



## Kemang Wa Lehulere: BIRD SONG

MAXXI presents the first exhibition dedicated to Kemang Wa Lehulere, one of the most interesting new generation South African artists and winner of *Deutsche Bank's "Artist of the Year" 2017 award*.

**September 27 - November 26, 2017**

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*I make art for myself, for my family, for my friends, for my community.  
I make art for anyone who is interested in art, I make art for people who are not yet interested in art, I.  
I make art for people who are curious about the world, I make art for people . . .*  
(Kemang Wa Lehulere, Interview by Alice Inggs on *Asymptote Journal*, April 2016)

Rome. September 26, 2017 From September 27 to November 26, 2017 **MAXXI** along with **Deutsche Bank**, presents the **first solo exhibition in Italy** by Kemang Wa Lehulere, winner of Deutsche Bank's "Artist of the Year" 2017 award.

The exhibition, **BIRD SONG**, curated by **Britta Färber**, Chief Curator at Deutsche Bank Art, Culture & Sports, and **Anne Palopoli**, curator of MAXXI, presents about **twenty works** by the young South African artist (born in Cape Town, 1984), winner of the annual award that Deutsche Bank dedicates every year to emerging or mid-career artists who stand out for the artistic and societal relevance of their work.

The exhibition was inaugurated last March at Deutsche Bank KunstHalle in Berlin and is now part of MAXXI's *Expanding The Horizon* initiatives promoted by the museum to develop global ambitions and collaborations with other institutions and private collections.

As **Giovanna Melandri**, President of the Fondazione MAXXI says: "We are delighted to be hosting the Kemang Wa Lehulere exhibition, not only for the sensitivity and civil and social impact of his work, but also because it confirms and reinforces our collaboration with an exceptional partner such as Deutsche Bank, which has supported and promoted the arts for many years. *Expanding the Horizon*, the project of which this exhibition is a part, in fact underlines the fundamental role played by private institutions, businesses and collectors in MAXXI's development, providing the necessary support to allow us to meet our cultural challenges."

"Since more than 35 years Deutsche Bank promotes contemporary art and fosters the cultural exchange worldwide. In this context, we are enthusiastic to open in Rome Deutsche Bank's "Artist of the Year" 2017 exhibition, which travelled from Berlin and goes to Switzerland afterwards. We are sincerely grateful to MAXXI for welcoming us once again in this beautiful setting and for sharing with us the commitment to present innovative and quality artistic programs to a wider public" commented **Flavio Valeri**, Chief Country Officer Italy of Deutsche Bank.

History, time, and the role of the artist in society are some of the great themes of Kemang Wa Lehulere's work. **BIRD SONG** is a project focused on the dialogue between the works of the artist and those of **Gladys Mgudlandlu (1917-1979)**, a self-taught artist and the first female black artist to exhibit her works in a South African gallery in the 1960s. Mgudlandlu mostly painted landscapes and birds and for this she was nicknamed *Bird Lady* but was also criticised for not having taken sides politically and was forgotten after her passing. **Kemang Wa Lehulere**, who grew up in Gugulethu, a township in Cape Town, in the same neighbourhood as Mgudlandlu, discovered that his aunt Sophia Lehulere had visited the painter's house and still cherished the memory of her murals: he then began a search for traces of those paintings with her, bringing some of them to light that have inspired this project.

The exhibition includes a series of works entitled **Does this mirror have memory** (2015) including gouaches and watercolours by Mgudlandlu and chalk drawings made by the artist with his aunt Sophia.

Throughout the exhibition, the works by Wa Lehlere and Mgudlandlu dialogue as in a jazz improvisation, but the project's scope is not to rehabilitate the memory of a forgotten artist, rather to create a dialogue between the present and the past of South Africa. The works of Wa Lehlere are deeply rooted in his personal history and in the history of his country, focusing on topics like collective conditioning and the mechanisms of oppression.

Among the other works there are **two large installations**: *My Apologies to Time* (2017), consisting of old school desks dismantled and converted into bird houses, a denunciation on how schools are not just places to cultivate thinking, but also ideological control and conditioning tools. The installation creates a dialogue between some watercolours by Gladys Mgudlandlu that represent landscapes at the limit of abstraction interpreted as a hymn to freedom but also as a denunciation of the deportations forced onto the black population during Apartheid.

The other large-scale installation is **Broken Wing** (2017), made with pieces of old school benches, medical crutches and the artist's teeth casts inserted like screw clamps inside Bibles written in the Xhosa tribe language. The crutch is a recurring symbol in the artist's work, representing the loss of something authentic, as well as the attempt to ignore or keep quiet on what was happening in South Africa. With this work, Wa Lehlere expresses his reaction to the past colonial conditions and elaborates the history of missionary activity and of the expropriation of land in the same way that the Bible addresses the Fall of Man.

The title of the exhibition, **BIRD SONG**, comes from a jazz song written for Miriam Makeba. Jazz is an integral part of Wa Lehlere's life and work: in an exclusive edition for the exhibition, the artist composed and recorded an album with the musician Mandla Mlangeni, of which the score is part of **Lefu la ntate** (2017) composed of a black hair pentagram, a tribute to music, black identity, resistance and to the struggle for freedom and equality, represented by African hairstyles.

The force behind Wa Lehlere's work lies in the issues he deals with and that relate to writing history, to the failure of memory, and to the impossibility for time to be linear. With the analysis of his own history, of the people around him and of entire nations, the works of the artist question us on the common ground between personal memory and authorised history.

**Kemang Wa Lehlere** was born in 1984 in Cape Town where he lives and works. After graduating in Art at the University of the Witwatersrand (2011), his works have been displayed in solo exhibitions at Lombard Freid Projects, New York (2013); at the STEVENSON gallery in Cape Town and Johannesburg (2012/2015) and at the Goethe-Institut in Johannesburg (2011). He participated in the Berlin Biennale as part of *Public Intimacy*, a collective exhibition, in 2014: *Art and Social Life in South Africa* at the Art Yerba Buena Centre in San Francisco (2014), and at the second Triennial at the New Museum of New York (2012) and is the co-founder of the Cape Town Gugulethu art collective and founding member of the Center for Historical Reenactments of Johannesburg. He won the 15th Baloise Art Prize in Art Basel in 2013, the first International Tiberius Art Award in Dresden in 2014, and Deutsche Bank's "Artist of the Year" in 2017.

**The press file and images of the exhibition can be downloaded** in the Reserved Area of the Fondazione MAXXI website at <http://www.maxxi.art/area-stampa/> by entering the password **areariservata-maxxi**

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