

MATTHEW BROWN LOS ANGELES

IRIS KENSMIL

Something Still Comes Back

Iris Kensmil constructs a visual history of *Black Modernity* from a Black feminist perspective: with reverence to the experience, activism and intellectual work of Black people in the Western world who have created a new phase of modernity's emancipatory aims and its progressive utopian claims. Over twenty years of studying, archiving and painting, Kensmil has developed a unique style, by which she accentuates the active role of Black movements and Black intellectuals, writers, musicians, artists and activists who are influencing the shape of our future.

For the sake of Black Modernity and through a decolonial thinking, Kensmil maintains a critical attitude toward modernism with its tendency to objectify and decontextualize the real, and limit the notion of subjectivity to the artist and their narrative “behind” the artwork. Stylistically Kensmil breaks with imagery in which “Black people and especially women are painted mostly as bodies; I paint them as the intellectuals they are.”

In collaboration with The Black Archives in Amsterdam, Kensmil's research for her 2019 Venice Biennale presentation titled *The New Utopia Begins Here* resulted in seven portrait paintings of Black female utopians. *The New Utopia...* focuses mainly—in view of her own background—on the Caribbean, United States and Europe, and was constructed from found images of bell hooks, Claudia Jones, Hermina Huiswoud, Sister Nancy and Suzanne Césaire. The paintings glow, with a soft light emanating from beneath the surface. This technique was used by 19th century Impressionists who discarded the traditional dark undercoat for a layer of white paint. Kensmil's portraits of Black feminist intellectuals honor and celebrate their place in history. Stylistically, the bright undercoat serves to light up historical figures who have been kept in the shadows, highlighting their importance for our present world. Other works of reverence from this period of research include a portrait of Mamphela Ramphele, and several works of Angela Davis. Notably, Kensmil met Davis in 2018 at The Black Archives, where she exhibited among other works, the drawing, *Angela Davis was acquitted June 5th 1972*.

The Black Archives was initiated in 2015 by Jessica de Abreu, Mitchell Esajas, Miguel Heilbron and Thiëmo Heilbron, and is currently managed by the New Urban Collective to provide book collections and literature which are not discussed, or rarely discussed, in schools and within universities, and to inspire conversations, activities and literature from Black and other perspectives.

In 2012 and 2013, Kensmil participated in an artist exchange program of Nubuke Foundation Accra, Ghana and Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam. During her stay in Ghana, the artist visited a series of slave-castles. At that time, Kensmil created works based on other aspects of Ghana's history, including paintings of W.E.B. Du Bois who spent his later years in Ghana (where he is buried) and depictions of Ghanaian chieftains. In 2020 Kensmil felt strong enough to paint her impressions of the slave-castles too. From her own photographs of these places, the artist produced *Dungeon*, the dungeon for enslaved men at Cape Coast Castle; *Crawl Hole*, from the dungeon the enslaved were forced to crawl through a low tunnel that ended at this hole near ‘the gate of no return’; *Gate*, the gate to the ships at Saint George

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Elmina; *Elmina Dungeon*; and *Elmina Gate*. These paintings point to what should be a collective memory around these spaces, inextricable from their architectures which still stand.

“Blues, soul and reggae are entertainment. However, as a Black person you can also hear back the experience of your world in these genres. My father used to play a lot of soul music at home, and such music has remained important to me.”

Detroit was ablaze following a police raid on July 23rd 1967. Singer and guitarist John Lee Hooker lived within the unrest and described his experiences in the song “The Motor City is Burning.” Kensmil memorializes Hooker in her piece, titled in solidarity *The Motor City is Burning*. In the same spirit Kensmil produced a series of female singers, under the title of Nina Simone’s song “Four Woman” which includes the works: *Four Woman: Nina Simone; Betty Davis; and Lauryn Hill*.

During Kensmil’s 2011 ISCP residency in New York, she visited the Malcolm X and Dr. Betty Shabazz Memorial and Educational Center at the Audubon Ballroom, where Malcolm X was assassinated. The powerful impression of this visit prompted a visual memorial titled, *February 21, 1965*, depicting Betty Shabazz, Malcolm X’s wife and fellow activist, after identifying her husband’s body in the New York morgue. In the triptych, Shabazz’s portrait is between two side panels based on police photos of the Audubon Ballroom following the murder.

After the murder of George Floyd, Kensmil began a series of paintings about the impact on families of racist murders in the western world. *Commemoration*, the first piece in this new series, is based on a found photo of Dominika Stanley and Charles Jones, whose seven year old daughter, Aiyana Jones was shot and murdered by police officer, Joseph Weekley while his unit was being filmed for the reality TV show “The First 48” on A&E.

Post Blackness and *Genelva in Black Dress* are two works in a larger series of drawings and paintings of Black Dutch women from the artist’s life. Kensmil is preparing a future performance and installation with six young Black women from the Netherlands to talk about the heritage of Black intellectuals, and the importance of this for contemporary discussion. This new body of work also includes drawings and material from the artist’s archive. In the installation the women will be presented in portraits, for which the works on paper titled, *Zaire* and *Helené* are studies.

Iris Kensmil works from a Black European feminist narrative, but her critical attitude also extends to the way of presenting. Working within this lens of critical thought, Kensmil offers a unique sensibility to the complexities tied within historical and contemporary life, as archived throughout art history.

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Something Still Comes Back is Iris Kensmil's first solo exhibition in Los Angeles.

Born in 1970 in Amsterdam, Kensmil lived the first half of her youth in Paramaribo, Suriname. The artist lives and works in Amsterdam.

Kensmil represented the Netherlands at the Venice Biennale 2019 in the Dutch Pavilion. Other recent solo exhibitions include *Art Institute Melly*, Rotterdam, NL (2021-22); *Women Make History. Feminism in the Age of Transnationalism* at the Haifa Museum of Art, ISR (2019); *Blues Before Sunrise* at the Museum Kranenburgh, Bergen, NL (2019); *Shifting Colours*, with Willem de Rooij at Tropenmuseum Amsterdam (2014); *No sidon na bakra sturu*, with Charl Landvreugd; *6to8months* at Kara Walker Studio, New York, NY (2010).

Her work has been shown in collection presentations at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam (2017 / 2021) and Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (2018-2021); other group exhibitions include *1 Million Roses*, Albertinum, Dresden, DE, (2021); *Here. Black in Rembrandt's Time*, Museum Het Rembrandthuis, Amsterdam, NL (2020); *Neither Black/Red/Yellow Nor Women*, curated by Nikita Yingqian Cai, Times Art Center, Berlin (2019-20); *Black and Revolutionary* at The Black Archives, Veronsur, Amsterdam (2018); *Evolution/Revolution/Revision*, Bread House at the Tsaritsino Museum, Moscow (2017); *How Far, How Near* at Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2014); *Time Trade Travel* at SMBA, Amsterdam, Accra, Ghana (2012); *Mutualism* at Co-Prosperity, Chicago, IL (2011); *Monumentalism* at Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam (2010); *Wakaman: Drawing Lines, Connecting Dots* at Fort Zeelandia, Paramaribo, Suriname (2009); and *Respect! Forms of community* at Musée Dar-Si-Said and Palais el-Badi, Marrakech, Morocco (2005).

Kensmil acted as an organiser for the *Becoming More* caucus at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven and created an installation for the collection 'Study in Black Modernity (2017)'.