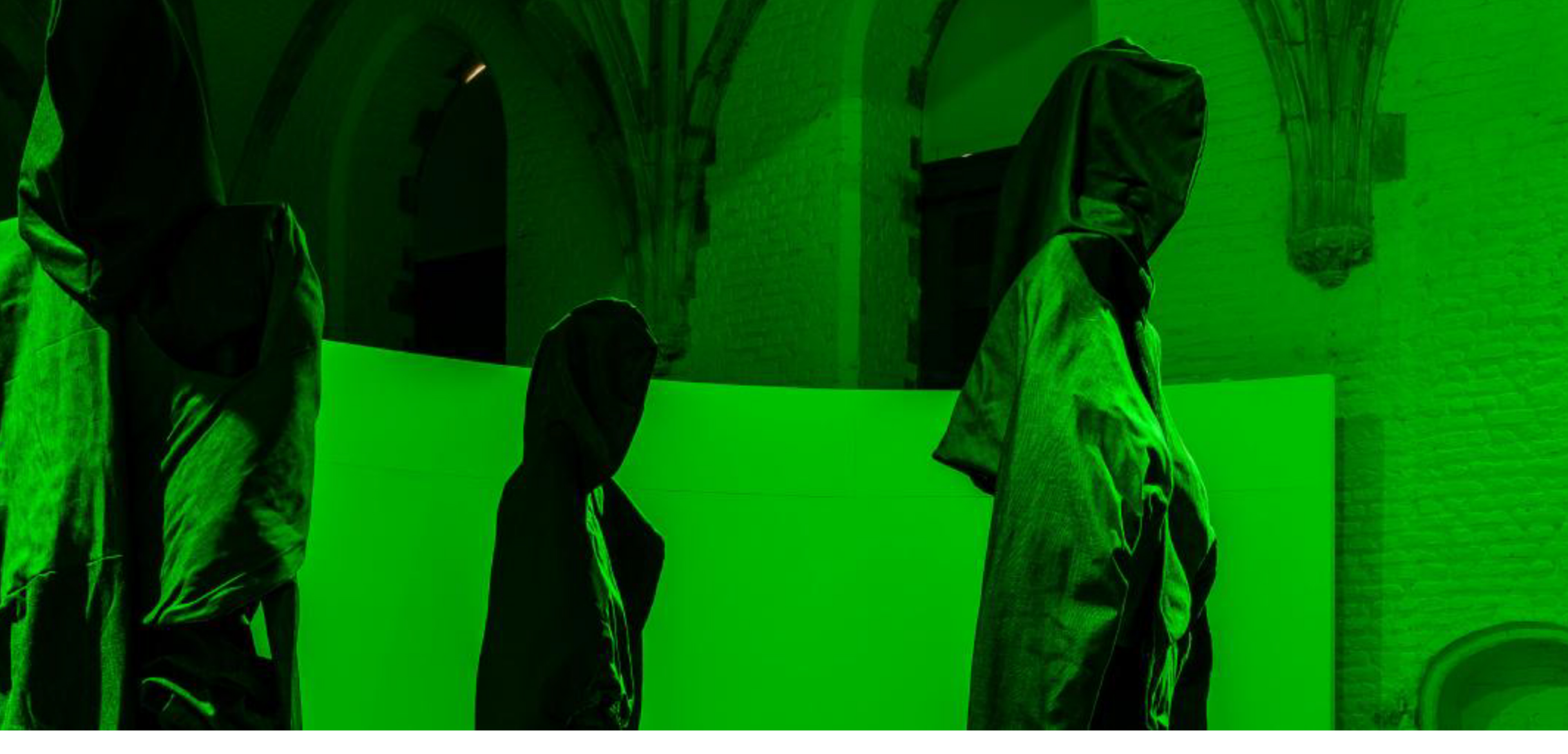# Sandra Mujinga Sheds a Light on a Troubled Dutch Past

At Vleeshal, Middelburg, the artist's darkened spaces shed light on both the city's colonial burden and the invisibility of Black bodies

BY **HERA CHAN** IN **REVIEWS** | 25 NOV 20

'Your eyes will adjust to the darkness and then you will see', the gallery attendant assured me as I entered Sandra Mujinga's solo exhibition, 'Midnight', at Vleeshal. Mujinga's practice manifests a certain lineage of Black studies that centres on the power of opacity. Diverging from the European Enlightenment-era concept that equates knowledge with seeing, the artist creates darkened spaces that force viewers to adjust their sensoria to her work. 'Midnight' follows the artist's largest solo show to date, held at Bergen Kunsthall in 2019. To complement both presentations, the spaces published *SONW: Sandra Mujinga* (2020), comprising interviews, essays and poems.

Sandra Mujinga, 'Midnight', 2020, exhibition view, Vleeshal, Middelburg. Courtesy: the artist; photograph: Gunnar Meier

The first of the show's two galleries houses four wearable sculptures bathed in green light; standing two and a half metres tall, the works give a haunting impression. Respectively named *Libwá* (Nine, all works 2019), *Mókó* (One), *Nkáma* (Hundred) and *Zómi* (Ten), each figure consists of a large, dark, faceless hood, whose textile folds fall to the ground, evoking an elephantine trunk, elongated arms and oversized feet. Flesh-like red plastic bulges out from the seams – apt in a building that used to be the city's meat market. Earlier presentations of these works at Croy Nielsen in 2019 were physically lessimposing, the textiles hanging limply and less structured. Here, the light alludes to the green screen used in video production: these works are studies in how to disappear in plain sight.

Sandra Mujinga, 'Midnight', 2020, exhibition view, Vleeshal, Middelburg. Courtesy: the artist; photograph: Gunnar Meier

In Octavia E. Butler's sci-fi novel *Fledgling* (2005), the protagonist, a vampire called Shori, has been genetically enhanced to have a higher dose of melanin, making her Black. Unlike her counterparts, she isn't harmed by daylight and operates with her survival instincts. The exhibition architecture of 'Midnight' blocks out all the natural lighting that usually permeates the galleries of Vleeshal, leaving the works in darkness. In an interview with Olamiju Fajemisin published in *SONW*, Mujinga also reflects on the relationship between Blackness and melanin. Family members warned her about the sun, saying it would make her skin darker. She notes: 'You become very aware of how the sun is continually changing, because the skin of the earth, which protects [it], gets thinner.'

Vleeshal is located in the city of Middelburg, which was one of the Netherlands' two major slave ports during the late 18th century. From here, between 1732 and 1807, the Middelburgsche Commercie Compagnie orchestrated the removal by force of 31,095 people from the African continent to be sold into slavery in the West Indies. The slave trade, as well as the sugar and coffee produced on plantations, is foundational to much of the Dutch economy and wealth. In this context, the darkness into which Mujinga plunges the viewer creates a fitting environment to reflect upon Middelburg's invisibilized historical burden. Based in Norway, and born in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mujinga creates works informed by an awareness of the global discourses that extend beyond the confines of Europe to define the continent's history of violence and human exploitation.
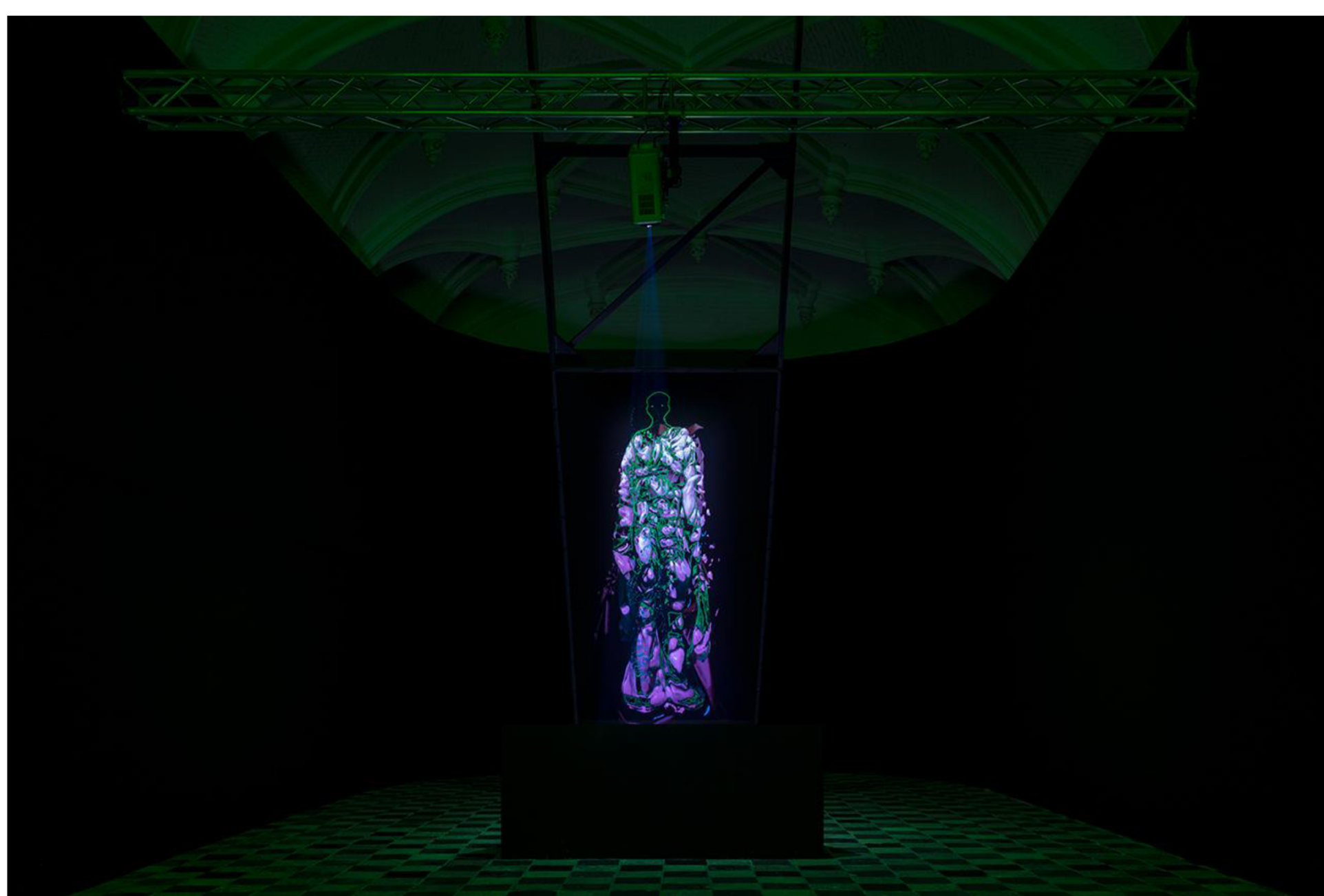
Sandra Mujinga, *Flo*, 2019, installation view, Vleeshal, Middelburg, 2020. Courtesy: the artist; photograph: Gunnar Meier

In the second gallery, a technologically conjured spirit dances through thin air. Named after Mujinga's mother, *Flo* is a technologia hologram video of DJ Adrian Blount (GodXXX Noirphiles), dressed in one of the artist's hooded sculptures, moving to a specially composed soundtrack of electric strings. It is a mesmerizing idol for this dark temple. The exhibition title acts as an homage to, and activation of, yet another shapeshifter: Midnight is the stage name of Ann-Marie Crooks, a Jamaican-American bodybuilder and wrestler active in the 1990s. As I walk through the space, Mujinga's dark-arts practice affixes the dematerialized image of *Flo* to my body. The edges of the room are not privy to me; but, then, not everyone deserves to see everything. In the words of Mujinga's poem 'Amnesia? Amnesia?' (2020): 'At the moment, it really doesn't matter how you ended up here.'

*Sandra Mujinga, **'Midnight'** is on view at Vleeshal, Middelburg, until 13 December 2020.*

Main image: Sandra Mujinga, 'Midnight', 2020, exhibition view, Vleeshal, Middelburg. Courtesy: the artist; photograph: Gunnar Meier