

Underneath the Surface — a Map
of the Scars of Colonialism
By Louise Deminger

Beneath the Surface
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Remembering the scars of Colonial
Deininger
Louise



The Portal, 2024, Ø 35 cm

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The exhibition “Beneath The Surface: Mapping the Scars of Colonial Power” offers a nuanced exploration of the lasting impacts of colonialism on African societies, identities, and cultures. Louise Deininger seeks to unravel the complexities of post-colonial trauma, resilience, and the ongoing struggle for cultural reclamation, with focus on the East African block based on her upbringing and her experiences in Uganda and Kenya. This exhibition draws on the intellectual foundations laid by some of the most significant African theorists, including Frantz Fanon, Ngũgũ wa Thiong’o, Kwame Nkrumah, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Achille Mbembe, among others. Their insights into the psychological, cultural, and economic ramifications of colonialism provide a critical framework for understanding the themes of Deininger’s work.

Colonialism in Africa was not merely an economic or political enterprise; it was a comprehensive system designed to reshape African societies at their core. European colonial powers imposed their languages, religions, and political structures on African people, often with devastating effects. This process of cultural and political domination, as Ngũgũ wa Thiong’o argues in his seminal work “Decolonising the Mind”, amounted to a “cultural bomb” aimed at erasing African cultures and replacing them with the values and ideologies of the colonizers. Ngũgũ’s concept of the “cultural bomb” is particularly relevant to understanding the deep psychological scars that colonialism has left on African societies. He writes, “The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves”. These scars manifest not only in the loss of language and cultural practices but also in the internalized perceptions of inferiority that many Africans continue to grapple with.

Frantz Fanon, another towering figure in post-colonial thought, delves deeply into the psychological effects of colonialism in his works “Black Skin, White Masks” and “The Wretched of the Earth”. He describes how colonialism instills a sense of inferiority in the colonized, leading to a “colonized mind” that internalizes the dehumanizing views of the colonizer. “The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards”. This psychological condition, according to Fanon, is one of the most insidious legacies of colonialism, as it perpetuates a cycle of self-hatred and dependency even after the end of direct colonial rule.

Colonialism disrupted a rich tapestry of pre-colonial African civilizations, which had their own sophisticated systems of governance, culture, and trade. Prior to European colonization, Africa was home to thriving empires such as the Mali, Songhai, and Great Zimbabwe, which were centers of learning, architecture, art and commerce. Timbuktu, for instance, was renowned for its libraries and Islamic scholarship, attracting scholars from across the world.

The Kingdom of Kongo and the Ashanti Empire had highly organized political systems and engaged in extensive regional and global trade. These civilizations were self-sustaining, with rich traditions in art, science, and law, debunking the colonial myth of Africa as an uncivilized land. The imposition of European rule, with its dismissal of these achievements, not only dismantled these structures but also imposed an external culture and economy that disconnected Africans from their heritage. The legacy of this cultural erasure is still felt today, as post-colonial societies struggle to rebuild and reclaim the grandeur of their pre-colonial histories.

The exhibition’s focus on the psychological and cultural scars left by colonialism resonates strongly with Fanon’s analysis, as it highlights the ongoing struggle for mental and cultural liberation in post-colonial Africa.

The Role of Art in Post-Colonial Healing

Art has always been a powerful tool for resistance and healing in the face of oppression. In the context of post-colonial Africa, art serves as a means of expressing the pain and trauma inflicted by colonialism, while also offering a path toward reclaiming and celebrating African identity. Louise Deininge’s work is a prime example of how art can function as both a reflection of and a response to the enduring impacts of colonialism. Her use of materials such as elephant dung, cowry shells, Kanga cloth, Ugandan bark cloth and Ghanaian tree bark is deeply symbolic, connecting her art to the land, culture, and history of Africa. Ngũgũ’s wa Thiong’o’s call for the decolonization of African minds through the revival of African languages and cultural practices finds a visual counterpart in Deininge’s art. By using materials that are inherently African, Deininge is participating in the larger project of cultural reclamation that Ngũgũ’s advocates. Her work challenges the legacy of cultural erasure imposed by colonialism and underscores the importance of reconnecting with African traditions as a form of resistance. As Ngũgũ’s states, “Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture”. Deininge’s work, through its use of culturally resonant materials, embodies this duality, communicating both a critique of colonialism and a celebration of African culture.

The Scars of Neo-Colonialism

While the formal period of colonialism may have ended, its scars remain deeply embedded in African societies through the mechanisms of neo-colonialism. Kwame Nkrumah, one of the foremost theorists of neo-colonialism, articulated how former colonial powers and other global forces continue to exert control over African nations through economic and political means, even after these nations have achieved political independence. In his Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism, Nkrumah argues that neo-colonialism is more insidious than direct colonial rule because it maintains the illusion of independence while perpetuating ...



Negative, 2024, 195 × 195 cm



Path, 2024, 50 × 90 cm

dependency and exploitation: “The essence of neo-colonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside”.

Louise Deininger conceptualizes her work as a direct critique of these ongoing neo-colonial dynamics. In recent years, Deininger’s birth country, Uganda, has seen significant political protest, driven by the countries’ youth, who are frustrated by political repression, economic hardship and the long-standing rule of President Yoweri Museveni (since 1986). This authoritarian rule is deeply intertwined with colonial legacy: the roots of contemporary political instability can be traced back to the era when European powers drew arbitrary borders, grouped together diverse ethnic communities, and established systems of governance that favored centralized control. The British colonial strategy of indirect rule fostered ethnic divisions, favoring certain groups over others, which created tensions that continued to plague Uganda after independence. Post-colonial Uganda, like many African nations, inherited not only these colonial borders but also the centralized systems of governance and military force established during colonial rule. Museveni’s regime, which began with promises of liberation and democracy, eventually adopted similar authoritarian tactics to maintain power, much like the colonial administrations that relied on military force and suppression to control the population. His regime has been characterized by the suppression of opposition, human rights abuses, and the manipulation of constitutional processes to expand his rule—practices that echo the colonial methods of governance. Museveni’s regime has responded to protests with violent crackdowns, and ever since 2020, when the leader of the opposition, Bobi Wine, was arrested, many young Ugandans were killed by security forces using live ammunition, tear gas and other forms of repression. Human rights organizations have condemned the government’s oppressive tactics, which include arbitrary arrests, disappearances and torture of protesters. The continuity between colonial and post-colonial governance is evident in how many African leaders have used the structures left behind by colonial powers to enrich their authority. Colonialism not only disrupted African societies, but also left a legacy of governance that emphasized coercion and militarism. Museveni’s prolonged rule can therefore be seen as part of a broader pattern in post-colonial African states where leaders, in response to internal pressures and legacies of instability, replicate the same oppressive tactics once used by colonial powers to maintain control. These protests reflect deep-stated anger over authoritarian rule, corruption and lack of opportunities. Deininger, having witnessed the grief and heartbreak of mothers who see their children off when joining a protest, not knowing whether they will survive or not, reflects these desperate and infuriating state of affairs in her art works. Her Kanga installation addresses the red line crossed by an oppressive neo-colonial ruling system. Her work not only critiques the legacies of colonialism but also affirms the strength and resilience of contemporary African youth striving for self-determination in the face of ongoing attempts to dominate and control them.

The history of colonialism in Africa is a history of violence, exploitation, and cultural erasure. However, it is also a history of resistance, resilience, and the ongoing struggle for self-determination. Historians like Walter Rodney, in his influential work *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, have documented the economic impacts of colonialism on the African continent, showing how colonial powers systematically underdeveloped Africa for their own benefit. Rodney argues, “African economies were integrated into the very structure of the capitalist system that was being imposed upon the world by Europe”. Rodney’s analysis provides a critical economic context for understanding the material conditions that Deininger’s art addresses.

Rodney’s work also intersects with the sociological perspectives offered by thinkers like Ali Mazrui and Thandika Mkandawire, who have explored the cultural and social dimensions of post-colonial Africa. Mazrui’s concept of the “triple heritage” in Africa—comprising indigenous, Islamic, and Western influences—offers a framework for understanding the complex cultural dynamics at play in Deininger’s art. Her work reflects the multiple layers of African identity that have been shaped by these diverse influences, while also asserting the primacy of indigenous African cultures.

This interplay of heritages is embodied in Deininger’s works “The Portal and Shadow III”. Both objects are sculptural pieces made from elephant dung, clay, and wooden Catholic rosaries, incorporating traditional African materials with elements of Western religious iconography.

“The Portal” resembles a spherical or circular form with wooden rosary beads draped around it, suggesting the intertwining of traditional African materials with symbols of Western religious devotion. The object is a subtle interplay between the rough texture of clay and elephant dung with the polished surface of wooden beads of the Catholic rosary, emphasizing the hybrid result at the confluence of spiritual belief systems.

“Shadow III.” is a wall-mounted piece. It features a circular form made of elephant dung, decorated with cowry shells arranged around a mirrored central space, surrounded by a wooden rosary chain. The rosary extends downward, its beads resembling traditional African prayer or healing necklaces but clearly identified as Catholic.

The use of elephant dung and clay taps into traditional African art and spirituality, particularly the close relationship between African societies and the natural environment. Elephant dung is not only a symbol of fertility and life cycles but also a material that connects the work to the earth and ancestral spirits. In many African traditions, natural materials like clay and organic matter are used to create ritual objects and sculptures with spiritual significance. The use of cowry shells reinforces this connection to African cultural symbols of wealth, fertility, and protection.

The Catholic rosaries represent the Western, colonial influence on African societies, particularly the introduction of Christianity through European ...





Exhibition Views



Galerie Michaela Bella

missionaries. Catholicism has a complicated history in Africa, often associated with violence and the imposition of Western values over indigenous practices. By integrating the rosary beads with elephant dung, Deininger comments on the juxtaposition and coexistence of African spirituality and Christian religious practices in post-colonial African identity. The proportionally oversized Catholic rosaries entwined around the African materials symbolize the imposition of Christianity, but also how these two traditions have been forced to coexist. Deininger’s work suggests that while these traditions may coexist, there is a constant negotiation and transformation of identity. By placing such contrasting materials together, she challenges the viewer to consider how Africa’s indigenous heritage has been shaped and reshaped by colonial histories yet remains resilient and vital in its cultural significance. The materials themselves speak to the persistence of African culture, even in the face of imposed Western religious structures.

Generation Z

Kanga cloth is a vibrant, colorful fabric that is embedded in the cultural life of East Africa, particularly in countries like Kenya and Tanzania. The origins of Kanga cloth date back to the mid-19th century, when the fabric began to emerge as a distinctive part of Swahili culture. Kanga cloth is typically characterized by its bright colors, intricate patterns, and, most notably, the inclusion of a proverb or saying, known as a “jina,” which is printed on the fabric. Originally, Kanga cloth was created from a combination of imported cotton fabrics and traditional designs. The cloth was often worn by women as a wrap or shawl, and it quickly became a symbol of cultural identity and communication among East African women. The motifs and proverbs printed on Kanga cloth are used to convey messages, celebrate occasions, or even subtly express social and political commentary.

Colonial Influence on Kanga Motifs:

The motifs and designs on Kanga cloth have been significantly shaped by the region's colonial history. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, East Africa was under the colonial rule of various European powers, including the British and Germans. This colonial presence influenced the production and aesthetics of Kanga cloth in several ways.

The colonial period saw the introduction of new motifs and patterns on Kanga cloth, influenced by European tastes and the influx of imported fabrics. Some designs began to incorporate elements of Western fashion and iconography, blending them with traditional African patterns.

This fusion created a unique visual language that reflected the complex interactions between African and European cultures during the colonial era.

Kanga cloth became a medium for subtle political resistance during the colonial period. The proverbs and sayings printed on Kanga often contained veiled critiques of colonial authorities or expressed hopes for independence. These messages were sometimes encoded in language or symbolism that was understood by local communities but not by colonial officials, making Kanga cloth a powerful tool for resistance and communication.

Under colonial rule, the production of Kanga cloth became increasingly commercialized, with European textile companies producing and exporting the fabric back to East Africa. This commercialization led to the standardization of certain motifs and the introduction of mass-produced designs that were influenced by colonial marketing strategies. Despite this, Kanga cloth remained a vital part of East African culture, with local artisans continuing to innovate and create new designs that reflected the region’s cultural and political dynamics. After independence, Kanga cloth continued to evolve, with new motifs reflecting the changing social, political, and economic realities of East Africa. The proverbs and sayings on Kanga cloth often address contemporary issues such as women’s rights, political leadership, and social change, showing how the fabric remains a living document of the region’s history and culture.

In Louise Deininger’s work, the use of Kanga cloth serves as a reminder of this rich history and the ways in which African cultural practices have been shaped by, and have responded to, colonial influence. The incorporation of Kanga cloth into her art is not just an aesthetic choice but a deliberate engagement with the fabric’s role as a medium of communication, resistance, and cultural identity in East Africa.

“Generation Z” by Louise Deininger wraps the entire room in Kenyan Kanga cloth, creating an immersive environment where every surface—walls, ceiling, and floor—is adorned with vibrant, patterned fabric. The Kangas feature traditional Swahili designs, characterized by intricate geometric patterns in red, black, yellow, and white. Within this colorful setting, two framed paintings hang on the wall, slightly separated from the viewer by a string of red ropes stretched across the space. The rope symbolizes a boundary, referring to a meta-phorical “red line” crossed by the government in suppressing youth protests, particularly those against political repression and state violence in Kenya and Uganda.

The atmosphere within the installation is both intimate and overpowering. The familiar texture and patterns of the Kanga cloth are traditionally used for clothing and personal expression in East Africa, but here they become a full-scale environment, transforming the space into a cocoon of memory and cultural history. The red rope creates a visual interruption, serving as a barrier between the viewer and the art on the wall, symbolizing not only physical restriction but also the emotional and political lines that have been crossed.

Louise Deininger’s installation is a powerful meditation on the themes of cultural identity, political resistance, and the repression of youth movements in her home countries of Uganda and Kenya. The Kanga cloth, deeply embedded in the daily lives of East African women, traditionally serves as a medium of communication, with printed proverbs or sayings offering wisdom, social commentary, or political statements. By covering the entire room in Kanga, Deininger transforms a common, personal fabric into a larger political statement, connecting the intimate with the political. ...





The red rope that runs across the space is symbolic of the government’s violent repression of the youth-led protests in both Uganda and Kenya. It alludes to the limits that have been crossed—both in terms of state violence and the loss of rights. The rope’s placement, separating the viewer from the paintings, evokes feelings of restriction and frustration, paralleling the experiences of young activists who have been silenced or suppressed in their efforts to push for change.

Frantz Fanon’s analysis of violence in “The Wretched of the Earth” provides another lens through which to view this installation. Fanon argues that violence is both a tool of the colonizer and, inevitably, a tool of the oppressed in their struggle for liberation. Deininger’s “red line” evokes this dynamic: the government’s violence is depicted as a transgression, while the installation itself becomes a space for contemplation of resistance. The immersive use of Kanga reflects the idea that culture and resistance are inseparable, while the red rope alludes to the lines that the state has crossed in repressing its citizens.

In this installation, the viewer is not just a passive observer but is placed in the middle of this tension, surrounded by symbols of identity and struggle.

The Kanga-clad room creates a protective, yet suffocating environment, representing both the endurance of cultural identity and the pressures exerted by political repression. The red line becomes a stark reminder of the limits of freedom in the current socio-political context, emphasizing the urgency of the youth’s call for change and their resilience in the face of oppression.

Painting

Louise Deininger’s paintings are characterized by a richly textured technique that blends organic materials—such as elephant dung, cowry shells, Ugandan bark cloth, Ghanaian tree bark and Kanga cloth—with vibrant acrylic pigments. This combination creates a tactile, layered surface that evokes a sense of depth and earthiness. Her iconography often includes masks, abstract forms and a plethora of symbolic motifs.

Her work “Negatives” features five mask-like forms set against an earthy background. The masks are varied in color and material, with some three-dimensional and others left as blank silhouettes. They sit atop a horizontal line made of elephant dung and tree bark, while cowry shells and crochet accents create intricate details. The background is divided into red, blue, and earthy brown sections, evoking natural and cultural connections. The masks evoke themes of identity and presence, tapping into the long history of mask-making in African art. Traditionally, masks are used in rituals to represent ancestors, spirits, or collective identity. Here, the blank or hollow masks seem to speak to erasure—perhaps reflecting how African identities were fragmented by colonialism. The use of cowry shells, symbols of wealth and spirituality in many African societies, reinforces the connection to cultural heritage. Deininger’s use of elephant dung brings an additional layer

of meaning, emphasizing the organic connection between the land and cultural memory. Elephant dung, in this context, symbolizes continuity and the cycle of life, adding a rich tactile and symbolic dimension to the work.

Similarly, “Womb I.” and “Womb II.” feature a large circular, womb-like form dominating the canvas, constructed from red-stained cloth, which was used to clean up another installation. The central form emerges from the base of elephant dung, with swirling patterns in blues and earth tones surrounding it. Cowry shells line the edges, enhancing the symbolism of fertility and creation.

The imagery of the womb is potent in African art, symbolizing fertility, creation, and the nurturing aspects of womanhood.

By reusing the red-stained cloth, Deininger imbues the piece with themes of renewal, transformation, and the cyclical nature of life. The cloth is a by-product, reinforcing the idea that creation can arise from destruction, much like how African identities have evolved and regenerated in the face of colonial oppression. The swirling colors and patterns evoke the constant movement of life, growth, and cultural exchange, while the elephant dung grounds the piece in the earth, symbolizing resilience and continuity.

Unity centers on a mask surrounded by vibrant Kanga cloth patterns and flowing abstract shapes. The mask’s eyes are adorned with cowry shells, and the texture of the piece is rich with the integration of natural materials like elephant dung. The flowing colors and shapes seem to suggest movement and connection, while the Kanga cloth—a textile associated with East African identity and communication—provides cultural grounding.

Unity reflects Deininger’s interest in the cultural ties that bind individuals to their heritage. The mask symbolizes ancestral connection, while the cowry shells evoke spiritual protection. The use of Kanga cloth is significant because it traditionally carries Swahili proverbs and social commentary, functioning as both a symbol of cultural identity and a form of communication. This ties into themes of collective identity and resilience, suggesting that despite colonial disruption, cultural unity endures.

“Path” also features a single mask with cowry shell accents on its eyes and necklace. The mask is set against a richly textured background of abstract shapes and patterns, rendered in red, blue, and green. The mask is framed by intricate crochet work, adding a delicate, feminine touch to the otherwise bold and earthy materials like elephant dung.

The title “Path” suggests a journey—perhaps a metaphorical or spiritual one. The mask, with its cowry shell eyes, seems to gaze out, serving as a guide or protector along this path. The organic, flowing shapes and earthy materials suggest a connection to the land and the cyclical nature of life, while the crochet details evoke themes of femininity, care, and cultural preservation, often associated with women’s roles in many African societies. By combining crochet with rougher materials like elephant dung and bark, Deininger bridges the gap between softness and strength, underscoring the resilience required to navigate the “path” of post-colonial identity.

The presence of cowry shells, historically used as currency and spiritual objects, reinforces the notion of guidance, protection, and value. The “path” suggested by the mask’s forward gaze could symbolize both personal and collective journeys toward healing, decolonization, and reclaiming African identity after colonial disruption. ...





Negative II., 2024, 50 × 50 cm



YATH/Medicine, 2024, 50 × 50 cm

The broader context

Louise Deininger’s art presents a powerful dialogue between the historical, cultural, and social realities of post-colonial Africa and broader global themes of identity, reclamation, and resistance. Her use of natural materials such as elephant dung, cowry shells, Kanga cloth, Ugandan bark cloth and Ghanaian tree bark situates her work within both traditional African artistic practices and contemporary post-colonial discourse. In this analysis, we will examine Deininger’s techniques, iconography, and subjects, placing her within the broader context of African and Afro-American artists who have similarly explored these themes.

Her particular use of materiality connects Deininger to artists such as Chris Ofili, known for his provocative use of elephant dung in works such as “The Holy Virgin Mary” (1996). Ofili challenged Western perceptions of “purity” in art by incorporating elephant dung as a material representing both the sacred and the profane. Like Ofili, Deininger employs elephant dung not simply as a medium but as a symbol of African culture, history, and connection to the land. The material’s presence in both artists’ works invites discourse on the commodification of African culture and the tension between Western and African perspectives.

Similarly to El Anatsui, Deininger’s use of found materials, particularly in pieces like “Womb II.” which repurposes a red-stained cloth, demonstrates the ability of African artists to imbue objects with new cultural and symbolic significance. Both artists focus on the regenerative potential of these materials, reflecting themes of transformation and continuity.

The South African artist Nandipha Mntambo uses cowhide in her sculptures to address the tension between materiality, gender, and identity. Similarly, Deininger’s use of Kanga cloth, cowry shells, and crochet suggests an exploration of femininity and the role of women in maintaining cultural traditions, while also examining the friction between tradition and modernity.

One of the most prominent features in

Deininger’s work

is the repeated

use of masks, a

central sym-

bol in African

art, often used in

rituals to communi-

cate with ancestral spirits

or to signify cultural archetypes.

Deininger’s masks, however, take on a more

layered significance, representing the fragmented

or “negative” spaces left by colonial erasure. In this,

her work recalls the practice of Ben Enwonwu, a Nigerian

modernist who used masks to explore the intersection of tradition

and modernity in post-colonial Africa. Deininger’s masks are not lim-

ited to representing tradition but engage with the complexities of identity

in a globalized, post-colonial world. This places her work alongside artists like

Wangechi Mutu, whose fragmented figures similarly critique the hybrid identities

imposed on African bodies through colonialism, global capitalism, and migration.

The cowry shell, a recurring motif in Deininger’s work, carries profound cultural significance, symbolizing fertility, wealth, and spiritual protection across African societies. By incorporating cowry shells into her pieces, Deininger aligns her art with traditional African practices while also reflecting on the commodification of these cultural symbols through colonialism. The cowry shell also resonates with Simone Leigh, an African American artist who often uses these shells in her ceramic works to explore Black female identity and spiritual resilience.

Kanga cloth, which features prominently in Deininger’s installa-

tion work, is not just a fabric but a form of social communication

in East Africa, often carrying Swahili proverbs and political messages. In

this, Deininger’s work draws parallels with Faith Ringgold, who uses quilts as

narrative devices in her exploration of African American history and identity.

Both artists reclaim textile traditions as a means of resistance and storytelling,

placing everyday objects in the realm of fine art to comment on political

and social issues.

Conclusion

“Beneath the Surface: Mapping the Scars of Colonial Power”

is an exhibition that challenges viewers to confront the

enduring legacies of colonialism and neo-colonial-

ism in Africa. Through the richly textured works of

Louise Deininger, the exhibition explores the ways

in which these legacies continue to shape African

identities, cultures, and societies. Drawing on the

insights of African theorists such as Frantz Fanon,

Ngũgũ wa Thiong’o, Kwame Nkrumah, Walter Rodney,

Achille Mbembe, and others, the exhibition provides a

critical framework for understanding the psychological,

cultural, and economic scars left by colonialism.

At the same time, Deininger’s work offers a

powerful statement of resistance and resilience. Her

use of materials that are deeply rooted in African

cultural and natural heritage serves as both a reflec-

tion of the past and a call to action for the future.

This exhibition is not just a display of art; it is Deininger’s

engagement with the complexities of post-colo-

onial identity and the ongoing challenges posed

by neo-colonialism. By encouraging view-

ers to look beneath the surface, Mapping

the Scars of Colonial Power invites us to

confront the hidden legacies of colonial-

ism and to participate in the process of

healing and reclamation that is so vital

to Africa’s future. Through her art, Lou-

ise Deininger offers a vision of hope and

resilience providing a space for reflection and

understanding.



TAYA/Light, 2024, 37 × 23 cm



PARO/Thought, 2024, 37 × 23 cm



FIKIRA/Idea, 2024, 37 × 23 cm



Shadow III., 2024, Ø 25 cm

YOO/Way, 2024, 50 × 50 cm



UMOJA/Unity, 2024, 90 × 150 cm





“I was constantly exposed to the beauty and complexity of my culture, which gave me an early appreciation for the power of storytelling and symbolism.”



AA: Can you tell us about your early influences? What experiences or people first drew you to the world of art?

LD: My early influences come from being born in Uganda and growing up in Kenya, before later moving to the UK. This mixture of environments gave me a deep sense of connection to my roots while also exposing me to new perspectives. The stories, traditions, and culture of my tribe, the Luo, played an essential role in shaping my identity and artistic vision. From an early age, I was surrounded by rich narratives about our people’s history, beliefs, and values. These stories were often passed down by elders in my family, which helped build a strong sense of pride in my cultural heritage. I also learned about the strength and resilience of my people, which made me reflect on the beauty and complexities of our identity.

Growing up in this environment of storytelling and cultural pride gave me a desire to explore themes related to identity, memory, and interconnectedness in my work. At the same time, the challenges I faced as a member of the Luo tribe, as well as the stereotypes associated with my background, deeply influenced the way I view the world and the subjects I choose to address in my art. For me, art became a way to engage with these issues and explore deeper questions about who we are, where we come from, and what our purpose is in the world. These early experiences—being shaped by the traditions of my people but also facing the complexities of navigating multiple cultural identities—set the foundation for the themes I explore in my work today.

AA: How did growing up in Kenya shape your artistic vision and the subjects you choose to explore in your work?

LD: Growing up in Kenya had a profound impact on the way I approach art. Belonging to the Luo tribe, a group with rich traditions, customs, and a deeply rooted sense of identity, has significantly shaped the way I view the world. I was constantly exposed to the beauty and complexity of my culture, which gave me an early appreciation for the power of storytelling and symbolism. This is something that continues to influence my work today.

Being raised in Nairobi, Kenya was pivotal because it exposed me to a whole set of challenges, stereotypes, and questions of identity that I have grappled with throughout my life. I often delve into topics related to trauma, pain, joy, and healing, trying to find connections between these experiences and larger cultural or social issues. In many ways, my background gives me a lens through which I can investigate the interconnectedness between different cultures, while also addressing universal human experiences. In addition to this, growing up in a post-colonial African country exposed me to the ongoing effects of colonialism on African identity and culture. This has also become a major theme in my work.

AA: Your work incorporates materials like elephant dung, cowry shells, and Kanga cloth. What significance do these materials hold for you, and how do they relate to the themes you explore?

LD: These materials are all deeply symbolic and carry a rich cultural significance, both for me personally and for the broader African context. For example, the elephant dung in my work is directly tied to my Luo heritage. In our culture, the elephant is our totem animal, symbolizing peace, strength, intelligence, and memory. The Luo people believe that the elephant guided our ancestors during their migration from the south of Egypt to southern Sudan and into

East Africa, where we now live in countries like South Sudan, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, and parts of Congo. The elephant represents the strength and wisdom of our people, which is why using its dung in my work takes on a symbolic meaning—it stands for the resilience and peaceful nature of the Luo people.

Similarly, cowry shells hold great historical significance in Africa. Before colonialism, cowry shells were used as currency in many African countries, especially in landlocked areas where the shells were rare and therefore valuable. The shells were a symbol of wealth and status, worn by kings, chiefs, and their wives to demonstrate their position in society. However, after European colonization, money was introduced, and cowry shells lost their value, becoming almost worthless objects. By incorporating them into my art, I am attempting to restore the value and meaning they once held, challenging the devaluation imposed by colonial powers. I often collect these shells from markets when I travel back to Northern Uganda or Kenya, bringing them back into my work to remind people of their historical significance.

The Kanga cloth, too, is deeply meaningful. Although it was introduced to us by colonialists, it has become an integral part of our culture. I grew up surrounded by Kanga cloth, which is used for a variety of purposes—from carrying babies to wrapping gifts and even as part of healing rituals. In some cases, people take Kanga cloth to healers, who pray over it before giving it to someone in need of healing. The cloth becomes a vehicle for carrying spiritual energy, which is why I use it in my work. For me, these materials—cowry shells, elephant dung, and Kanga cloth—are not just physical objects but carriers of meaning, history, and cultural identity. They allow me to explore themes such as who we are, where we come from, and what our purpose is in the world. ...

INTERVIEW, OCTOBER 2024

AA: How does your work engage with or respond to the legacy of colonialism and its impact on African identity and culture?

LD: The legacy of colonialism and its impact on African identity and culture is a central theme in my work. The series I’m currently showing was inspired by the growing awareness among young people in Kenya and East Africa, who are beginning to question the true extent of our independence from colonial powers. Many are asking whether we ever really gained full independence or whether colonialism has simply taken on a new form. This questioning of independence is something I’ve also grappled with in my work, and it’s a key theme in the pieces I’m presenting in this exhibition.

One of the issues I explore is the way colonialism left lasting scars on African culture and identity. These scars have been passed down through generations, and many of the policies that exist today still reflect colonial structures. For example, issues around land ownership, food security, and even cultural policies are often shaped by the globalist agenda, which continues to infringe on our identity and way of life. My work challenges these retrogressive policies and asks tough questions about the ongoing effects of colonialism on African society.

The inspiration for this series came from discussions I had with young people in Kenya, who challenged me and other artists to reflect on how we are responding to the issues facing our communities today. These conversations made me realize that, although colonialism may have officially ended, its effects are still very much alive in our society. The works I’ve created for this exhibition aim to bring these issues to the forefront, asking viewers to reflect on whether we ever truly gained independence and what the ongoing legacy of colonialism means for our culture and identity.

AA: Your paintings often feature masks and abstract forms. Could you talk about the role of iconography in your work and how you develop these visual motifs?

LD: Iconography plays a crucial role in my work, particularly when it comes to depicting hidden emotions, thoughts, and perceptions. Throughout history, artists have used iconography to give their work deeper meanings, and my work is no exception. In this series, I’ve chosen to use masks as a way to represent the underlying emotions that are often hidden behind the faces of our mothers and grandmothers. These women, in my view, have borne the greatest burden in protecting their families, often hiding the truth and numbing their pain in order to shield their loved ones from the harsh realities of life. In particular, I focus on how these women dealt with the political, social, and economic injustices they faced during colonialism and post-colonial times. By wearing masks—both literally and figuratively—they were able to conceal their emotions and protect their families from the full extent of their suffering. The masks in my work symbolize this hidden emotional world, which is often overlooked or misunderstood.

In addition to this, I’ve incorporated ready-made papier-mâché masks into my work, which I collage with tea bags that I collect from the East African tea I drink. This choice of material is significant because it represents the struggles of those who work in tea plantations, particularly in East Africa. These workers often face poor working conditions, low pay, and other challenges, and by using tea bags in my masks, I’m drawing attention to these issues. The masks, therefore, serve not only as a representation of hidden emotions but also as a way of addressing broader social and economic injustices.

AA: How does your use of organic materials, such as elephant dung, challenge traditional notions of fine art and elevate natural elements to a symbolic or spiritual plane?

LD: The use of organic materials like elephant dung is intentional and deeply symbolic, challenging the conventional ideas of what materials are considered appropriate for fine art. Elephant dung, in particular, is not just a material for me; it carries a lot of meaning connected to my Luo heritage. In our culture, the elephant is a totem animal, symbolizing peace, wisdom, strength, and memory. By using elephant dung in my work, I’m elevating this organic material beyond its physical form, turning it into a powerful symbol that speaks to these qualities.

For me, working with natural materials like elephant dung or tree bark is also a way of grounding my art in the earth, connecting it to the natural world and the cultural stories that are passed down through generations. It challenges the idea that fine art must be made with expensive or traditional materials like oil paints or marble, instead showing that organic materials have their own beauty and significance. When people encounter my work, they’re often surprised to learn that something as humble as elephant dung can be transformed into an object of art. This reaction is exactly what I aim to provoke—it opens up a conversation about the relationship between nature, culture, and art, while also elevating these natural materials to a symbolic or even spiritual level.

Moreover, I believe that by using materials like elephant dung, I’m able to tap into deeper layers of meaning that go beyond aesthetics. In a way, I’m taking something that might seem ordinary or even undesirable and turning it into something sacred.

AA: Your work often touches on the psychological and cultural scars left by colonialism. How do you approach these sensitive topics in a way that invites both reflection and healing?

LD: One of the ways I do this is through the use of symbolic materials, motifs, and color palettes that engage the viewer on an emotional and intellectual level. For example, I often incorporate objects like the rosary, which is a symbol of faith and spirituality, alongside more unconventional materials like elephant dung. The juxtaposition of these objects can spark conversations, encouraging viewers to reflect on the complex history of colonialism and its impact on African culture and identity.

In many ways, my work is about opening up a space for dialogue and shared reflection. I want viewers to engage with the work, to ask questions, and to think about the deeper meanings behind the materials and symbols I use. It’s through this process of questioning and dialogue that healing can sometimes take place. By bringing these difficult and painful topics to the surface, I’m not only inviting viewers to reflect on their own experiences but also creating an opportunity for collective healing.

I find it particularly interesting to observe the emotions that arise when people see objects like the rosary connected to something made from elephant dung. These reactions can range from surprise to curiosity to discomfort, and it’s through this emotional response that the work begins to take on new layers of meaning. In some cases, the conversations that arise from these encounters lead to a form of transformation, both for the viewer and for myself as the artist. This is also why I actually view my work as conceptual.

AA: Can you talk about your creative process? How do you go from an initial concept to a finished piece, and how important is improvisation or experimentation in that process?

LD: My creative process is a combination of research, contemplation, and experimentation. It often begins with deep conversations—whether with my studio mates, during artist residencies, or with other artists, curators, or even friends and family. I also do a lot of reading and research on various topics, which gives me a broad foundation of ideas to draw from when I begin working on a new piece.

Once I have an idea in mind, I start gathering materials. Many of the materials I use come from my personal archives, which I’ve built up over the years by collecting objects that speak to me or that I feel would connect to certain topics. For example, I collect wooden rosaries, beads, cowry shells, and Kanga cloth. I also source elephant dung in bulk, which I allow to dry naturally over time. These materials, which have both symbolic and literal significance, become the building blocks of my work.

When I start working on a piece, the process is very intuitive. I blend these materials—sometimes elephant dung with natural sand that I order from Hungary—into a powder that I use as needed. I might also incorporate other materials that I’ve collected while traveling or during artist residencies. For instance, when I visit different countries, I make it a point to collect fabrics, textiles, or other objects that I feel will blend into my work.

Improvisation and experimentation are central to my process. While I might start with a clear concept in mind, the final piece often evolves in unexpected ways. Each morning, I spend time in deep contemplation before starting work. I allow inspiration to come from within, but I also visit exhibitions, museums, and galleries, taking photos of works that inspire me. This process of absorbing influences and then allowing them to mix with my own intuition and ideas is what makes the end result feel like a gestalt—a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

There are times when a piece doesn’t feel complete, and I set it aside for a while. These unfinished works often marinate in my studio for years before I return to them. When I do come back to them, they sometimes become part of a new series or take on new meanings that I hadn’t initially anticipated. This process of allowing the work to evolve over time, and being open to experimentation and improvisation, is essential to my creative journey. It’s what allows me to push the boundaries of my art and create pieces that feel both deeply personal and universally resonant.

AA: Many of your works feature themes of transformation and resilience. How do these concepts reflect your personal experiences or the broader African narrative you aim to convey?

LD: Growing up in Africa until the age of 19, I faced many challenges that shaped my understanding of what it means to be resilient. I was sent to a strict boarding school at a very young age, and the experience was both physically and emotionally demanding. I often compare it to the experiences depicted in prison movies—it felt like we were cut off from our families and had to find ways to survive under strict conditions. These early experiences of separation, hardship, and survival had a profound impact on my psyche and influence my work.

One of the most significant challenges I faced growing up was the constant presence of death. From a young age, I attended funerals regularly, and death was not hidden from us—it was something we had to confront and accept as part of life. This exposure to death led me to ask tough existential questions about life, identity, and purpose. Who are we? Why are we here? Where are we going? What is the meaning of life, and how can we live with purpose? These questions have guided my personal journey and are reflected in my art, particularly in the themes of transformation and resilience.

In my work, transformation often takes the form of spiritual or emotional growth. I believe that our ancestors play a significant role in guiding us through life, giving us the strength and courage to face difficult challenges and venture into the unknown. This belief in the power of our ancestors and their ongoing presence in our lives is a source of resilience that allows us to transform pain and hardship into something meaningful. For me, resilience is not just about survival—it's about the ability to grow, change, and transform in the face of adversity. This idea is reflected in the broader African narrative as well, where resilience is often celebrated as a key quality that has allowed African cultures to survive and thrive despite centuries of oppression and hardship.

AA: What message or feeling do you hope viewers take away from your work? How do you see your art contributing to conversations about African identity and the global art scene?

LD: When it comes to the message or feeling I want viewers to take away from my work, I leave that somewhat open to interpretation. I'm always curious to see what emotions or thoughts arise when people engage with my art. For me, it's not just about the aesthetics it is more about how it resonates with people on a deeper, emotional level. I want viewers to reflect on the themes, such as identity, memory, colonialism, and resilience, and how these themes connect to their own experiences or perspectives.

At the same time, I see my work contributing to a larger conversation about African identity, not just within Africa but in the global art scene. My art serves as a platform to amplify African voices and to critique the lingering effects of colonialism on our lives, culture, and identity. By bringing these issues to the forefront, I hope my work sparks dialogue about how we, as Africans, can reclaim our heritage and find ways to heal from the scars of colonialism. I'm particularly interested in exploring how African art can move beyond the confines of traditional aesthetics and engage with contemporary issues in meaningful ways.

In addition to addressing African identity, my work also contributes to the global conversation about art and culture by highlighting the importance of cultural heritage in shaping contemporary art. I believe that African art has a lot to offer in terms of challenging the dominant narratives and perspectives in the art world.

AA: What role does memory play in your work, especially in relation to your experiences growing up in post-colonial Africa?

LD: Memory plays a central role in my work, particularly memories from my childhood in Nairobi, Kenya. These memories are filled with moments of play, sorrow, joy, beauty, and the teachings of my mother and grandmother, who was a healer. My grandmother, in particular, had a profound influence on me, as she passed down stories and wisdom that continue to shape my understanding of life and my artistic practice. These memories are not just personal; they are part of a larger cultural narrative that I draw from in my work. Growing up in Kenya during a time when Uganda was going through political turmoil and listening to tales of terror from my siblings who were still living there, and also the separation from them for a long time had an huge impact on my life. It heightened my awareness of the importance of family ties in the preservation of memory, cultural identity and heritage. My memories of growing up in Kenya and later moving to the UK are a rich source of inspiration for my art, as they allow me to reflect on the complexities of identity, belonging, and the ways in which personal and collective memories shape our understanding of the world.

These memories also play a significant role in how I choose the titles for my works, which are often in Luo, my mother tongue, or Swahili. The act of naming my work in these languages takes me back to my roots and helps ground the pieces in my cultural identity.

AA: You use traditional African symbols, but your works also feel very contemporary. How do you balance honoring cultural heritage while addressing modern-day issues in your art?

LD: I believe that art has a universal language that transcends time and culture, and this is what allows me to balance traditional African symbols with contemporary themes in my work. While my art is deeply rooted in African cultural heritage, I strive to create work that feels relevant to the present moment. For me, it's not about choosing between the past and the present, but rather about finding ways to connect them. By using traditional symbols, I honor the cultural heritage of my ancestors and the wisdom that has been passed down through generations. At the same time, I use these symbols to address modern-day issues, such as the ongoing impact of colonialism, identity, and resilience. In this way, my work becomes a bridge between the past and the present, between the traditional and the contemporary. I'm not trying to separate these elements but rather to show that they are interconnected.



AA: You've spent time in different countries and cultural environments. How has exposure to diverse global influences impacted your artistic expression?

LD: After graduating from the University of Fine Arts Academy in Vienna, I had the opportunity to participate in various artist residencies in the U.S.A, Ghana, and other places. Each of these experiences has introduced me to new perspectives, ideas, and materials, all of which have influenced the way I approach my work.

For example, during my residency with the blaxTARLINES in Kumasi, Ghana, I had the chance to visit artists like Ibrahim Mahama and engage with his initiatives. These interactions, along with conversations with other artists, greatly inspired my current series of works on the theme of scars. The idea of scars—both physical and psychological—became a central theme in my work as I reflected on the shared experiences of trauma and resilience in African societies. The writings of Kwame Nkrumah also found their way into my work, further shaping my exploration of African identity and post-colonial struggles.

When I travel to different countries, I make it a point to collect materials that resonate with me, whether they are fabrics, textiles, or objects with symbolic meaning. These materials often find their way into my work, adding new layers of meaning and connecting my art to the places and cultures I've encountered. At the same time, exposure to these diverse cultural environments has made me more aware of the global context in which my work exists. While my art

is deeply connected to African culture and identity, I recognize that it also speaks to broader global issues.

AA: What challenges have you faced as a Black female artist working in a field where African voices have historically been marginalized? How do you navigate these dynamics?

LD: As a Black female artist, I've faced numerous challenges. When I first started out, collectors and institutions were primarily focused on promoting local artists from their own regions, and my work wasn't seen as particularly interesting or valuable in their eyes. There was a certain disinterest in African art, especially in the type of conceptual art that I create. Many institutions and collectors were more interested in figurative African portraiture, which put me at a disadvantage because my work doesn't fit into that category.

However, things began to shift around 2017, particularly with the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement and a growing interest in African art. Even though this shift brought more attention to African artists, the focus was still largely on portraiture. Nevertheless, I remained undeterred. I continued to produce my art and participate in residencies, especially in the U.S., where I found more opportunities to connect with other artists and engage with the broader art community.

In Austria, where I live, I started to receive invitations to participate in group shows, with one of the largest being at the Künstlerhaus in Vienna, curated by Günther Oberhollenzer. This exhibition, which spanned 2023 into 2024, was a major turning point for me. I also received invitations to solo exhibitions, including a solo representation at the SPARK fair in Vienna, and I participated in group shows at the Museum of Contemporary Art Vojvodina, a Biennale in Novi Sad, known as the Danube Dialogues and a solo at the Zora Neale Hurston National Museum in Orlando Florida.

While navigating these challenges has been difficult, I've learned that persistence and focus are key. As a Black female artist, I've had to work harder.





“I believe that art has a universal language that transcends time and culture, and this is what allows me to balance traditional African symbols with contemporary themes in my work.”

Louise Deining's

Beneath the surface—
mapping the scars of colonial power

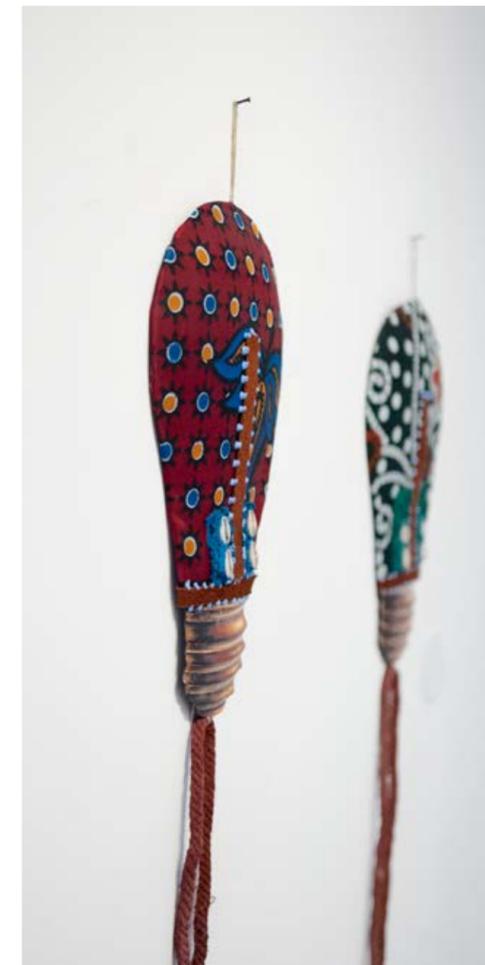


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