



Kapwani Kiwanga, *Sisal #1*, 2021, sisal fiber on mild steel oval rings, dimensions variable.

Kapwani Kiwanga

GOODMAN GALLERY | LONDON

Both meanings of the word *plot*—a storyline and a parcel of land—overlapped in Kapwani Kiwanga's complex exhibition "Cache." Fifty years ago, Jamaican writer Sylvia Wynter brilliantly drew a connection between the two disparate meanings: Both kinds of plots, Wynter observed, were transformed by the founding of a market economy. Small single-family holdings that connected humans to the earth through cultivation, ancestry, and folklore vanished with the rise of vast, single-crop, labor-intensive estates. Around the same time, the novel innovated literary narratives centering on protagonists freed from the constrictions of nature and ancient truths, able to weave individualized stories that, as Wynter said, made "the world safe for the market economy."

Colonial legacies connected to both "plots"—histories of displaced plants as well as forgotten life stories and myths—were explored in this formidable exhibition of sculptures, textiles, and ceramic-based wall works. Dominating the ground-floor gallery was *Sisal #1*, 2021: a tall and thin hanging sculpture created from yards upon yards of extraordinary white-gold threads. *Sisal #1* prompts wildly disparate fantasy associations—with everything from unicorn tails to angel hair, from albino yeti to the platinum locks of *Baywatch* or *Game of Thrones*. Sisal is a natural fiber derived from the *Agave sisalana* plant that dominates the agriculture of Tanzania. But when the Canadian-born Paris-based artist visited the East African country, she learned that this plant, native to Mexico, had been introduced to the Tanga landscape by German colonizers around 1891. Tanzania's eventual dependence on this monocrop proved catastrophic to the newly independent nation when the bottom fell out of the sisal market after the 1960s. Similarly hollow and seemingly open-bottomed, and with an elongated window on one side, the hollow and columnar *Sisal #1* seems a hiding place for a partially concealed person, combining two meanings for *cache*: in English a stored-up treasure (the colonizers' golden cash crop), and in French the verb *hide*. "Secretive histories can be found in the *plots*," scholar Katherine McKittrick has written in reference to Wynter's overlap of the two meanings of *plot*, adding the potential for both to hide secrets.

Installed downstairs were geometric fabric works in black, white, and gray: *Triangulation: 1, 2, and 3*, all 2021, which refer to the coded patterns stitched into quilts that hung from windows along the Underground Railroad, allegedly giving directions to safe houses. Again, evocative material objects address multiple entwined subjects: plantations and slavery, forms of concealment, individuals attempting to produce their own narratives. On the opposite wall hung *The worlds we tell: Nii Gaa, Xevioso, and Dojity and Micha*, three small works, all 2021, created from various earthy materials: clay, wood, and metal. Formed of complex designs, varied textures (bubbled, glossy, polished, in relief), and sumptuous glazes and embroideries in blue, green, gold, black, and red, they refer to creation myths from Africa, Asia, and South America. Appearing as both symbolic illustrations (vertically oriented) and fertile patches of earth (horizontal aerial views), these bright and imaginative compositions contrasted with *Semence*, 2020, the flat, enormous, colorless sculpture at the center of the downstairs gallery, which came across as a sprawling mono plantation pushing vibrant plots to the margins. A roughly sixteen-by-sixteen-foot grid of tiny piles of ceramic rice grains, *Semence* refers to the minuscule provisions of rice that enslaved people supposedly hid in their clothing or braided into their hair. Allegedly, African women secretly preserved these meager supplies in the event they escaped capture and could again cultivate land for themselves and determine their own stories.

Before turning to art, Kiwanga studied anthropology, among other disciplines. Perhaps the two floors of “Cache” rehearsed anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss’s cultural dichotomy between “raw” (unprocessed vegetation upstairs) and “cooked” (fired ceramic downstairs). But Kiwanga plainly rejects simplistic binaries. Similar to the rich surfaces of *The worlds we tell*, contrasting forces (horizontal/vertical, past/present, earth/sky) magically intersect throughout to tell unresolved, astonishing tales.

— Gilda Williams