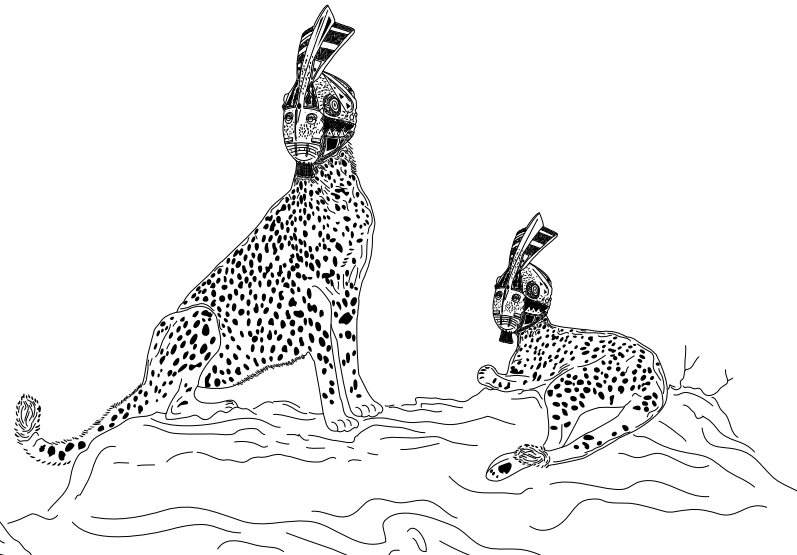
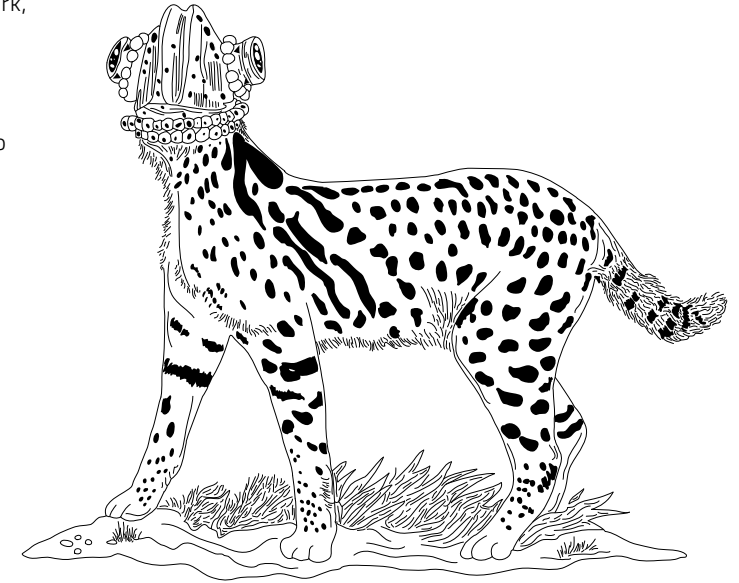
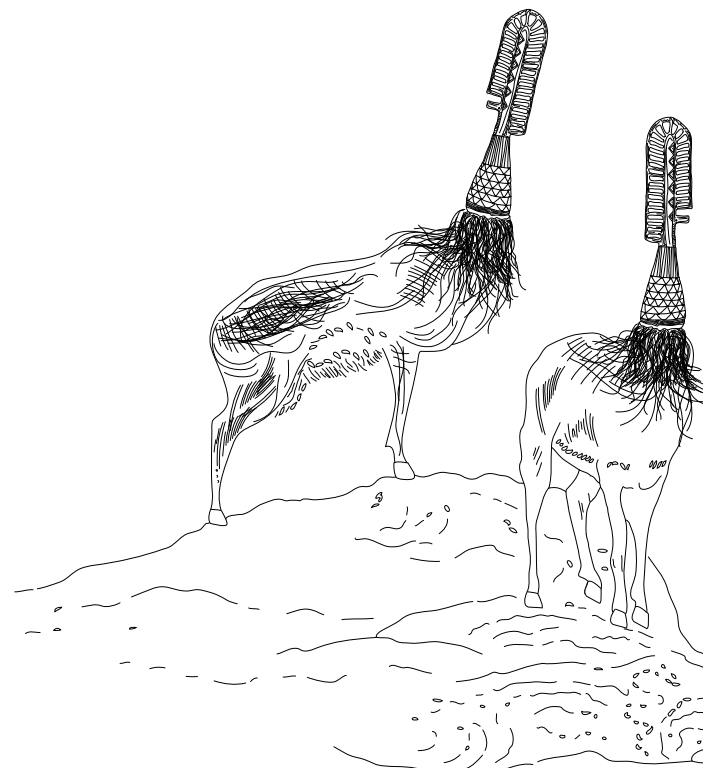
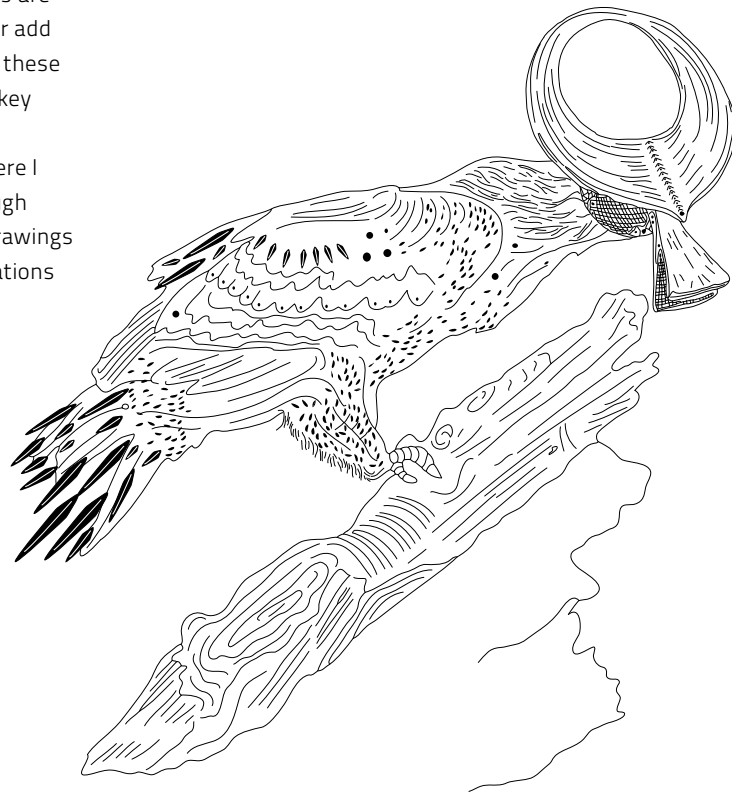
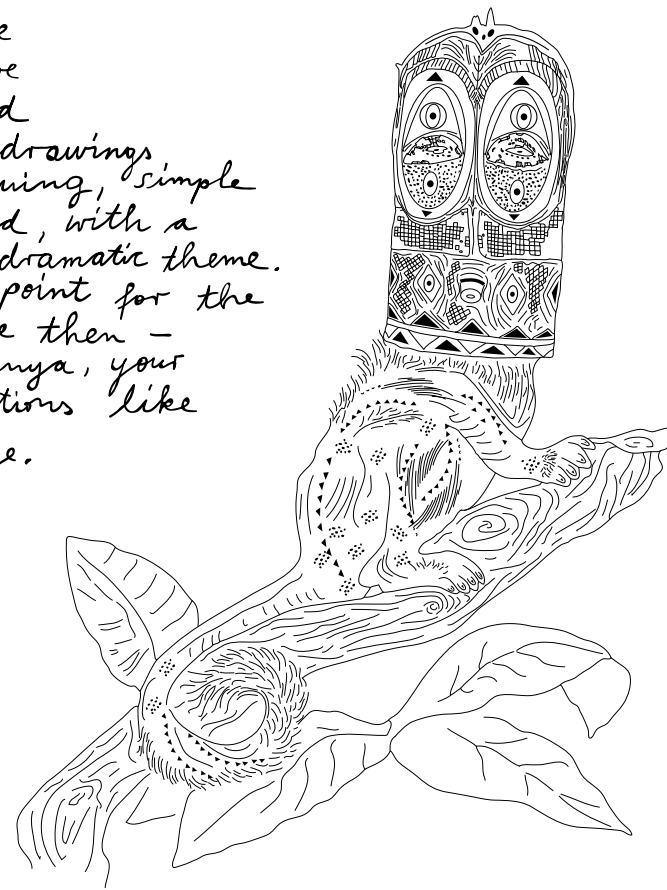


# INTERVIEW

ELISABETH BYRE invites BRENDAN FERNANDES 73

The series of drawings titled "Love Kill" of wild animals killing other wild animals were the first art works I saw from you, about five years ago, in New York. When FUKT invited me to invite an artist who draws, these drawings immediately came to mind. They are intriguing, simple and aesthetized, avoiding any bloodshed, with a very light touch or line - despite their dramatic theme. Looking back, I see them as a reference point for the projects you have been working on since then - related to your place of origin, Kenya, your ongoing investigations around crucial questions like cultural codes, identity and language.

You are right this drawing series is simple in its aesthetic form, but the action that it depicts is more complex and that is what I am interested in investigating. In many of my works I reference the "safari" and the idea of "the kill"; the action of one animal killing another. Through this work I am interested in the power dynamics that exists between predator and prey through survival and death. I am also making comparisons to how social structures act within hierarchies of power, i.e. capitalism. These works have now become short animations where I have taken my original sketches and created movement. They still act in a way like drawings, because the movement in them is so subtle. At times the viewer is unaware that the picture is in motion even though they are watching the image via a TV monitor. Behind the animations are sound tracks of pop love songs sung by me, and they further add to the ideas behind the work. The three songs that I sing in these animations are: Dolly Parton's "I Will Always Love You", Smokey Robinson's "You Really Got A Hold On Me", and Patsy Cline's "Crazy". This work has definitely affected newer works, where I am questioning notions of self-identity and belonging through hegemony, but it was also the first work where I used my drawings to create animations. I have since continued to make animations with my drawings.

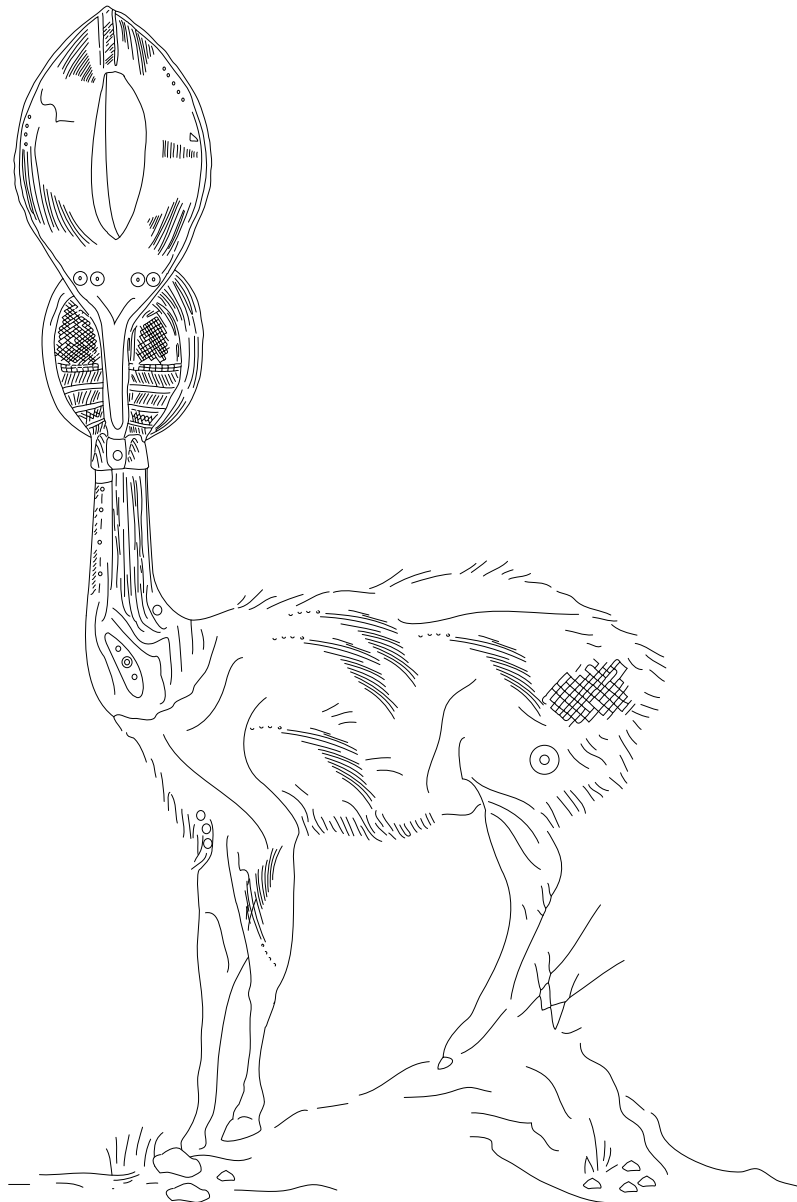
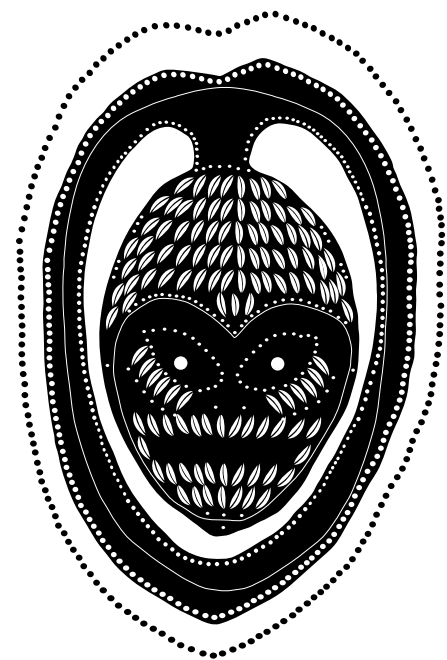


I would not describe you as an artist particularly occupied with the formal or conceptual questions of drawing; rather you are using drawing as an integrated part of your practice. How do you evaluate the "importance" of the drawing, as sketch, working tool and as an autonomous piece of work in itself?

I would agree, I don't have a practice that is invested in any particular form of art making or medium. I invest in my conceptual ideas and work thorough the material expression after. That said, drawing is a form that always plays a part within my process. Sometimes the drawings are not even evident in a completed work, but I always begin with a sketch. I use many forms to draw and most recently I have been using computer technology to make my renderings, which, as I have mentioned, become animations. Drawing in my practice is always a starting point; a way for me to begin, to sketch out ideas.

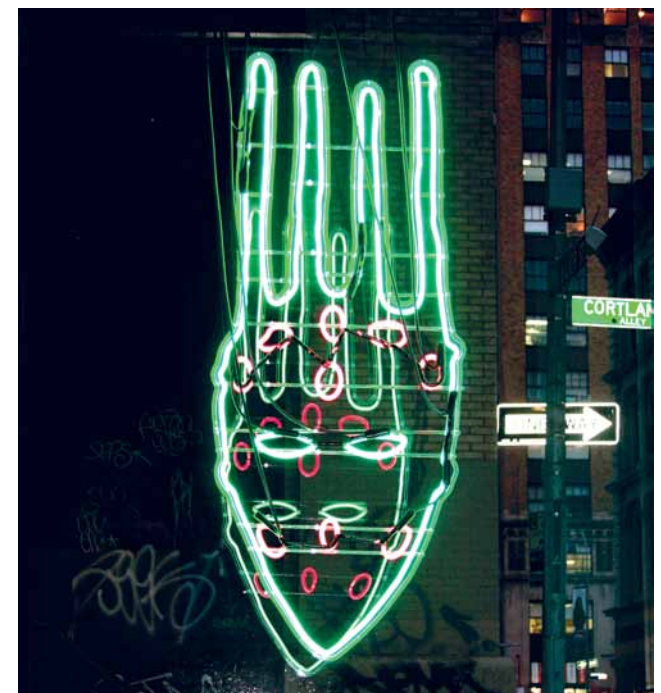
I see a close relationship between drawing and sculpture in your recent work on neon masks, which were a part of your exhibition "From His Hands", at Art in General in New York a few months ago. Here, the Western gaze and (mis)understanding of Africa is being explored, both referring to the conservation of mask as artifact and object of value, with the titles of the masks corresponding to the number given to the "original" at the Metropolitan Museum, and to the many street vendors selling African masks around the corner, down on Canal Street.

B: In this project I am investigating the notion of provenance and the history of ownership that does not exist for many African objects in museum collections. It is partly a question of authenticity, where I am making comparisons to museum artifacts and souvenir masks sold in a tourism industry. This work began with me making research trips to the Metropolitan Museum's African mask collection, where I would sketch the objects. I then used these drawings to create line renderings that I used to fabricate neon versions of the masks. The transformation from drawing into object is an important point of interest for me, as it speaks to an idea of change where things are perpetually in flux. When the neon versions hung in the windows of Art in General in New York, I loved how the lines pulsed and flashed, it is another form of a moving drawing.



The African mask as artifact, symbolic figure and iconic representation reoccurs in several of your projects, as in the series "Anomalia" where wild animals are wearing masks. How do you see the difficult question of ethnicity, so to speak, through the mask?

B: In "Anomalia" I have drawn images in Illustrator of African animals from the pages of National Geographic, I have then replaced the animal heads with drawings of African masks and/or objects. I like the way that this project plays with hybridity as the animals are created from various sources. They become exotic creatures and play within the unknown. Since they can not be classified, they can exist as being prehistoric or even alien. Through this work I am making a connection to the ways that Africa is still stereotyped as a place where the uncivilized and primitive exist. By using the masks as a trope of the exotic, I am questioning the things we come to understand about a place through myth and story. To further think about hybridity in this project, the drawings are made by computer but the line work mimics the gesture of being hand made. I like the dualities that exist in this series.





In your series of animations titled "Dada Africa", you are combining spoken word that has lost its original meaning, with drawings of African masks. Why did you choose to animate and breathe life into these drawings?

My recent work has come to deal with language and how it becomes codified, where it creates barriers that allow for understanding within specific groups and communities. In particular I am investigating how language can be altered and forgotten through the process of migration. In this work I am referencing Dada and the poetic works of Hugo Ball. I am interested in altering language to become something that is seemingly nonsensical but still carrying meaning. In this work I have created animations from drawings of African masks. Each mask pulses in a rhythmic score while a sound track plays behind. The sound track is a spoken word soliloquy about spiritual takeover by an apparition an apparition. This investigation is being explored through Voodoo, and the ways that this religion is not fully understood and thus perceived with apprehension and fear. By animating my mask drawings, they directly become characters that communicate with my viewers about the aforementioned ideas, while engaging them aesthetically.

