

## Frieze Art Fair 2017: Donna Kukama on why she's selling medicinal plants at an art fair

As the Evening Standard teams up with Frieze for next week's art bonanza, Ben Luke meets performance artist and star attraction Donna Kukama



Gardener's world: Donna Kukama will trade plants from her Frieze installation / Daniel Hambury/Stella Pictures

By [Ben Luke](#) | 29 September 2017

It's Donna Kukama's first visit to London and the South African performance artist is sitting in the South Place Hotel looking down on bustling Moorgate. But her thoughts are on a more verdant London space – Regent's Park – because Kukama is here for the Frieze art fair, where she will make her first ever UK work.

It's about time. She's been one of the liveliest presences on the performance art scene for a few years – she featured in the South African pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2013, has since shown in major biennales in Lyon, Moscow and São Paulo and twice at the New Museum in New York, that reliable bellwether of fresh developments in contemporary art. "It's really strange," she says. "I've shown widely everywhere, but never in Britain, so I'm excited."

Kukama, 36, is a striking presence, with corkscrew ringlets, blue lips and matching fingernails, and bright red, sculptural earrings – three felt orbs with long trails descending to her shoulders. She's charming company, speaking quietly and deliberately but regularly interrupting her thoughts with a raucous and infectious laugh.

For Frieze she's bringing in goods you might expect to find at a horticultural fair: medicinal plants. Researching the work, she noticed that Regent's Park is punctuated with discrete spaces, like Queen

Mary's Gardens, not far from the Frieze London (the other fair, Frieze Masters, is at the Camden end of the park). "I thought it would be interesting to introduce another garden within this space," she says, "but one that functions in a way that speaks to Frieze."



Desk job: one of Kukama's performances titled *What We Caught, We Threw Away. What We Didn't Catch, We Kept* / Anders Kreuger

The work references "things that get bought, of art and its value", she says. "What if one were to offer a service that had to do more with things that cannot really be traded, like empathy or solidarity — all those human qualities that one wouldn't necessarily buy at a fair — within this garden?"

The plants are metaphors, then. "It was important that they are medicinal, but of course their function is not necessarily to heal," she says. "It is more a commentary on the space [the art fair] into which they are introduced."

Kukama is encouraging Frieze visitors to enter into a transaction in the widest sense. "People will get a certificate that comes with the plant they get, and the exchange will differ from one person to the next — there's no set formula."

It will all take place in a small closed-off area at the entrance to Frieze London. Kukama says it will run "a bit like a shop, with opening hours and it's closed during lunch". Once the conversations are under way, "we would narrow down to a suitable plant, its remedy, the certificate that comes with it, and then bid a price for the person to keep this plant and nurture it in their own home".

She's playing with the idea of what constitutes art: do those of us leaving Frieze with a plant, complete with her certificate, take away an artwork, just as the collectors do from the fair?

Much thought has gone into the plants that will surround Kukama: they reflect on Britain's colonial past, which inevitably connects to her South African homeland. "Initially I was looking at plants that are used in England but don't come from here, so that was the starting point," she says. "Also plants that are used on a day-to-day basis, like for cooking — nothing that seems too exotic, it has become part of the day-to-day living experience of people here."

Another metaphor, then: these plants are effectively immigrants that we have absorbed into our culture. She initially planned to try to evoke more than 400 years of British imperial ambitions through the plants, and though the choice of plants has shifted, partly because of seasonal availability, she thinks elements of this colonial theme might linger in the conversations.

She was also mindful of more recent British history and “the whole thing about Brexit”, she says. “That backdrop informed this idea of a closed-off structure and the plants living in their own universe, that people would have to go through processes to enter and exit.”

Although she has made her name in performance, Kukama says a lot of her work is “thought through in a painterly way”. Does she mean in its structure and colour? “Yes, but even how one would layer paint... I think the same applies to how I layer subject matter or material within the performance. I think of it visually even though it’s not necessarily only limited to a two-dimensional medium.”

She also explains that her methods owe a lot to her experience growing up. “I went to a lot of boarding schools — not just one but many,” she says, “where I would have to adjust to any environment pretty quickly: find ways of building connections and find ways of navigating space, language, whatever it was that I had to learn. And some of those have carried into my work as a performance artist.”

Why so many schools? “I got kicked out of some,” she says, rather sheepishly. “It was mostly my behaviour; I was a very good student in terms of academics... but I just wasn’t easy to control or contain.” Does this rebellious spirit explain her desire to make art in the unconventional realm of performance? “Yeah, it totally does.”

Though Kukama creates work for traditional museum spaces, they’re not her natural preserve because they often “don’t allow for much that comes from outside to enter, or for conversations to come inside unless they’re framed in a certain way”, she says. “There’s not the openness that a public space offers, in terms of audience, in terms of even me being surprised myself.”

In her native South Africa “museums are kind of dated”, she says. “It doesn’t really bother me that there isn’t such a huge museum culture, because it’s allowed for all sorts of practices to emerge, including my own. When you look at the majority of the country, going to museums was never really part of many people’s reality — it’s just never been a thing to do. Which is why, when artists became more diversified, when there were more women and more black people taken seriously as contemporary artists, not much happened with finding ways of existing within museum structures.”

Her performances are triggered by place or context, which might prompt aggressive or violent actions. A work in Milan this summer was based on conversations with people in the largely immigrant Porta

Venezia area of the city. It featured a section where she spoke of “fragile communities” and added: “The common line here is the need to feel human, but when one is so fragile, it sometimes becomes easy to crumble.” She followed this by using a whip to crush balls of earth on a mirror.

But her work is as likely to be more poised, as her Frieze performance seems likely to be. She sees the performances as chapters in a book, an idea that partly relates to “a very common conversation around many parts of the world — the idea that history is told from one perspective, and it’s often written in a certain way and it excludes a lot”, she says. “So if a book were to be something that’s open-ended, that can expand and contract depending on what it speaks to and what form it would be, then that is when this series of performances happens.”

She is also addressing “the idea that history had been passed along through storytelling or ceremonies... those existing ways of telling histories that may have been around before books were introduced to us.”

Inevitably, as a South African artist, the idea of untold histories being written has a particular resonance. “It definitely begins with me and my context within South Africa,” she says. “But it also hopes to be able to reflect on things outside of South Africa — I don’t want it to carry this South African burden.”

Given that the nationalistic, anti-immigration rhetoric of Brexit has been in Kukama’s mind as she has been preparing for her first UK performance, I suspect she’ll be pleasantly surprised by Londoners’ openness to her project. Drop in to see her at her “shop” next week if you can, perhaps after a visit to the fair proper, where you might witness art changing hands for six- and seven-figure sums.

Kukama’s plants might be medicine for the body, but a conversation with her might prove to be a balm for the soul.

*Frieze London and Frieze Masters, Regent’s Park, NW1, Thurs until Oct 8, [frieze.com/fairs](http://frieze.com/fairs)*