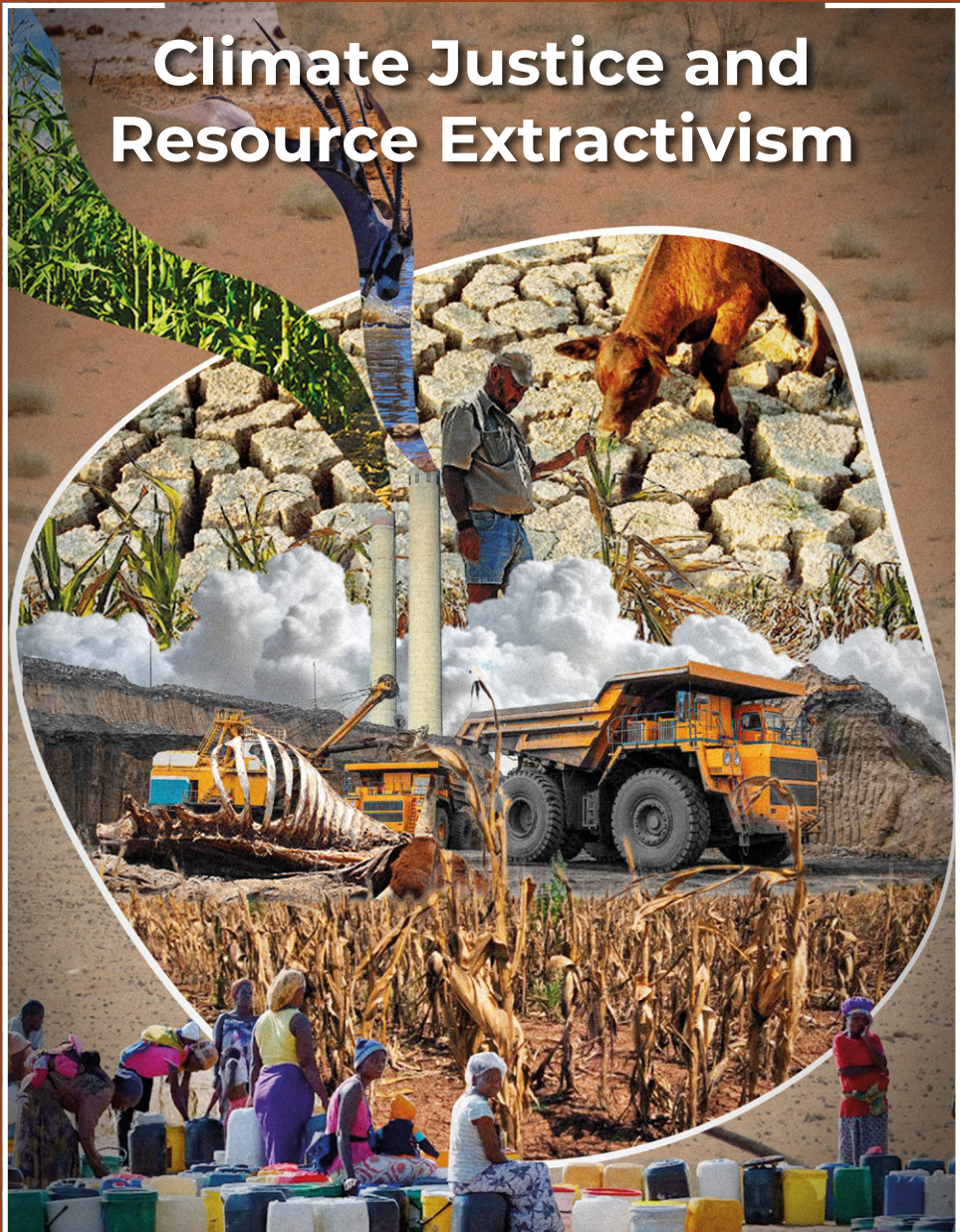


Climate Justice and Resource Extractivism



the fish that sees its water is getting shallow cannot be stranded: a curatorial essay

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the fish that sees its water is getting shallow cannot be stranded is an exhibition project that was curated at The Project Room in June 2023, and the Franco-Namibian Cultural Centre in August 2024. The show is a project of the Owela Live Arts Collective Trust. This exhibition's point of departure is an observation of the recurrence of fish in contemporary Namibian art.

By simply attending a local exhibition or working through a collection of Namibian art, one is likely to find representations of or engagements with fish or other water resources. A curatorial intervention of this nature therefore reflects on the ways in which fisheries and water cultures have been historically expressed in Namibian art. The title, the fish that sees its water is getting shallow cannot be stranded, is a popular African proverb which metaphorically and literally speaks to experiences of survival, livelihoods and mobility. It emphasises both the fish and water as relational, marked by movement.

The shows at both venues presented a discursive and historical outlook on how

artists in Namibia's post-coloniality are thinking with and through images of fish, water and other natural environments. The project is a collection of prints, photography, mixed-media works, installations, sculpture, performances, documentation of previous artwork and literature relating to the political and socioeconomic uses of oceans, rivers, reservoirs, springs, lakes and groundwater.

One of the themes in this show is the climate crisis and natural disasters such as the regular floods in northern Namibia, as seen in Shomwatala Shivute's *Efundja* (Figure 1). Here, we are invited to think of Namibia as a site of regular floods and droughts, two extremes that are caused by changing climatic conditions. Littering comes to mind as one of the contributing factors to the climate crisis. Julia Hango's installation titled *Alien Invasion* is a pile of trash that was collected in preparation for this exhibition by an artist who lives both at the coast and inland.

Samuel Mbingilo's popular print *Rain Callers* (Figure 2) can be found in various public and private art

collections in Namibia. Mbingilo's print, depicting supernatural figures (half-human, half-fish) in ritual, drumming and dancing, reminds us of the ancient African mythologies and spiritualities relating to rain-making practices, including the metaphysical resources of water. Kay Cowley's serpentine wall hanging sculpture, Mermaid Mother and Child, is one of these water figures. This celebration of rain and water is echoed in a choreographic and sonic intervention titled *Water* (Figure 3) by Gift Uzera, Muningandu Hoveka, Joanne Sitler and Diolini at the 2019 Owela Festival.

Water also evokes the spectre of migrants who die trying to cross the Mediterranean sea, and ingrained memories of the historically enslaved Africans crossing the Atlantic. Jo Rogge's mixed-media work *Mare Nostrum II* offers an emotive and sensitive portrayal of this painful reality. For many Africans, and Black people in particular, the ocean and water in general are charged with memories and lived experiences of pain, trauma and loss.

Kay Cowley's prints and storyboard document her 1999/2000 installation *In search of the Moneyfish* (Figure 4), "an allegorical journey undertaken by SilverMoonBeam fish, and a cast of fish characters". This is a story that uses the world of fish as metaphor to

speaking to a people's wishes and dreams, deferred by the bureaucratisation of public resources. This story also speaks plangently to the title of this exhibition, evoking the survival and resilience of the living, despite the odds. It is interesting to look at Cowley's older works in relation to her latest charcoal texture rubbings of a fossilised dolomite stone on pastel. What is interesting is the notable continuity of dealing with fish and the ocean in her artistic collaborations across time.

Shomwatala Shivute's photographs *moMeya* (Figure 5) and *Olutenda* (Figure 6) both show scenic views of a ship at Lüderitz port and the railway, hinting towards the extractive nature of racial capitalism and its continuities in the post-coloniality of Namibia. These photographs evoke Namibia's baggage – the plundering of natural resources through political schemes such as Fishrot and the baggage of history. If we think of Lüderitz as a historic site of forced labour, concentration camps and the genocide of indigenous people, have we ever asked what the water at Shark Island remembers? Two bodies of work that attend to this question are the photographic and performance works by Veronique Kuchekena-Chirau and Tuli Mekondjo. Kuchekena-Chirau's series titled *Daughter of Molly* (Figure 7) draws on her autobiography and Nama material culture in relation to Lüderitz's spatial memory of colonial

violence. Reflecting on the same geography, Tuli Mekondjo's *Oudjuu wo makipa etu* (Figure 8) looks at traumatic histories, matrilineal relations and colonial labour. Tuli Mekondjo, Cowley, Shivute and Kuchekena-Chirau's focus on Lüderitz all invite us to take seriously national questions of the redistribution of land, restorative justice, and healing.

Sea water holds healing qualities for various Namibian and African cultures, and we see this potential in Julia Hango's new series of mixed media works (Figures 9, 10 and 11). This series emphasises fluidity and movement as central to our environmental awareness. In Hango's ecofeminist imagination, the ocean is treated as a site of human origins as much as it is a source of medicine. In Hango's new collection of photographs,

fish and water are interfaced with her naked body located between the city and the desert ecosystems. The ocean's healing qualities are also raised in Joseph Madisia's *FishRot Aquarium Cleansing*, not only recognising the ocean's ability to cleanse itself, but also reminding us of the corruption and exploitation of natural resources by Namibia's political elites.

There is also a question of food security echoed in the additional images and objects collected from different Namibian artists. These include Ishmael Shivute's outdoor metal sculpture and Hercules Viljoen's acrylic painting on eucalyptus wood. Fish as a traditional and religious symbol is also depicted regularly in Elia Shiwohamba and Peter Mwahalukange's prints sold at local markets in Windhoek and Swakopmund.

Figure 1 *Efundja* (2021), *Shomwatala Shivute*



Figure 2 *Rain Callers* (1998) by Samuel Mbingilo. Photograph complements of StartArt Gallery.



Figure 3 *Water* (2019), Gift Uzera, Muningandu Hoveka, Joanne Sitler and Diolini



Photograph courtesy of Owela Live Arts Trust

Figure 4 *Photographic documentation and storyboard of the In search of the Moneyfish (1999/2000) installation, Kay Cowley*



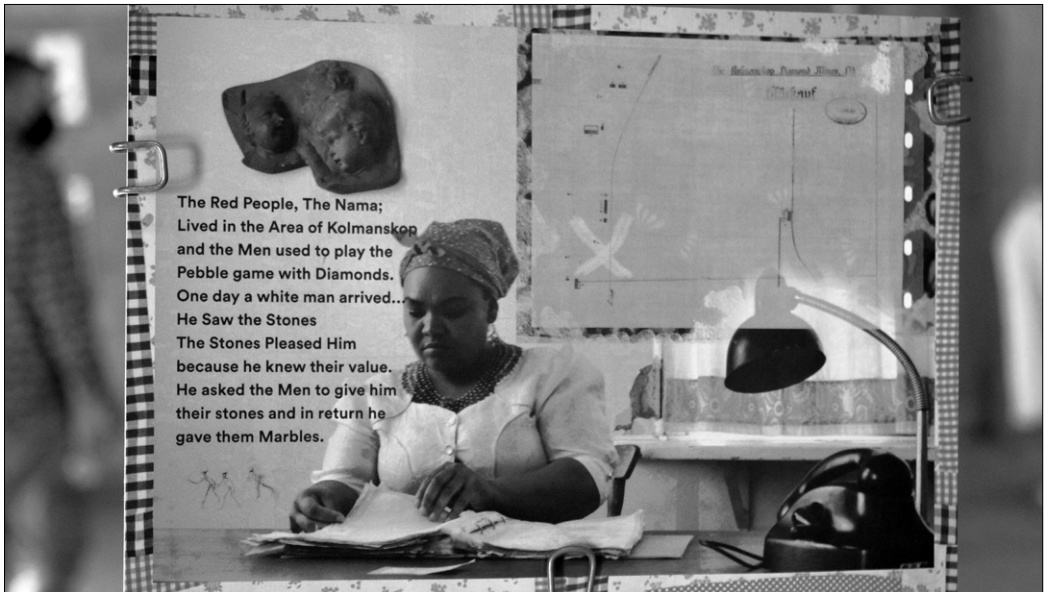
Figure 5 *moMeya (2021), Shomwatala Shivute*



Figure 6 *Olutenda (2021), Shomwatala Shivute*



Figure 7 *Photographic documentation of the exhibition My Body is an Archive (2019), Owela Festival*



Photograph Courtesy of Owela Live Arts Trust

Figure 8 *Oudjuu wo makipa etu* (2022), Tuli Mekondjo



Figure 9 *A Fish Odyssey with the 3 Angels- The Private becomes Political* (2024), JuliArt (Julia Hango) and Lila Swanepoel.



Figure 10 *A Fish Odyssey with the 3 Angels- The Private becomes Political* (2024), JuliArt (Julia Hango) and Lila Swanepoel.



Figure 11 *A Fish Odyssey with the 3 Angels- The Private becomes Political* (2024), JuliArt (Julia Hango) and Lila Swanepoel.

