

Shanduko nhema

A conversation between Yilmaz Dziewior and Kresiah Mukwazhi about her contribution to the series *Schultze Projects*

Yilmaz Dziewior: Let's start with the title of your new piece specially made for the *Schultze Projects* series. What does *Shanduko nhema* mean?

Kresiah Mukwazhi: *Shanduko* is from my native language Shona and means "to bring forth change through reclaiming," and *nhema* means "black." Together, these two words form a title that loosely translates as "black reclamation" or "black lies". This work reclaims the power of Black women.

YD: How does the work connect to your earlier, more figurative paintings?

KM: I am not sure if there is a connection. It is a piece that asked to be made, called to be made. A challenge I gladly accepted without even knowing for sure if I could execute it. And so I embraced the calling, and here we are. I am on a path to use my work to decolonize the African narrative of feminism. My figurative paintings come from a place of wanting to express the real, sometimes personal, stories of other women seeking to be seen or heard through my work. With this piece, I aim to reclaim the sacred nature of women, so often stolen from them, and to see them as royal beings who should be celebrated as such. In Shona culture, black fabric (often linen because it carries a very high frequency) is worn only by the most respected person or spirit in the council.

YD: Do you see a connection between *Shanduko nhema* and your video works?

KM: I do. I can say that my textile pieces are an extension of my video pieces, which are an extension of my performance work, and my performance work evolved from my photography.

YD: The titles of your works appear in either English or Shona, your mother tongue. For this work, you chose a Shona title. How do you decide which language to use for each work?

KM: I think language is very political. There are schools in my home country that chastise students for not speaking English. When we sit Cambridge English exams, they are written in what is called the "first" language. However, this is not the case for Africans because we have our own first languages, of course. Language thus becomes a means of accessing spaces we would otherwise be excluded from because of our identity. I find it odd that more and more families train their children to speak a foreign language before they learn their native language. This is often the case with middle- to upper-class families. While I understand the good intentions behind this choice, I feel it is a pity because it causes a lot of African culture to be lost and not preserved. Giving my works Shona titles is an attempt to preserve and present my identity as an African. A lot can be lost in translation. Audiences

often derive their own meanings from a work regardless of its title, but titles are a safe space for me to express what I truly intend to channel through my work.

YD: I see a connection between the material used in *Shanduko nhema* and the concept of upcycling because you have taken a material discarded by others and used it in an art context. In addition to its economical and cultural aspects, the material also has clear postcolonial connotations because the used bras are shipped from the West to the so-called Global South. Are these subjects of interest to you?

KM: They interest me in the sense that I see the bra as a medium of feminist views, most of which we as modern-day African women adopted without questioning. I think we believed we all faced the same forms of repression, and we may not have fully considered our own power before adopting one imposed on us. This is sadly the case when a people's culture is highly influenced by exotic views. For us, patriarchy was hiding behind the face of Christianity and used as a weapon to brainwash and control. And so the bra comes to Africa as a donation but returns to the West art, as lies. *Nhema* also means "lies" in a different context, which I find interesting and ironic. Perhaps this black "garment" does not fit here, and so I am returning it to be altered, not entirely rejecting it but taking what fits and returning the rest.

YD: In some of your works, the used bra straps are oriented vertically and in others horizontally, producing associations with landscape painting. What are your associations when positioning the bra straps vertically?

KM: There is always a constant battle between what the artist intends and what the work becomes. The vertical has to do with imagining a coming together of these women, a mobilization as it were, so thinking of them as actual people standing upright facing the viewer.

YD: In your works made from used bra straps, I see a productive tension between the discourse of painting and a conceptual approach that refers to Minimal Art. There also appears to be a socially charged discourse connecting feminism and postcolonial issues. How do you think about these subjects in relation to these works?

KM: At present, I am quite invested in using my work as a means to deconstruct the Western ideologies that have shaped the identities of a lot of modern-day African women. I believe how we see ourselves is heavily inspired by colonial constructs that we need to unlearn. *Shanduko nhema*, in its large monumentality, calls to the urgency of the matter. African setups put women first before summoning ancestral guidance because we regard women as sacred and as spiritual, not physical—as portals that life enters through and, therefore, very much godlike. The textile made out of bra straps in its collective form is a symbol of the enormous strength women carry and a call for them to be regarded as such.

YD: Some of your works using bra straps seem almost like landscapes or seascapes because of their colors. Others appear in the beige tone once referred to as “nude” because it matched Western complexions. In the works that only use black or white straps, references to skin could also be made. How do you decide on the colors of these works?

KM: A reference to skin can be seen in *Ndakangavara*, a piece from my recent solo exhibition at blankprojects titled *bodycount*. *Ndakangavara* translates as “to glow up,” more loosely as “I am glowing now,” which metaphorically means someone looks better when they take better care of themselves. It’s a beige piece that takes inspiration from a fair-skinned woman. Notions of care can be read in my work, as the bra strap is a delicate object that speaks to delicate matters. I don’t always intend for my work to be seen as black and white but rather for what’s beneath the surface. In the case of the work I am presenting for *Schultze Projects*, I challenge the negative perceptions attached to the color black—as evil (black magic), as dark, as misfitting (black sheep), and I present it as a form of empowerment to those that it represents.