



FONDATION
GANDUR
POUR L'ART

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Collection of African Contemporary Art and of the Diaspora

Protégeons la nature by Lucie Kamswekera



© Lucie Kamswekera © Crédit photographique : Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographe : Lucas Olivet

Lucie KAMSWEKERA (Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo, 1942)

2022

Recovered jute canvas, stitched and embroidered with coloured wool threads

130 x 85 cm

FGA-ACAD-KAMSW-0005

Provenance

Artist's studio

Espace Texaf Bilembo, Kinshasa, 2022



“I write the history of the Congo through my use of these bags”. Both indignant and passionate about the political and environmental situation in the territory she inhabits, that of Goma, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Lucie Kamswekera embroiders in order to express her anger and to raise awareness about the richness of the country's history and its natural context to its population. In *Protégeons la nature*, animals, volcanoes and plants remind us of the importance of the unique diversity of her region's ecosystems. The latter simultaneously warn us about the various threats they face.

Embroideries of wrath

Born in 1943 in Goma, North Kivu's capital, where she lives and works, Lucie Kamswekera is an important figure in the Congo-Kinshasa art scene. Her worn-out bags – gathered with patience from the streets of Goma and embroidered with stories that both animate and outrage her – have become her preferred medium of expression over the last thirty years.

“Could I have written a book, I would have done so without hesitation”¹, she says, not mincing her words. What she could do and finally did was to embroider the stories that animate her and that she brings to life for the public of Goma and the world. Today over 80 years old, she was introduced to embroidery at 7, at an age when she was already attracted by the representations of animals and flowers at school. In her work, she has depicted colonizers with machetes, the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, kidnappings in the North Kivu region, yet she also emphasized with vivacity both the importance of the natural resources that surround her and her attachment to the land. The inaugural audience for her work is always Goma's population, her neighborhood: nicknamed Maman Lucie by local artists, Kamswekera has the habit of hanging her works on supports placed in front of her



Fig. 1 – Exhibition view , Lucie Kamswekera, espace Texaf Bilembo, Congo Biennale 2022© Lucie Kamsekera. Photo credit: Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Geneva.

¹ Archive from *Journal Afrique*, TV5 Monde, 21.02.2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=muH2C4Va1zc> (accessed August 8, 2024)

house, before they are moved to the Kinshasa art scene, as was the case for the discussed work, exhibited at the Texaf Bilembo space during the 2020 Congo Biennale (fig. 1).



Fig. 2 – Détail. © Lucie Kamswekera © Photo credit : Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer : Lucas Olivet

Within *Protégeons la nature*, Lucie Kamswekera depicts animals that are both spectacular and ancestral to the region. Animals that populate the imaginations of children the world over: the elephant, the giraffe, the crocodile, the hippopotamus, the pelican, the leopard, the gorilla, and one final animal represented while jumping, the only one not named by embroidered black letters (it might be an okapi, the DR Congo being the only country in the world where they live in wilderness², or perhaps a Ruwenzori duiker). Also represented on this canvas are four volcanoes, including Mount Nyiragongo (fig. 2), which has been in an eruptive phase since May 2021 and is part of the Virunga Mountains – the Virunga National Park being home to all the above-mentioned species. The latter's particularity is to have within itself an exceptional lava lake; its lava flows are

among the fastest on the planet, which makes it one of the most dangerous volcanoes on the continent³. The city of Goma, where Lucie Kamswekera lives and originates from, with its population of 1.5 million inhabitants, stands on the slope of the volcano, which threatens the entire environment surrounding it. Thus, Lucie Kamswekera proclaims the following as a wake-up call: "PROTECT NATURE". Humans, in the lower part of the composition, have of course their place within it, but what the artist expresses is her concern regarding the eruptive – and perhaps also poaching – activities that threaten the living in the broad sense.

2 MARSH, Jenni, « Récit. En RD Congo, sauver le mythique okapi envers et contre tous » in *Courrier International* [original source : CNN], 23.04.2019, online :] <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/recit-en-rd-congo-sauver-le-mythique-okapi-envers-et-contre-tous> (accessed August 14, 2024)

3 ANDREWS, Robin George, « Le Nyiragongo, volcan le plus dangereux d'Afrique, est entré en éruption » in *National Geographic*, 26.05.2021, [online :] <https://www.nationalgeographic.fr/sciences/le-nyiragongo-volcan-le-plus-dangereux-dafrique-est-entre-en-eruption> (accessed August 7, 2024)



While the forms applied by the artist appear as being simple and straightforward, the compositions of her works are in fine equilibrium due the accurately weighted proportions of the elements and their distribution on the canvas. Everything holds together in her work, mirroring the practice of embroidery and work with fabric, where the interweaving of threads gives body to the material. The various animals, characters and floral motifs, although superimposed on each another, provide a sense of bond between a priori different registers (fauna, flora, human). Weaving – from the Latin *texere* – to assemble, compose, tell, narrate – in this manner links form and content.

“Relegated for an eternity to needlework while men had access to the fine arts, women have finally turned this curse into a strength. And into an art form in which they reign almost unchallenged. Even when Alighiero Boetti dared to take it up in the 1970s, it was to entrust his own motifs (maps, flags, alphabets...) to Afghan female embroiderers”, recalls Charlotte Vannier, author of *De fil en aiguille*, her study of the practice of embroidery in contemporary art⁴. “Alternating between small stitches and long caresses”, she adds, “embroidery artists definitively emancipated themselves during the process of the sexual revolution and the women's liberation movement. Testimonies of this are Ghada Amer stitching erotic scenes on the reverse side of her works, Mona Hatoum embroidering a keffiyeh with long black hair or Letícia Parente sewing the words “Made in Brazil” directly onto her skin. All the above make it clear: there's no turning back. Embroidery will be fantastical – and political – or it will no longer be.”⁵

Political embroideries

Lightyears from a “well tamed domesticity”⁶ as art critic and author Frédérique Joseph-Lowery describes it, Lucie Kamswekera's work additionally deals with the death of Patrice Lumumba, DRC's Prime Minister in 1960, assassinated in atrocious circumstances (fig. 3), the DRC's colonial era (fig. 4), and kidnapping (fig. 5). The five works in the collection of the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art thus represent a body of work whose seriousness, political significance and content complexity find themselves in contrast with the clarity with which the artist depicts them. Lucie Kamswekera thus joins a line of women who “prick without caressing” the matters they tackle. We could cite, adjacent to Kamswekera's work, Ghada Amer and her erotic and pornographic portraits, sometimes concealed by threads that blur

4 NATAF, Natacha, « La broderie dans l'art contemporain. Talents aiguilles » in *beaux-arts magazine*, discussion with Charlotte Vannier, 16.02.2023, [online :]<https://www.beauxarts.com/grand-format/la-broderie-dans-lart-contemporain-talents-aiguilles/> (accessed August 14, 2024)

5 Ibid.

6 See the article by JOSEPH-LOWERY, Frédérique, « Broderie et art contemporain » in *artpress*, n°352, 2009, [online :] <https://www.artpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/3474.pdf> (accessed August, 7 2024)



the access to the bodies offered up to voyeuristic gazes. Or Joana Choumali and her *Ça va aller* series which tackles the Grand-Bassam terrorist attack and pays tribute to its victims via a sense of calm and meditation that is associated with weaving and the gesture of repair linked to the act of stitching. In the same vein, Georgina Maxim's embroidery gestures (fig. 7) also form her sculptural works, engendering the healing process of mourning whose wounds close up stitch by stitch. Or that Annette Messenger who uses thread and needle to stitch the letters of a series of misogynist proverbs: "Fear women and thunder" ("*Il faut craindre la femme et le tonnerre*"), or "Rubbing polishes the diamond and the woman" ("*Le frottement polit le diamant et la femme*"). Louise Bourgeois to add, also in embroidered letters: "Red is the color of blood. Red is the color of pain. Red is the color of violence. Red is the color of danger. Red is the color of shame. Red is the color of jealousy. Red is the color of reproach. Red is the color of resentment." All the text is in red thread on white fabrics, done with a sense of subversion, in the manner art critic Rozsika Parker understands it, "when it [embroidery] is placed at the service of a feminine discourse denouncing male domination"⁷. A sort of denunciation that Lucie Kamswekera communicates implicitly, her artistic approach being more focused on the representation of historical and social events, the priority given to their accessibility to all generations and social strata of the Congolese population.

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October 2024

7 LAUVAUX, Léonie, « L'expression de la violence dans la broderie contemporaine », *Les Cahiers de l'École du Louvre* [Online], 15 | 2020, published October 31, 2020, accessed August 12, 2024. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/cel/7816> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/cel.7816>



Figure 3 - © Lucie Kamswekera © Photo credit : Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Geneva. Photographer : Lucas Olivet



Fig. 4 - © Lucie Kamswekera © Photo credit : Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Geneva. Photographer : Lucas Olivet



Figure 5 - © Lucie Kamswekera © Photo credit : Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Geneva. Photographer : Lucas Olivet



Fig. 6 - © Georgina Maxim. Courtesy galerie 31Project



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