



STANDARD BANK YOUNG ARTIST AWARD WINNERS NEVER STOP MOVING FORWARD

As he reaches the end of his year as the Standard Bank Young Artist for Performance Art, Athi-Patra Ruga shows every sign of continuing his rapidly climbing trajectory. Like his *Elder of Azania*, he's something of an icon now...

Athi-Patra Ruga's performance of his work *The Elder of Azania* at this year's National Arts Festival was a popular favourite, resembling, wrote one reviewer, 'a slowly shifting digital artwork.' Another described it as 'reminiscent of the best of epic fantasy storytelling... whose creation of an alternative civilisation offers a complete political and social system that mirrors our own, but in a new and strange light.'

'Performance art is the new form of protest theatre,' Ruga himself said of his National Arts Festival work in July. 'You do not need materials, or even a studio. Your body becomes the studio, so your mind becomes the hub that uses the body to communicate these things... My new character, the Elder, revolves around the character of the priest, or the sangoma, or the character that is used to be a spiritual signifier in nation building. There's always one. It's either a saint or a kind of martyr character.'

The Elder, whose gender metamorphosis Ruga describes as suggesting 'something that questions the processes of a problematic cultural assimilation,' stands at the centre of Ruga's *Future White Women of Azania Saga*, which he initiated in 2010.

In this series, Ruga considers the idealised fiction of Azania, a decolonialised arcadia dreamt of during the apartheid regime – 'a founding myth that perhaps seems almost less attainable now than when the Pan Africanist Movement (of Azania) appropriated the name in 1960s as the signifier of an ideal future South Africa,' says Ruga. 'Then at least was a time to dream more optimistically, largely because the idea seemed so infinitely remote.' A far cry from the Azania then envisioned, Ruga's own version is a fantasy creation, a glittering exotic space of intense colours, tropical vegetation and wildlife, with glamorous characters mid-transformation.

Amidst the frenetic preparations that his Standard Bank Young Artist Performance for this year's National Arts Festival must have taken, Ruga's work also appeared at Art Dubai in March. While the dust settled in Grahamstown, his

short film *Purge* formed part of 'Points and Counterpoints', during *The Film Will Always Be You: South African Artists on Screen* at the Tate Modern in July.

Most recently, a solo exhibition of Ruga's work opened in Paris, France, beginning in September and running until the end of October. Entitled *A Land without a People for a People without a Land*, the exhibition featured new large scale tapestries by the artist, depicting 'the exile and return' of characters drawn from his *Azania* saga.

And so, Ruga's recent inclusion in Season 3 of *21 Icons: The Future of the Nation* seems utterly appropriate. The season focuses on youthful icons (under the age of 35) who are shaping the country's future, and Ruga is arguably carving out a name for himself as the country's leading performance artist, with a considerable international reputation (although

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as he notes, 'geography is fast becoming a staid idea, to be honest – what with the intimacy of the Internet and all'). *21 Icons* sees Ruga immortalised by photographer Gary van Wyk, photographed with an image from his *Azania* series projected directly onto his bare chest: close to his heart, a fantastical vision of the future, and all the troubles and challenges that moving towards a brighter day must consider and overcome.

'Knowing that I'm working towards something that will benefit a nation's way in which they identify with images of themselves, with their stories, with all of that: THAT makes me come to work every day,' says Ruga. **CF**