

Undefined Territories

Perspectives on Colonial Legacies

Exhibition from 17 May to 20 October 2019



Munem Wasif, *Land of Undefined Territory* (detail), 2014-2016. Courtesy of Project 88 and Artist.

UNDEFINED TERRITORIES is a reflection on the notion of territory in an expanded sense of the term, going beyond the mere geographical to also encompass questions of identity, culture, history and time, within the framework of colonial legacy. Through works by artists from diverse geographies and diasporas, the exhibition articulates the effects of colonialism and how structures that were imposed centuries ago have established the paradigms by which we continue to abide today. Despite the independence of former colonies, decolonisation is an ongoing process.

STRUCTURES OF COLONIALISM

'I am talking of millions of men in whom fear has been cunningly instilled, who have been taught to have an inferiority complex, to tremble, kneel, despair...'

Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*

The exhibition opens with works that address the enduring imprint of colonial repression and disenfranchisement of native populations through epistemic violence imposed by European colonisers.

The phrase 'Look how far we've come' is embedded in the multi-coloured mural by the Choctaw-Cherokee artist **Jeffrey Gibson**. The sentence is open for interpretation; however, given the unlikelihood of the US ever being decolonialised, it can only be read as ironic. The patterns, which are inspired by Native American motifs, are also reminiscent of American modernism, which has appropriated aesthetics from the former.

Spread out on the floor is **Mariana Castillo Deball's** *Nuremberg Map of Tenochtitlan* (2013), an ampliation of the detailed map of the ancient Aztec capital (now Mexico City) that the conquistador Hernán Cortés sent to the Spanish king in 1520, along with letters describing the large, highly developed city and its people, including the ritual of human sacrifice, which was instrumentalised in depicting the Aztecs as barbaric and in need of civilising by the Spanish empire. The map, first published in 1524, became one of the most widespread images that Europeans had of the Aztecs and New World. It captured the European imaginary and garnered support for the conquest of the territory.

Justification of colonisation also took the form of monument building as a way of cementing historic memory by the state. *Nation State - Part 1. Exercise #1. History. Christopher Columbus (2013)* by **Daniela Ortiz and Xose Quiroga** attests to the continued glorification of Christopher Columbus in the 'discovery' of the Americas, even years after the independence of Spanish colonies. The work, composed of photographs of the monument erected in Barcelona for the Universal Exposition in 1888, is accompanied by a text that describes the role of Columbus in the colonisation of the Americas.

Landscape painting and the still-life genre have been closely linked with European colonial expansion in distant lands, imposing a Western gaze and creating the notion of the inferior 'Other'. **Sandra Gamarra** alludes to this by overlaying her paintings with excerpts of texts by Enrique Dussel, Victor Stoichita and Mario Rufer about modes of representation and power, objectification and monetisation of culture through a system of transnational capitalism that was propelled by colonialism.

Works by **Lothar Baumgarten** and **Maria Thereza Alves** both reference the repressive politics of naming and how renaming by imperial and colonial forces was a strategy for claiming possession and control. In *Salto (Pipa Cornuta)* (1977) Baumgarten simply relays the names of rivers of La Gran Sabana in the native language as a way of restoring memory and vindication of place and language. *This is Not an Apricot* (2009) by Alves illustrates 20 different types of indigenous fruit that the artist found at a market in the Amazonas, all of which the vendor referred to as apricots. Their original names have been obliterated through years of linguistic imperialism, which continues into the present.

Emerging hauntingly from the wall is *Chinkachiy* (to eliminate or erase in Quechua) (2019) by **Alán Carrasco**, a faint portrait of Túpac Amaru II (1738–1781), the indigenous leader of the uprising against Spanish rule in Peru. Long after his brutal death, his image has remained an icon for independence and indigenous rights, including being commemorated on the different currencies of Peru, such as the 50-Gold-Soles banknote (designed by the artist Germán Suárez Vértiz, on which Carrasco has based *Chinkachiy*) and its last apparition on the 500-inti banknote. However, since the fall of General Juan Francisco Velasco Alvarado's leftist government (1968–75) and his appropriation as a figurehead by the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement during the internal conflict in Peru (1980–2000), Túpac Amaru II has slowly been omitted from the official narration of Peruvian history. The figures who have appeared on the new Peruvian Soles since 1991 are all criollo or white.

'An investigation into colonial fantasy' reads one of the slides of **Black Audio Film Collective's** *Signs of Empire* (1983). This phrase lays the ground for a succession of archival photographs from the British colonial era juxtaposed with contemporary reportage. Together with piercing texts and a sombre soundtrack interspersed with political speeches, what unfolds is a powerful storytelling of colonial constructs of identity and how they resonate with contemporary realities in Britain.

The twenty-one black-and-white photos that form *Land of Undefined Territory* (2016) by **Munem Wasif** are a meditation on the way we define space as well as our political relationship to land. The non-descript terrain depicted has been one of the most historically contested areas between India and Bangladesh, with shifting borders defined by post-colonial divisions and war.

Cartography is a powerful tool; its lines institutionalise borders and its text legitimises place names. In *Other Maps Series* (2016), **Pala Pothupitiye** presents us with reimagined cartographies through richly illustrated narrations over official maps that blend mythology and colonial history, as well as detailing Sri Lanka's own history of occupations by the Portuguese, Dutch and British, and its civil war of over a quarter of a century, putting in question the idea of rigid sovereign territory.

NON-ALIGNMENT MOVEMENT

'The Third World was not a place. It was a project.'

**Vijay Prashad, *Darker Nations:
A People's History of the Third World***

In April 1955, representatives of 29 newly, and struggling-to-be, independent countries from Asia and Africa gathered for a conference in Bandung, Indonesia, to champion common interests of national sovereignty, decolonisation, anti-imperialism and economic development. The international meeting of new geopolitical alliances represented 54% of the world population at the time and signalled a pivotal moment for postcolonial political order. From this encounter emerged the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) formed by nations that embraced the above and shunned the polarities of the Cold War, from which the term Third World was born.

Naeem Mohaiemen's film *Two Meetings and a Funeral* (2017) weaves together archival footage and the narration of historian Vijay Prashad to articulate the momentum and solidarity of the NAM's leftist ideologies. It also unravels the complexities behind its unfortunate failure through a chronicle of Bangladesh's critical shift from Socialism to Islamism through the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation.

DECOLONISATION AND NEO-COLONISATION

'Colonialism has also its modern dress, in the form of economic control, intellectual control... It is a skilful and determined enemy, and it appears in many guises.'

**Ahmed Sukarno, President of Indonesia,
Bandung Conference, 1955**

In the film *Nucleus of the Great Union* (2017), **The Otolith Group** revisits the journey that African-American novelist Richard Wright made to the Gold Coast (Ghana) in 1953 to accompany the Conventions People's Party on their campaign for independence from British rule. The film is a digital unpacking and reconfiguration of the archive of over 1,500 photographs that Wright took on this trip and which remain unpublished. A poignant part of the film is when the narrator, Saidiya Hartman, recounts local boys in Ghana telling her that they wished their ancestors had been enslaved so they could now be as rich as Americans.

The complexities of national identity, decolonialisation and migration are explored in *Kwassa Kwassa* (2015) by **Superflex**. The film poetically tells the recent history of Mayotte, formerly one of the islands of the Federal Islamic Republic of the Comoros that chose to be recolonised by the French in 2011, making it the European Union's outermost region, with less than 80 km separating it from its closest independent neighbour.

Flowers for Africa (2013 – ongoing) by **Kapwani Kiwanga** revives historic memory through reconstructions of floral arrangements based on archival photographs related to independence ceremonies of African countries. Over the duration of the exhibition, the flowers are left to wither and dry, alluding to notions of impermanence and flux, as well as to the challenges of independence.

Just as floral arrangements are a colonial import, the ceremonies themselves have also been adopted from Western models. **Maryam Jafri's** *Independence Day* (2009 – ongoing) brings together photographs of the first Independence Day events of former colonies in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Organised according to type of event, the images are indicative of how the new nations have upheld the political aesthetics, protocol and sometimes systems of governance, of their former colonisers.

Language as a tool of repression and manipulation is explored again through **Dana Whabira's** *Black Sunlight* (2017). The title is inspired by Dambudzo Marechera's cult novel that was banned in Zimbabwe in 1981 for being obscene and Euro-centric. Written in neon is the phrase 'It's not the end of the world', with the letter 'L', which does not exist in Shona, darkened to create another meaning. Together with a video of a Shona lesson that includes excerpts from an interview with Marechera, the work points to the calculated misinterpretations of indigenous language and how ideas of African nationalism were often invoked to justify totalitarian regimes across the continent.

Exhibition organised and produced by MACBA Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona.

Curator
Hiuwai Chu

MACBA App

Enjoy the explanatory files for a selection of works in the exhibition, as well as detailed information on exhibitions and activities, videos, curiosities and practical information about the Museum.

Guided visits

See times and languages at macba.cat

Accessible visits

Visits with accessibility for people with hearing difficulties available on request at educacio@macba.cat.

Lecture

Naeem Mohaiemen:
The Shortest Speech
Friday 17 May, 7 pm
Convent dels Àngels Auditorium

Let's talk about...

Undefined Territories

With MACBA Study Group of ideas, practices and afro/black activisms and the artist Alán Carrasco, among others. Consult the timetable at macba.cat.

Course

Aura Cumes: «*Seguimos vivos*»: *Pueblos Mayas, colonización permanente y horizontes de vida*
3, 4 and 5 July
Convent dels Àngels Auditorium

Afrofuturist Saturday

With Kapwani Kiwanga, Jokkoo Collective and MACBA Study Group of ideas, practices and afro/black activisms
Saturday 28 September
Capella MACBA

Friends of MACBA

Exclusive guided visits

Reflections on Post-Colonialism with Hiuwai Chu, curator of the exhibition.
Wednesday 29 May, 6 pm and
Friday 14 June, 11 am
(in English)

Opening times

Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, 11 am to 7.30 pm (from 25 June to 24 September, from 10 am to 8 pm)
Tuesday closed
Saturday, 10 am to 8 pm
Sunday and public holidays, 10 am to 3 pm

Every Saturday, from 4 to 8 pm, entrance to the Museum is free.

The Museum entry ticket is valid for a month. Activate it at the ticket desk and visit us as often as you like.

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