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**DAZED**

## THE ANGOLAN ARTIST WHO USES THE POWER OF PHOTOGRAPHY TO OVERCOME TRAUMA

By Miss Rosen, April 23, 2018



Grief is one of the most profound emotions we may experience in life, forcing us to reckon with a loss so powerful it can take years, even decades, to fully process. We may become consumed by feelings of denial, anger, bargaining, and depression in waves so strong it feels like they may never end – until our commitment to healing forces us to pull ourselves through, and we wash upon the shore of acceptance, battered, and bruised.

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But the story does not end there, for although grief has gone, something equal and opposite arises in its place: gratitude. Such is the power of love in its deepest sense, for it is love that allows us to change the way we think about and see the world – and ourselves.

When Angolan-Dutch artist Keyezua lost her father as a young girl, her life was forever changed. Her father, suffering from diabetes, had both his legs amputated before he died. Growing up without a father, Keyezua began to question the disempowering beliefs that were damaging the image of her father that she held close to her heart. In Angola, it has been said that a man without legs is no longer a man – but Keyezua knew this to be false and set about to speak truth to power through the creation of art.

In her new series, Fortia, which is included in the group exhibition Refraction: New Photography of African and Its Diaspora at Steven Kasher Gallery, New York (April 19 – June 2, 2018), Keyezua transforms the way we look at and think about the physical disability. Each photograph features a black woman in a red dress wearing a mask designed and created by a group of six Angolan men who, like Keyezua’s father, no longer had legs.

Fortia, which is Latin for “strength” tells Keyezua’s story through a series of work that shares her experience in pieces titled “My Mother’s Womb,” “This is Not His Funeral, This is Life!” “Sailing Back to Africa as a Dutch Woman,” and “Womanhood – Sex, Love and Betrayal.” For Keyezua, the creation of art is a revolutionary act, a ritual for therapeutic self-expression that simultaneously changes the way we look at and think about disability.

Below, Keyezua takes us through her journey to show how love can become a catalyst to empower, restore, and heal ourselves – and the world.

#### SHE WANTS TO CONFRONT THE SHAME OF DISABILITY

“I could never let go of the last images that I had of my father. He had diabetes and had both of his legs amputated. He died when I was very young. For me, it’s still impossible to let it go.

“In Angola, we grow up to see our fathers as the leaders of the house. It means, ‘Respect your parents. Listen to your parents. Do what your parents say.’ You continue to empower and honour your parents in everything you do. One of the things that I can remember is that some people believed that a black man in Angola who has no legs has no worth. He is incomplete and no longer a man. So then you grow with the thought and it hurts.

“If something like this happens to you, that your father or mother is disabled, you may think your parents are no longer complete. I wanted to talk about shame and people who feel ashamed – who do not understand the psychological effect it has on your own parents. I didn’t want the last images of my father to be images that do prove what people said is true.”

#### SHE HOPES TO CHANGE THE PARADIGM

“I learned to understand physical disabilities through images were always very dramatic, like: ‘Help this person. Give money,’ or ‘Look at this person. This is what war can do.’ The images that I had seen were never empowering or beautiful. They were always very aggressive, very sad. I didn’t want to think about my father and have to connect with that image. I wanted to create a ritual that would help me understand how it is to grow without a father as a woman.

“In 2015, I saw a group of six men with no legs. They were making typical African crafts to survive. I started to talk to them, asking what happened to them, what kind of work they were doing, and we started to have conversations. They

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were born as normal boys but then through different sicknesses, they lost both of their legs. I told them I would like to invite them to do this project with me because I needed to understand their psychological way of thinking in a society that doesn't really understand people who go through sicknesses where you are left incomplete.

"I spent three months researching, interviewing them, and understanding how it is to be a man without legs. The conversations informed the material research, and then the movements themselves. The movement is about putting yourself in the same position as these men to work with them. If they have to climb in a strange way, I would have to climb in a strange way, too. If they had to push their legs to the floor in a way, I would do that too to understand exactly what I wanted to tell with this story, to feel, and to try to understand what my father was going through. Through this experience, I could create a ritual: Fortia, which is Latin for 'strength.'"

## ALL THE MASKS IN THE SERIES REPRESENT A MOMENT OF HER LIFE

"Fortia as an image is a woman who seduces the eye of the viewer with a red dress but the story is the masks. Each mask represents the strength of people that go through a physical disability around the world. It is strength that should be celebrated – not exhibited as sad stories. We want the conversation in another way.

"Each mask has a title and the title helps the viewer to understand which part of my life that I am talking about. I went back to moments in my life as a young girl growing up without a father and all masks were based on that: moments of sexuality, love, my mother, and all the pain that I had to go through. Each mask represents a part of me, but it's also the ritual continuing and how I see my father in all the details of the work: the things that I wanted to keep with me that will never vanish.

"There is one that is called 'My Mother's Womb,' which is about birth. My mother gave birth to me, but it was also difficult to grow up without my father, so in a sense, my father was my mother as well. It's about birth. There is another called 'This is Not His Funeral, This is Life!' I understand that if I want to continue to give me father life, I had to do my best artwork.

"Fortia is a celebration of his life because without all these feelings, this process that I went through because I wanted to say goodbye to him, this would never happen. I didn't have to say goodbye. In all of the small details, I can continue to breathe life into his existence and the things that he taught me."

## SHE BELIEVES THAT ART HAS THERAPEUTIC POWERS

"In countries where there is so much poverty, people don't have the culture of going to a psychologist. If you say that you are going, the question becomes, 'Are you crazy? Do you have psychological issues?' They don't see it as a form of communication and being able to talk about your issues with someone.

"Art gives people the freedom to talk about the impossible, to talk about the taboos, to honestly share their feelings, to relate and connect. It is the best way to start the conversation and not immediately deal with the fear of 'How will society judge my story?' Art permits you to show the majesty that is in you, even though it might come out as pain. Art gives you the freedom to express yourself through all those instruments that will then, in the end, be the piece that will represent your story and difficulties.

"In countries with poverty, this is a way to give people the inner peace that they are looking for me. I thought if I create images that support people with disabilities, I will be providing more images that can educate children and adults. This

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was not only my therapy. I had to be careful with the choices because I want to empower people. The conversation I had with my work was, 'Which colours and details do I want in it? What final image do I want?'"

SHE WANTS TO ENSURE THE FEMALE BODY, AND VOICE, IS TAKING UP SPACE

"I use the female body because I am a woman and I know what my body goes through when I am telling a story. It is always a female voice that tells the story because the female voice loves to talk about her body, her unprotected body, or her dictated body.

"In Angola, it is mostly men who decide what happens to the female body. It's still an issue in Africa and other countries – and we have had enough. We want to talk about what it is to be a woman. There are so many different versions of a woman and there's not much space, time, or debates, to talk about it. I use the female body so that it continues to be about us.

"In Fortia, I talk about what it is to grow up without a father figure. I had a free sexuality where I had no father to place rules and say what is good or bad, what a girl should do or not. I had my freedom as a young woman very soon.

"Some people still think that we should not walk on the same line as men. They want us behind and we want to be on the same line because we believe in our rights, our strengths, in our body, and what it is to be the woman that we want to become. We are still fighting and going to the streets."

Fortia is showing as part of Refraction: New Photography of African and Its Diaspora at Steven Kasher Gallery, New York until June 2, 2018