

# RISD MUSEUM

## Kudzanai Chiurai

### Iyeza

NOV 2015–MAY 2016

*Spalter New Media Gallery*



Kudzanai Chiurai, *Iyeza*, 2012

Kudzanai Chiurai's *Iyeza* (2011) is the first in a trilogy of video works. In *Iyeza*, *Creation* (2012), and *Moyo* (2013), Chiurai (Zimbabwean, b. 1981) investigates and confronts how Christianity has been used to support and expand European colonialism in Africa since the 19th century. This trilogy lends a dramatic and dynamic edge to the artist's larger critical investigation of how African cultures, politics, conflicts, and histories are processed and depicted by the media. The works are composed after written descriptions—and numerous artistic depictions—of three stories from the Bible: the Creation, the Last Supper, and the Crucifixion. In his reframing of each account, Chiurai has replaced the biblical figures with African figures that blend reality and stereotype, hyperbole and realism.

In *Iyeza*, Chiurai uses the *Last Supper*, iconically depicted by Leonardo da Vinci, as a compositional and historical framing device. Chiurai replaces Christ's disciples with contemporary African identities moving in hypnotic slow-motion to a rhythmic soundtrack. By adding motion and theatrical staging to the Western tradition of history painting, the artist choreographs an inflated, condensed moment into a dynamic epic. References to contemporary Africa abound, including a 1997 charity dinner hosted in Pretoria by South African president Nelson Mandela and attended by the Liberian president and notorious warlord Charles Taylor. That dinner included British supermodel Naomi Campbell, American actress Mia Farrow, celebrity and politician Imran Khan of Pakistan, and American music producer Quincy Jones, among others. Following the event, Taylor was rumored to have given Campbell a number of uncut blood diamonds, which was a source of scandal and mystery for years. A number of the dinner guests later testified against Taylor at The Hague for his role in aiding war crimes in Sierra Leone throughout the 1990s. Taylor was convicted in 2013 and sentenced to 50 years in prison.

Everything in Chiurai's scene holds multiple layers of meaning: each gesture and detail relates to biblical narratives, Leonardo da Vinci's painting and other Western art historical references, and the current—and perceived—state of the African continent. In the center of the composition is a stoic and peaceful female Christ figure. Dressed in a smartly tailored black suit and sporting a high-top fade, she sits in a plush red chair, her arms and hands open. Chaos and conflict unfold on her left and right as she offers an unbroken gaze directly into the camera lens. The 1997 charity dinner is woven throughout *Iyeza*'s characters and stylistic tropes. As the focal point, the female Christ figure strikes a chord with Nelson Mandela's role as a social and political leader who, through great personal sacrifice, radically altered the South African political climate. Mandela, a black African, subverted the government-sponsored Apartheid system, just as this female Christ figure subverts the traditional symbol of masculine power.

To the left, three contemporary African apostles—one prominently wearing the American flag—struggle, becoming increasingly entangled. In the central foreground, a medicine man prepares a concoction on a small raised platform directly in front of the Christ figure; as he sprays a liquid from his mouth above her, his ritual appears complete. Two young women in Dutch-wax dresses crouch in the far right foreground, watching the medicine man with interest and awe before turning their attention to the violent scene at the far right of the frame. The women cry out as an AK-47-wielding man in camouflage pushes another man to the ground. Watching the assault next to the Christ figure is another gunman who wears a helmet and the trappings of an officer—perhaps an allusion to Charles Taylor. He smiles and laughs as he drinks from a metal cup, reveling in the chaos.

In this narrative, Chiurai examines the effects of Christianity and the power exercised through promises of salvation in exchange for loyalty of those willing to, or forced to, convert. By juxtaposing *The Last Supper* with a bizarre meeting of presidents, celebrities, and activists, the artist offers a startling yet all-too-familiar depiction of Africa as a continent of unrest and trepidation, slow to adopt Western values. Doing so, he proposes a multi-dimensional critique both of religious involvement and the notion that the West signifies beneficial progress, and dispels suggestions that progress is universally accepted and measurable.

The slow-motion effect paired with the darkly ebullient soundtrack makes the scene intensely dramatic, revelatory, and frustrating. Combining the staging and scale of historical painting, the artist uses a wide-angle lens that matches the horizontal orientation typical of Last Supper scenes; reference to figurative and portrait painting comes further into view as the performers appear larger than life, exaggerated in costume and gesture, with dramatic shadows and highlights. Chiurai instills a caustic tension between his historical and contemporary references, encouraging a distinct hyper-focus as he challenges the viewer's desire both to draw conclusions and to see them fulfilled.

Kudzanai Chiurai (Zimbabwean, b. 1981) works in photography, video, film, and installation in Johannesburg, South Africa. His work is focused on investigating the political, social, and economic strife in both Zimbabwe and the African continent and how those facets are conveyed by the media. Chiurai holds a BFA from the University of Pretoria, and his work has been shown in solo and group presentations including dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, Germany; Sundance Film Festival, Park City, Utah; Goodman Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa; Zeitz MOCAA Pavilion, V & A Waterfront, Cape Town, South Africa; Museum of Modern Art, New York; and Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts (MoCADA), Brooklyn, New York.

