

Priscilla Kennedy

A Thousand Disguises

Curated by Tracy Naa Koshie Thompson

1st September – 13th October 2023, Gallery I, Accra



Priscilla Kennedy, 'Gliding out of Space', 2023, 52 inches x 66 inches 132cm x 168cm, Velvet cut outs with sequins and beads embroidered on Kente. Image courtesy of the artist and Gallery 1957.

Gallery 1957 is delighted to present 'A Thousand Disguises', a new solo exhibition by Priscilla Kennedy curated by Tracy Naa Koshie Thompson. The gallery was proud to present Kennedy as the 2022 recipient of the Yaa Asantewaa Women's Art Prize.

It is also of utmost importance to recognize the unique nuances of gender issues across cultures, avoiding the tendency to generalize experiences worldwide. This is especially evident when examining the diverse textile traditions found in Ghana. While Western textile traditions, such as weaving and needlework, historically served as tools for domesticating women until the Women's Liberation Movements of the 1970s, the situation differs significantly in Ghana. In Ghana, the intricate weaving traditions, exemplified by the renowned Kente weaving among the Akan people, predominantly involve men as weavers. This stands in contrast to the weaving practices in the Northern part of Ghana, where women take the lead in weaving smocks. These contrasting dynamics within Ghana's textile traditions highlight the complexity and diversity of gender roles within specific cultural contexts. By acknowledging these distinctions, we can appreciate the richness of Ghanaian textile heritage while challenging any assumptions about gender roles that may be based solely on Western experiences. *Weaving and textile culture throughout history has been used as a means of expression and resistance.*

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From the significance of the traditional smock as a sign of resistance and pan-Africanist pride; to the cultural resistance of indigenous Quiche Mayan women against colonial forced assimilation using “traje” cloth; to Palestinian Thobes (traditional embroidered dresses) and “tatreez” weaving becoming a symbol of displacement and resistance, carrying with them a part of their home; and inversely, the rejection and burning of women head scarfs in Iran against the oppressive religious regime in Iran. This nuanced understanding allows us to engage in meaningful cross-cultural dialogues and promotes a more inclusive portrayal of gender dynamics within different societies. Priscilla Kennedy approaches her work with such complexity as she weaves different traditions and forms together in order to complicate, disguise, knot and twist how we look at things linearly, especially the body of women in history and art.

Now what happens in retailoring traditional adornments to talk of the politics of women and their bodies? Priscilla Kennedy expands the ways our bodies are knitted with the bodies of not only fabrics, but geological and historical maps, mythical creatures, data, fables, light etc; in transforming complex notions of identity; requiring us to look beyond the obvious. Priscilla Kennedy’s work requires an anamorphic gaze or a shift in perspective, just like the iridescence of velvet in her work: Black is not necessarily black, the female nude is not just a nude, and the human is not just human. Priscilla Kennedy in this exhibition plays with the illusive nature of things just like the materials she employs in her works and the camouflaging character of her muse - the octopus.

For Priscilla Kennedy in her recent works, the nude is a body to be distorted or mutated than to be constricted within what is only human. This has birthed the monstrosity of hybrids with animals and otherworldliness that informs her exploration of the female body as a space for creative exploration and strange imaginations. Even in the process of the photoshoots with female models, she asks how to posture like that of a wall gecko or an octopus (-challenging the traditional postures expected from models in the commercial beauty industry). The nude in Priscilla Kennedy’s recent work is to move a step further from the human, though with some parts retained. To be further from ‘human’, which is reiterated in this text, is already explored in clothing and fashion: like mystical Zangbeto dancers in their straw costumes, Chiwara masks, Lil Nas X’s beaded skin at the 2023 Met Gala, Martin Margiela’s monster masks, or Rei Kawakubo deconstructive fashion which distorts the body other than elevating it to the ideal.

This exhibition has tentacles and pseudomorphs, just like the octopus which is Priscilla Kennedy’s artistic muse. The fascinating thing about pseudomorphs also in mineralogy, is like a mineral that has stolen the appearance of another mineral by taking its shape, as it replaces it. There are so many disguises with the materials Priscilla Kennedy explores in this exhibition. In this exhibition, she explores her new experiments with light installations that project on the bodies of her works and the bodies of her audiences; together with florescent bodies lying in darkness like bioluminescent squids in the dark seas, as she weaves parts of her works with florescent threads. She explores these new installations that diffuse the sense of bodies as just physical and concrete to that which is luminous and fluid. Light permeates boundaries and creates interesting disguises altering our appearances, - in the way we see and perceive things though be it illusory and also real. She projects her drawings of other bodies on us, throwing our spectating gaze back at us by including our bodies as we walk right into her light installation. Like a pseudomorph decoy, the light installation features drawings that mimic the appearance of tentacles but are from different things. Priscilla Kennedy interweaves her personal data routes of her production into these tentacles. Mapping her route to Bonwire where she sources her fabrics, to Makola Market, Kejetia bead market, and her studio routine. Her works then become embodiments and fragments of herself, tracing her paths through which these works are birthed.

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This exhibition is of multiple disguises, an iridescence to complicate the gaze of the spectator. Moving around the exhibition space, the audience can take multiple perspectives on the works, which utilize various forms of iridescent materials, from velvet to sequins. When you move at certain angles, the velvet bodies appear darker; where darker does not mean literal black bodies, as they appear to be but are not. Sequins with their reflective and tactile surfaces bring to mind the mythical scales of mermaids, relating to worlds and fictions beyond the human. Sequins morphing through interesting histories: from their religious use in Peru as shiny disks to ward off evil spirits, to the sparkling burial garments of Tutankhamen, to becoming popular culture emblems for rock stars and popular icons. All these are the complexities which Priscilla Kennedy explores in this body of exhibition. She invites us not only to be strangers and spectators of viewing female nudes and black bodies in objectifying pleasure. Priscilla Kennedy wants us to be challenged in our perceptions of the body, as interwoven with things human and non-human. With the body as mutable, immersible, and fluid; reflecting on the intricate relationships with fabrics, the body and its complex materiality and histories.

- Extract from curatorial text by Tracy Naa Koshie Thompson

About the Artist

Priscilla Kennedy

(b.1994, Kumasi. Lives and works in Ghana)

Born in 1994, Priscilla Kennedy lives and works in Kumasi. She is a member of the blaxTARLINES KUMASI collective and is presently pursuing her MFA at the Department of Painting and Sculpture, KNUST-Kumasi, Ghana. She holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the same institution. Notably, she won the esteemed First Merit Award in the Barclays L'atelier Art competition in South Africa and was honoured as the recipient of the 2022 Yaa Asantewaa Art Prize. With a multidisciplinary approach, Kennedy intricately weaves connections between body, race, sexuality, and fictional histories of objects with hybrid life forms. Her artistic practice encompasses diverse media, such as painting, tapestry, and light. These result in a tentacular deconstruction of the female body, including her own, as a multi-site for engaging conversation. Kennedy was the 2022 recipient of the Yaa Asantewaa Art Prize.

About Gallery 1957

Gallery 1957 is a contemporary art gallery with spaces across Accra, Ghana and London, UK.

It dedicates its programme to spearheading international exchanges between art practices from these communities and the rest of the world, presenting artists who interrogate concepts of belonging and identity, cultural exchange, and social history beyond Western narratives.

Launched by Marwan Zakhem in 2016 on Ghanaian Independence Day, Gallery 1957 has since expanded across three gallery spaces in Accra. Originally set up to promote Ghana and West Africa's presence in the arts scene, it now encompasses the Global South and its diaspora. Gallery 1957's London space opened in October 2020, providing a further platform for artists to build dialogues with its growing network of international collaborators.

Gallery 1957 presents exhibitions, installations, and performances by celebrated artists, fostering connections between local and international audiences. The Gallery's global gallery partnerships and ongoing artist residency program have attracted numerous international artists and arts professionals to Ghana. The Gallery's annual Cultural Week in September serves as a platform for encouraging deeper engagement with Ghana's vibrant contemporary art scene.

In 2021, Gallery 1957 launched the Yaa Asantewaa Art Prize for female Ghanaian artists, the first ever dedicated art prize of its kind. The prize aims to further strengthen the gallery's commitment to supporting and promoting emerging and established artists.

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Gallery 1957's work expands beyond the gallery walls through a public programme that includes local and international art fairs, talks, off-site projects, and site-specific installations as well as the publication of books and catalogues – continuously supporting cultural initiatives in Ghana, Africa and beyond.

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Title: A Thousand Disguises
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Opening Reception: - 6pm-9pm
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