Kandinsky, Wassily. *Du Spirituel dans l’art, et dans la peinture en particulier*. Paris, Folio essais, 1989 [1954], p. 156

[Translator’s note: English version translated by Michael T. H. Sadler and published by Dover Publications, New York, 1977].



self-expression become the key words of this line of thought that wishes at all costs to separate itself from the object.



The purity of shapes and colours is also at the heart of these concerns. As art historian Kobena Mercer explains in a publication that puts abstraction and extra-Western heritage into perspective: “when considered as a whole, the quality of abstraction lies in its openness”.

III. 2: Turiya Magdala, *Untitled* from the series *Inequalities*, 2016, Nylon and cotton tights, and sealant on canvas, 150 x 150 cm, FGA-ACAD-MAGAD-0001 © Turiya Magadala Studio © Photo credit: Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer: Mathieu Bernard-Reymond

“Breaking free from inherited rules and norms of picture making, the European artists who originated the earliest forms of abstraction in the first half of the century—Kasimir Malevitch, Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian—understood these open qualities in largely spiritual terms.”⁶ Spirituality, purity, or even the idea of abstraction as the manifestation of the highest form of art⁷ were therefore conceptions of abstract art that perhaps found their apogee in the appropriation made of it in the United States and from which Turiya Magadala's work precisely moves away. A trans or intercultural vision, such as the one put forward by Kobena Mercer and David Craven before him disturbs this conception of abstract art as being the manifestation of a (single) identity (in this case American). Indeed, Turiya Magadala's work is reminiscent of certain pieces by Siah Armajani in the use of clothing, where the artist works on the contrasts between black and white, or indeed, of Alma W. Thomas's practice on the effects of depth, created by the alternation between “full” and “empty” spaces on the canvas. Finally, Magadala reintroduces the raw object into the painting, and taking advantage of its flexibility, diverts it from its function, while also turning

⁶ “When viewed in the round, abstraction's defining quality lies in its openness. [...] Breaking free from inherited rules and norms of picture making, the European artists who originated the earliest forms of abstraction in the first half of the century—Kasimir Malevitch, Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian—understood these open qualities in largely spiritual terms.” Mercer, Kobena. *Discrepant Abstraction*. Cambridge (Massachusetts): MIT Press, 2006, p. 8.

⁷ Kobena Mercer also adds: “During a time when modern art collections were expanding—the Museum of Non-Objective Painting (later the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum) opened in 1936—Alfred Barr's exhibition of Cubist and Abstract Art (1936) underlined the growing institutional prestige of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. As a genealogy of the various directions modern art had taken since cubism, Barr's epic narrative was driven by a teleology of progress in which abstract art was regarded as the highest achievement of modernism.” *Ibid.*, p. 11.



herself away from the aesthetic or even ethical considerations of artists from the beginning of the last century.

Black skin, white tights

Flesh-coloured tights have “long [been] reserved for fair skin”⁸—a material history that does not yet have any serious references. Brown and black shades are thus, and in particular, the sign of a post-apartheid South Africa. Tights for darker skin were in fact marketed at a much later stage, and therefore only presumably appeared on the market after the struggles for the rights of all those who wear them had ended with some success, at least within the consumer society.

In short, these black and brown stockings become in Turiya Magadela’s work the reflection of a (post)-colonial history, and of the violence exercised on the supposedly minority and indisputably minoritized bodies that make up this history. In her work, tights fray, crack, develop holes. The pressure exerted by the tension of these on the canvas evokes a form of torture. “In the white world, the man of colour encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema”, claims psychiatrist and essayist Franz Fanon in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*. “Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty”,⁹ he explains as if to highlight the complexity of the relationship to the body, in a context that precedes African independence movements, and in the midst of apartheid South Africa.

Far from the “interiority” expressed on the canvas, and advocated for by certain European abstract artists, Franz Fanon’s considerations confront us with the opposite of the interiority of a differentiated experience: that of black people and white people. “The white man is sealed in his whiteness. The black man in his blackness”, he says again, as if to voice the impossibility of communication and mutual understanding. However, he introduces in his essay, which, moreover is intended as an attempt to develop tools for emancipation that “man is a yes that vibrates to cosmic harmonies”.¹⁰ We eagerly imagine the work of Turiya Magadela rallying to this “vibrant yes” that goes beyond the inequalities [*Inequalities*] raised by her work.

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May 2022

⁸ Huet, Virginie. “Art contemporain: l’art textile de Turiya Magadela, une arme contre les violences racistes et sexistes” in *Connaissance des arts* [online], January 2022, available at: <https://www.connaissancedesarts.com/artistes/art-contemporain-lart-textile-de-turiya-magadela-une-arme-contre-les-violences-racistes-et-sexistes-11168778/> (consulted on 12 April 2022).

⁹ Fanon, Frantz. *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2013 [1952], p. 108 [Translator’s note: *Black Skin, White Masks*. English version translated by Charles Lam Markmann and published by Pluto Press, London, 1986].

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8.



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