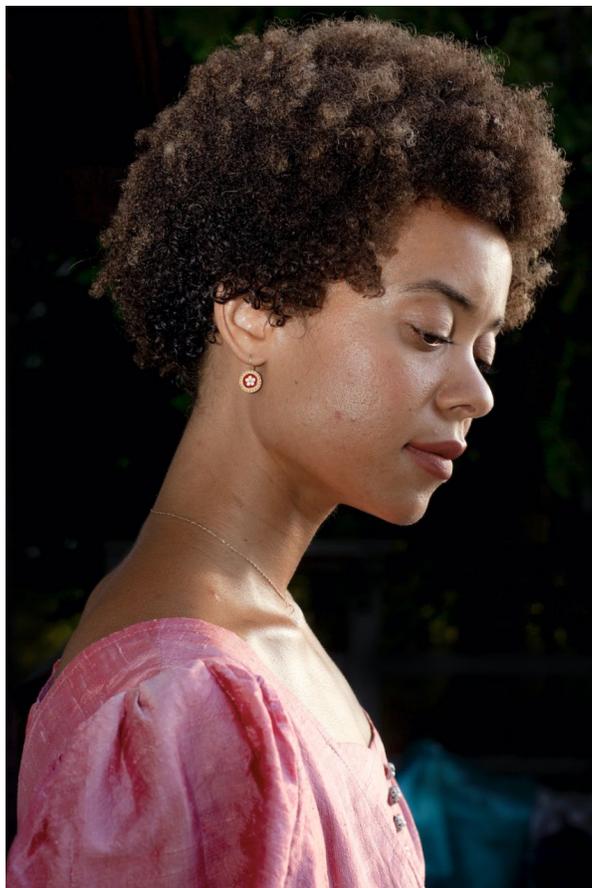


KALEIDOSCOPE



Cassi Namoda: Lusotropical Painting

Interview by
Hunter Braithwaite
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Cassi A. Namoda (Mozambican–American, b. 1988, lives and works in Los Angeles) has solo shows coming up at OFR Galerie, Paris, in October, and Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles, in December.

HUNTER BRAITHWAITE Let's talk about how movement factors into your work. As the daughter of a Mozambican mother and an American father, you grew up in Africa, Haiti, and the United States. You travel constantly, often setting up studios in hotel rooms or Airbnbs. Are you playing with the notion of the nomadic, post-studio artist?

CASSI NAMODA I think at some point in your life, you accept the way you are and embrace the way you operate. It's a very spiritual realization, and also very liberating. I seem to have created a sort of perfect transatlantic path for myself, where I need both dimensions differently. It also is true for my work. My upbringing followed the particular cadence of African life; it was a sort of Aristotelian training/boot camp, hence my peripatetic perspective. So my practice is really tied into the journey, and I like this kind of shifting of space. I feel familiar with the unfamiliar.

HB You mentioned the cadence of African life. Now that you live elsewhere, how do you feel that landscape is embedded in the way you work?

CN At times, when I paint, I'm deeply nostalgic for my time spent in Africa and the duality of living in urban and rural worlds. I am interested in the

mundaneness of African life: the daily motions of the people, the wanderings of animals, the culture and architecture itself. The colonial, Brutalist, Deco, experimentalist architectures, the wide boulevards along the coast of Maputo City in my native Mozambique.

HB Your exhibition at Nina Johnson Gallery reflects upon Kenyan philosopher John Mbiti's seminal book *African Religions & Philosophy* (1961). In the book, which compares Western and African forms of belief, Mbiti focuses on two Swahili notions of time: Zamani and Sasha. How do Mbiti's ideas factor into your practice at the moment?

CN I am interested in the paradoxes of African life, the negotiation of Western religion and African spirituality. Sasha and Zamani are two aspects of time as expressed in some Eastern and Central African cultures. Sasha are spirits known by someone still alive, while Zamani are spirits not known by anyone currently alive. Sasha are concerned with, and are expressed as, the present time, the recent past, and the near future, while Zamani is the limitless past. Potential time is the third part of the space-time continuum in African thinking. People must



learn from the past to act wisely in the present to create a good future.

HB In your work, you're often riffing on the Western canon—appropriating Picasso's facial distortions here, Matisse's palette there... Max Beckmann, Marc Chagall... All of these iconic artists—who happen to be white, male, European—become a type of raw material for you. To what end?

CN I like this idea of making work that I would consider "African Expressionism." It's like I am taking agency over the idea of European painters that were inspired by African aesthetics. During the early 1900s, traditional African sculpture became a powerful influence among European artists such as Matisse and Picasso, but also Cézanne, Gauguin and other early Modernist painters. I don't think any of these guys knew a whole lot about the functions and meanings of the sculptures within the African belief system; they simply connected to the spiritual aspect of the compositions. It helped them move past the naturalism that had defined Western art up to that point. Some might argue, of course,

that it was the product of a colonial mentality, and that the Europeans “stole” this from Africa (like many other things), but personally, I am really fond of German Expressionist painting—the emotional intensity, dissonant color tones and figural distortions.

HB You studied filmmaking. How does cinema factor into your paintings? You mentioned to me that your titles are almost like subtitles or dialogue, adding another layer to the image.

CN I think about directors like Ousmane Sembène or Djibril Diop Mambéty, and the way the image holds such weight before dialogue is even expressed. This idea heavily informs my work in painting: it’s the same responsibility of telling a good story, but only through pictures, which is why I also love the work of Mozambican photographer Ricardo Rangel.

HB As a member of the Lusophone (Portuguese-speaking) diaspora, how do you situate this identity in your work?

CN I have been reading a book called *Voices from an Empire*, which is a history of Afro-Portuguese literature pre- and post-colonization and the literary movement called Lusotropicalism. Particularly in Cape Verde, a few members of the educated elite cultivated popular Creole poetry as an expression of their sense of regionalism. I feel that I am bringing that to painting, focusing on the characters, the dialects, the customs, the topography, the local colors. My goal is to give the viewer a sense of a place

Images courtesy of the artist and Library Street Collective, Detroit.
Photography by D’Angelo Lovell Williams.