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Thursday–Sunday: noon–6pm.

Closed Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday.

Géza at 306 Maujer St., a space for discursive events, performance, and screenings, opens only on weekends or for occasional events.

Grada Kilomba “Heroines, Birds and Monsters”

June 5 – October 3, 2021



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Curatorial Text

“Heroines, Birds and Monsters” is the first solo exhibition of Grada Kilomba’s work in the United States, presenting her unique form of storytelling. Working with theory, performance, film, and literature, Kilomba reveals narratives of the colonial past, giving space to the silenced voices whose traumas are ever present. In her own words: “What if history has not been told properly? What if our history is haunted by cyclical violence precisely because it has not been buried properly?”

Kilomba’s work is showcased across three of Amant’s buildings, transforming them into a theatre stage where characters, gestures, words, sounds, and props unfold into a hybrid body, exchanging roles and staging a new dramaturgy that traverses geographies and temporalities.

A World of Illusions (2017–2019) forms the centerpiece of the exhibition. In this large sculptural video installation on display at 932 Grand, Kilomba radically reinterprets three well-known Greek myths to expose the unresolved tragedies of the post-colonial condition. Drawing on her academic background in psychoanalysis, the artist dedicates *Narcissus and Echo* to the politics of invisibility; *Oedipus the King* is dedicated to the politics of violence; and the tragedy of *Antigone* exposes the politics of erasure and the importance of ceremonial memory. Combining music, mime, and dance, she re-stages these fables using the African oral tradition of storytelling—the Griot—and building on analogies to the modern patriarchal system through the inclusion of a postcolonial lens.

At 315 Maujer, another set of images portray the mythical narratives using different formats and methodologies. The trilogy reincarnates as a sequence of photographs with the shared title of *Heroines, Birds and Monsters* (2020), portraying the female protagonists in sculptural poses. In *The Desire Project* (2016), the representational image disappears entirely, with text displayed as the only visual element and musical rhythms substituting for the narrator’s voice. The concluding work, *Table of Goods* (2017), a sculpture born out of ritual-performance, presents as both an object and landscape of the whole exhibition. Goods exchanged in the transatlantic trade between Europe, America, and Africa—sugar, coffee, cacao—are interred in a pile of soil. Kilomba displays these extracted materials as a burial, a symbolic ritual of remembrance of the slave trade as historical trauma, the psychological consequences of which are yet to be thoroughly explored.

“Heroines, Birds and Monsters” is an exhibition that applies new poetic, theoretical, and political frameworks to the colonial past and the ways these narratives continue to embed themselves. “Retelling history anew and properly is a necessary ceremony,

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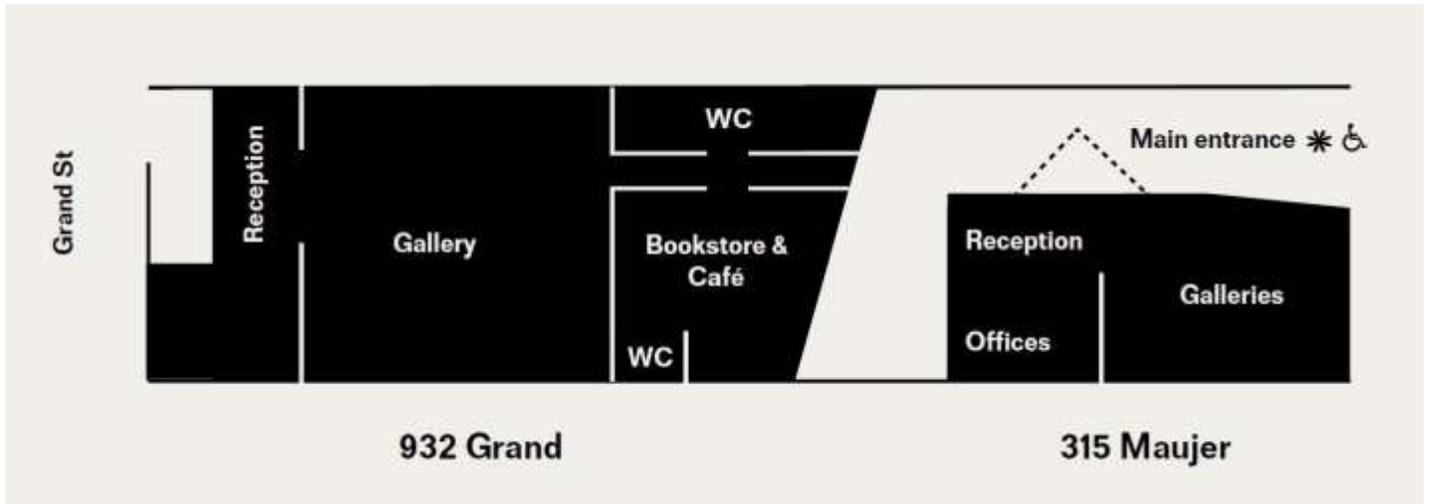
a political act. Otherwise, history becomes haunted. It repeats itself. It returns intrusively, as fragmented knowledge, interrupting and assaulting our present lives."

The exhibition is curated by Ruth Estévez, Artistic Director at Amant Foundation, with the assistance of Isabella Nimmo, Curatorial Coordinator.

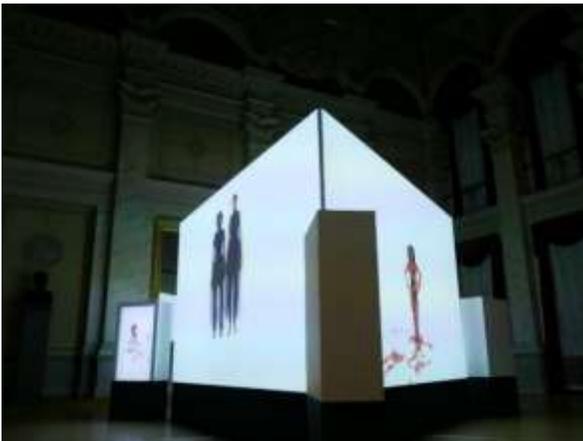
This project was produced in partnership with the Goethe-Institut.

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Works in the Exhibition



On view at 932 Grand



Word of Illusions, 2017–2019

Six-channel video installation; HD, color, sound, installed in a triangular sculptural formation, comprising the trilogy: *Illusions Vol. I, Narcissus and Echo* (2017), 30'38", in loop; *Illusions Vol. II, Oedipus* (2018), 45'26", in loop.; and *Illusions Vol. III, Antigone* (2019), 54'49", in loop

315 Maujer St.
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In *A World of Illusions*, Grada Kilomba stages three well-known Greek myths and their inherent tragedies to approach today's politics of cyclical violence. With a certain irony, Kilomba retells the classic narratives, only to gradually twist them onto themselves, raising questions around knowledge production and power. In this sense, *Illusions Vol. I, Narcissus and Echo* (2017) becomes a story on the politics of invisibility; *Illusions Vol. II, Oedipus* (2018), a tale on the politics of violence; while *Illusions Vol. III, Antigone* (2019) is a narrative on the politics of erasure and the importance of ceremonial memory. The audience circulates around the triangle, as the films can be viewed and entered at any point, destabilizing the assumed linearity of history and time.

In her storytelling, Kilomba creates a poetic imagery with an ensemble of Black actors, recounting the tales through music and mime in an empty, white infinity, metaphorically interrupting the "white cube" with a new vocabulary, both visual and semantic. On a vertical screen, Kilomba narrates each of the stories. As the storyteller, she takes on the role of a Griot, a repository of the African oral tradition, using voice intercalated with music to narrate postcolonial urgencies.



Illusions Vol. I, Narcissus and Echo (2017)

Two-channel video installation, HD, color, sound, 30'38", in loop
Commissioned by the 32nd São Paulo Biennial
Supported by the Goethe-Institut São Paulo

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About the myth of Narcissus and Echo:

In his *Metamorphoses*, the Roman poet Ovid tells two intertwining tales of unrequited love: that of Echo, a naive and relentlessly talkative nymph whose careless and assertive manner leads her into trouble, and that of the hunter Narcissus, revered and reviled in equal measure for both his beauty and shameless vanity. Each cursed by the Gods for their past indiscretions, both Echo and Narcissus are left trapped in a perpetual cycle of their own exaggerated faults: he, condemned to yearn for the unattainable love of his own reflection, and she, to forever repeat only the last words she hears, thus left unable to gain her love's affection. For Grada Kilomba, these stories of Narcissus and Echo exist together as a metaphor for 'whiteness': imposing its likeness as the default for all humanity, and imprisoned in an endless, self-serving feedback-loop of denialism and fantasy.

"I enter libraries, theatres, cinemas, museums, galleries, and universities only to find myself surrounded by the reflected image of whiteness. Always gazing at itself and reproducing itself as the ideal object of love. As Fanon said: 'All this whiteness, that burns me.'" —Grada Kilomba

2. *Illusions Vol. II, Oedipus* (2018)

Two-channel video installation, HD, color, sound, 45'26", in loop

Commissioned by the Bildmuseet, Umeå, Sweden and the 10th Berlin Biennale with support of Outset Germany and Switzerland



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About the myth of Oedipus the King:

The myth of *Oedipus*, written by the Greek playwright Sophocles and first performed around 429 BC, explores the fatal tensions between a father and son doomed to tragedy. King Laius and Queen Jocasta learn from an oracle that their newborn son will both murder him and marry her in the years to come. Abandoning Oedipus to the elements, the boy survives and is adopted by the Kings of Corinth. Upon hearing rumors of the prophecy as a young man, Oedipus runs away, believing he will kill his adoptive father. Along the journey, he meets his birth father Laius, and, unaware of each other's identity, Oedipus slays Laius in a deathly duel. Later, having solved the riddle of the Sphinx and freeing the kingdom of Thebes from its curse, Oedipus is rewarded with the hand of the newly widowed Queen Jocasta and the crown of the city, thus fulfilling the prophecy. When the truth finally comes to light, a horrified Oedipus proceeds to gouge out his own eyes in despair. Kilomba uses the themes of loyalty and the politics of violence to consider the role that destiny can play for those embedded within a system of cyclical oppression. In a metaphor for knowledge and healing Oedipus is overcome, evicting him from the comfort of blind consensus.

"The murderous fantasies of the Oedipal conflict and the unconscious wish to kill and destroy the patriarchal figure are repressed and performed on marginalized bodies, gratuitously. The Black bodies become the place where insult, humiliation, punishment, incarceration, violence and murder are performed." –Grada Kilomba.

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3. *Illusions Vol. III, Antigone* (2019)

Two-channel video installation, HD, color, sound, 54'49", in loop

Performed by Martha Fessehazion, Zula Lemes, Sara-Hiruth Zewde, Moses

Leo, Zé de Paiva, Isabelle Redfern, Grada Kilomba, Amanda Mukasonga

Commissioned by the Bildmuseet, Umeå, Sweden and the 4th Berliner Herbstsalon at the Maxim Gorki Theater, Berlin



About the myth of Antigone:

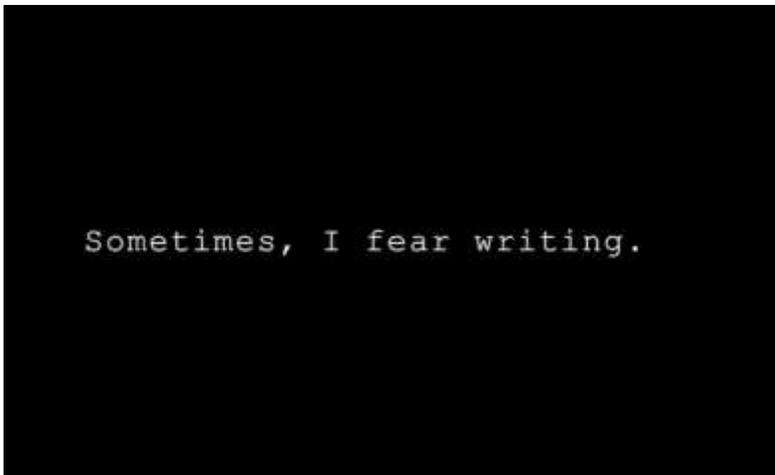
Written by the Greek playwright Sophocles around 441 BC, *Antigone* is a sorrowful tale of loss, of both life and dignity. An unwavering and relentless tragedy, the narrative is perforated with scenes of dutiful sacrifice, and the dire consequences inevitably driven by a blinding lust for power. The myth recounts the doomed fates awaiting the children of King Oedipus and Queen Jocasta, forever cursed by their wretched union. In Kilomba's re-staging, the story begins with sisters Antigone and Ismene united in mourning by the loss of their brothers Eteocles and Polyneices, killed by one another's sword in a deathly struggle for the throne of Thebes. Antigone fails in her attempt to persuade Ismene in joining her to evade the orders of the newly crowned King Creon. Accusing Polyneices of treachery, Creon has forbidden his subjects from offering their brother his sacred burial rites, condemning him to eternal unrest. Undeterred by the likely repercussions, Antigone self-sacrifices to ensure Polyneices passes on peacefully and nobly into the afterlife. In Kilomba's reinterpretation, Antigone lives on as a symbol of the Black feminist struggle, risking persecution, and even death, to enact memory: ensuring the ghosts of past traumas

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are laid to rest. For Grada, the politics of forgetting and control over the historical narrative is central to coloniality. In her words:

“Retelling history anew and properly is a necessary ceremony, a political act, otherwise history becomes haunted.” —Grada Kilomba.

Works on view at 315



The Desire Project, 2016

Three-channel video installation; HD, black and white, sound, 2:46 looped, with environment: printed impressions and a shrine installation comprising a bowl with coffee, a glass of water, a pipe, tobacco, several beads, a white candle, and a white lillian flower

Written, directed, and edited by Grada Kilomba. Music by Moses Leo
Commissioned by the 32th São Paulo Biennial
Courtesy of Marielouise Hessel Collection, Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

The Desire Project (2016) is a three-channel video installation in which text is presented as the sole visual element, accompanied by rhythmic drumming indicating the emergence of a speaker who has been historically silenced. In this work, writing becomes a methodology of resilience, countering colonial processes of "othering" and the dialectical relationship between speaking, silencing, and listening.

315 Maujer St.
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Before entering the video installation, one passes a shrine dedicated to *Anastácia*, a political and religious figure historically venerated by the Black communities in Brazil. For the artist, *Anastácia*, the emancipated African woman whose mouth was sealed a common practice to implement a sense of fear and speechlessness, embodies the still pressing questions: "Who can speak?"; "What can we speak about?"; and "What happens when we speak?"



Table of Goods, 2017

Installation with soil, sugar, coffee beans, ground coffee, cocoa, dark chocolate, and candles. Courtesy the artist and Goodman Gallery

At the center of the immaculate gallery room, a mound of soil that resembles a grave emerges from the floor with tiny pockets filled with colonial goods. Sugar, coffee, and cocoa, raw materials with long histories of colonial extraction, are offered a final resting place.

Combined with soil and interred in a pyramidal sculpture evoking a traditional burial pile, these materials elicit memories of transatlantic stories and the trade routes between Africa, America, and Europe into the present. In her installation, Kilomba creates a visual representation of centuries of forced labor and death, surrounded by candles that are waiting to be lit.

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Heroines, Birds and Monsters series, 2020

5 C-Print on cotton paper mounted in aluminium, framed
60 x 40 in. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery

The sequence of photographs reincarnate the main characters of Kilomba's trilogy *A World of Illusions* (2017-2019). In this series, the artist captures the Black female protagonists in sculptural poses, mimicking the conflictuous world they inhabit, a world between heroines, birds and monsters.