



Gerald Machona
(b. 1986)

Survive
(2018)

Single channel HD video STD 2/5
Duration: 4 min 12 sec
[looped and shown on secured monitor]

An edition of 5



UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN
IYUNIVESITHI YASEKAPA • UNIVERSITEIT VAN KAAPSTAD

Performance art, film, video and digital arts, while they are becoming more and more common and more and more widely circulated in the 21 st century, still tend to be some of the most difficult forms of art to commoditise. So the recent acquisition of Gerald Machona's video work, *Survive* (2018), by the UCT works of art collection seems all the more forward-thinking and remarkable for providing an alternative space in which to engage with art outside of the purely commercial.

Born in Zvishane, a mining town in south-central Zimbabwe, Gerald Machona is a graduate of the Michaelis School of Fine Arts at the University of Cape Town. While still a student there, Machona took the art world by storm with his installations, and performances that made creative use of decommissioned Zimbabwean bank notes. His work *Ndiri Afronaut* (2012) snagged him a spot at the South African pavilion at the 2015 Venice Biennial and representation by the Goodman Gallery. "Ndiri Afronaut" translates to "I am Afronaut" in Shona. The work consists of a space suit whose fabric is made of Zim dollars, transforming the value-less currency into valuable art. "The Afronaut came about as the end of a series of works that were trying to grapple with what it meant to be a foreigner in South Africa. More importantly, what it meant to be a foreigner from another African country," Machona says. The space suit not only gestures toward the reasons for migration to South Africa, but also toward the need for protection in the face of alien terrain and inhospitable climate. Both the suit itself and the performance work in which it is featured reference the eruptions of xenophobic violence against African migrants one must navigate in South Africa.

Survive was presented as part of the exhibition "Gerald Machona: Greener Pastures" at the Goodman Gallery from 4 October to 3 November 2018 in Cape Town, SA ; his second solo exhibition there. The body of work featured in the exhibition included photography, mixed media installation, and video among others. The work on view explored themes of migration and mobility -- their impetus, as well as their consequences. But the exhibition was also about trying to plant oneself in fertile soil, trying to nourish oneself in the barren land of unmet expectations, and dreams deferred.

Machona was actively involved with the Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall movement on UCT's campus, where he met Tankiso Mamabolo. As the statue of Cecil Rhodes finally came down on campus, Mamabolo and seven other students collaboratively wrote and ultimately performed *The Fall*, charting their experiences as activists grappling with the legacies of white supremacy, elitism, patriarchy and misogynoir, history, and power 24 years after the official end of Apartheid.

Among the #RMF and #FMF demands were calls to Africanize the campus and curriculum with more racially-inclusive course materials, more Black, Coloured and Asian professors, and more resources and support structures for first-generation and/or non-white students. *Survive* raises questions about education, which is seen as a guiding path to progress for members of oppressed groups. The books stacked atop Mamabolo's head allude to the teach-ins and political education projects that emerged alongside student protests and performances. Reading the authors featured in *Survive*, UCT students actively began filling in the gaps, silences, omissions and distortions engendered by the University's "canonical" curriculum of

European and European diaspora creators, theorists and knowledge producers. “I compared the books of students who participated in the Fallist protests. Books that they were reading at that moment or that they had written themselves. Tankiso then wrapped herself in her traditional Basotho blanket and we stacked all the books on her head while she sang a song about her experience with the academic world in the time of these protests,” Machona said of the 2018 collaboration.

While the video alludes to the #RMF and #FMF student movements of 2015 and 2016 and their calls to decolonize, it is interesting that the traditional Basotho blanket that Mamabolo wears as a symbol of cultural pride is itself an object with a colonial history. In 1897 Queen Victoria visited the then Basutoland during her Jubilee year. She gave King Lerotholi Letsie a blanket as a gift. Made out of wool, Basotho blankets were principally designed and manufactured in Great Britain. The royal pedigree of the blanket worked to transform it into a sought-after symbol of wealth and status, and it was quickly assimilated into indigenous African cultural rites. Today, Basotho blankets are also worn as part of everyday life and serve as a material connection to the wearer’s ancestry and heritage.

In *Survive*, Machona also plays with traditional Zulu marriage customs; the women of the family and village wrap the bride in a blanket and then tuck dollar bills, small ornaments, and symbolic gifts into its folds. Usually this is accompanied by song. The song, *Shake The Ground*, was written and performed by Mamabolo and appears on her debut solo album, *Freedom Hurts Sometimes* (2020).

Through select objects and references, *Survive* illustrates and echoes Stuart Hall’s claim that “identity is always in the process of formation,” (Hall 1997).

According to Machona, “the very notion that people can be ‘naturalised’ into a family, ethnicity or as citizens of a country through marriage contradicts any purist notions of national or ethnic identity rooted in [indigeneity]. What it does point out, however, is that identities are in flux and are constantly navigating across national and ethnic boundaries.” Through select objects and references, *Survive* illustrates and echoes Stuart Hall’s claim that “identity is always in the process of formation,” (Hall 1997). The idea of identity as being an ongoing and incomplete narrative is given voice when Mamabolo sings, “It’s only human to break what you have built [...] It’s like life in a book with empty pages.” The brown hands offer tools and knowledge that will aid the subject’s survival; yet it is not without strength, without poise, balance, and focus, that she is able to hold her head high and confront the viewer directly. Holding a steady gaze, Mamabolo calls on the viewer to think about what tools are necessary for survival in a hostile environment; and how the viewer will take responsibility for filling up the book of life’s empty pages, as they set about the project of making meaning out of their lives as they navigate politicized spaces.

Written by **Dr Fari Nzinga**