

SUPER BLOOM

Rhoda Davids Abel

Sergio Rojas Chaves

14.02.–12.04.2025

A superbloom occurs when an unusually high proportion of desert wildflowers germinate and blossom at the same time. This rare botanical phenomenon stands as a metaphor for the intensification and upsurge in current affairs and serves as an opportunity for Rhoda Davids Abel and Sergio Rojas Chaves to present a snapshot of their process-oriented and research-based work.

Whereas Sergio Rojas Chaves is concerned with the cultivation, exoticization, and commercialization of tropical plants, Rhoda Davids Abel traces individual stories and collective myth-making related to her own origins. Both artists utilize the attentive act of observation and narration as an artistic means for describing and situating their respective ways of viewing the world: How are the environments surrounding us configured? What makes them livable and desirable? What are the power relations, cultural and social codes inscribed in them? And how can these codes be made visible and negotiable through poetic means?

Rhoda Davids Abel's artistic investigations are based on in-depth research into her own origins, into the geography as well as political and social heritage of South Africa and Tanzania. She collects and reconstructs myths, spiritual customs and rituals, as well as dreams and traumas, and translates these into poetic texts, photographs, video essays, objects, or performances. Her own body and everyday objects, which are charged with symbolism and become vehicles for such narratives, emotions, and memories, play a central role. The artistic works form a contemporary archive in which marginalized voices are preserved.

Sergio Rojas Chaves also takes an observational approach in examining their own relationship to nature, to its cultivation, to historical and cultural influences on environments and natural imagery. For instance, Rojas Chaves analyses how human and non-human creatures coexist in urban space, the ambivalent status of tropical houseplants in our private homes, or the exoticizing viewpoint of tourists in Costa Rica, their current home. Rojas Chaves translates this artistic field research into photographic works, objects, and installations or brings it to life in participatory city tours.

The so-called Hawaiian shirt, colorfully printed with tropical birds, plants, and landscapes, has its origins in the everyday clothing worn by the male population in Honolulu in the 1840s. In the mid-twentieth century, it spread beyond the island's borders with the rise of US tourism on the island of Hawaii. Today it is experiencing a revival as a nostalgic recurrence of a certain lifestyle in the form of second-hand clothing but also new, fashion-designer versions. Sergio Rojas Chaves's interest in the shirt lies in the construction of the "exotic" and its tourist marketing. "Exotic" is understood as a mainly Western projecting of ideas onto places, objects, people, and landscapes, in which cultural differences are emphasized and their otherness transformed and romanticized. The idea of tropical places is thus stylized as a utopian paradise that promises an escape from everyday life and modern society. Throughout the history of its dissemination, appropriation, and its various related attributions, the shirt has become highly diversified. Depending on the person wearing it, it is read as authentic or appropriated, as characteristic of a particular lifestyle or of vulgar tourists, or viewed as a fashion statement.

SERGIO ROJAS CHAVES'S textile work *It all feels the same* is created from such tropical shirts: Rojas Chaves purchased the shirts in second-hand shops in San José. These are clothing items that were donated to charity in the US. Sold to Costa Rican retailers, they are promoted in charity shops as "American fashion." Sergio Rojas Chaves's stitching together of the shirts makes this phenomenon visible: the shirts are transformed into a textile patchwork that preserves their complex history and meaning—from the exoticizing view of the tropics to the globalized fashion industry and its value chains.

RHODA DAVIDS ABEL'S photographic series *van katrieltoer voersies en muggiepis wees was* was inspired by a pouch used for storing shoes that her mother, a seamstress by trade, made from cotton fabric and lace. Davids Abel recreated the pouch by sewing together colorful gauze and filling it with items that serve as individual and collective mementos: a photo of her deceased mother, thread and measuring tape, as well as artificial nails and broken ostrich eggshells from South Africa. Rhoda Davids Abel alludes to the political dimension and cultural history of such items. A comb that was heated over the stove, hair clips, and a hot air brush for straightening hair evoke childhood memories of the smells created when the hair was heated. Many of the objects are gifts that Rhoda Davids Abel received

while researching her own family history. And those who gave her gifts also recounted personal stories: Rhoda's Tanzanian grandmother's clothespins were her most prized possession. David Abel also links the practice of storytelling and the oral transmission of experiences with her mother's work as a seamstress. Her studio was a place of gathering, prayer, care, and healing practices.

The photographic presentation shows Rhoda Davids Abel wearing these storage pouches—similar to items of clothing—draped over the front of her body. The gestures of her hands alternate between tender caress, holding, and posing. The circular spotlight addresses the performative act of wearing these objects but also the representation of Black bodies and their ambivalent public perception between hypervisibility and invisibility. Rhoda Davids Abel playfully negotiates issues related to the transformation of one's own body into a performative body, as well as the relationships between people and their personal items: Where is the boundary between myself and others? Between human and non-human? How do the objects we carry around with us offer us a temporary home? And how can experiences of segregation, migration, otherness, and belonging be preserved?

Room 2

SERGIO ROJAS CHAVES'S installation *Build me up* features richly colored textile cutouts, draped over furniture-like structures or laid out on the floor. These evoke associations with the mountains of clothing scraps in the Atacama Desert, where the remnants of fast fashion overproduction end up. Structures made of acrylic glass, reminiscent of furniture, allude to recurring trends in furniture design from the 1990s. This minimal, modern aesthetic was taken up by IKEA, which brought it to the masses via inexpensive mass production and DIY assembly. In addition to decorative items, the furniture manufacturer also sells tropical houseplants that are just as easy to buy, dispose of, and replace. The outlines of these plants—which are native to countries in the global south and are relegated to our interior spaces—have been cut out of textiles by Sergio Rojas Chaves that feature tropical motifs of plants, flowers, and birds. The silhouettes appear to be resting on the furniture pieces, as if their decorative function has been exhausted and left to the mercy of interior design trends. Sergio Rojas Chaves's *Build me up* addresses the ephemerality and interchangeability of certain motifs and ideas, but also of actual things such as clothing, interior design, or houseplants. Their easy availability makes us forget where they come from, what

paths they have taken, and where they go when we get rid of and dispose of them.

Sergio Rojas Chaves's choice of textiles for the silhouettes, in turn, alludes to established ideas and expectations of what tropical aesthetics should embody: motifs of colorful nature, pristine landscapes, and wild animals have become interchangeable and homogenized in the wake of globalized design trends and fast fashion, but these stereotypical images are also still supposed to represent a certain tropical lifestyle. Sergio Rojas Chaves observes that such imagery can have a very limiting effect on the contemporary aesthetic and cultural production of tropical countries. While we bring tropical houseplants into our living rooms, tourist expectations lead to the reproduction of tropical aesthetics in order to market cultural products; for example, in Costa Rican textile production or arts and crafts. The colorful motifs of orchids, palm trees, and fruit play into stereotypes and thereby reinforce the "exotic view" of the country in contrast to a "developed, Western world."

Sergio Rojas Chaves criticizes this exotic gaze as a perspective "from outside and across geographical or cultural boundaries. It depends on the maintenance of boundaries, lest cultural difference and the sense of astonishment and wonder it evokes in the beholder, be preserved. Like a cage that is looking for a bird, exoticism renders people, objects, and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery."

Room 3

Many of RHODA DAVIDS ABEL'S works have their origins in dreams, family stories, and mythological tales. The floating textile objects *Bittergoet/Bitter Things* are based on a dream image by Davids Abel: an elderly gentleman with a goat at his side. While researching her biographical roots, Rhoda Davids Abel learned that her Tanzanian great-grandfather was a goat and sheep herder. An oral myth existed among shepherds that goats that travelled over the land in the form of clouds, acting as messengers of news. Fusing a factual account and magical thinking, the artist transfers the image of the goat cloud onto oversized, illuminated mail-sacks; these become metaphorical vessels for conveying information. The flaps covering the open ends of the sacks are embroidered with various symbolically charged objects—cowrie shells, small bells, and the lids and closures of aluminum cans. These are worn around the ankles by spiritual healers and accompany their ritual dances as rhythm instruments. Rhoda Davids Abel describes

her artistic aims as creating “light vessels for heavy messages.” The exploration of death, trauma, and spirituality plays as much a role in her work as the attempt to anchor herself through making contact with her own ancestors—across generations and across boundaries of communication and cultural understanding. It is essential for Davids Abel’s works that they are created in collaboration with family members or local communities. The bags were sewn by a cousin who typically decorates textiles for coffins, and then hand-embroidered by the artist. The audio track consists of field recordings that Davids Abels recorded on her trip to Tanzania and South Africa. It documents personal encounters, reconstructs the specific acoustics of the area she visited around the goatherds’ mountain, and creates an atmospheric soundscape through which the cloud objects seemingly move. United here are the chirping of crickets, the rushing of the wind, voice recordings, dance steps, the sounds of tires, and the ringing of bells.

Rhoda Davids Abel thanks:

Janosch Abel, Petra, Thomas, Kathleen, Joscene Bambani-van der Westhuizen, Allistair Davids, Hendo Koordom, Josef Jeremias David, Priscilla Bamiley, Jonas Bambani, Lena Basson, Esther Mtewa, Ouma Maria Dimpie, Petrus Bamboenie, Ouma Elsie Hendricks, Ouma Maria Kibido, uncle Jacob Damara, Bushwa & Ronnie Mbendeni-Engelbrecht, Neo Khumalo, Ida, Xander, Peyton, Mona, Mona, Sizwe, Crispin, and Bear.

Sergio Rojas Chaves thanks:

Amanda Rojas Chaves, Viviana Zuñiga Ramírez, Jorge Salazar Arroyo, José Manuel Rojas, Katherina Boeglin Claramunt

TEAM STADTGALERIE

Director/curator: Eva-Maria Knüsel
Administration: Andrea Bracher
Exhibition technique: Verena Dietze
Exhibition support: Christoph Studer, Urslé von Mathilde
Graphic design: Studio Amanda Haas

EVENTS

Countershading

A geo-poetic activation in sound and poetry by Rhoda Davids Abel and Louise Martig
Thursday, March 13, 2025, 7pm

Rhoda Davids Abel and Louise Martig enliven the space with sound and poetry. Countershading invites you to cross boundaries in your imagination and dwell in various atmospheres resonating with echoes of speculative futures.

Guided Tour in Sign Language

with Janet Fiebelkorn and Eva-Maria Knüsel
Thursday, March 20, 2025, 6pm

Eva-Maria Knüsel, Stadtgalerie director, will give a tour of the exhibition, simultaneously translated into sign language by sign language interpreter Janet Fiebelkorn. The tour is intended for all hearing and non-hearing interested parties.

In Search of the Interior Jungle

Neighborhood tour with Sergio Rojas Chaves
Saturday, April 5, 2025, 2–4pm

“Help! there are too many houseplants in the world! It’s a population explosion, a green one! Millions, maybe billions, fill windows in suburbia and ghettos, condominiums and rural schools, on boats and in cook shacks. If rice is the salvation of hungry nations, greens which grow indoors are comforting an emotionally hungry world. From South Africa to Canada, windows have literally turned green.”

Maggie Baylis, *Plant Parenthood*, 1974

Sergio Rojas Chaves invites you on a walk through the neighborhood: with a telescope and binoculars, you will discover all kinds of tropical plants residing in offices, private homes, and shops in Bern, peeking out from behind windows and curtains. In search of the interior jungle, you will have the opportunity to get to know the city’s botanical identity and its non-human inhabitants better, as well as broaden your perspective on plant care.

Stadtgalerie

PROGR

Waisenhausplatz 30

3011 Bern

stadtgalerie@bern.ch

www.stadtgalerie.ch

Öffnungszeiten

Mittwoch – Freitag

14–18 Uhr

Samstag

12–16 Uhr



Kultur
Stadt Bern