

# **Claudia Tennant**

## ***Waking The Dead***

### **Curated by Karin Schlageter**

Petite Galerie of the Cité internationale des arts  
From January 21st to February 20th, 2021

Claudia Tennant's exhibition *Waking The Dead* presents a series of original mixed media works on paper and canvas. In this series, Claudia Tennant addresses Africa's empires across thousands of years of history and courageously confronts her socio-political and cultural heritage as a white South African.

A homogenous set of works on paper and several canvases of imposing dimensions are presented in the Petite Galerie. The 50 x 65 cm sheets of paper display Claudia Tennant's multi-layered practice, in which she superposes multiple layers of paint, drawings, pasted photocopied texts, stitching and fabric remnants. Her works teem with details and, to get its bearings, one's gaze is first drawn to the recurrent elements of painted text. Proper nouns immediately catch the eye, as do the names of international museums, concepts and artworks represented schematically. The ensemble constitutes a dense network of reference points, like a multitude of landmarks on a map, which seems to map out a new vision of the mutilated African empires of years gone by. Here, countless layers of time seem entangled. History is a vast weave that stretches in all directions and whose entanglement consists of an infinite number of individual trajectories woven together.

There is a double movement that operates in Claudia Tennant's paintings: folding and unfolding. The gestures of collage and layering make elements that do not initially belong to the same space-time that touch and even cover each other. Simultaneously, the attempts to open, unfold and untangle the threads of history make it possible in places to make the grid visible and reveal hidden faces. The presence of textile fragments is recurrent: glued onto the paintings, they end up spilling over onto the walls. These links of wool and cotton create a network between the paintings, weaving them together. The knitted stitches are here loosened, making the structure legible, in an attempt by the artist to see more clearly; to unravel the bag of knots of the history of imperialism in Africa - whether it be colonialism originating from Europe or the fruit of imperialist desire emerging from the continent itself.

These entangled threads are reminiscent of Donna Haraway's beloved string figures for the way they intertwine ideas, shapes and people. They link the threads of thought and action, hands and brains: "These string figures are *thinking* as well as *making* practices, pedagogical practices and cosmological performances. [It is] a risky proposition in relentless historical relational contingency. And these contingencies include abundant histories of conquest, resistance, recuperation, and resurgence." (D. Haraway, *Staying with the trouble*, Duke University Press, 2016, p. 14).

In the attempt to decipher this problematic legacy, the deeper you dig, the more you try to see clearly, and the more everything seems obscure and tangled. In trying to put the puzzle back together from the scattered fragments, in trying to connect the different elements, the

divergent interests, the hope of obtaining a global vision always seems to be pushed back, prevented. However, the need to confront embarrassing legacies is obvious. At this point, we will take up the concept of *difficult heritage* forged by sociologist Sharon Macdonald: "that is, a past that is recognised as meaningful in the present but that is also contested and awkward for public reconciliation with a positive, self-affirming contemporary identity. 'Difficult heritage' may also be troublesome because it threatens to break through into the present in disruptive ways, opening up social divisions, perhaps by playing into imagined, even nightmarish, futures." (S. Macdonald, *Difficult Heritage. Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond*, Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2010, p. 10).

Indeed, what could be more embarrassing than this cohort of objects and sculptures that make up the bulk of major American and European archaeological museums' collections? The schematic representations of these looted works, torn from their original context, which Claudia Tennant incorporates into her paintings, draw the contours of a community of sculptures scattered around the globe. As we drift off from the title of the exhibition, we can dream and imagine that, like the Hollywood saga *The Night at the Museum*, busts of kings and queens, votive statuettes, mythological animals could suddenly come to life. And, who knows, the cohort of zombie artworks might even venture to claim their restitution. It is never harmless to risk waking the dead - they have a lot to tell us.

Karin Schlageter

