

ROBIN RHODE  
*The Abandoned Garden*

Opening: Sunday, October 8, from 11 am to 5 pm

Until January 28, 2024

From Wednesday to Sunday, 10 am - 1 pm | 3 - 6.30 pm

Robin Rhode's new exhibition at Galleria Tucci Russo, 'The Abandoned Garden', finds inspiration in the life and struggle of Afro-German poet and activist May Ayim by translating her evocative vision – 'Blues in Black and White'. Here, gravity meets yearning. As a musical and psychological riff, 'Blues in Black and White' deepens the burden and poetry of black life. As children of the African diaspora, Ayim then, Rhode now, have acknowledged the psychic consequence of disjuncture and displacement, which, for Ayim, tragically took its toll. Sensitive both to loss and to beauty, Rhode's visual translation edifies pain and sanctifies grace. His latest body of work on display at Galleria Tucci Russo is a vigil and a prayer.

It is against and within this mortal coil that Rhode presents 'The Abandoned Garden', a postlapsarian vision after The Fall, after systemic collapse. Which is why the artist speaks of 'conflict, displacement, environmental degradation, urban decay'. Rhode's artworks are not records of this collapse but counter-intuitive evocations of beauty amid ruin. In this regard, Rhode's is a universal reflection on the ruination of the Human Condition.

Rhode has repeatedly painted a specific wall in a Johannesburg township – a core backdrop and mise en scene – which speaks to the artist's commitment to place and to a generative psycho-geography, because places are ethical-political and emotional triggers. His wall is notably abraded and cracked, never a clean and uniform surface. Rhode's filigree evokes nature as a blue rather than a green idea. On this occasion, the blue bower prevails as an inner-city Eden after the fall. Against this stage and setting, Rhode places the schoolchildren, a boy and a girl, Adam and Eve. It is Eden as a definitional civilizational myth that accounts for our continued folly and sentiment. For Rhode, however, The Fall remains sustaining, a way to navigate a precipitous tightrope. His young couple perform their choreographed movements against and alongside this vision of a blue Eden, theirs, Rhode notes, a captured moment of 'transience and the fragility of beauty' and 'the inevitability of change'.

Susan Sontag states, 'Photographs are perhaps the most mysterious of all objects that make up, and thicken, the environment we recognize as modern'. In this spirit, Rhode refabricates the photographic image – as *Grafikwerke* – not only to maintain their singularity and authenticity but also their provenance.

However, the story built into 'The Abandoned Garden' is of utmost significance. It is what Rhode's images do that matters most: their vital optimism in a grimly bigoted heartsore time, their temperature of the state of the world. The decision to shoot the story in Johannesburg is not accidental. Not only is the city a mecca for the artist's imagination, but it is also a city in an acute state of siege and collapse, a city abandoned and betrayed. There, in its shattered and blighted fold, Rhode pictures a dancing couple in a rictus of poised moments ... beneath a gentle deluge of raindrops, perhaps seedlings ... along a leafy forest lane ... in the embrace of a splendid weed ... along the knot of delicately interlaced branches.

In this 'Abandoned Garden', the young couple leap, bend, wheel, fly, their movements balletic, their grace infinite. Is Robin Rhode reminding us of the indisputable fact that African youth is the earth's future? In this Anthropocene time, this derelict garden, this global state of moral collapse, and this catastrophic human-hewn error, there remains fecundity and promise. Because for all eternity, there, frozen in time, we see two young black figures splendidly entwined, together, always, in a ruined filigreed blue arcadia.

A text by Robin Rhode and Ashraf Jamal

Robin Rhode (Cape Town, South Africa, 1976) has lived and worked in Berlin since 2002. He studied art and film at University of Johannesburg and at AFDA - Association of Film and Dramatic Arts. His exhibitions include: Museum Voorlinden, Wassenaar, Netherlands (2021); Kunsthalle Krems, Krems, Austria (2020); Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Wolfsburg, Germany (2019); Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh, UK (2018); Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv, Israel (2017); Drawing Center, New York, USA (2015); Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, USA (2010). In 2005 and 2015 he participated in the Venice Biennale representing South Africa. His works are to be found in private and public collections including the Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea (Turin, Italy), GAM di Torino (Turin, Italy), Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington D.C., MoMA in New York, Walker Art Center of Minneapolis (Minnesota, USA) and Solomon R. Guggenheim in New York.