

AT THE ALTER OF WOMANHOOD

THE WORK OF LEBO THOKA AND MARGARET NGIGI IN 'I EXIST'
A COLLABORATIVE EXHIBITION PRESENTED BY AKKA PROJECT
AND DAVID KRUT PROJECTS

By Ellen Agnew

AKKA Project is a commercial art gallery focused on contemporary art with a special focus on emerging African artist. Their gallery spaces in Dubai and Venice are intimate spaces to admire a rich variety carefully selected works. 'I Exist!' features two emerging female artists, Lebo Thoka (South Africa) and Margaret Ngigi (Kenya).



Lebo Thoka, *Refugee of Sinners*, 2019. Digital archive photograph, 100 x 80cm. Edition 1-9.
All images courtesy of AKKA Project & David Krut Projects.

Lebo Thoka, *Black of my Flesh*, 2020. Digital archive photograph, 80 x 100cm. Edition 1-9



It's an image we're all familiar with; a portrait of our lady, Madonna, which we've seen time and time again since, they estimate, 101 AD. We've seen her in the mosaics of the Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome; in the ancient Egyptian goddess Isis nursing her son Horus; we've seen her in the work of Renaissance masters Duccio, da Vinci, Raphael and Michelangelo. More specifically, and recently, we've seen her in James McNeil Whistler's 1871 painting, *Whistler's Mother*; in Dorothea Lange's 1936 Great Depression photograph, *Migrant Mother*; and in Damien Hirst's 1993 Turner Prize award-winning sculpture, *Mother and Child (Divided)*. She is the Madonna; our lady, our mother, a woman.

And yet again, in *I Exist*, we see her. Here she is sitting, her bandaged hands cradling her swollen belly, her face turned slightly toward the light. It is a photograph made by South African contemporary photographer Lebo Thako, who, at once, is both photographer and subject. This portrait, while distinctly Marian and titled *Mother Inviolable*, highlights the individual case of a 'pregnant domestic worker who was attacked by her employer for cooking mashed potatoes instead of roast potatoes as instructed. The employer attacked her with a knife.' As Mary suffered the female condition, so too does Thoka's Madonna.



Lebo Thoka, *Mother Inviolable*, 2019. Digital archive photograph, 106 x 80cm. Edition 1-9.



**ON THE IMITATION OF A STAINED-GLASS WINDOW,
SHE EXISTS AS THE HOLIEST OF MOTHERS,
“WITHIN A CATHEDRAL OF AGENCY...
OUTSIDE THE PARAMETERS OF VIOLENCE
THAT BLACK WOMANHOOD HAS
LONG BEEN FORCED TO LIVE WITH”**

Central to ‘I Exist!’ is this very understanding of the idiosyncrasies of the female condition: that women suffer, that women are divine. *Mother Inviolata* sees the Madonna as a South African domestic worker; a black female dressed in ‘traditional’ domestic-work attire, her hands bandaged, a white sheet adorning her head, and her halo made from steak knives. This portrait is accompanied by the text described above: that *Mother Inviolata* is the image of an assaulted black woman. Yet, in Thoka’s choice of iconography – seraphic motifs seen in a series of Thoka’s artworks from *Seeds of the Dirt*, 2020 exhibited in ‘I Exist!’ – the artist has repositioned the perception of the South African domestic worker. Here, on the imitation of a stained-glass window, she exists as the holiest of mothers, “within a cathedral of agency... outside the parameters violence that black womanhood has long been forced to live with”.

This is evident too, in Thoka’s works *Initiation of Mary* and *Black of My Flesh*, where ‘Black Mary’ features as Thoka’s exploration into black womanhood within patriarchal and theological structures – destabilising the ideals of what divinity is and reclaiming the agency of black women and the roles they have come to fulfil in society.



THIS PAGE: Lebo Thoka, *House of Gold*, 2019. Digital archive photograph, 100 x 100cm. Edition 1-9.

FACING PAGE: Lebo Thoka, *Mother Undefined*, 2019. Digital archive photograph, 100 x 80cm. Edition 1-9.

Margaret Ngigi, *The Bride Avenue*, 2020. Inkjet print on fine art paper, 100% cotton Hahnemuhle, PhotoRag 310gsm, 59.4 x 84.1cm. Edition 1-3 + 2 AP.



THE IMAGES LOOK ALMOST PAINTERLY; A SOFT LIGHT FALLS ACROSS NGIGI'S BRIDES, ADORNED IN PURPLE AND WHITE CLOTH, EACH OF THEIR PERSONALITIES EXPRESSED THROUGH SUBTLE GESTURES.

Exhibiting alongside Lebo Thoka is Kenyan photographer and filmmaker, Margaret Ngigi. Like Thoka, her work, too, confronts the female condition – and is specifically grounded in the social roles of women in Kenya. For Ngigi, as she transitions into womanhood, the issue of marriage became a point of interest: “... it seems like one of the end goals for a lot of women in my society, and it changes how people behave and live... Looking at women around me who are part of this institution, taking an example of my mother, I admire their strength, resilience and perseverance with the tribulations that marriage comes with”.

Titled *Mke Mwema*, and which translates from Swahili to ‘good wife’, this photographic series on exhibition as part of ‘I Exist!’ sees Ngigi work with models, posing them to capture her vision of a wife at the altar. The images look almost painterly; a soft light falls across Ngigi’s brides, adorned in purple and white cloth, each of their personalities expressed through subtle gestures. Another of Ngigi’s bodies of work on show is *Murky Waters* – a photographic series shot in black and white on the shore of Lake Magadi. Here Ngigi has positioned her models to illustrate the various, progressive roles of women in Kenya: the school learner, the bride, the mother.



Margaret Ngigi, *Mke Mwema*, 2020. Inkjet print on fine art paper, 100% cotton Hahnemühle, PhotoRag 310gsm, 84.1 x 59.4cm. Edition 1-3 + 2 AP.



Margaret Ngigi, *Murky Waters V*, 2020. Inkjet print on fine art paper, 100% cotton Hahnemühle, PhotoRag 310gsm, 59.4 x 84.1cm. Edition 1-3 + 2 AP.



Margaret Ngigi, *Bride Avenue IV*, 2020. Inkjet print on fine art paper, 100% cotton Hahnemühle, PhotoRag 310gsm, 59.4 x 84.1cm. Edition 1-3 + 2 AP.

In *Murky Waters III*, we see a young woman, a school learner, passing through gates into, what we presume, becomes womanhood. She is faced by another woman who is dressed in a wedding gown, her back turned towards the viewer. This scene is expanded on in *Murky Waters V* where the school learner and bride have been joined by two additional figures: an older woman in long, white robes, stained at the hem from the lake's shore; and a younger woman, her face veiled. Their works represent the limited options for women in society – that religiously, socially, politically the oppression of women remains the (un)natural order of things.

In both Thoka and Ngigi's work, the violence enforced upon women, upon black women, is evident; cases of racial, sexual, verbal abuse and oppressive institutional structures form the backbone of this exhibition, where women whisper, cry, demand: I endure! Throughout *I Exist*, we see subjects at the altar of womanhood – a disease, a beautiful thing, a blessing.

'I Exist!' is a collaboration between AKKA Project and David Krut Projects. The exhibition is on view at AKKA Project, Venice, Italy, from the 6th of July until the 21st of August 2021.

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