

## A VISUAL LINEAGE IN DRAPERY AND HUES: NEW WORK FROM SEKAI MACHACHE

In etymological terms, 'stage' is derived via Middle English from the Old French *estage* [dwelling] itself based upon the Latin *stare* [to stand]. The various usages of 'stage' encompass the theatrical, as a setting for action or gesture; a raised platform on which to address an audience; and a moment, in a process, development, or time. Sekai Machache's work in equal parts presents a dramatic tension between movement and stillness performed to the camera, whilst fully taking up the space compositionally, bearing in mind that to dwell means both to exist and inhabit. For 'Body of Land,' the artist has created new work, composed of the series *The Gathering*, *The Oracle*, *Black Aspect*, *White Aspect* and *Red Aspect*. Machache has described how these works take on novel directions, developing from an existing interest in psychoanalysis and dreams to encompass spiritualism, pre-colonial African spiritual practices of divination, and the role of mediums and conduits to the spirit world.

The parallels between her work and that of artists Rotimi Fani-Kayode and Maud Sulter are imprinted in emulsion. Each works photography and initiates a dialogue with art history(ies) from a position both

within and beyond the West. Their collective deployment of chiaroscuro and decoratively draped fabric, their embedding of religious and spiritual symbols, recurring use of veiled faces and of their own bodies within the frame, as well as their gravitation to rich hues and shades of black, white and red, only scratch at the surface of their kinship. This triad of colours recalls those natural to the photographic darkroom but carry forth additional significations. Historian Michel Pastoureau says of the colour red, it is 'the archetypal colour, the first colours humans mastered...[with] religious significance as the colour of the blood of Christ and the fires of Hell...[and] secular meaning, as a symbol of love, colour and beauty,' with an equal array of political associations. He continues to describe how, in many ancient languages, the terms for "red" and "colour" are the same, while in other languages only three were called into existence: red, black and white. Understanding the same fluid nature of colour's meaning, across geographies as opposed to Pastoreau's chronological tracings, filmmaker John Akomfrah describes how producing the film *Testament* (1988) on location in Ghana induced an alternative understanding of how colours could be applied, but also of their symbolism. He outlines the use of red, blue and black in traditional funeral rites, each colour

publicly signalling a different state of mourning and non/acceptance. He states that it was a 'universe in which colour meant other things...so to approach questions of colour with a Ghanaian inheritance means, in a way, undergoing a particular transformation in which you are willing to suspend disbelief in your own understanding of colour, momentarily.'

Rotimi Fani-Kayode, born 1955 in Lagos, came from a family with strong ties to Yoruba spiritual traditions, his father being the high priest of Ife, and his work teams this influence visually with references to the Baroque, Catholicism and 'Caravaggio's mixtures of real and visionary cloth.' For Machache and Fani-Kayode, fabric is both a theatrical prop and dress, the figure often appearing veiled, hooded, enveloped in a single piece of cloth, carrying both ancient and religious connotations. In *White Aspect 4*, the artist stands facing the viewer, a length of plain white cloth draped around her frame. In terms of dress history, there were historically two kinds of garments: draped garments wrapped around the body, or fitted garments, where clothes were made from cuts of fabric pieced together. Draped garments in the ancient world became elaborate through the fabric itself,



Sekai Machache, *A Silent Gifting*, Performance and Digital Photograph, 2019.

in the motion of the fabric set by the deportment of the body wearing it, or through the manner in which it was hung upon its wearer. As art and dress historian Anne Hollander writes, the translation of the 'behaviour of loose, mutable textiles [into] a dense, static medium' began in the fifth century BC in ancient Greece, where attempts began to render the fluidity of fabric when worn into carved marble. The cloth of *White Aspect 4* connotes such white marble sculptures, creating a dynamism in tandem with the cloud of chalk rising against the starkness of the black backdrop. Machache's palms are upturned, a gesture that might traditionally be understood

in the context of Christianity as beckoning believers towards heaven and more generally as a gesture denoting openness, truth or a kind of surrender. These hand positions are also employed by Fani-Kayode, in works such as *Nothing to Lose XI (Bodies of Experience)* (1989) and *Untitled* (1987-88), as part of a much wider lexicon of hand movements and gestures within his compositions. The prominence of the artists' hands within their works, firstly, responds to a long tradition of artists' depicting their own hands, emphasising their role as maker: in the words of Henry Moore, 'artists have shown through the hands the feelings they wished to represent[;] hands can convey so much[;] they can beg or refuse, take or give, be open or clenched, show content or anxiety.' Over and above this, their careful placement of their hands conveys the transformation or transcendence of the figure beyond the purely human realm, signifying spiritual connections with other worlds, or the body as a receptacle for information delivered unto them.

Even when fashions changed, the space and attention to draped fabrics in art, particularly paintings, persisted. A key device in surmounting the challenges of capturing its three-dimensional volume on the flat surface of the canvas was *chiaroscuro* – literally teaming *chiaro* 'clear, bright' with

*oscuro* 'dark, obscure.' Maud Sulter's *Les Bijoux* (2002) and staged self-portrait as Calliope within the *Zabat* series (1989) draw upon the conventions of portraiture, with front and side profiles facing the viewer, the artist's torso wrapped in richly-textured fabrics, against a dark studio backdrop, with necklaces and a book as symbolic accessories. The lighting used here – while intrinsic to studio photography in pragmatic senses – has a longer visual lineage, and fully utilises *chiaroscuro* to enhance Sulter's torso, which radiates beyond the two-dimensional surface, outlined against the dark backdrop and defined by the rich velvet sheathed around her shoulders.

Machache has described her research across various world philosophies and psychologies, from Hindu and Ancient Chinese to Kenyan Luo and Freudian orders of thinking, tracing the comparable notion within all four that the human psyche, the soul and governing principles of the universe existing are three linked aspects of life. Visually interpreting these ideas, her work *The Silent Gifting* is presented in a triptych-esque manner, as we see the same figure offering upwards vividly red material, from each side profile and facing the viewer head on. Like Sulter, she applies *chiaroscuro* so that the figures' skin matches the drama of light and shadow

unfurling across the red fabric as gravity pulls it downwards – the fabric seemingly dipping out of the frame, to re-surface in the hands of the next figure. The image uses the trickery and possibilities of photography to present an image not physically possible, but that which might appear to us in the dream-like, hypnagogic state from which the artist draws her imagery. Writing on the work of Fani-Kayode, art historian Kobena Mercer has noted that the 'camera becomes both a lamp and a mirror,' a statement which feels equally applicable to Sulter and Machache, and which strikes to the heart of the visual lineage within which Machache's new work rests.

*Tiffany Boyle is an independent curator, researcher and writer based in Glasgow. Since 2009, she has produced projects as part of the curatorial duo Mother Tongue, is a Lecturer in Design History & Theory at The Glasgow School of Art, and is a 2019/20 Hauser & Wirth Institute NY Postdoctoral and Senior Scholar fellow.*