

## KOW Downstairs:

*Forced Love, sculpture in cocoa and palm fat, 2020 by Irene Kanga (b. 1994), member of CATPC (cercle d'art des travailleurs de plantation congolaise), a cooperative of plantation workers turned artists.*

*Forced Love by Irene Kanga portrays a man raping a woman. Kanga has been working with CATPC since 2014 and has sought to render visible the violence imposed on women – including herself – on the plantation. She links her personal experiences to an historic event: the rape of a Pende woman by a Belgian colonial agent in 1931, in the midst of one of many campaigns to forcibly round up men to become palm cutters for the Lever Brothers plantation in Lusanga (formerly known as Leverville).*

During such a round-up, able-bodied men hid in the forest to avoid recruitment. In their absence, Kafutchi, one of the wives of chief Matema Kelenge was forced against an enclosure and raped by colonial agents. According to the historian Charles Sikitele Gize, this rape was one of the key events that led to the decapitation and dismemberment of colonial agent Maximilien Balot, and to the great Pende revolt of 1931, one of the last open rebellions before independence. Fought with bows and arrows against the machine guns of the colonial state, an untold number of Pende lost their lives, including much of the political and religious elite.

In Congo and elsewhere, plantations have generated massive profits, which in turn have funded the building of European and American museums. Art thus provided an opportunity for shareholders to distance themselves from the violence of the plantation system. Today, plantations in the global south are still closely linked to art production. Rain forests are cut down and subjected to monoculture, causing climate change and increasing inequality. The value extracted from these plantations is still partially invested in museums in cities such as New York, Dakar or Brussels, generating beauty and wealth in the surrounding economies. Even if these museums propagate inclusivity and diversity, few of these benefits return to the plantation.

CATPC's sculptures from river clay are digitally scanned using state of the art 3D technology, exported and reproduced in Amsterdam (the world's biggest cocoa port) in chocolate enriched with palm fat. CATPC's first solo exhibition in New York City, highlighting these sculptures, led to much controversy and was hailed by the New York Times as 'best art of 2017'. As journalist Jason Farago wrote: 'This was the most challenging show of the year, and proudly "problematic," but that was the point: You need to be fearless, and run right into the swamp of possible misunderstanding, to have any hope of making a difference' (New York Times, 6 Dec 2017). Joanna Fiduccia went further: 'Plantations were not just operations; they were ideologies, justifying the

treatment of resources, people, and their sculptural “fetishes” alike as raw material that must subsequently be refined into first-world luxuries. A plantation workers’ art collective is transgressive because it establishes intimacy with material that has been historically denied to them: not chocolate, but sculpture’ (Even Magazine).

Through participating in the global art market, profitably producing and selling critically engaged art, CATPC buys back land. In collaboration with Dutch artist Renzo Martens, who launched a ‘reverse gentrification program’ in 2012, CATPC has opened an OMA-designed museum on their own land, near the plantation town Lusanga. Dubbed the White Cube, it operates like art museums do elsewhere: it functions as a vehicle for diversity and inclusivity, as well as for capital, visibility and legitimacy, in this case to start another type of plantation. With the sales of their sculptures, CATPC has so far acquired 85 ha, where its members develop a sustainable alternative to the destructive system of monoculture: a new, inclusive, worker-owned post plantation.

On a visit to CATPC’s studio in Lusanga in 2016, the former Congolese minister of Culture and Tourism, Elvis Mutira Wa Bashara, stated: “Plantations have financed European museums. This means that inequality is prolonged through these museums. Working class Congolese are not represented in art exhibitions in New York, London or Berlin. There is a wealth of artistic vision that lives in the population. Today, the adversity that lives in the plantation expresses itself through art.”

Text by Zoe Gray for Wiels Centre d’Art Contemporain