

LEBOHANG KGANYE

Dipina tsa Kganya, 2021, Three-channel Video Installation.



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Film Still collage from *Dipina tsa Kganya*,
Three-channel Video Installation, 2021
12 min 42 sec
Edition of 5 + 2AP

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Dipina tsa Kganya (2021) is a black and white three channel-video installation by South African artist Lebohang Kganye. It features two performances that are informed by the notion of healing, enacted through acts of naming and cleansing. The word *dipina* means “songs” in the artist’s mother language of seSotho. The song referred to is that of her family clan names, traditionally passed down through oral tradition. Additionally, the Sotho word

for “light,” *kganya*, is in the etymology of the artist’s last name Kganye. A central visual component is the lighthouse featured in the middle channel of the video work. A light beam, in perpetual motion, casts light onto the surrounding ocean scene and in turn creates shadows in the two peripheral channels of the work. In the first or left video channel, a lighthouse keeper appears as a custodian of this light, tending to it by continually cleaning the bulb – a light source that symbolically guides those lost at sea. The song featured in the work (composed by musician Thandi Ntuli) plays from a large, custom-built Polyphon music box, which is hand cranked in the third or right video channel. These performative gestures are in conversation with the southern African practice of the “praise-singing” of clan names as a way of passing down the origins of the family story as an act of resistance to historical erasure, to insure its unwritten continuity.

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Film Still 1

Dipina tsa Kganye: Naming Her Story

Dipina tsa Kganya underpins a traditional praise singing Nguni figure known as *imbongi*. This African traditional character recites emotive poetry, and in (his) performative act retells historical events. A double speaking happens, voice over voice, wherein the writer reconfigures intentions of characters or expands small ideas. Kganye's artistic journey is far too extraordinary and far too complex for one *imbongi*. The biography of her work requires multiple thematic framings beginning with black feminist writers, to sociological thinkers and contemporary art historians. The charting of her productions is essentially multi-dimensional.

While it has become something of a norm for female artists to keep their premarital surnames as their professional brand, the practice has spilled over and has been informed by a social phenomenon wherein an increasing number of informed and educated young women keep their premarital surname regardless of their marriage status. In so doing contemporary women retain and claim their individuality. In the context of South Africa, the marriage act declares in law jargon that '*a woman after her marriage assumes the surname of the man with whom she concluded such marriage or after having assumed his surname, resumes a surname which she bore at any prior time*'. Naming oneself or retaining a name is a powerful indicator of self-determination.

Simphiwe Sisanti argues that "African women's rejecting and abandoning their husbands' surnames would be the first step in liberating them from being seen as their husbands' appendages". The power to be referred to, by one's own preferred name frames much of the contemporary discourse of identity politics. This power is even more delightful when one has taken that name into the sphere of the arts. Lebohang Kganye has made of the name '*Kganye*' a significant surname that is worth remembering through her work and the content of her work. Names, family names are in fact a form of currency that help to open doors. In opposition to what Kganye's creative preoccupation as an artist, women in social circles are often advised to marry the right name to make of themselves part of family empires.

If the artist Lebohang Kganye were to be given yet another title, it would be that of the 'the stone that the builder refused', the key stone to her family. Lebohang Kganye has inherited her surname from her mother and not her father. A scenario that began circumstantially but grew to be an intentional choice. She, as the holder of this

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name, has become its keeper and champion. The hoisting up of a surname contributes to the world a form of world building. Kganye is known for her studying traditional photography at the illustrious Market Photo Workshop but evolving out of that traditional process into an interventionist into domestic family archives and creating a dialogue with those past worlds. The creative process is artistic and but has its roots in photographic image making and generating visual dialogues with scenes long past.

There is a follow through with the use of light, the primary medium of photography with her chosen name. Kganye is derived from the SeSotho word *kganya* meaning light. There is something of a battle strategy, Shaka's famous "the pincer movement, or double envelopment, known as a military maneuver in which forces simultaneously

attack both flanks (sides) of an enemy formation". Kganye's pincer movement is where light from both ends is a meaningful metaphor and functional element in meaning making in her work.

If her development as creative figure, and artist or photographer is seen as a ground, it is rich and fertile. Fiction combined with historical facts, determined by her research, is then what sprouts out of her work. This storyteller leads us into another interesting rabbit hole in the form of video making, performance and installation. Just as in that tradition of storytellers, the flavor of her work as an added feature is science fiction-like. In this world that she built, there is a believability in her contraptions that speaks to a logic of that diorama.

The video installation *Dipina tsa Kganya* (2021) is a visually stimulating work that brings about storytelling into the fore. Kganye takes on the omnipresent light and fixes it into a beam from a lighthouse. Yet again making complex simple historical elements. We are once again left with adding another form of light referred to by Michel Foucault in the form of light that looks back at the viewer, thus placing the audience as participants or witnesses. Here, we witness a shadow or silhouette of a figure tending, maintaining this beam. The role of caretaker evolves into a young woman exposing what has often been overshadowed by 'big history'. Big history refers here to spectacular male history that flavored by perpetual patriarchy. Female figures who've tended to the glow and cleanliness of light itself, and in so doing undermining darkness.

The viewer and participants are introduced to an opening scene of an active thunderstorm, flashes of light crack open dark cloudy skies. The water is presented in its states, as large body in cantankerous motion and as raindrops

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Film Still 3

contributing to the enlarging mass of water. The disembodied voice reveals itself as though coming from within the water. An air bubble of voice pushing from within the water outwards recalling the clan names.

There other speculative possibility is that the voice sounds like the horn of a lost ship at sea, blaring out and calling on guidance to safe ground. We are carried into the sacred space of the lighthouse to find the solitary figure. The invocation of names is performed by multiple voices throughout the video, all of which are disembodied. Just as people speak to their forebears through the ritual of burning sage and praying into the void of the unknown. The figure animates a record player that echoes out to us all the clan identities related to the Kganye name.

Throughout this installation, we are lead through by a disembodied female voice. This distorted voice starts off from a stutter as if struggling to let out a word. The voice is followed up with a much more deliberate and faster paced one, calling out the associated clan names of Kganye. This version of *imbongi* is the SeSotho version called '*dithoko*', praise poems. This transition in language description is not alien to the describing of the Kganye name, as there are SeSotho, isiZulu versions of the name. Names, especially family names and clan names in a traditional sense are not static and do evolve over time and develop through marriage and contexts multiple offshoots. Khanya is, which also means light is the Nguni, version of her name.

In the black and white video, a fresh perspective into "what we know", gives birth to the notion of the second coming of 'enlightenment'. An enlightenment that does not bleach out personal identity and genealogical history but one that embraces a woman who names herself into existence. The allure of the 1960's conceptual art movements in empowering those left in the margins of 'importance' to centre themselves, not in assimilating into a system designed to keep them out, but carve out their self determination to let the light in. Kganye has taken that baton by naming those who have been out of the light and out of sight, and all this time herself immersed in multiple forms of lights.

In the third screen, the lighthouse keeper declares who she is. In a magical way, we recognize the voice as coming within the figure. With brush and water in hand, the figure cleans the light source. The characteristic of the water changes from a rough sea water and raging down droplets to a soothing healer. The water has transformed calm cleanser, refreshing the brightness of light itself. The outtake is that of the keeper acknowledging and taking the reins of her name.