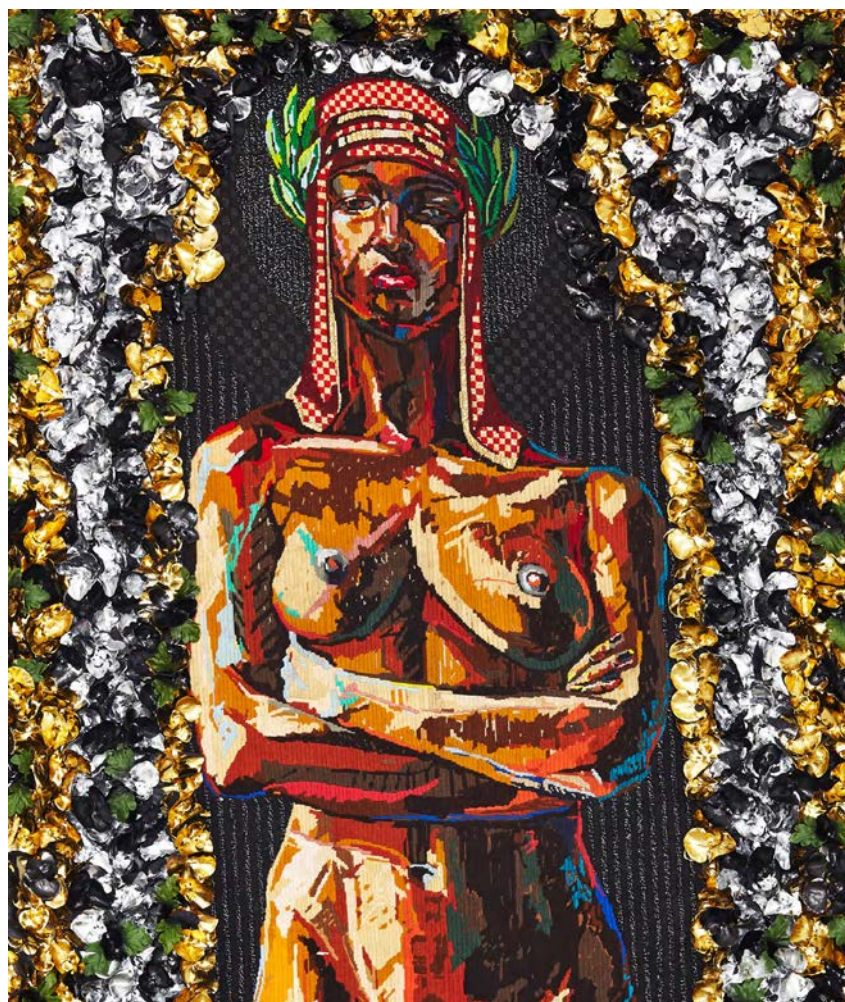


Gilhooley, Emma, *Athi-Patra Ruga*,
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ATHI-PATRA RUGA

By Emma Gilhooley

Proposed Model of the New Azanian



African Queens to Drag Queens

Born in Umtata in 1984, the artist Athi-Patra Ruga lives and works between Johannesburg and Cape Town, South Africa. Exploring the border zones of fashion, performance and contemporary art, Ruga plays with constructs of nationality, sexuality and gender; mythical queens morph into drag queens as landscapes oscillate between seductive Arcadias and discomforting realities.

Influenced by a range of multicultural references, from fine art to pop culture, Ruga's works have the feel of Rococo paintings reimagined as dance hall music videos. Having exhibited widely at such a young age, it's little wonder he was recently included in Phaidon's book *Younger Than Jesus*, a directory of over 500 of the world's best artists under the age of 33.

Brought up a Xhosa traditionalist, an act of protest by his parents against the Christian apartheid stronghold of the time, Ruga lived in Transkei, but commuted across the Kei River to school in the Republic of South Africa. Growing up across the borders of the 'homelands' and South Africa, grappling with life as a traditionalist studying in a Christian English school, Ruga developed a multifaceted attitude towards identity. Adding to this is his experience of being a gay man in a heteronormative society; Ruga's concept of the individual is unsurprisingly, and unashamedly, fractured.

This aspect of Athi-Patra Ruga's work is explored alongside other artists from Africa and the diaspora in the exhibition *Broken English*; on show from 18 September – 28 October 2015 at Tyburn Gallery, London. The works exhibited encapsulate the sense of operating within a hybrid space, which informs so many of the artists working across contemporary Africa, and the wider

world, today. They explore and question the categorisation of cultural identities in our increasingly globalised world.

Included in the exhibition is Ruga's tapestry work *Proposed Model of the New Azanian* (2014), a piece from his ongoing series *The Future White Women of Azania*. Ruga draws on the mythical/aspirational land of Azania, simultaneously an ancient place of pre-colonial Africa, and a transgressive Utopia dreamt up by the Pan Africanist Congress; Azania is both real and imaginary, restrictive and liberating. His embroidered canvases are hung so as to show both sides of the canvas, exposing the creative process. *Proposed Model of the New Azanian* depicts a hybrid-person: a man-lady with breasts and a phallus proudly on display. The individual is neither discernibly black nor white, encapsulating the proposed ideals of Azania as an all-embracing post-apartheid place of post-identity. However in another Azania work, *Uzoko* (2013), we are introduced to a member of the fictional Azania public: a young black lady in a swimsuit and a sash akin to that worn in a beauty pageant. At first glance the figure is similarly captivating, but this gives way to a sense of unwanted euro-centrism: not only is the woman seemingly restrained by ideas of beauty ideals, but her necklaces are made from thick rope – suggestive of the shackles used to oppress and transport African slaves. Ultimately the viewer is left to question whether the Azanian reality is far removed from the proposed Azanian ideal.

Ruga's creations dance across the frontiers of categorisation, alluding easy definition just like the population of his Azania, it is this that makes him truly exotic, and endlessly beguiling.



Uzuko, 2013, Wool, thread and artificial flowers on tapestry canvas, 200 x 180 cm, Copyright Athi-Patra Ruga, Courtesy Tyburn Gallery.jpg