

## Art

# 'Fuelled, fed, nourished' by Joburg

French new media artist Tabita Rezaire says her time in South Africa helped to heal her

Sean O'Toole

Emigration, living abroad by choice, as opposed to the exile of Ernest Cole and Thami Mnyele, has been a propulsive event in the careers of many artists.

The story of South African art is, in part, a story of relocation, of artists such as Lerato Shadi and Dineo Bopape redefining themselves in other places, typically cities of the global north.

But does the reverse hold true? Can Johannesburg, a city built by immigrants, replenish strangers? Especially artists? Absolutely, says Paris-born Tabita Rezaire, who for three-and-a-half years called the elusive metropolis home.

"South Africa really was so healing for me," says Rezaire when I reach her by video at her home in a forested conservancy in French Guiana, on the north coast of South America.

The story of Amakaba, the fledgling yoga centre that Rezaire established in 2020 on a small-scale cacao farm outside Cayenne, is strongly connected to her time in Johannesburg.

"Johannesburg allowed me to look at my own wounds," says Rezaire. "It was fertile, and I say this without minimising the harshness of what the city is for the people living there, but for me it had that effect."

Rezaire moved to SA's ragged capital of commerce in 2014 with a romantic partner she met in London. Her life journey up until that point had been an apprenticeship in emancipation, of fashioning a "disobedient living scheme" to challenge institutionalised oppression, as she put it in a recent essay.

Born to a French Guianese father and Danish mother, Rezaire studied economics in Paris and Copenhagen. It was alienating, so Rezaire opted to pursue a postgraduate arts degree in London. Her focus was cinema and 1960s agit-prop performance. She met a Zimbabwean man, an artist, with whom she moved to SA.

She shortly fell in with a creative set of artists and designers who shared her interest in digital communication technologies, cheap internet aesthetics, collage, video and personal emancipation. They included Bogosi Sekhukhuni and Nolan Oswald Dennis, with whom she founded the artist group NTU, a brief-lived "agency concerned with the spiritual futures of technology". She also befriended Jamal Nxedlana and Ravi Govender of CUSS Group and became besties with pioneering installation artist Dineo Bopape.

"I had a sense of community in SA, artistically, spiritually, politically," says Rezaire. "I was very fuelled, fed, nourished, nurtured."

"I really felt that strongly."

Life in Johannesburg was not

without its complications. Her relationship cratered. This personal tumult coincided with a period of intense social ferment and revisionism. The status quo was forcibly being audited, notably by university students, and found wanting. For Rezaire this was thrilling — and so unlike Paris or London.

"South Africa, it's so open; there is really a willingness to look at history, to look at the past, and the legacy of that past, what it does in the present and in the future — and to really understand the medicine that is needed."

That medicine, at least for Rezaire, was yoga. It was Euridice Kala, an experimental Mozambican photographer then living in Johannesburg, who suggested Rezaire join her for a session of kemetic yoga at the Yeoville Recreation Centre. Developed in Chicago during the 1970s, kemetic yoga combines poses from Indian yoga with postures suggested in ancient Egyptian art, in particular hieroglyphs.

"I took the class and went 'Wow! I got hooked.'" Yoga prompted her spiritual awakening. "I trained and eventually started giving classes in Yeoville. And then I met the whole kundalini yoga community."

Healing is central to Rezaire's daily practice as a yoga teacher, doula (birthing coach) and farmer.

It also informs her lexicon as an artist. Last year, Rezaire published *Womb Consciousness*. It is a sprawling survey of her research-driven and joyously recombinant art that features more than a dozen contributions by poets, theorists and artists.

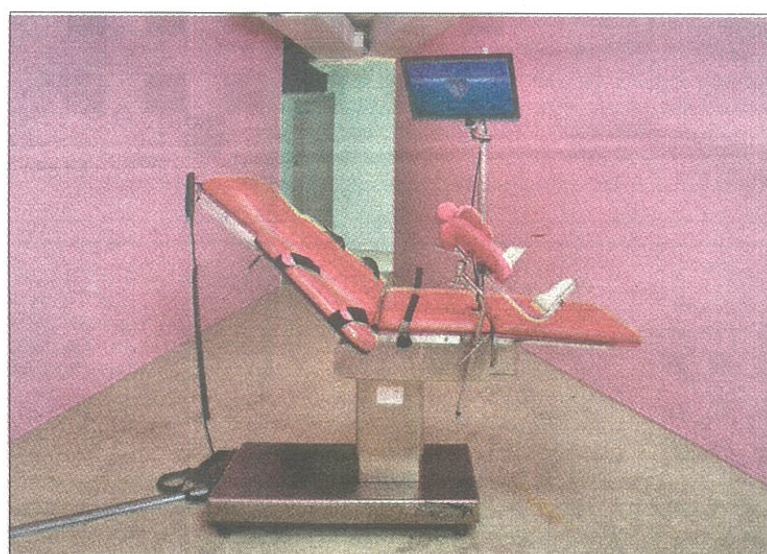
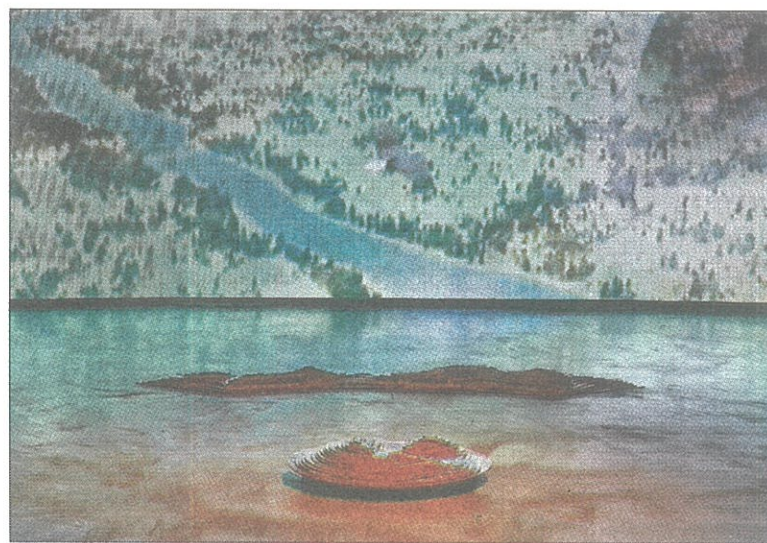
Her father, psychiatrist Théodore Rezaire, is also a contributor.

"My work is very constellation-ish," says Rezaire of the book. "I don't know if there is such a word." She laughs. "The book goes into different areas: ancestral memory, womb worship, the divine feminine, technology, indigenous knowledge, the African sphere and so on. It touches on different things of interest, areas I explore, investigate and try unearthing."

It includes some of Rezaire's own writings, notably an essay titled *Decolonial Healing: In Defence of Spiritual Technologies*. By turns incantatory and analytical, it begins with her posing pointed questions.

"As electronic networks swiftly replace intuition-based technologies, what effects do computing technologies have on our heart-mind-womb-

**'How can we retrieve ancestral knowledge as a weapon against modern/colonial imperialism?'**



lands? How can we retrieve ancestral knowledge as a weapon against modern/colonial imperialism?"

Rezaire ventures that the answer has something to do with engaging African and indigenous ancestral technologies of information and communication, by daring to "reconcile the worlds of organic matter, energy and electronics to nurture a mystic-techno-consciousness".

The intellectual foundations of this essay go back to a 2014 essay titled *Afro Cyber Resistance*. Interested in theorising the work of her new friends, notably Sekhukhuni and CUSS Group, she coined the phrase "Afro cyber resistance" to speak of strategies of digital resistance and creative emancipation in the face of cyber-racism and the distorted representation of black people, especially Africans, online.

For a certain constituency of artists and intellectuals interested in the evolution of digital arts in Africa, Rezaire has emerged as an important essayist-maker in the mould of German filmmaker and writer Hito Steyerl and American artist Martine Syms. But even avant-garde artists face transforming kudos into wonga.

In 2017, Rezaire presented her debut solo exhibition with Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg. It was heavily weighted towards new-fangled photography and film. Standout works included *Deep Down Tidal* (2017), a standing-room-only film exploring how privately owned fibre cables retrace old colonial shipping routes, and *Sugar Walls Teardom* (2016), an intimate film installation framed by the encounter of a pink gynaecological chair.

"The womb is the original technology," reads a title overlaid onto Rezaire's lo-fi animations appearing on a video monitor.

Her techno-mysticism can read as goofy but it is unapologetically feminist. *Sugar Walls Teardom* includes a deliberation on American physician James Marion Sims, the so-called "father of modern gynaecology", who experimented on African-American slave women as part of his research.

While living in Joburg, Rezaire started to voice an aspiration to "find some land and start a village". It remained a vague ambition. In 2017, she visited French Guiana, the homeland of her father and one of five overseas departments of France.

**Shocking pink: (From above) Tabita Rezaire (centre) at her Amakaba yoga centre in French Guiana. A still from Rezaire's film 'Deep Down Tidal' and the gynaecological chair from the 'Sugar Walls Teardom' video.**

"We are still France," explains Rezaire. "We vote for the French president. We have French passports. We learn French history at school. We have euros. We are French citizens. It is a very complex territory."

While in French Guiana opportunity knocked in the form of a patch of riverine land in a forest.

"Wow! And then panic. How am I going to do this? What about my career? Fierce, fierce, fierce."

The chance passed.

Rezaire says she was too attached to being an artist, the recognition it gave her and sense of identity, to act decisively. But artistic success, which has the veneer of glamour but often involves hurried travel and endless obligation, also prompted Rezaire's decision to embark on "a grieving journey for the death of myself that needed to happen so that a new version of me could come through".

"I was always on the computer, editing things online. And then the travelling — I was always removed and displaced. I couldn't have it. That's why I had the yearning for an anchor, the need to be grounded, to be rooted like a tree and not move. I wasn't unhappy, just misaligned, unbalanced completely."

Rezaire has swapped hurry for grounded routine and healing. Amakaba follows the sustainable farming techniques pioneered by Ernst Götsch in neighbouring Brazil known as syntropic agriculture. Its cacao crop is used to make chocolate sold at local producer markets. The profits are negligible.

The yoga centre is similarly modest, although Rezaire's ambition is to replicate the Isha Yoga Centre of Sadhguru in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu. And what about her lauded artistic practice?

"I make pottery," she shyly responds. "I am transitioning in my art-making."

A thought comes to her. Her index finger pops upright. "Though." Rezaire mentions her 2019 film *Mamelles Ancestrales*, which explored megalithic architecture in Senegal and the Gambia. Last year, she started to work on a new film. Its subject is a stone circle on the border of French Guiana and Brazil.

"It seems to be my last video work. But who knows? I am open to being surprised by life."