



Tales by Women

2 December 2023 - 12 January 2024, in Douala, Cameroon

DOUALA, 29 November 2023 – Bwo gallery is pleased to present *Tales by Women*, a group exhibition featuring the works of Zandile Tshabalala, Ayanfe Olarinde, Wilfried Mbida and Laura Tolen. Swiss-Cameroonian art historian and curator Bansoa Sigam contributed to the exhibition with an essay.



Zandile Tshabalala, *Homebody: bathtub serenity*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Bwo.

Essay – *Tales by Women* provides access into the dignified intimacy of women's spaces through the artistic lens of four emerging visual artists from across Africa. The group show holds space for a new generation of underrepresented artists, mastering and reappropriating artistic techniques to share their own stories. **Zandile Tshabalala, Ayanfe Olarinde, Laura Tolen, and Wilfried Mbida** all contribute with their distinct and unique figuration and abstraction styles to transforming the art scene, creating new visual narratives.

Curated with the objective of recentering black women's lives, voices and perspectives, the exhibition answers the question: what emerges when black women share their stories on canvas? In *Tales By Women*, the four artists and their thought-provoking works tell in a surrealist, expressionist or cubist way, unexpected tales of memory, dignity and intimacy, anchored in their lived experiences.

Laura Tolen centers her work around transgenerational memories, and narrative reappropriation. Exploring memory through self-portraiture she blurs the lines of time and identity. In the exhibited works she represents herself as a child or wearing her mother's clothes, adopting her posture. Creating transient spaces where elements of reality and fiction collide, she also depicts different versions of herself, here gathered around a single-piece chest game in a surrealist way. Her play on multiplicity and transparency, along with her chromatic use of ink and watercolor brings to life the temporal and identity layers coexisting in a single frame. Dynamic yet infused with a sense of pensive quietness, Laura Tolen's enigmatic works question the viewer on their own relationship to time, space and memory.



Working on intimacy, **Wilfried Mbida's** artistic research emphasizes home interiors. "Going into people's homes is intimate", she notes, "and representing their daily lives and environment is not frequent in the Cameroonian context". Her acute depiction of interior spaces transcends borders however, and she portrays wherever she senses the right place, the right moment, the right feeling. In this show her three paintings, capturing scenes in Cameroon and Ivory coast, display a common spatial agencement of the subjects she came across. All looking through the windows, in Grand Bassam or Bamendjou, they gaze into the light, confronted to the spatial constraints and resounding silence. She captured these scenes regardless of the geographical location, only drawn to the felt energy of the place, to the nostalgic feeling that will wake the viewer to a moment of remembrance.

Zandile Tshabalala's work concentrates on representation and black women figuration, celebrating their existence in a state of rest. Mainly utilizing self-portraiture, she speaks of relations, both to the social fabric and to the self. The two acrylic paintings in the exhibition are part of her series "Homebody", giving us a glimpse into her intimate space, in her places of reflection, selfcare and solitude: the bedroom and the bathroom. She sheds light on mundane home activities going somewhat countercurrent to the expectations placed on black women given the intersectional burdens they face. Resting is in her art a form of resistance, the depiction of what she calls a dreamscape that remains often unattainable for many due to societal pressures and the undervaluation of black women's labor. Through her portraits celebrating selfcare, beauty and sensuality, and serving as windows to possibilities, she contributes to reshaping the prevailing narrative.

Mixed-media artist, **Ayanfe Olarinde** uses an experimental approach to break out of the rigidity of both social norms and artistic canons. Her collages, textural and chromatic patchworks, form eccentric cubic-like figures engaged in diverse activities. In the two pieces presented, she depicts commoners in their daily urban lives in Johannesburg. Mesmerized by the crowd coming together at the Kwai Mai Mai food festival, where women reign supreme as the key organizers and main attendants, she created scenes full of detailed references to South African popular culture. With architectural elements, sports emblems, billboards and street flyers, she binds together the fragments she picked up from a residency in Johannesburg with her unique creative glue.

Together, the four artists born in the 1990s give us a fresh take on identity, resistance, home making, memory and women's agency. From oil pastels to acrylic and watercolor, from drawing to collage, they portray themselves or the people they encounter, capturing intimate moments inside or outside the home. Drawing inspiration from previous generations and artistic movements, and sometimes creating their own, they freely use fictional and realistic elements to convey lived experiences, with much vulnerability.

Communing together in this group exhibition from their unique perspective, they show that different voices can tell diverse yet similar, Tales by Women.

Bansoa Sigam is a curator of Cameroonian descent specializing in African arts and heritage, and celebrated for her impactful contributions both in museums and cultural institutions in Switzerland. Pursuing a double PhD in Art History and Geography, she brings a profound understanding of the continent's artistic traditions, cultural transfers, and women's heritage which she refers to as "sheritage". Sigam is also the founder of Nwola Cultural Agency, which offers curatorial and cultural consulting.

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