

Richard Saltoun Gallery

Everlyn NICODEMUS ‘What is it to you to be a woman?’

Art Basel Miami Beach 2021

Short Description

One of the strongest feminist voices to emerge from Africa in the past 50 years, Everlyn Nicodemus (b. 1954, Tanzania) is an artist, writer and curator. As an artist, her works centres on trauma and the role art can play in healing, while her research and curatorial interests focus on re-writing the history of Modern African Art. Nicodemus has spent the past 40 years in a moving diaspora, living in Sweden, France, Denmark, Belgium and now Edinburgh, Scotland. Nicodemus’s series of paintings *Woman in the World*, made in the 1980s, an exploration of women’s trauma and experiences, were made in Dar es Salaam, Calcutta, and Skive and form the basis of our presentation. This will be the artists first solo exhibition in over twenty years.

Long Description

For Art Basel Miami Beach, the gallery presents its first solo presentation of the work of Everlyn Nicodemus, one of the most important feminist voices to emerge from Africa in the past 50 years. Despite her significant contributions to research on black cultural trauma and a prolific body of work, Nicodemus has flown under the art world’s radar. For the past 40 years Nicodemus has been on a moving diaspora – from Tanzania to Sweden, France, Denmark and Belgium before finally settling in Scotland, where she now resides and works as a care worker. Nicodemus produces powerful works centred on personal and cultural trauma as well as the role art can play in healing. As an academic and writer, her research and curatorial interests focus on the history of Modern Africa Art.

Born in Kilimanjaro, Tanzania in 1954, Nicodemus’ ongoing contribution to the study of modern and contemporary art, as well as the intersection of art and trauma, cannot be overstated or underestimated. Between 1994 and 2000 she served on the advisory board of *Third Text*, the leading international journal dedicated to the critical analysis of contemporary art in the global field. In 2011, Nicodemus was awarded her PhD from Middlesex University following the submission of her thesis “African Modern Art and Black Cultural Trauma.” She subsequently co-edited the influential book *Modern Art in Africa, Asia and Latin America: An Introduction to Global Modernism*, which was published in 2012.

Her experience of racism first occurred after moving to Sweden in the early 1970s, where she encountered the notion of the “other.” This prompted her to study cultural anthropology at Stockholm University and this early training laid the groundwork for an extraordinary artistic practice that combines a breathtaking formal sensibility together with an obsessive exploration of postcolonial theory, Feminism and Black radical thought. On a return trip to Tanzania in the late 1970s, Nicodemus met a community of aid workers who came together as a group to draw and paint. These meetings triggered a transformative response in Nicodemus, kickstarting her artistic practice and leading to a solo exhibition at the National Museum, Dar es Salaam in 1980. Nicodemus continued to cultivate her artistic practice in Sweden and in 1983 received an invitation from the Skive Art Museum, Denmark to exhibit her work. This invitation developed into her series *Woman in the World*, a three-year exhibition project held in three locations: Skive, Denmark (1984); Dar el Salaam, Tanzania (1985); and Calcutta, India (1986).

Nicodemus travelled to each city to interview local women and asked the same question of the women she met: ‘what is it to you to be a woman?’. Meeting in community centres (Skive) and slums and local outlying villages (Dar es Salaam and Calcutta), the women entered into intimate conversations with the artist as she invited spontaneous reflections and testimonies. Sharing traumas and experiences, from domestic violence to arranged marriage, to forced labour and dowry practice, these open, intercultural dialogues were translated into a series of 65 paintings and poems unique to each city and community of women. Visually the paintings evoke the work of Harlem Renaissance painter Aaron Douglas or the abstract dreamlike style of Bob Thompson but Nicodemus’ distinctive approach to art making, which grappled with different social and cultural settings across the globe, went further, relating to and indeed anticipating the socially engaged practices that have emerged since the 1990s. This pivotal series brought Nicodemus to the attention of critics and curators such as Jean Fisher and Catherine de Zegher. This is the first time these works will have been exhibited together, marking this presentation a unique and historical moment in her practice, as Nicodemus calls on her audience to bear witness.