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SORANA MUNSYA

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Interview by Ezra Babski



Soñ Gweha, 'Des Sifous pour les Bayan-Sellam', 2021, cera...

STORIES WITHOUT CO-ORDINATES

Last December, 'The Last Place They Thought Of' opened in Kunsthall Mechelen, the city's new flagship contemporary art centre that was inaugurated in late 2023. The exhibition seeks to explore notions of territory and space from the perspective of Black women and non-binary artists, foregrounding stories of Black experience that challenge traditional historio-geographic narratives. Curator Sorana Munsysya sheds light on the vision behind the ambitious group show.

(Ezra Babski) When did you first get the idea to make 'The Last Place They Thought Of'?

(Sorana Munsysya) Like many of my curatorial projects, this exhibition was born not only from my readings but also from a visceral need that has accompanied me ever since I started to think about the world from a situated perspective. It follows logically from the projects I have undertaken in recent years, which address questions intimately tied to Black existence. This exhibition project is another attempt for me to develop a language – an attempt grounded in Black thought and literature, but one that seeks to give form to what I sometimes consider unspeakable because it is so deeply linked to lived experiences.

Since curating Michèle Magma's solo exhibition at Kunsthall Extra City in 2021, I have been deeply interested in the question of spaces and Black diasporic practices, particularly in Europe. My subsequent projects have consistently grappled with the possibility of a language while coming to terms with silence and the unspeakable. 'The Last Place They Thought Of' reinforces these concerns by raising the question of society's acknowledgment of the perspectives and experiences that Black women and Black non-binary people bring to the territories they navigate. It also explores how this recognition could reshape the world.

'The Last Place They Thought Of', through 2 March 2025, Kunsthall Mechelen, mechelen.be, with work by Lungiswa Gqunta, Soñ Gweha, Gaëlle Choisine, Godelive Kasangati, Lou Cocody-Valentino, Michèle Magma, Mónica de Miranda, Zohra Opoku, MIMI Green, melissandre varin and Ophélie Mac coco

As with other of your recent projects, the title of the exhibition at Kunsthall Mechelen is taken from a text, in this case Katherine McKittrick's book *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (2006). It refers to a passage from Harriet Jacobs's autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, in which Jacobs describes concealing herself in a garret in the roof of her grandmother's house for seven years to escape the man enslaving her. The hiding place, due to its proximity to the house of her pursuers, would be 'the last place they thought of', Jacobs writes. Why choose this line as the title of the exhibition?

I pay close attention to the titles I choose for my exhibition projects. It's true that for my recent projects I have often turned to Black literature to help me articulate what I was trying to achieve with the artists involved. I believe this is closely tied to the process I'm currently engaged in – the creation of a language.

Black Studies encompasses a vast body of knowledge, an entire artistic and intellectual library produced by thinkers from the Black world. I draw on this library as part of the study of Blackness, what Fred Moten refers to as Black Study. At the heart of Black Study are practices of Black life and creation born within a society that rejects Blackness.

'The Last Place They Thought Of' clearly references the story of Harriet Jacobs and the experience of confinement – here understood as the place assigned to someone by society – that gives rise to a practice of life, an alternative vision. For Jacobs, the place of thought and confinement is specifically named. In the context of the exhibition, 'the last place they thought of' refers to something more indeterminate, a 'somewhere' between margin and centre. Yet this less definable place, as well as the fluid practices it encompasses, is at the same time very precise: 'the last place they thought of' ultimately refers to the Black body, more specifically the Black female body. On a deeper level, it refers to the spaces made possible by the very existence of Black women in this society.

All participants in this project are Black female and Black non-binary artists who, from their different positions and identities, bring forth a body of knowledge that is essential to understanding the spaces they navigate. While their reflections inevitably include elements that might be considered subjective, their work predominantly offers undervalued knowledge when it comes to mapping the world's geographic lines.



Installation view 'The Last Place They Thought Of', 2024–25, Kunsthall Mechelen, with 'Give Me Back My Black Dolls' by Zohra Opoku, photo Lavinia Wouters

Although the concept of opacity was developed by Édouard Glissant, a Martinican philosopher and poet, and fugitivity has mainly been associated with Anglophone spaces, these concepts are important because they articulate certain aspects of Black existence in a transcontinental way.

Can you explain how a Black conceptualisation of geography – as theorised, for example, by Katherine McKittrick – might differ from traditional geography? How do some of the artistic practices represented in the exhibition challenge or resist the latter?

Traditional geography largely assumes that space can be fully understood and measured through geometric concepts, particularly the Cartesian coordinate system.

Critics have challenged this assumption, pointing out that such a view of 'transparent space' overlooks the fact that not all spaces are knowable – some are hidden or secret, or can even be designed as traps. Black geographies, in contrast, operate both within and beyond the boundaries of traditional geography, drawing on the unique experiences and knowledge of Black social life to reveal the shortcomings of this 'transparent' perspective.

As McKittrick highlights, traditional geography is complicit in marginalising difference by systematically obscuring certain physical and social spaces. This framework insists on confining Blackness to predetermined 'places,' thereby diminishing Black ways of knowing and understanding their own spatial realities. In response, Black geography emerges as a critical tool to challenge this landscape of domination, using lived experiences to expose and contest struggles over social space.

For example, the installation by artist Soñ Gweha, *Des safous pour les Bayam-Sellams*, invites reflection on the fleeting presence of African women traders in Château Rouge (an African neighbourhood in Paris). Using the safou – a fruit predominantly consumed in Central Africa and by Central African diaspora – the artist evokes the memory of Cameroonian women who participated in the anti-colonial revolution of their country in the 1950s and 60s. By connecting Château Rouge to the anti-colonial struggle, the artist reminds us, through a soundscape, of African revolutionary songs and the radical practices of Angolan filmmaker Sarah Maldoror.

Additionally, Gweha incorporates the 'reverse technique' in the creation of her soundscapes, which involves playing a sound backward. This approach allows her to explore how rewinding, shifting perspectives or shifting one's position in space can create new meanings and alternative visions.

Opacity and fugitivity are recurring themes in your curatorial work. Why are these concepts important for you, and how do they relate to each other?

As I mentioned earlier, what interests me is the practice of Blackness. I consider opacity and fugitivity to be practices of Blackness. Although the concept of opacity was developed by Édouard Glissant, a Martinican philosopher and poet, and fugitivity has mainly been associated with Anglophone spaces, these concepts are important because they articulate certain aspects of Black existence in a transcontinental way. This is not to say that all Black lives are the same – whether in Europe, the Caribbean or Africa. Rather, it is to acknowledge that there are histories that connect Black lives and practices of Blackness and that concepts can serve as the glue, offering a path toward a more general understanding.

For instance, the artist and intellectual Dénétem Touam Bona is working to 'translate' the concept of fugitivity for the Francophone world. Glissant's thinking around opacity, which he originally formulated as a right and as a form of resistance, interests me because I see it as a practice that can be applied to struggles that our own society faces today. It is a concept that starts from a rights-based claim but can also be understood as a practice of 'fleeing' and creating an alternative space – much like fugitivity.

These concepts exist within artistic practice and can take various forms. They raise questions about liminality – being inside versus being outside – the nature of fleeing and the implications of these dynamics in art practice and creative behaviour.

This exhibition is also a reflection on the spaces we occupy and what we make of them. In Belgium, there are very few spaces dedicated to Black culture and thought. There are initiatives, of course, but they rarely last long, for a variety of reasons.

Many of the works in the exhibition reference political struggles and relationships that mainly take place elsewhere, sometimes very far away. Were there challenges you faced as a curator in conveying the specific geographical, social and political contexts of these practices in the white-cube exhibition spaces of Kunsthal Mechelen?

The challenge is always to try and transform a defined space into a place that transcends its own boundaries. Obviously you're confronted with what the white cube represents in the art world. But this exhibition is also a reflection on the spaces we occupy and what we make of them. In Belgium, there are very few spaces dedicated to Black culture and thought. There are initiatives, of course, but they rarely last long, for a variety of reasons.

The challenge, then, is to appropriate the space and make it, as much as possible, a habitable place for the artists, their work and the ideas those works carry. The goal here was to create a space where the Black project – the development of connections between different Black realities – could take shape.

The inhabitation of the space was also made possible thanks to the intervention of Ophélie Mac coco (Fatsabbats), who created a salon, a space of conviviality where vinyl records, books, plants, armchairs, African textiles and incense coexist. This helps to announce what the space has become – or at least will be – until March 2, 2025. Despite this, did you sometimes worry about connecting with a local audience who might not be familiar with the historical realities and places that the works address? I truly trust in people's intelligence and curiosity, wherever they may be in the world. You also invited the Black Archive to organise film screenings alongside the exhibition. I believe they are doing urgent work, and if I can bring along initiatives like Black Archive or Ophélie Mac coco, I do so without hesitation. Again, this exhibition is also about the spaces we have access to and what we do with those spaces once we enter them. We bring with us those who share similar interests, who can contribute their unique perspectives, who are practising Black Study and who often lack opportunities or spaces to showcase their work.



Michèle Magema, 'Aux couleurs de nos souvenirs' (detail), 2021, for the exhibition 'Watermarks, silent traces' in Kunsthal Extra City, 2021, photo Léonard Pongo