

**Tamary Kudita:**  
***African Victorian and***  
***Birds of Paradise***

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**Cincinnati Art Museum,**  
**Gallery 104**

# **Tamary Kudita:** ***African Victorian*** and ***Birds of Paradise***

Tamary Kudita (Zimbabwean, b. 1994) makes photographs that examine African identity in relation to the social and historical forces that frame individuals' lives. Kudita lives and works in Zimbabwe, a country formerly colonized by Great Britain. She traces her family heritage to the Shona-speaking people of Zimbabwe and to a nineteenth-century union between a Black South African plantation worker and a Dutch soldier.

As a student, Kudita found that few images in art history reflected her complex identity or the identities of people around her. She began using the camera to blend elements of African history and everyday life with references to historical European fashion and art. Mixing cultural signifiers across centuries and continents, her portraits make the hybrid nature of African identities visible while giving everyday Zimbabweans their due.

This gallery features selections from two related bodies of work. In the series titled *African Victorian*,

Kudita explores the personal histories of her models, who are her female friends and acquaintances, to better understand her own sense of self. In the series *Birds of Paradise*, she represents her models' stories to empower them as individuals and to describe the layers of history, culture, and feeling that make up contemporary Zimbabwe. artworks from the museum's collection, observe how social culture and art intersect through this iconic vehicle.

# **Sight Unseen I** from the series **African Victorian** 2019

inkjet print

Private Collection of Lesley Goldwasser  
and Jonathan Plutzik with thanks to  
VISU Contemporary art gallery

This photograph's subject matter and light reference *Saskia as Flora*, a painting by the Dutch Golden Age artist Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669). Dutch prosperity in the seventeenth century flowed in part from colonial endeavors in southern Africa. By inserting a Black African woman in this composition, Kudita points out omissions in the canon of European art. At the same time, she suggests that representing this sitter's identity requires thinking about how the past and present are linked.

# **Vessel**

from the series **African Victorian**  
2020

inkjet print

Private Collection of Lesley Goldwasser  
and Jonathan Plutzik with thanks to  
VISU Contemporary art gallery

*Vessel* is a meditation on histories of migration and the notion of home. Like Kudita, the Zimbabwean woman in this portrait traces her lineage to southern Africa. Symbolizing her ancestors' journey to what is now Zimbabwe, the woman's dramatic headpiece suggests both an enduring sense of displacement and an indelible connection to her roots. For many viewers, this image also calls to mind the massive, multigenerational dislocation perpetrated in the transatlantic slave trade. Does the photograph's title refer to the ship, or to the woman who moves forward even while carrying the weight of history on her shoulders?

# **African Pot II** from the series **African Victorian** 2021

inkjet print

Private Collection of Lesley Goldwasser  
and Jonathan Plutzik with thanks to  
VISU Contemporary art gallery

*African Pot II* is one of several portraits Kudita has made of a woman, Gladys, who supports her family by working at a grocery store in Harare, Zimbabwe. Although indispensable to society, Gladys and others like her are largely invisible in prevailing cultural narratives. Kudita places her at the center of a magisterial portrait, reinventing her work apron as a regal dress and placing in her hands a type of pot used to carry water—labor at the foundation of human society. The tall cacti behind Gladys and the round cacti that Kudita digitally superimposed in the foreground also store water, suggesting a long and complex interplay between natural systems and human technology.

# King's Peak from the series **Birds of Paradise**

2022

inkjet print

Private Collection of Lesley Goldwasser  
and Jonathan Plutzik with thanks to  
VISU Contemporary art gallery

Reminiscent of European Romanticism, this composition conveys a sensitive, poetic interiority and a rugged sense of dominion over the land. For Kudita, it is an homage to the historical Shona kings and queens of Great Zimbabwe, embodied in a real citizen of the contemporary, post-colonial nation.

The costumes Kudita designs for her models mix old-fashioned European clothing styles with printed fabrics that are strongly associated with Africa. While Africans use this type of fabric to express a myriad of African national and cultural identities, Dutch merchants introduced the fabric to Africa. Here, the Zimbabwean model's cape is made from a variation on a cloth associated with the west African nation of Nigeria. His costume speaks to the movement of cloth between African cultural groups as well as the possibilities opened by creative adaptation of material culture.

# Muroora from the series **Birds of Paradise** 2022

inkjet print

Private Collection of Lesley Goldwasser  
and Jonathan Plutzik with thanks to  
VISU Contemporary art gallery

*Muroora* is a reinterpretation of Johannes Vermeer's painting, *The Milkmaid* (circa 1658). In Shona culture, *muroora* (daughter-in-law), is a common sculptural motif. It suggests an idealized femininity centered on humility, youthful beauty, servitude, and fertility—ideas similar to those the milkmaid symbolized in a European context.

But Kudita's *Muroora* is a portrait of a real woman. Everyday items on the table, including the spices she sells as a side hustle, represent her self-reliance and passion for cooking as much as her place in a family structure. Here, Vermeer's painting is a meaningful point of reference because it highlights the role of representation in patriarchy across cultures and because it broaches the interior life of a woman placed in a subservient social position.



# Hair Tales from the series **Birds of Paradise**

2022

inkjet print

Private Collection of Lesley Goldwasser  
and Jonathan Plutzik with thanks to  
VISU Contemporary art gallery

A digitally composited border, patterned with British coins and ancient combs, echoes this model's striking profile set off against a field of gold. Symbolically, *Hair Tales* suggests that African hair is a proud inheritance and an elevated form of social currency. On a more direct level, the photographer's personal knowledge of her models allows the picture to work as a portrait of an individual. As Kudita has stated, "he loves his hair—it's what makes him him. His gaze, the way he commands, can't be scripted. It comes from our interaction in the moment."

# Thoughts of a Black Man from the series **Birds of Paradise** 2022

inkjet print

Private Collection of Lesley Goldwasser  
and Jonathan Plutzik with thanks to  
VISU Contemporary art gallery

This model also appears in *Hair Tales*, on view nearby. Here, Kudita invites viewers to reflect on the multifaceted nature of his personality by picturing him not as a public icon, but in a quiet, almost dreamlike moment. Contrary to negative stereotypes of African masculinity, he is thoughtful and feeling, devoted to his family, and a caring force in his community.

# Liberty 1980 from the series **Birds of Paradise**

2022

inkjet print

Private Collection of Lesley Goldwasser  
and Jonathan Plutzik with thanks to  
VISU Contemporary art gallery

1980 was the year that Zimbabwe became an independent nation, ending nearly a century of British colonial rule. Women fought in the war leading up to independence, but their role goes unrecognized in Zimbabwe's national stories. There are no monuments to them. *Liberty 1980* is Kudita's answer to that historical erasure. She pictures her model as a commanding mounted rider—a motif familiar from innumerable statues and paintings of Anglo-European male military heroes. Unflappable and gazing directly at the camera, the real person who sits atop the horse wears the shoes of a contemporary heroine: a woman who does it all, in pumps.