

# KAPWANI KIWANGA

## Sunlight by Fireside

June 9 to September 9, 2018

Curator: Anne-Marie St-Jean Aubre

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The complex issues related to current and historical colonization processes are at the core of Kapwani Kiwanga's art practice. For example, *Maji Maji* (2014), which addressed the revolt that eventually led to Tanzania's independence, or *Flowers for Africa* (2013), which reproduced, based on historical images, the floral centrepieces that graced the tables where decolonization treaties were signed, namely those of Côte d'Ivoire, Uganda, and Nigeria. Canadian artist Kapwani Kiwanga, who studied anthropology and comparative religion at McGill University, continues this line of research with her exhibition *Sunlight by Fireside*, a new body of work which, in light of the recent Truth and Reconciliation Commission, takes on special significance.

Kiwanga often creates installations that actively involve viewers as a way to uncover various systems and structures of exclusion, oppression, and control. As such, she stresses the importance of avoiding a position of passive reception when it comes to acquiring knowledge, and instead, encourages viewers to experiment, participate, question, discuss, and ultimately learn to form their own opinions. Her projects displace expected points of view on a given situation to focus not on the players themselves, but on the objects or actions underlying or representing the power relations that are the focus of her inquiry. Her investigations take shape through the symbolic use of materials and processes – soil, flowers, woven shade cloth, invisibility and absence, lectures and oral transmission – that are capable of conveying political and social meaning.

As part of this project, Kiwanga chose to create opportunities for dialogue and sharing, inviting viewers to directly engage with her installation by handling the works in the gallery. By incorporating the Museum's grounds as well as its galleries – creating a bridge between interior and exterior interventions – the artist indirectly put the Museum institution to the test, forcing it to be more flexible, open and accommodating; a constructive approach that ideally should prevail in any negotiation between parties with particular agendas. Institutional critique, however, is not central to Kiwanga's work. Its ultimate aim is to help people reflect on the colonial experience as a whole. By using materials such as soil, light and shade cloth, the artist addresses economic and social issues of land ownership in relation to the extraction and exploitation of natural resources.

Anne-Marie St-Jean Aubre, Curator of Contemporary Art

# LIST OF ARTWORKS

## KAPWANI KIWANGA

Hamilton, Ontario, 1978

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### **1. *Positive-Negative (morphology)***

2018

Hole dug in the grounds of the MAJ and its soil

30 x 50 x 460 cm

Collection of the artist

The Musée d'art de Joliette is located on Nitaskinan territory, homeland of the Atikamekw First Nation who have been negotiating their comprehensive land claim with the governments of Quebec and Canada since 1980. The Canadian Encyclopedia states that the territory of Quebec has never been the subject of a historic treaty for the sharing of First Nations ancestral land. If the daily consequences of this reality have no direct effect on most Quebecois, it certainly generates a feeling of injustice amongst Indigenous peoples, and undermines their confidence in authorities in general, and in the Crown in particular. One cannot help but think of this when experiencing this new work by Kapwani Kiwanga, who hopes to draw attention not only to the complex gesture of land appropriation that underlies any colonization process, whether in Australia, Algeria, India or South Africa, but to the less common gesture of returning and/or reclaiming what has been taken.

A portion of soil in front of the Museum was symbolically removed and placed in the gallery. This seemingly simple act required the implementation of a sterilization process to eliminate any living organism in the material, and thus maintain the museum environment. Viewers are invited to use the tool and bucket left at their disposal to remove a piece of soil from the gallery and return it to its original setting in front of the Museum. If the violence of the initial appropriation act is emphasized by the soil's treatment, it is through this gesture of reparation that the artist intends to make us actively reflect. This evolving, participatory installation will continually transform itself throughout the exhibition, highlighting the time and ongoing effort required by any advocacy and negotiation process. Following this intervention, a scar-like trace will remain on the ground, marking the Museum's immediate surroundings and the memory of its visitors for the foreseeable future.

## Participation protocole

Take the ceramic tool with care.

Use it to carefully scoop some soil into the pail.

Put the lid on the pail.

Put the tool back on the shelf.

Exit the Museum to empty the pail's content into the hole in the ground.

Return the pail to its original place, under the shelf.

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## 2. *Red Sky at Night*

2018

In situ installation (shade cloth, wood)  
approx. 165,6 m<sup>2</sup>

## 3. *The Sun Never Sets*

2017

HD video, color, mute

9 min

Filmed in Ireland, Canada (Manitoba and Northwest Territories), New Zealand, Australia, Myanmar, India, Hong Kong and Tanzania.

Collection of the artist

As a nod to the expression “The sun never sets on the British Empire,” widely used by the British during the 19th and 20th centuries to assert the vastness of their global territorial empire, Kapwani Kiwanga’s video *The Sun Never Sets* features successive views of red sunsets filmed in different former British colonies. The images and the title create an ambiguous relationship. In contrast with the title, the video portrays the sun’s descent, symbolically confirming the decline of the British Empire, an important historical player in the promotion of Western ideology throughout the world. And yet, the sun never quite disappears, giving the equal impression that Britain’s colonial hold persists, with all of its implied consequences for cultural diversity and the environment.

Echoing this work is *Red Sky at Night*, a false ceiling made of red shade cloth whose geometric, loosely woven texture and transparent layers transform the atmosphere of the adjacent gallery. Shade cloth is used in large-scale agriculture, often in industrial monoculture crops, to artificially maintain a microclimate that helps plants – especially non-native species – survive. The pressures of capitalism, as manifested in overproduction and land ownership, infiltrate this reflection on the ability of technologies, however simple they may be, to exploit the land and its natural resources. Interested in the metaphorical potential and the social and political relevance of the materials she uses, Kiwanga sees in this porous fabric – which also doubles as a screen – an evocative image of the border as a complex concept, touching on issues of exclusion and inclusion, and the possibility of transgression.

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## **4. Implements**

2018

Ceramic tool with ash-based glaze

approx. 5 x 15 x 10 cm

Ash bucket with ceramic handles, ash-based glaze

approx. 23.5 x 18 x 18 cm

Collection of the artist

On June 2nd, from 5 to 9 p.m., a meeting was held around a fire pit in front of the Museum, where Kapwani Kiwanga invited participants to exchange viewpoints, opinions and knowledge on issues of decolonization and property in relation to environmental exploitation. The event emphasized the diversity of voices and the importance of orality in the transmission of knowledge; it was an opportunity to speak, to read aloud, and to view presentations. It was grounded in an attitude of active listening, openness and sharing, in an informal atmosphere where food and drink were served. While the artist has previously used the conference format in some of her performances, playing with the idea that, in her words, “the conference is an apparatus of authoritative knowledge production,” here, as the sun set on the horizon, it is conversation that prevailed.

The memory of that exchange is imbued in the ceramic tiles, tools and pail handles, all made in Joliette with clay from Grand-Métis. The ceramic glaze that covers them was made with ashes from the fire around which the participants

were gathered. The conversations were intentionally not recorded; they persist in the minds of those who were present, in the reflections they may continue to have, in the actions they will make perhaps differently in the future. By serving as the preliminary context for the gesture of restitution that visitors are invited to make, these words, inscribed in the objects visitors will manipulate, perpetuate themselves differently, symbolically infusing each action. Much like nature's cycle of renewal, where wood becomes ash that becomes soil that nourishes the ground, words are transmitted and transformed, influencing or conditioning the gestures and way of life adopted by each person throughout time.

## 5. *Fire & Fallow*

2018

Ceramic tiles with ash-based glaze

10 x 15 cm each

Collection of the artist

## FLOOR PLAN

1<sup>st</sup> floor and outside

Salle EBI

