

CASSI NAMODA

**THE ART OF SLOWING DOWN:
IN CONVERSATION WITH CURATOR
JESSICA BELL BROWN**





“WHEN SOMETHING BECOMES OBVIOUS IT IS NO LONGER INTERESTING.
AND THIS IS THE WAY THAT I THINK ABOUT MAKING WORK”

CASSI NAMODA Introduction XANTHE SOMERS Photography WAI LIN

Cassi Namoda's dreamlike figurative portraits explore everyday life in post-colonial Africa. She draws on mythology and memory to create deceptively simple scenes that quietly reveal complexity. Born in Mozambique, she originally studied cinematography then worked as a fashion designer before switching to painting in 2017. Since then, her star has risen with solo shows in London, Johannesburg, São Paulo and Los Angeles, and her work has been acquired by MACAAL in Marrakech, the Studio Museum in Harlem and the Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA).

Jessica Bell Brown, Curator for Contemporary Art at BMA, is a long-time supporter of Black women artists who engage with historic, social, political and environmental constructs. Her research focuses on the relationships between form, Black radicalism and abstraction in 20th-century African-American art. As Namoda's latest show opens, *Condemned To Perpetual Earth* at Goodman Gallery in Cape Town, they discuss beauty, romance and sensuality in and outside her work.

JESSICA BELL BROWN: Beauty is central to your work, especially when you think about finding beauty in different places, in different sets of imaginations or experiences...

CASSI NAMODA: There are so many different notions around beauty and it can often be misconstrued in the West. I am a product of them but I understand that there are many ways to approach these ideals. Beauty in the West is the search for youth, right? But I like to think about beauty in the sense of 'ugly' beauty. That for me is an interesting beauty, a beauty of nuance, and it is a realistic one. We have all been exposed to it, whether we are aware of it or not.

I try to find novelty. I search for new experiences and I am not afraid to find myself in totally unfamiliar places. I am moving to a new home in The Berkshires, Massachusetts, and the house I fell in love with is a 200-year-old building with wonky floors, crooked hallways and misshaped windows but to me, it is absolutely beautiful. Some people may disagree but I am attracted to that. Just like how someone could find crooked teeth beautiful but others may like them white and straight. My approach to living and how I enjoy my environments all filter into my practice as an artist. I think living in a very modern or polished setting would hinder my ability to see. It's hard to think about beauty outside of a sense of attainment, or what we want to look like, but when we look at beauty as a whole, we can use it as an approach to life.

JESSICA BELL BROWN: I am so glad you started there. Your work is so much about moving us away from Western idealism and notions of beauty or even what it is to be an antiquated painter or a painter of modern life. I think it is important to foreground that you are

very much a citizen of the world. Mozambique is central to your formation and you spent time in Haiti as well. This creates so many different frames for being and ways of seeing and these all find their way into your work. I was wondering if you wanted to say more about your upbringing?

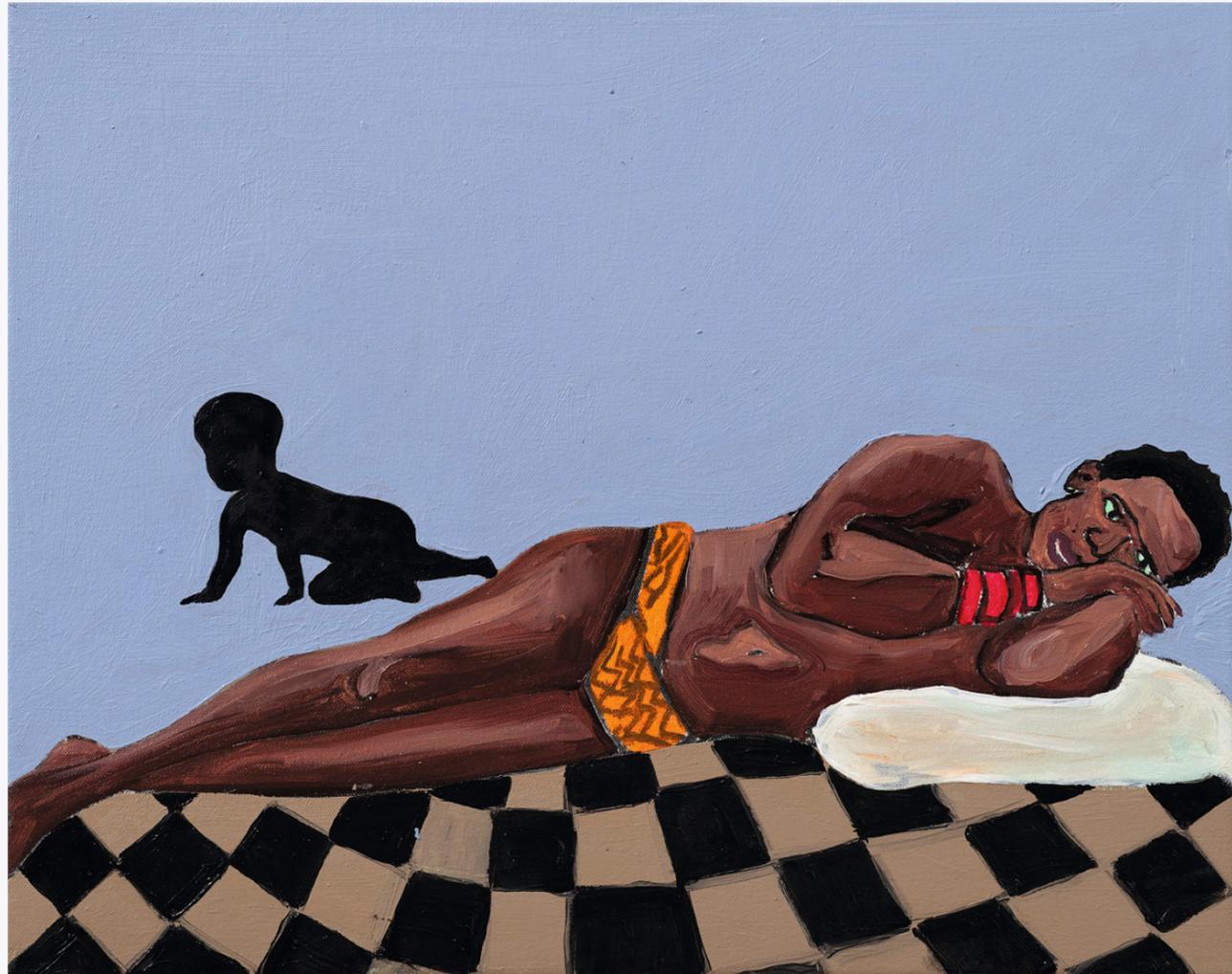
CASSI NAMODA: Yes, that is very poignant and really hits the nail on the head. I grew up with my father's philosophies. Even though my father was very western he was also very anti-Westernisation, so in some ways that was always at my family's core and this leaks into my practice.

Now when I think about the cities I've lived in – the longest being Kampala – they were all very dynamic and exposed me to a world of architecture. We engaged with urban landscapes every day. In some ways I think the unfamiliarity and over-stimulation created an early anxiety in me, but it also gave me a way to consider varied or alternative ways of being. In my twenties I spent time in Maputo in Mozambique, the city where I was born but had never lived, and it had vibrant Art Deco and Brutalist architecture but there were also dilapidated sidewalks on the coastline as well as the erasure of the colonial past and a stoic quality to the people.

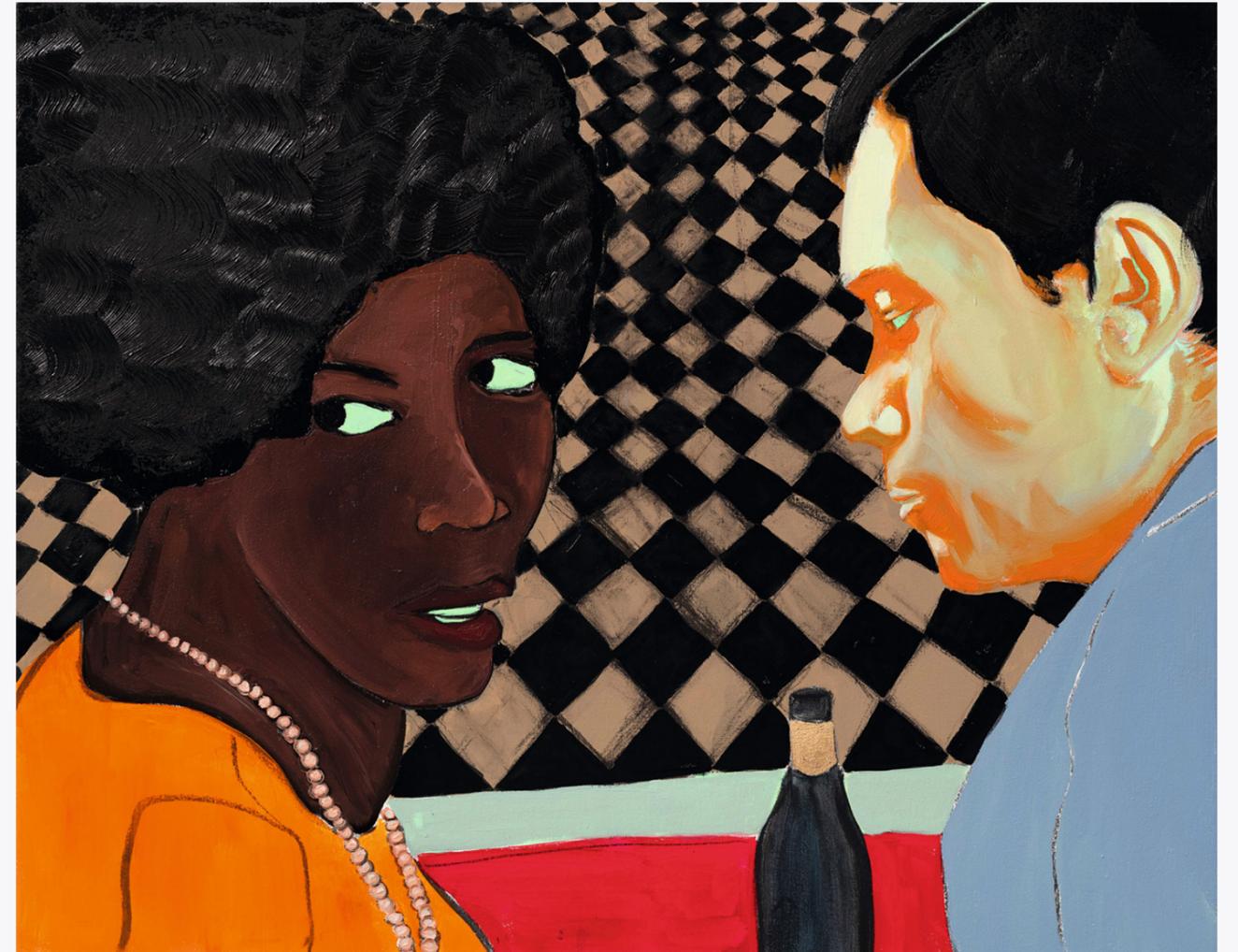
I think the constant unfamiliarity made me experience life in a cinematic way and this finds its way into my paintings. Prior to my last exhibition *Forgotten Limbs* (at François Ghebaly, Los Angeles in 2021), I had been dancing around the history of Mozambique. I would go off into themes of urban and rural storytelling but finally I decided I needed to speak about the war. I was born in a liberated country that soon after went into a state of civil war. In this show – I turned to abstraction and I think in beauty there also exists abstraction. When something becomes obvious it is no longer interesting. And this is the way that I think about making work. It must be pleasing; however there needs to be a sensitivity that creates curiosity, which produces appeal.

I feel very connected to colour and my expression of colour is very attached to my ideas of beauty. Through colour I develop a narrative and create duality within my works. We have this issue in society, when we allow the obvious to become the norm and we need to focus more on the subtleties and nuances that exist.

JESSICA BELL BROWN: Yes, I remember seeing a presentation of yours and I found the painting to be, as I always do, utterly beautiful but in the way that you describe as an 'ugly beauty', in an almost impossibly beautiful way. You bring attention and beauty to scenes that you might otherwise want to look away from such as unemployment, extreme poverty, decapitation and death, but again your masterful colour sensibility really slows us down and there is such a deep tenderness in the way you handle paint and colour relationships that make these scenes digestible.



At Rest, the Tragedies of a Fantasy II, 2022, courtesy Goodman Gallery.



Bar Texas 1973, 2022, courtesy Goodman Gallery.



Season of Judgement, 2022, courtesy Goodman Gallery.



Young wife, 2022, courtesy Goodman Gallery.

"I TRY TO CREATE SCENES ONE CAN VIEW WITHOUT LOOKING AWAY. I DO THIS BY CREATING CURIOSITY"

CASSI NAMODA: Yes, they are digestible. I try to create scenes one can view without having to look away. I do this by creating curiosity. In our society we take one look at an image, consume it, and we have already created a whole story around it. I try to slow this down by complicating the narrative.

I call my recurring female figures Maria. They usually appear in my urban landscapes. I also portray a recurring symbolism of a burnt sun or an orange moon. In one piece, a Maria is holding a glass of wine that is spilling from her hand as if she has lost her grasp on reality, or her state of being. When viewers engaged with this, they initially thought the figure had stabbed herself, but slowly realised that the image wasn't threatening, and it was wine spilling not blood. I try to remind people that it doesn't always have to be so obvious.

JESSICA BELL BROWN: Yes. I wonder if we may switch gears to talk about romance.

CASSI NAMODA: I love romance! Life must be very romantic.

JESSICA BELL BROWN: I am thinking about this video that you shared of a young couple on the beach dancing and it was striking to me, as it was very crude.

CASSI NAMODA: Yes, absolutely. It made people very uncomfortable but we have lost touch with our sensuality, which is the essence of life. And although *Forgotten Limbs* is an exhibition about retracing war in abstracted ways, at the centre of life there will always be love, there will always be romance and there will always be sensuality. Angola has had one of the longest-standing wars and I thought it was important to show this clip of a gyrating young couple at the Bay of Benguela, moving in a sensual way. Within the suffering and hardship of life, Black people are able to celebrate life with their bodies. We are body people!

JESSICA BELL BROWN: I love that so much. When I watched it, I thought about dirty dancing in middle or high school! They are moving in a way that is hyper-intuitive and with such expressivity. Dance allows one to move through all of life's complexities.

CASSI NAMODA: Dance is the vernacular language of Black culture. It's interesting because I think it can be seen as a threat when Black people use their bodies to engage in life. When I do explore video work or performance art there is always a physical expression or manifestation, which includes romance and sensuality.

In one of my previous exhibitions, I had Léopold Sédar Senghor (poet, cultural theorist and first president of Senegal) swimming laps in a pool at his home in Dakar. I wanted this to exude a sense of peace. There is mysticism around water in Black life, which I saw when I spent time in Benin in West Africa. There is a mythical creature named Mami Wata which people have a profound respect towards. I would jump off sand dunes and go swimming in the water and everyone thought I was insane. But to me being in the water is my

sense of peace. I found this video of Senghor taking off his jacket and slowly descending into his swimming pool and it is the most elegant and sophisticated depiction of beauty to me. Beauty is also self-care.

JESSICA BELL BROWN: Totally. How do you find renewal in and outside of your work? Where is the constant inspiration for you?

CASSI NAMODA: I think you have to be a soulful being. My show at Xavier Hufkens Gallery was called *Tropical Depression* and I made it about recently visiting my mother in northern Mozambique. I was really sick with Covid and the whole time I was with my family I was having this out-of-body-experience. I was feeling off, my mood was off, but everyone around me was also suffering. Life in the tropics can be very hard. Often it is made to seem exotic; this very happy place with mangoes, beaches and palm trees. But there is also depression. The whole time I was there there was a looming prospect of a cyclone, also known as the 'tropical depression'. It was as if everyone was crying around me and the sky was crying as well. European male painters were able to travel to these "exotic" places and claim their narrative and it is interesting for me to reclaim these histories, especially from the perspective of a female Black painter.

JESSICA BELL BROWN: There is something interesting in how your painted Marias exist in the post-colonial, Lusotropical world. There is a very particular engagement between white and Black bodies in your work and your Marias denote vulnerability but also a reclamation of power and beauty.

CASSI NAMODA: Exactly, it is a reclamation of power. *Tropical Depression* is one of the most feminine shows I have made. My new show with Goodman Gallery in Cape Town is called *Condemned To Perpetual Earth* and it is only female bodies. There is a divine sense of power but also a vulnerability, which is not usually depicted with female bodies of colour. I feel there needs to be more examples of female Black beauty which are not so didactic.

JESSICA BELL BROWN: Let's end with this question. How does fashion and design enter into your work? Arguably you are one of the most elegant and worldly people that I know. There is a very distinctive sensibility that you have, especially in how you hold your body, how you wear your hair and move around in the world.

CASSI NAMODA: They say that necessity is the mother of invention. When I lived in Lamu, life was very simple and I would make clothes with the local tailor. Donkeys roamed the dirty streets and there is a beauty there if you let it absorb you. I think it requires sensitivity and then design becomes natural, cooking is natural, wearing your hair is effortless and organic and that builds self-confidence, which is the ultimate form of beauty.

JESSICA BELL BROWN: That couldn't be better said.

Cassi Namoda's *Condemned To Perpetual Earth* is at Goodman Gallery, Cape Town, from 14 July to 3 September 2022

