

PATRICIA



KAERGENHOUT

VISIONS OF

POSSIBILITIES



ENGLISH

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Previous page: patricia kaersenhout in front of her artwork *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner Too?* (2017) in de Appel, Amsterdam, 2019. Photo: Aatjan Renders.

## **patricia kaersenhout: *Visions of Possibilities***

patricia kaersenhout (Den Helder, 1966) is a leading Afro-Dutch visual artist and thinker in the Dutch contemporary art world. Shaped by her Surinamese background and by virtue of growing up in the Netherlands, she has long interrogated ideas of place, belonging and social processes. Throughout her oeuvre, she has explored the lingering legacies of slavery and colonialism within and beyond the Dutch context. The artist is widely celebrated for her critical and rigorous engagement with race, sexuality and gender. Known for her multi-faceted collaborations and community-based projects, kaersenhout invites audiences to consider how they might be implicated in Dutch coloniality. She often creates necessary tensions between the invisible and visible forms of presence, mourning, guilt and power. Her work is informed by larger references to iconography, religion, mythology and archival politics.

Undergirding kaersenhout's practice is a deep commitment to the politics of care and Black feminist praxis. Ideas of binding permeate the artist's overall vision and inform the ways in which she works with a multitude

of textures. In textile-based works, she shows how various histories and people touch across time and space. The exhibition *Visions of Possibilities* brings together older and newer work from across kaersenhout's oeuvre. For the artist, the idea of possibility leaves room for viewers to consider where we might find a fragment, shatter or a trace of a different kind of future.





patricia kaersenhout, *While We Were Kings and Queens #8/12*, 2021, digital prints, hammers, nails, wooden text boards. Commissioned by Kunstverein Braunschweig. Production: AGALAB Amsterdam. Courtesy of the artist.

## Room 2.17

*Mea Culpa* (2020) is inspired by the accumulation of power and wealth by European nations and their ties to slavery and colonialism. The title of the work, *Mea Culpa*, refers to the traditional Christian practice of atoning for sins through enduring physical hardship during ritual pilgrimages.

kaersenhout is interested in questioning how nations deal with larger issues of atonement and guilt. kaersenhout created *While we were Kings and Queens* (2020) for an exhibition in honour of Anton Wilhelm Amo (c. 1700–1753), who is considered the first Black academic and philosopher in Germany. kaersenhout's installation *While we were Kings and Queens* brings together nineteenth-century German sources on the Enlightenment; the text of a 1712 speech by slaveholder Willy Lynch; and tools recalling the traditional use of nkisi objects as a pledge or vow to banish evil. By allowing audiences to hammer nails into the work, the artist offers a long-duration interactive piece.

The artist made the series *Showtime!* (2007–2023) as a response to the murder of Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old Black boy, who was violently killed by George Zimmerman. At the time this happened, the artist created work depicting the Ku-Klux clan in their traditional white robes fighting each other as a symbol of their own violent racism. In this iteration of the work, kaersenhout showcases a remake where these images are shown as a photo negative. The intention of the artist here is to portray the detrimental effects of racism in society on Black and brown people.

## Room 2.18 and 2.19

How do we grapple with hauntings of the past that continue to shape the present? In recent years, we have seen an increase of conversations about statues and monuments that celebrate and uphold colonial violence and white supremacy. These statues are never neutral and bring up important questions about the politics of removal and the way history is told. While there has been pushback calling to remove statues, their mere removal alone does not erase or silence history. The installation *What a Piece of Work is Man* (2021) brings up questions and conversations about violence and invisibility. kaersenhout purposely works with glass in this installation. Glass is transparent and opaque at once. The potential explosive qualities of glass further inspire the artist. If the process of cooling down happens too soon, glass has the potential to scatter and explode. These ideas shape kaersenhout's thinking about transformation, explosiveness and destruction.

patricia kaersenhout, *What a Piece of Work is Man* (video still), 2021, 40 glass sculptures, video installation. Production: Katrin Maurer, Richard Price & Ravi Breukers. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Cassander Eeftinck Schattenkerk.



Jeannette Ehlers & patricia kaersenhout, *The Image of Me* (video still), 2012, video. Commissioned by CBK Zuidoost. Courtesy of the artist.

kaersenhout contemplates ideas pertaining to Black womanhood early on in her work. With *The politics of the Black Female Body*, she centres the importance of discussing the objectification and stereotyping of Black women. The series represents the artist's ongoing interest in how the mechanics of visibility operate in relationship to Blackness.

Two older video works portray the artist's early engagements with topics such as skin and kinship. *The Image of Me* (2012), a collaboration between kaersenhout and Jeannette Ehlers, explores the complex political meanings of skin colour. The video portrays two women, one Black and one white, who gradually change colour. It's inspired by the poem, *Lord Why Did You Make Me Black* by Black American poet RuNett Nia Ebo. The other work, *S(K)IN* (2013), is a one-minute film about the outer layer we call the skin in relation to the inner layer we call the soul. The artist contemplates the conflict between private feelings and public political statements.



## Room 2.20

Inspired by film noir, *Le retour des femmes colibris* brings together five women in a fictitious meeting. In this film, the artist creatively imagines a dialogue between Josephine Baker, Suzanne Césaire, Frida Kahlo, Paulette Nardal and Jeanne Nardal in relationship to the revolutionary Négritude movement.

kaersenhout takes the 1956 Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Paris held at the Sorbonne as point of departure. In retelling this historically significant encounter, the focus is frequently on well-known figures of the movement such as Léopold Senghor, Aimé Césaire and Léon Damas. The artist redirects the viewers' attention to the Black women who unequivocally shaped the movement. kaersenhout draws on her poetic licence to imagine Frida Kahlo's presence in the film.





## Room 2.21

The role of Nordic colonialism is often overlooked and downplayed. In *Phases of Sugar* (2017–2023), the artist engages with Danish colonial involvement in the history of sugar production. In 2017, Denmark ‘commemorated’ the selling of the Virgin Islands to the United States one hundred years ago. The artist engages with this history by presenting one hundred faces of Black men, women and children cast in plaster and covered with blood and caramelised sugar. kaersenhout purposefully places the works on podiums that have the exact measurements of the spaces on the slave ships in which enslaved men, women and children were forcibly moved. For the artist, allowing viewers close proximity to the work creates a deeper contemplation of how sugar and blood are inextricably linked.

kaersenhout and decolonial scholar rolando vázquez have a long-term friendship. Collaborative projects undergird much of kaersenhout’s creative praxis and inform the ways in which she understands art as a social process. *Our Light will Outlast their Flags* (2022) takes on the histories of people from former colonies who were exhibited and photographed in colonial world exhibitions in the 1900s. Shown on large tapestries, the photographs of these people are intertwined with images of war flags of the VOC, the WIC, and the MCC Middelburg, which played a key role in the transatlantic slave trade. kaersenhout and vázquez invite audiences to unravel the threads of the flags portrayed in the tapestries. By pulling these threads, the public participates in the act of dismantling symbols of power. This transformative act of unravelling symbolises reparation, healing and liberation.

*Search for ...* (2007) is an earlier work exploring complex questions related to the skin and identity.

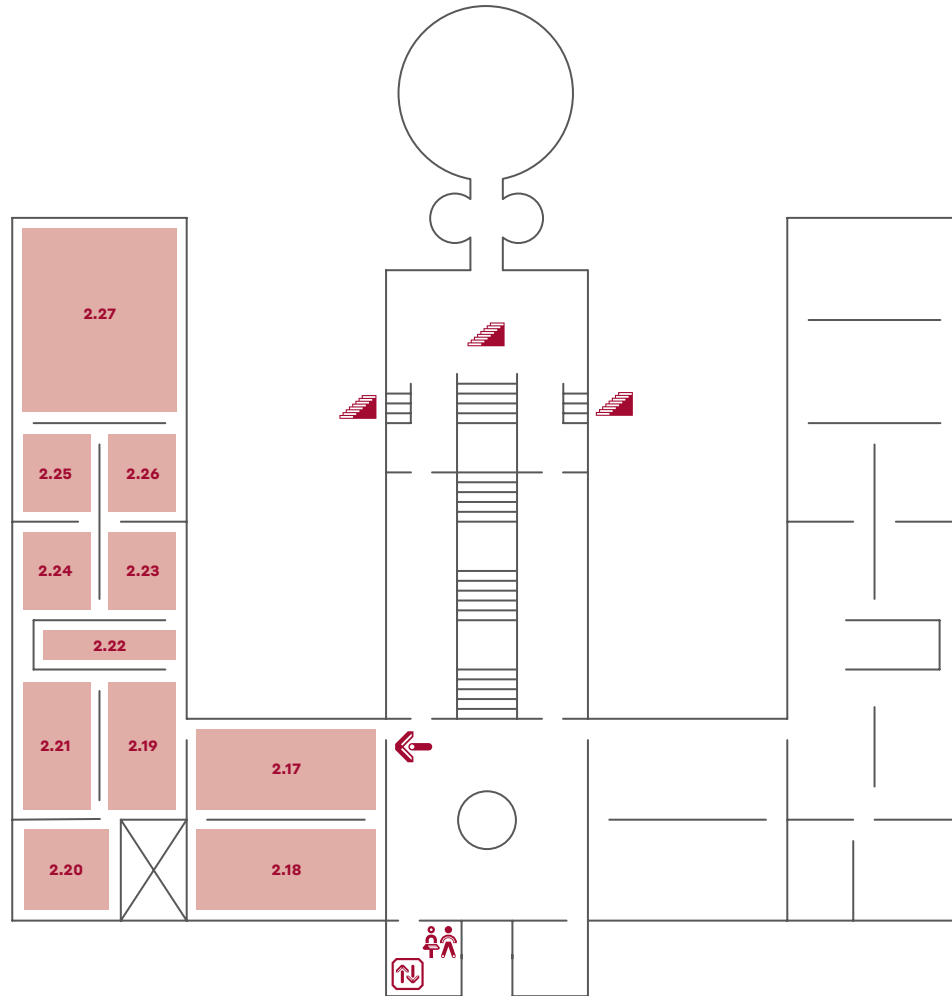
patricia kaersenhout, *Happiness Can Wait*, 2009-2023, digital print on Hahnemühle handmade cotton paper. Production: AGALAB Amsterdam. Courtesy of the artist.







← Exhibition starts here



 Elevator to other floors

 Stairs to other floors

 Toilets



kaersenhout has always used drawing to give meaning to her rich inner world. In *Happiness Can Wait* (2000–2023), she delves into how Black women and girls experience the burden of care. The artist comments on what it means for Black women to be pulled in several directions. *A Dog Can Look at Anybody* (2009–2023) confronts the colonial gaze of dominant cultures and asks how one looks back. The artist centres a dog in this drawing to grapple with the ways in which colonisers used dogs in violent regimes to attack Black and Indigenous people. *When We Balance We're Equal. When We Fall We're Free.* (2009–2023) is inspired by what it means to search for equality and balance. The emotional labour that shapes the quest for equality forms much of this work for kaersenhout.

patricia kaersenhout, *A Dog Could Look at Anybody*, 2009-2023, digital print on Hahnemühle handmade cotton paper. Production: AGALAB Amsterdam. Courtesy of the artist.



## Room 2.22

*Sacred S(k)in* (2023) is a newly commissioned work in collaboration with close friend and writer Rashid Novaire. In this work, kaersenhout and Novaire probe the ongoing racist and anti-Black interpretations of the biblical story of Ham and its relationship to Black people in the Maghreb countries, who are sometimes referred to as 'Haratin' (a contested term for Black people in this region). kaersenhout and Novaire use the story of Ham to address histories of slavery, race and Islam in Morocco. In this biblical story, also known as the 'curse of Ham', the son of Ham and his descendants are destined to perpetual servitude. kaersenhout and Novaire interrogate the ways in which the 'curse of Ham' has been used to justify the transatlantic slave trade and the subjugation of Black people in the Maghreb region. Novaire's family are descendants of 'Haratin' and still work for the King of Morocco. Some 'Haratin' people from the Draa Valley in the South of Morocco see themselves as descendants of Ham and draw on a different interpretation of this story. One day, Ham, who was still white, used a Qur'an to protect his head from a heavy rainstorm. It rained so hard that the writing and black ink spilled from the Qur'an onto Ham's body turning his skin Black. For the 'Haratin', this is a story of empowerment and proof that their skin is sacred.

The installation consists of a slow ink drip on top of a Bible opened at the pages that tell the story of Ham. The black ink dripping on the story symbolises the importance of connecting two religions that have been in opposition for thousands of years. Novaire's specially created poem fills the room. With this work, kaersenhout and Novaire contemplate the importance of storytelling, religion, communion and a shared sacred space.

Next page: patricia kaersenhout, *The Hummingbird Women: Frida Kahlo*, 2022, mixed media on digital print. Production AGALAB Amsterdam. Collection Bonnefanten. Photo: Marjolein van Veen.



## Room 2.23

In *An Ontology of Black and White* (2009), the artist continues to survey themes pertaining to race, power and visibility. In this diptych, the artist explores the meanings and synonyms of the words black and white as described in English and American dictionaries and in the Thesaurus. Here, kaersenhout is specifically interested in the ways in which these words carry distinct meanings. The artist works with the image of *Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise*, a well-known fresco by Masaccio. kaersenhout portrays this scene in two ways: one side of the diptych portrays a white Adam and Eve who are filled with remorse when God casts them out of Paradise, and the other side portrays a Black Adam and Eve. Adam averts his face and ridicules Christianity and how it legitimises racism.

*The Hummingbird Women* (2022) series showcases the main characters of kaersenhout's film *Le retour des femmes colibris* in room 2.20. These portraits further address the invisibility of the Black women within the Négritude movement. In honouring Josephine Baker, Suzanne Césaire, Frida Kahlo, Paulette Nardal and Jeanne Nardal, the artist deliberately depicts the women in tailcoat, which was controversial in the mid-nineteenth century. Tuxedos at that time were a symbol of independence, creativity, authenticity and the power of women.

*Hibernation Dreams* (2009) is inspired by Ralph Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man*, published in 1952. Listening to Armstrong's music, the protagonist starts to experience space and time in a dream-like state. Drawing on these visions and internal dialogues, the artist addresses larger themes related to Blackness and violence in the United States. kaersenhout visualises these nightmarish dreamscapes alongside her own, thereby creating a diasporic dialogue across geographies.



## Room 2.24

Earlier work is similarly inspired by Ellison's novel. In the opening pages of the novel, the protagonist states: 'I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fibre and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.' The series consists of 56 collage works and drawings. Using an old biology textbook with illustrations of skin structures, hair and the digestive system, the artist considers how to make the invisible visible. The short animation and the three drawings, *The Poetry of Invisibility* (2010), are drawn from a scene in Ellison's novel, where the protagonist muses on Louis Armstrong's song *What did I do to be so black and blue*. The soundscape is interrupted by Ellison speaking about the complexity of humanity.

Central themes in kaersenhout's oeuvre pertain to questions related to race and belonging. In this earlier body of work, *Entangled* (2011), the artist explores ideas of Otherness within the context of Dutch culture. Through an imaginative visual language, kaersenhout teases out what belonging means for her. For the artist, these works are sketches toward freedom and the possibility of being.



patricia kaersenhout, *Proud Rebels/Rebelse Trots* (video still), 2015, two videos.  
Courtesy of the artist.

## Room 2.25

kaersenhout created *Proud Rebels* in 2015 a video which grapples with the feminist and queer Black, Migrant and Refugee Movement, active from the late 70s until the early 90s. In her archival research, kaersenhout came across the story of Christina. An enslaved woman, who was convicted and imprisoned in 1786 in the Spinhuis in Amsterdam, a penitentiary for women. Since so little was known about Christina, the artist decided to draw a connection between the histories of slavery and colonialism, and the work of the feminist Black, Migrant and Refugee Movement in the Netherlands. In the video we see and hear how Christina intertwines her story with that of her sisters from the present. Specifically, kaersenhout probes legacies of rebellion and researches how we tend to grapple with these histories in the Netherlands.

*Nomzamo Winifred Zanyiwe Madikizela Mandela: a Portrait of Love and Revolution* (2022) builds on similar conversations pertaining to freedom. In this work, kaarsenhout offers Winnie Madikizela-Mandela the redemption she deserves. The artist recognises the ways in which Winnie Mandela has been demonised and humiliated by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The South African secret service intentionally initiated a hate campaign against Winnie Mandela, which caused a world-wide backlash. kaarsenhout shows how easily Black women are demonised and relegated to the margins of history. Acknowledging the important role Winnie Mandela played in the struggle for freedom, the artist honours her with deep care and respect.

The series *No Names Please!* (2017) consists of eight portraits of famous Southern pioneers printed on cotton and intertwined with the histories of (enslaved) Black people and Native Americans of the Southern USA. They are embroidered with coloured beads. The shiny beads refer to Native American and African embroidery, and they contrast with the violent histories that are depicted in the portraits. Like small shiny lotuses, they create beauty within a swamp.

## Room 2.26

The tapestries *Of Palimpsests & Erasure* (2021) grapple with themes related to oppression, exploitation and migration. In working with Maria Sibylla Merian's publication on plants and insects in Suriname published in the eighteenth century, kaarsenhout delves into the histories of colonialism and botany. By portraying the tapestries as a palimpsest, which is a parchment or other writing surface from which the original text has been erased, the tapestries incorporate multiple layers. For the artist, it is imperative to highlight the neglected role that enslaved Black women and Indigenous women played in creating Sibylla's sketches and research into insects and plants.

patricia kaarsenhout, *Of Palimpsest and Erasure #2 & #3*, 2023, woven tapestry.  
Production: Textile Lab Tilburg. Courtesy of the artist.



Conversing with kaersenhout's palimpsests work is the series *We Refuse* (2009–ongoing). In this series, the artist draws on old history and anthropology books as a medium for cut-outs, collage and text. In her artistic praxis and teaching, kaersenhout often alters books pertaining to western knowledge production and colonial perspectives by meticulously mutilating them with a scalpel.



patricia kaersenhout, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner Too?*, 2017, installation view De Appel, Amsterdam, 2019. Collections Centraal Museum Utrecht, Frans Hals Museum Haarlem, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven. Photo: Aatjan Renders.



## Room 2.27

The large-scale installation *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner Too?* (2017) offers a nuanced critique of Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1979). For kaersenhout, Chicago's work celebrates strong women, but denies Black women and women of colour their sexuality and presence. Inspired by Chicago's installation, the artist built four triangle tables honouring fifteen Black women and women of colour per table. In total, the work honours sixty women of colour and thus moves away from Chicago's table. Four major museums in the Netherlands acquired the work. The hybrid nature of the work makes different constellations possible.

kaersenhout is known for working with textiles, which are often hand- and machine-embroidered. In combining digital and traditional ways of printing fabric, the artist reclaims the medium of textile to produce works that chart the role of women, politics and diasporic imaginaries. In *Food for Thought* (2018–2021), the artist portrays the following important Caribbean scholars, journalists, poets and activists: Paulette Nardal, Gerty Archimède, Suzanne Césaire, Elma Francois, Madeleine Sylvain Bouchereau, Jamaica Kincaid, Andaiye and Hermine Huiswoud. The artist is interested in drawing connections between these women because they have been largely forgotten or erased from public memory. Inspired by Chinese propaganda posters, each banner portrays the women as heroic in their own right. During transatlantic slavery, Black women were responsible for much of the food production, which they sold on markets. The artist recognises how this worked against the economy of the plantation system.



In *Objects of Love and Desire* (2019), kaersenhout honours women of Caribbean descent known for their contributions to culture, academia and science. Solange Fitte-Duval, Amy Jacques Garvey, Una Marson and Eslanda Goode Robeson are each portrayed on large assemblages of fabric. The artist draws on Chinese communist glorifying propaganda posters that deal with food production. kaersenhout digitally printed each of the black and white portraits on cotton and accentuates the fabric with patchwork and beaded embroidery. Here, ideas of care and different forms of binding are prevalent. Hand-stitching becomes another way to explore the connections between the fibres of material and stories that the artist brings to the surface.

The textile-based works *Vrouwen van VOS* (2019) showcase women from different generations that shaped the Dutch association Vereniging Ons Suriname. Portrayed are Mrs. Weels & Camille Parker, Naomie Pieter & Twi Tjoa and Jessy D'Abreu & Polly Levens. This is the fifth series kaersenhout produced after *Proud Rebels* (2015), *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner Too?* (2017/2021), *Food for Thought* (2018) and *Objects of Love and Desire* (2019). In these works, we see the artist's commitment to honouring Black feminist knowledge production, resistance and movement, which speaks to the importance of connection and intimacy.



patricia kaersenhout, *Vrouwen van VOS #2: Camilla Parker en mevrouw Weels*, 2020, digital print on cotton, beads, felt, African fabrics. Production: AGALAB Amsterdam. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Raul Balai.

# patricia kaersenhout: *Visions of Possibilities*

10.06 – 05.11.2023

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