

Planting, Healing, Blossoming

Myriam Mihindou, the Shaman of the Living

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Abstract

How can the visual and performance practices of the Franco-Gabonese artist Myriam Mihindou be at the origin of a reflection on care? This article answers this question by analysing the video *La Robe envolée* [The Flying Dress] (2008) and the photographic series *Déchoucaj'* (2004–2006). The ‘transperformances’ represented in these works are a means of healing individual and collective wounds through ancestral remedies from traditional religious cultures. African belief systems comprise conceptions of care, solidarity, and nature that constitute a healing horizon from which Myriam Mihindou draws to perceive alternatives to contemporary wounds. The works studied thus constitute emancipatory spaces in which bodies free themselves from political and social injunctions. By developing new imaginaries in which hierarchies are abolished, the artist produces what has been called a “decolonial aesthetic of care.” In a context where colonial legacies and legacies of slavery are constantly being revived, this implementation of care becomes a political act with critical and therapeutic potential.

Keywords

Care, Decoloniality, Aesthetic, Gender, Environment, Performance

Introduction¹

“I am a ‘We’ in an ‘I’. In my body, the collective is expressed, and I am the conduit of my own experience of existence, just as I am the conduit of all these voices and bodies.”²

This is how the Franco-Gabonese artist Myriam Mihindou conceives her work: if her artistic practice is multidisciplinary, the body is its central subject. From Port-au-Prince to Las Palmas, the artist digs into both collective and personal bodily memories in order to extract the wounds and take special care of them. Inhabited by the schism constituted by her mixed race, her work is covered with elemental ruptures in which the artist seeks her place between the colonizer and the colonized, the feminine and the masculine, the pure and the impure. These tensions, together with the traumas of her personal history and experience as a racialized woman, appear in her work as a neuralgic wound that calls for reparation. In ritualised forms, the body and soul are soothed in a powerful visual artistic language. In this way, the artist asserts the therapeutic role of her art, of which healing is the source. How does Myriam Mihindou’s artistic and performative practice enrich the debate on care? Through the analysis of the video work *La Robe envolée* (2008), as well as the photographic series *Déchoucaj’* (2004–2006), one can see how the work of the visual artist invites us to consider care as a therapeutic practice inspired by the cosmogonies of traditional religious cultures.

Putting words to the hurt

In the video *La Robe envolée*, the artist creates a performance in which she frees herself from the injunctions imposed on her body as a racialized woman. Through a metamorphosis that is both physical and emotional, she slowly escapes from the taboos associated with the female body, the mixed-race body domesticated by education, laws, society and history. On a terrace in Las Palmas (Spain), the artist, sitting on a chair, films herself in a fixed frame where only her legs are revealed to us. The sobriety of the black and white image accentuates the emotional and verbal trance of the artist-therapist. Her gestures hurt as much as they heal, painful and sensual: they seek to find what lies beneath the skin, beneath the mask of domestication.

Femininity and nature

La Robe envolée [The Flying Dress]: this title, at once evocative of uninhibited femininity and open/liberated intimacy, visually recalls the Baubô statuette and the myth that accompanies it. In 1898, in the ruins of a temple of Demeter (dating back to the 4th century BC) in Priene – a Greek city in Asia Minor now located in Turkey – archaeologists discovered a group of terracotta statuettes. On the round bellies of these figurines are drawn large faces: the eyes are similar to breasts and the chin to the vulva. Thick thighs support their heads, which a ‘flying dress’ reveals for all to see. In Greek mythology, Demeter (goddess of agriculture and harvest) has been wandering the earth since Hades (god of the underworld) kidnapped her daughter Persephone. In her pain and despair, the mother arrives at Eleusis, in the house of Baubô the nurse. In a gesture that makes Demeter smile, Baubô lifts her dress and lets her discover her genitals. This eccentric character “will be depicted at the same time as the nurse, but also as the witch, the dirty old woman, the prostitute... all disturbing strange figures, of fear and terror, figures of the unspeakable sex of a woman when the reality of the body is not covered” (Jamart 2006). The myth of Baubô crystallises the idea of a disconcerting and obscene physical intimacy, both attractive and repulsive. Nietzsche takes up this mythical figure in the preface to the second edition of his book *The Gay Science* [also translated as *The Joyful Wisdom and The Joy of Science*] (1887):

- 1 This research is part of a broader reflection in art history on contemporary artistic practices of care to heal the wounds of slavery and colonialism. This text is largely inspired by a public discussion I had with the artist Myriam Mihindou during her monographic exhibition “SILO” at the Transpalette in Bourges. Curated by Julie Crenn; 2 July – 19 September 2021.
- 2 Les Abattoirs, Conversation no 8 / Myriam Mihindou, conversation between the artist Myriam Mihindou, the art critic and curator Julie Crenn and Annabelle Ténèze, the director of the art centre Les Abattoirs (Toulouse), 6 May 2021, link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CqiN4OXr5RY> [accessed on 01/08/2021].



Myriam Mihindou, *La Robe envolée*, video performance, 19 min 23 s, Las Palmas Gran Canaria, Espagne, 2008 © Adagp, Paris, 2021.

“I think that’s indecent’ – a hint for philosophers! One should have more respect for the bashfulness with which nature has hidden behind riddles iridescent uncertainties. Perhaps truth is a woman who has reasons for not letting us see her reasons? Perhaps her name is—to speak Greek, Baubô” (Nietzsche [1982/1887] 1982, p. 38).

From the myth of Baubô, we retain the association between woman and nature in contrast to man and culture; humanity is dissociated from animality, just as knowledge is dissociated from ignorance, the body from the mind, reason from emotion, etc. These fundamental categories of modern thought – still present in Western societies – impose an identity framework that Myriam Mihindou imperatively seeks to go beyond. Although the artist does not explicitly evoke the mechanisms of domination at work, throughout her monologue she uses the metaphor of the caterpillar that transforms into a butterfly to evoke her inability to find her place in society. The cocoon represents society, from which it is absolutely necessary to extract oneself in order to become a butterfly, to become a woman. She says:

“I still feel... like... fossilised... in this idea of the body that still cannot find its place in the cocoon. [...] I still can’t find my place in the cocoon. The butterfly... hasn’t told me anything yet.” (10 min 37 s)

Neither patriarchy nor any form of domination of the body is mentioned, but the effects on her body are definitely present: “With this narrative of the body, I lost the use of speech for several years. I lost the use of my body... I am talking about my female body too... And my female body is not clean.” (9 min 30 s) These words, a little confused, are the result of a trauma inscribed in the flesh; speech would be taken away from her, as if she didn’t deserve it. She continues in a voice full of sobs: “I’m very afraid to let myself be exposed... It’s something... I can’t! I can’t show my skin!” (14 min 58 s) At the same time, the artist tears off her tights, revealing her bare skin, which she scratches and rubs before caressing, as if to soothe it. Her cry, expressed as much by words as by gestures, is unloaded from her subjective history which has remained in pain. Her recovery of speech becomes a creative act through which the artist makes room for the wounds of her memory. The rubbing she gives to her body offer her the possibility of reconnecting with her feelings, of putting an end to the dualism between body and mind.

“Skin deep³”

Her various journeys have contributed to transforming the artist’s relationship with her own body:

“I have changed countries many times... And I have always had to... I negotiate with this history of the skin... The skin...” (2 min 12 s).

3 This title is drawn from the name given to another series of works by Myriam Mihindou, and reflects the artist’s interest in the skin.

From Gabon to France, from Reunion Island to Morocco via Egypt, Myriam Mihindou has made the places where she found herself personal and singular experiences as well as creative grounds. From a naked body that she could exhibit freely in Reunion to a body that she had to hide in Egypt, these experiences have made the artist a stranger to herself. “When I moved from Reunion Island... to Egypt, I had to cover that body. I had to absorb new notions.” (4 min 23 s). A split has occurred between what she feels about her body and what others see in it: “I don’t know how to define this image of the body...” (3 min 3 s). A taboo femininity has turned her body into an erotic object that has contributed to erasing any sensory and empirical character of the body. “Today I’m looking for a dress... I... I had to wear dresses for years, but... I can’t wear a dress today. I am unable to... wear a dress... I am unable to feel the water on my body...”

I am unable to feel this contact... I think that... all my artwork is about this question of the memory of skin.” (3:33) When the artist admits that she cannot let herself be discovered, that “showing skin [she] cannot! [She] must not!” (14 min 58 s) and that “[her] female body is not clean” (9 min 30 s), there is a whole heritage of modesty hidden in this speech. This modesty takes on a feeling of shame: Myriam Mihindou who used to wear dresses, no longer wears them today because of the way she is looked at. Modesty and shame are particularly gendered feelings: while male shame is related to the transgression of a given social etiquette, female shame is strongly linked to the preservation of sexual integrity.

In the course of her travels, Myriam Mihindou incorporates these doxas that make women’s bodies the object of permanent and incessant controversy. These cultural tensions impose a perceptual framework on the body from which the artist struggles to break away. Her inability to wear dresses, to show off her skin, as well as the way she feels impure (“my female body is not clean” [9 min 30 s]) is a reflection of the external world that permeates her entire being. Myriam Mihindou begins her performance, which has the appearance of a shamanic ritual, with these words: “This skin... I don’t know why people always say skin... I’ve never understood why the skin could be the subject of so much talk. I’ve always wanted to rip off that skin.” (1 min 17 s) The skin, the interface that separates the outside from the inside of the body, is supposed to protect against aggression from the outside. Its epidermis, subject to the shame of the unrepresentable, is no longer able to assume its protective role. In psychiatric terms, this malaise concerning the skin is similar to a “prison of the flesh,” which is characterised by an indifference between one’s internal and external worlds, between the self and society. Inner and outer are intertwined like a Moebius ring, resulting in an inability to imagine oneself.

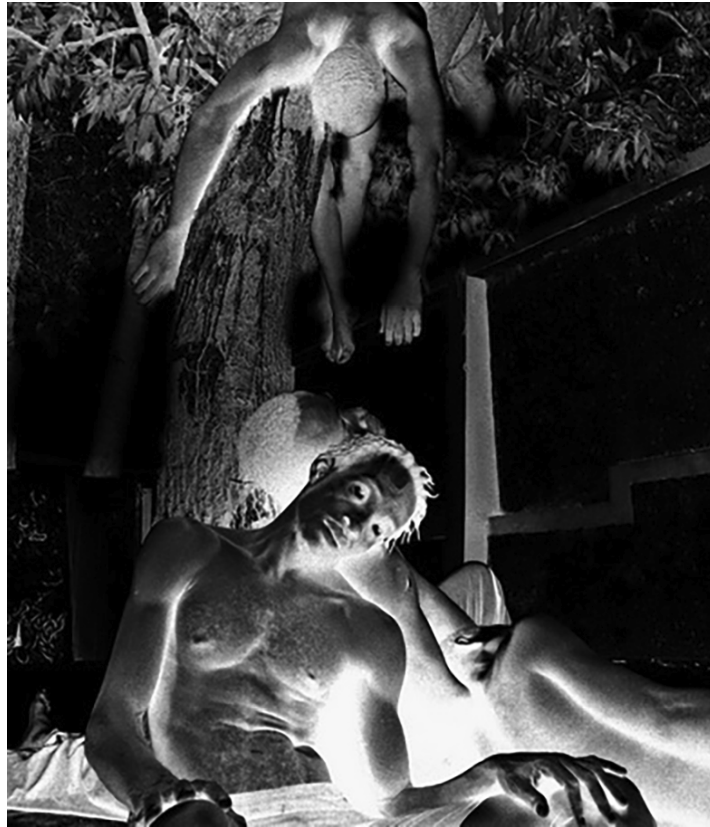
This psychological disorder is at the heart of the concept of the “Skin-Ego” theorised by the psychiatrist Didier Anzieu. When it appeared in 1985, in the book *Le Moi-Peau*, this neologism had a subversive flavour: it intended to rehabilitate the ego and the body. Anzieu defined this notion for the first time in an article published in 1974:

“A figuration that the child’s Ego uses during the early phases of its development to represent itself as Ego from its experience of the surface of the body.”

The ‘skin-ego’, as it appears in this first definition, manifests itself as a representation of an ego that is both primary and metaphorical, corroborated by a ‘tactile sensitivity’ (Anzieu, 1995, p. 1). The functions of this skin-ego are conceived from the functions of the skin. Through this ode to the epidermis as a vital sensory organ, Didier Anzieu elaborates a conception of tactility capable of putting the inside and the outside in communion: the differentiation between the psychic ego and the bodily ego thus makes it possible to imagine one self. If Myriam Mihindou struggles to imagine herself outside of external injunctions, her performance, between self-giving and introspective gaze, acts as a curative practice capable of delimiting the inside and the outside. Indeed, the skin-ego is both a psychic and bodily entity from which the care of the body can be thought of in its psychic dimensions. It is in this sense that the artist intends to cure her being. But this cure is not only individual; it is also through the interface of the skin that Myriam Mihindou intends to make her story a space in which all women can recognize themselves. The artist explains:

“I wanted to add an English translation because I wanted this body to speak to all women’s bodies and for them all to be concerned with this body, like an echo.⁴”

4 Les Abattoirs, Conversation no 8 / Myriam Mihindou, op. cit.



Myriam Mihindou, "Le Monologue des Anges" from the series *Déchoucaj'*, 2004–2006, digital ink print on fine art paper mounted on steel, 120 x 92 cm © Adagp, Paris, 2021.

From the individual body to the “big body”

Haiti's long history of violence

The foundations of this echo between bodies are set out in Myriam Mihindou's photographic series *Déchoucaj'* on Haiti, a country that was founded on the maelstrom of the barbarity of slavery and the slave trade. The deported African populations joined forces in a long struggle against the domination of the white colonists. Formerly known as Saint-Domingue, the country officially renounced French despotism and Haiti was born on 1 January 1804, becoming the first black republic in the world. This strong symbolic status was accompanied by long periods of political instability brought out by extremely restrictive economic policies and linkages with Europe, during which foreign powers kept intervening – especially the United States. The long dictatorship of François and Jean-Claude Duvalier (1957–1986) led to thirty thousand deaths in the country, which became accustomed to the structural violence of the political society. The first democratically elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, did not escape the despotic excesses. As the Haitian state fell apart and various external forces and with the interference of the United States, the president was finally deposed following a coup d'état in 2004. Thereafter, the amount of violence, abuse and torture suffered by Haitians reached an unprecedented level. It is in this context of perpetual waves of violence, without a clear outcome in sight, that Myriam Mihindou acts. *Déchoucaj'* (which means 'to pull up the stump after felling a tree' in Haitian Creole), refers to the term used by Haitians at the end of the Duvalier dictatorship. The *déchoucaj'* involves destroying the foundations of houses belonging to notables or alleged commanders linked to the various despotic governments. It was a popular explosion against political, administrative, military and even religious leaders. This practice resurfaced with the fall of President Aristide.

In Port-au-Prince in 2003, Mihindou and members of *Nous*, the theatre company she collaborated with in the country, were ambushed on their way to work one day by armed militias. Against all odds and in the face of the weapons aimed at them, the actors delivered poetic psalmodies that save their lives. When they finally arrived at their meeting place in a state of shock, rather than work, the actors decided to sublimate their fears by performing a Vodou ritual, which Myriam Mihindou captures in portraits of bodies in the midst of an exorcism⁵. This event follows many others in a context of trivialised violence in Haiti, where insecurity reigns. The extremely violent events that followed the fall of President Aristide caused deep trauma among the Haitian people. One of the photographs in this series, *The Monologue of the Angels*, shows three protagonists, almost lifeless, in the middle of a Vodou exorcism. Two of them lie at the foot of a tree while the third hangs from a branch. The bark of the tree, similar to those of the bodies, merge with the skin of the protagonists into an almost indissociable whole. The photograph, a little over a metre high, is presented in negative, with strong contrasts: the black bodies become white and the white on the composition becomes black. The tree leaves at the top of the image seem to want to pour down like a shower of insects at the slightest noise, at the slightest breath: between heaven and earth, paradise and hell, a place both phantasmagoric and unreal.

Memory in the body

When she arrived in Haiti in 2004, Myriam Mihindou had certainly not experienced the exactions that have been endured by the Haitians, but the death of her sister a month earlier gave rise to a common ground of suffering on which the artist was able to forge links with the local populations. Moreover, this suffering found a common language through ceremonial gestures. A few weeks before arriving in Haiti, Myriam Mihindou made a video, in homage to her sister, *La Colonne vide* (2004), in which she performs Kongo gestures on a plinth. This ritual of accompanying and protecting the dead was passed on to her as a child in Gabon. This video became the point of contact with the Haitians, who have similar rites. Indeed, in Gabon, the dead are more important than the living and the whole of life is governed by this concept, according to Mihindou⁶. Similarly, in Haitian culture, the dead and the living continue to live together on a fantastical and imaginary level. Thus, the photographer's work on the memory of the body found an important anchor point around ritual ceremonies: in order to help her mourn and to be able to work with the *Nous* theatre company, the artist was initiated into *vévé* (a Vodou ritual practice).

So, when the members of *Nous* and Myriam Mihindou fall into a trance, the artists are expunging a whole heritage of subjugation and suffering. From the threat posed by the militia, to the context of generalized violence following the fall of President Aristide, through the conditions of past and present domination, all the scourges of Haitian history pass through the bodies of those possessed. In a disorderly gait, the actors bow their heads, arch their spines, throw their whole body backwards... These postures, painful to see, are in fact curative for these artists. This ritual of possession rids them of their fears, their anxieties, their traumas; they emotionally unload all the violence they have endured. The trance rituals have an undeniable therapeutic value, which Haitians have transformed into a weapon against humiliation and despair. This common memory, shared with Myriam Mihindou through her initiation into the *vévé*, is reawaken in a collective trance adapted to the circumstances of the present (the fear provoked by the armed militias). This collective memory comes from a set of links between individual memories. The body appears as the interface between the individuals: the experience of each finds a way to extend itself in the body of the other. In the *Déchoucaj'* series, trance takes on a therapeutic dimension thanks to the integration of the individual body into the collective body.

5 The writing of the term 'vodou' acknowledges an increasingly widespread consensus to write the word in the same way as it is pronounced in Creole.

6 Interview between Philippe Piguet and Myriam Minhidou, "Myriam Mihindou, l'être et l'image," *Art Absolument*, no. 53, May-June 2013, <https://media.artabsolument.com/pdf/article/53813.pdf> [accessed on 14/06/2020].

New relations to the world

The “cosmic body”

This interrelation between one’s own body and the body of the other is at the heart of Myriam Mihindou’s artistic practice. Far from stopping at the gates of humanity, the artist also weaves links with what she calls the “cosmic body”, which includes nature, plants, water and air⁷. In *La Robe envolée*, the performer explains that she had to learn to reveal herself to others, but also to herself. The gestures she undertakes as she expresses herself seem essential to understanding her own person. Her hands rip off the pantyhose, tearing and tangling it. The caresses on her stiff legs are sometimes soft and gentle, sometimes aggressive and rough. The artist falls into a kind of trance, which she describes as a “transperformance”: if she does not leave her body, she fully embodies it. The external environment seems essential to this practice of self-awareness: “I spent a lot of time as a child leaving this skin bare... That’s how I learned from my experiences in nature” (1 min 17 s). The sensations that the skin experiences when in contact with the environment help to focus attention on the movements of both its internal and external nature, while linking the two. This sensory anchoring has the merit of acting on oneself and the world, acting on oneself in the world. Just as in the *Déhoucaj’* series, it is a question of reappropriating one’s body through trance, of reappropriating one’s history. The emotional release that is expressed through the state of possession is cathartic and liberating.

According to the artist, all these bodies constitute a single entity in which separation and hierarchy are both abolished. The “big body”, as she calls it, acts on her work and influences it. From this animist perspective, the artist intends to “produce works that lead to inner perspectives to connect with the spaces of the living and the dead.”⁸ By turns artist and shaman, Myriam Mihindou acts as an intercessor between a rational and a spiritual reality. In traditional societies, the shaman assumes an essential social role: he or she stimulates the link between a proven and conceptualised conception of the world and a cosmic reality, capable of discerning all forms of energy. Like the shamans of traditional societies, Myriam Mihindou’s performances, which are likely to open us up to listening to ourselves and the world around us, are part of a practice of care⁹. According to the American political scientist Joan Tronto ([1993] 2009, p. 103), “care is an activity characteristic of the human species that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, or repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible.” Performance and the trance-like state in which Myriam Mihindou immerses herself constitute spaces in which the artist takes care of herself as well as others and her surroundings. Transperformance allows her to free herself from oppressions towards her post-colonial female body, just as it allows the actors of the Haitian theatre company to unburden themselves of social shackles and historical violence. Theories of care, as they have emerged in feminist and ecology studies, are enriched by contact with traditional African beliefs. Each individual takes part in the cosmic body, integrates and regenerates itself through contact with it. This ethic of relationship also has a political dimension: on the one hand, it opposes the model of individualism and autonomy advocated by our neo-liberal societies; on the other hand, it brings about other ways of being in the world thanks, among other things, to a decolonisation of the imaginary.

Transperformance: a decolonial aesthetic of care

Decolonial thinking¹⁰ asserts the existence of a ‘colonial continuum’ from which it is necessary to free oneself by developing theoretical, critical, political, militant and artistic practices outside of Western-centric epistemologies. According to the Argentinean semiologist Walter Mignolo and the Mexican art historian Pedro Pablo Gomez (2012), artistic culture, and more specifically aesthetics, are part of the colonial matrix of power in its processes of using and manipulating subjectivities: in

7 Les Abattoirs, Conversation no 8 / Myriam Mihindou..., op. cit.

8 Myriam Mihindou, interview by Sylvie Arnaud, *Mouvements*, 3 April 2018, online: <http://www.mouvement.net/teteatete/entretiens/myriam-mihindou> [accessed 01/08/2021].

9 The English word “care” is deliberately not translated in French texts, because it has no semantic equivalent; it means “to take care”, “to give attention”, “to show concern”.

10 Decolonial studies emerged in 1998 from an interdisciplinary group of critical theory in Latin America, “Modernity/Coloniality/Decoloniality”. Today, decolonial studies are rooted in different philosophical traditions, whose precise intellectual and historical mapping is beyond the scope of this article.

the Western-colonial aesthetics, a coloniality of feeling is interwoven, closely linked to a coloniality of being. Thus, researchers propose the concept of ‘decolonial aesthetics’, which would consist of proposing imaginaries other than those developed by Western hegemonic norms. Pedro Pablo Gómez adds that “all of this has a critical component and a praxis in which various modes of doing, disobeying the Western global aesthetic hierarchy, begin to appear, to make themselves visible, not as alternative aesthetic practices, but as alternatives to art and aesthetics – other voices for a different and horizontal conversation between arts and aesthetics” (Gómez *et al.*, 2016). The ancestral healing practices from traditional religious cultures expressed in La Robe envolée and the Déchoucaj’ series undoubtedly participate in this decolonial aesthetic. The dominant discursive models are destabilised by the narratives conveyed in these works, which act as therapeutic and emancipatory tools. Thus, this decolonial aesthetic is perceived as a form of reparation of colonial wounds. In addition to a decolonial reparative aesthetic, the works of the Shaman artist combine a decolonial practice of care: if her transperformances heal the memory of injured bodies, they also repair a visual regime in which indigenous subjectivities and sensibilities have long been excluded. Myriam Mihindou thus creates what might be called a “decolonial aesthetic of care”: her works refer to forms of ethical relations in which indigenous cosmologies and epistemologies are brought to light as curative knowledge.

Conclusion: seeds to be sown

Myriam Mihindou’s artistic practice seeks to give substance to oppressed people through an approach that is both curative and decolonial. In La Robe envolée, the artist reveals her secrets by talking about the conflicting experience she has with her body. Through an emancipatory trance that she describes as a “transperformance”, the performer seeks to free herself from the injunctions imposed on her by the many countries in which she has lived. The words she unloads and the gestures she performs appear as acts of healing for her wounded body memory, as well as for all the women who can recognize themselves in her story. In Déchoucaj’, Haitian actors exorcise their fears through a collective trance. From political trauma to individual wounds, the bodies retain the traces of past violence. Their performance symbolizes the corporeal character of politics as much as the political nature of the body, which is perpetually inscribed in relations of power. By representing subjectivities that have long been downplayed by Western aesthetics, Myriam Mihindou creates what has been called a “decolonial aesthetic of care”. The therapeutic approach of the shaman artist is poetically reflected in the metaphor of the silo. This cavity dug in the earth allows the preservation of harvests throughout the seasons. As a synonym for the “big body”, the silo links humans to the earth, life to death. The exhibition Silo, curated by Julie Crenn at the Transpalette in Bourges, uses the image of this pit full of life to present a series of works by Myriam Mihindou¹¹. Twenty years of creation are exhibited in order to give an account of the extent of her curative practice. From Gabon to France, via Egypt and Morocco, the artist’s committed thinking is spread like seeds to be sown.

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11 Centre d’art Antre-Peaux: Transpalette, “Silo”, monographic exhibition by Myriam Mihindou, curated by Julie Crenn, 2 July – 19 September 2021, link: <https://antrepeaux.net/silo/> [accessed on 02/08/2021].