

ghouls, guts, dust:



Installation view of Donna Kukama, *Ways-of-Remembering-Existing*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist and Wits Art Museum.

donna Kukama's 'Ways-of-Remembering-Existing'

A review by Thuli Gamedze on the 6th of November 2022. This should take you 5 minutes to read.

Wits Art Museum

31.08 - 05.11.2022

A demonic, yelping soundscape, *Chapter 0* (2022), greets anyone walking into WAM on the ground floor. It makes me laugh, but I'm secretly kind of freaked out too. This feels like the necessary introductory chapter for what's below in the basement: a show (or a book) by donna Kukama, including projects from the last sixteen years, that gets me to consider the use, value and character of *creepiness* as an orientation in artwork. Kukama's *Ways-of-Remembering-Existing* demonstrates the possibility of the irregular, hidden and socially-odd logics of intuition, in meaningfully encountering the violence of public memory and bad histories made concrete. Intuition-led encounters—here shown as documentation of performances or drawings or sounds—are often unsettling though, uninterested as they are in social etiquette, or symbolic shortcutting. Donna's work is exactly this, the affect and pull-power of its eeriness and humour are undeniable, even as rhetorical interpretation of it is deeply challenging.

The core of the exhibition is its collection of lo-fi performance footage shown on flat screen TVs. The shifty films stand around in the basement, capturing donna's variously unhinged approaches to disturbing the memorial structures that slowly fossilise forgetting.

ghouls

In *Not Yet (and nobody knows why not)* from 2008, donna stands in front of the camera. Kinda sultry, one hip popped, flared blue jeans. She's in Nairobi at Uhuru Gardens. Her back is faced toward a flow of Mau-Mau war vets whose path towards a protest—for recognition of their role in Kenyan Independence—approaches and then passes. Almost shy at first, donna

looks down and slowly begins to spread red lipstick over her lips. Soon enough, her lips are covered, but the process powers on, donna spreading the colour onto the surrounding skin of her face. The red perimeter grows wider and wider, eventually consuming her forehead.



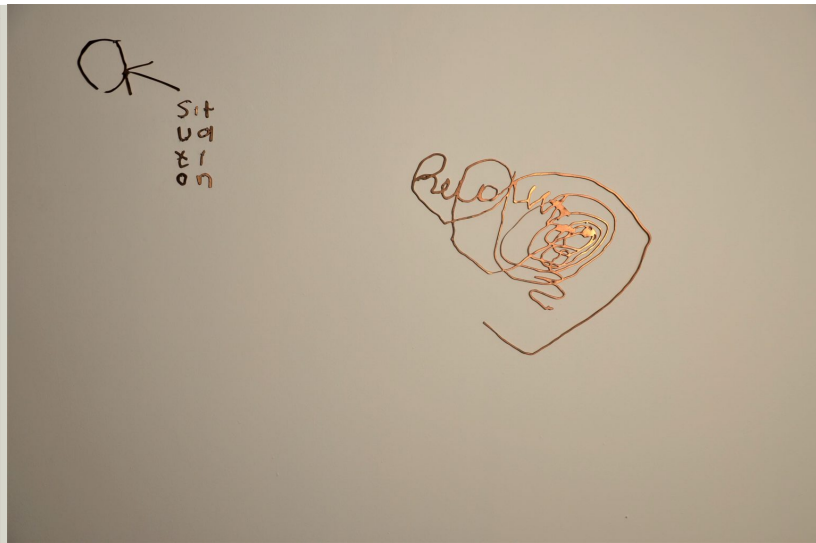
donna Kukama, *Not Yet (And Nobody Knows Why Not)*, 2008. Courtesy of blank projects.

She rubs it in real slow with both hands, stretching the skin of her cheeks down, pulling her eyes open, smearing and smearing, the lipstick staining her hands and any other previously unpainted patches of her face. Creepy.

Then she faces the walking crowd, standing with her red face and red hands at her sides, her eyes closed. Most people are unmoved (and just keep moving). They have a historical gap to fill, a public memory to jog, and thus avoid the temptation of this possessed red character. Only a few take glances back, but they do it without breaking pace, bewildered faces spinning back to stare for a couple more seconds. I only see one person actually stop to watch. An uncle in a suit. He's staring back from a few metres behind, so absorbed in the scene that he drops the thing he is carrying. Donna—ghoulish, relentless, dreaming—haunts this painful scenario of forgetting, an eerie figure disrupting a single instance of historical neglect.

guts

The show's title, *Ways-of-Remembering-Existing*, suggests that memory—regardless of its abuse by oppressive forces—lives inside our beings. Kukama's articulations of memory work enter the space of discrepancy between the constructed memory worlds of the 'public record' and what we know in our guts. I believe her memory work often feels creepy because guts don't speak in words. They generally *just know* when something is wrong, and their expression of this exceeds language—or fails language—making them something we are prone to ignore. Donna does the opposite of ignoring guts. Her drawings, paintings, and the copper work *To be announced* are all gutspeak; intuitive responses to the wrongness of pillaged histories, insistent loops, and attempts to re-draw attention to the reliability of the body-memory, the big and often wordless knowledge that lives inside. Apart from paint, graphite, chalk, gouache and pastel, donna's painting material lists variously include "erasure," "revolutions," "spells," "pride," "grief," "Black Anger," "lies," "sunshine," "faithlessness," "solid truth," "rhythm," "moonlight," and "humming." What is the texture of a mark made with lies?



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dust

The Swing (after after Fragonard): donna's in a white dress, leaning back in a swing attached to the rails of a raised road on the east of Joburg CBD. It is documentation of a live reenactment of Fragonard's famous 1766 painting, edited in slo-mo and backed by a soundscape of stretched-out garbles of French and Setswana. It's filmed from above. A couple of people at the Mai Mai market below are strangely captivated, reaching up and out to donna's feet—the slow motion makes the reaching more desperate than it probably is. This severely abstracted iteration of *The Swing* pulls 2009 Joburg into a strange parallel with 1700s France—whether it is a pre-Revolutionary parallel remains to be seen. While donna's Joburg version is more dusty and less Romantic, its unpredictability and social life bring it closer to a remembering that is also an *existing*; an art historical reference enlivened by relation beyond the swing's frame.



donna Kukama, *The Swing (after after Fragonard)*, 2009. Courtesy of blank projects.

Kukama's memorial chapter, *Chapter Q: Dem Short-Short Falls* (2017–18) appears projected across two channels displayed adjacently and reflected-distorted in the shiny silvery floor.

Donna, shot both from the side and in faraway bird's eye view, wears white overalls and silver space boots. She slowly traverses a wet, muddy plain, treading carefully over very long, laid out pieces of what looks like white paper. Her walk remembers (and exists) across a traumatised site; it gradually muddies her. She's in the Netherlands, moving through a park in the Bijlmer neighbourhood, where an Israeli cargo plane tragically crashed into a residential high rise building on its way to Occupied Palestine in 1992. As well as the on-board crew of four, at least thirty-nine people living in the building were killed, including many immigrants, likely some from the South American former Dutch colony Suriname, as well as Ghana. Donna's 'long walk' is across former Bijlmerpark, now renamed Nelson Mandela Park, a transformation play so familiar to this side of the world that it has almost surpassed tiresomeness. Her dealings are muddy and slow, a questioning meditation on this chaotic confluence of tragic death, traumatised nationalisms, and histories held captive by neoliberal imaginaries.



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I keep coming back to the handout to reread donna's titles: they are poetry that parallels, rather than explains, her intuitive dances with history. "we do not expect you to believe in us" is gutspeak on canvas, in "black acrylic, faithlessness, graphite, solid truth and liquid chalk."

We do not expect you to believe in us... Perhaps *Ways-of-Remembering-Existing* does not require belief? Rather, it wants us to join in on its history-existentialism, to get that guts-down feeling that donna's creeping makes more sense than the rotten colonial and neoliberal memory structures we live amongst.