

# CCQ

a creative conversation



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## That Beautiful Kiss That Doesn't Happen

Madagascan artist, Joël Andrianomearisoa, met **Ric Bower** at the opening of his solo exhibition, *Last Year at Antananarivo*, to talk about colonial legacies, the colour black, and the relationship of his culture with death.

**Joël Andrianomearisoa:** This is the first time that I have made work using my own memories of Madagascar. I built the show around found imagery and film. I am an artist, though, so my approach was both complicated and imperfect. I like the idea that everything we do exists in a continuous loop – our lives, our breath, our history – then, sometimes, certain incidents intervene to disrupt that cycle, making room for something else to appear, before the whole process is repeated over again.

**Ric Bower:** You have a reputation for using a lot of black in your work...

**JA:** The black that I have used in much of my earlier work, is about darkness. When you close your eyes, in the dark, different things have the capacity to be revealed –

smells, textures, even little chinks of light can become apparent in the darkness.

**RB:** There's a certain reverence, a religious sensibility, which you seem to be giving to the rows of black wrapped objects in *Last Year at Antananarivo*.

**JA:** We dedicate about 75% of our lives to the dead in Madagascar. Even when we are drinking, there is a tradition to pour a little alcohol in the corner of the room for the memory of people that have died.

When people die, we wrap them in layers of silk. If you are rich or well known, you might have, say, 50 layers; if you are not, you might just have two. My grandmother died about a year ago. She had about 20 layers, the first one referring to her as a child and the subsequent ones being about →





1st spread:  
*What really happened last year? Walk through this door with me. Show me your eyes, again. Try to remember.* Joël Andrianomearisoa, 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Tyburn Gallery

current spread, left to right:  
*Joana Francesa / Jeanne la Française.* Joël Andrianomearisoa, 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Tyburn Gallery

*Mireille Rakotomalala.* Joël Andrianomearisoa, 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Tyburn Gallery

*Mathangi Arulpragasam.* Joël Andrianomearisoa, 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Tyburn Gallery

following spread, left page, first column, from top:  
*Duration: continuous loop.* Joël Andrianomearisoa, 2016. Image courtesy the artist, FTM Archives, Antananarivo, Madagascar and Tyburn Gallery

*Where have you been?* Joël Andrianomearisoa, 2016. Courtesy Joël Andrianomearisoa FTM Archives, Antananarivo, Madagascar and Tyburn Gallery

*Your eyes tell me stories of Paris.* Joël Andrianomearisoa, 2016. Images courtesy the artist, FTM Archives, Antananarivo, Madagascar and Tyburn Gallery

*Last Year in Antananarivo.* Joël Andrianomearisoa, 2016. Courtesy the artist, FTM Archives, Antananarivo, Madagascar and Tyburn Gallery

following spread, left page, second column  
*Do you remember?* Joël Andrianomearisoa, 2016. Images courtesy the artist, FTM Archives, Antananarivo, Madagascar and Tyburn Gallery

*Remember Iarivo?* Joël Andrianomearisoa, 2016. Images courtesy the artist, FTM Archives, Antananarivo, Madagascar and Tyburn Gallery

following spread, right page  
*Untitled.* Joël Andrianomearisoa, 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Tyburn Gallery

her family. The last one was a red piece, like a dress; her last dress. After you die, every 10 or 20 years your body is exhumed and rewrapped.

Anyway. In the same way, the wrapping of objects in my work is to do with the memory of them. The technique for fabricating them is first to wrap them and then to remove the objects from their casing, leaving behind just the black wrapping, the shell, a hollow memory.

**RB:** You've placed the wrapped objects in an unexpected way in the gallery space; you almost trip over them as you walk in.

**JA:** Yes, when people expect a specific thing or approach, I don't want to give it to them. When I'm about to kiss someone, it's just at that moment that I might find I don't want to kiss them.

**RB:** Delicate disruption and looking at things in alternative ways appear to play a large part in your practice. Similarly, you also seem to eschew the political or historical in any overt way, but both are very much present in your work.

**JA:** What people know most about the past of Madagascar is the colonisation of the country by the French; if you go there now, people are speaking French and there is a general sense of 'French-ness'. My own experience of colonialism is based almost entirely on images and on the memories of my grandparents and my parents. Sometimes, they spoke of that time with a certain fondness; my grandmother would say, "Oh, when the French were here, the city was so clean; everything was more beautiful somehow..." Many of the forms we experience in Madagascar originate from the time of our

colonisation; but of course this implication is constructed. There is no perfect connection to the Madagascar of that time.

**RB:** You seem to have an awareness of the ephemerality of each period the country passes through.

**JA:** It's all ephemeral. When the French left Madagascar in the early 1960s, just as they were leaving Vietnam and Algeria, there was a brief time when we were both French and independent at the same time. When my grandmother was looking back through the effects of my grandfather after he died, she discovered he still had a French passport.

Geographically, Madagascar is part of Africa, but our culture is also totally Asiatic; it's a complex country. We are three times the size of France, but we are an island. If you come from an island and stay there, you have

to dream about something else; you have to imagine the connection.

**RB:** So, are you facilitating a process of imagined connection?

**JA:** Maybe... or just trying to disturb something.

**RB:** Can you offer an indication as to how you go about disrupting the direct reading of a subject, interrupting the conclusions that are so easy to slip into when dealing with subjects like Madagascar?

**JA:** I came across an archive from the Colonial period during my research for the show. I spent time with it, turning pages, just blowing off the dust and looking, and I came across this particular image of a group of people. Written on the back was 'The Malagasy Ball, 19th

Century' and I decided that this was the perfect image to use as the basis for my enquiry. I wondered how I could talk about the glamour that the title suggested, when in fact the image, as we read it now, is very unglamorous. I decided that the image wouldn't have to be part of the hung show, but I wanted to use it as a vehicle. I worked with it over a period of time, chopping it and trimming it to different sizes.

While I was working on this, I was reminded of the film *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961) by Alain Resnais; it is a languorous and elegant film. There is nothing concrete connecting the actors with the story; they pass one another by – like that beautiful kiss that doesn't happen. There is no touch, there is no sensuality; everything is suspended.

**RB:** What role do images play in your practice?

**JA:** We don't take time anymore to focus just on one thing, on one image. What I'm trying to do is to establish a link with something very small, something that you might have forgotten, something that might even be forbidden. For example, it's ok to cry when you watch a film, but it's not generally acceptable to cry in an exhibition. In an exhibition, it's more about references and effect. I want people to be able to cry in my exhibitions.

**RB:** What processes of translation occurred between the source image that you found in the archive and your fully-fledged exhibition – the cloth pieces, that you refer to as paintings, and the black wrapped objects?

**JA:** The clothing in the archive image and the people depicted present a quite particular identity. I started tearing up fabric and attaching the strips to canvas. And, then, —→



I came across a woman selling second-hand saris and felt that was the right material to use, both because Madagascar and India have a very strong connection, and because it made sense aesthetically. I also took the objects from the photograph as a starting point for my wrapped objects. I added in other items – everyday ones, like a bottle from the cafe next door – to the collection. I wanted to disturb the perfection of the memory and of what the photograph shows.

**RB:** Many of the sari paintings have a strong horizon line. Why is that?

**JA:** I began my career training to be an architect in Paris. I learnt the importance of the horizon then. My main references were the Bauhaus and Malevich. When you're designing a building, the starting point is always a line from which you create two surfaces, two elements; outside and inside. That duality can be pushed much further of course: life and death, hell and paradise, light and darkness. The horizon line represents a fragile moment, the indiscernible point at which something can change. Also, you automatically have to think about proportion – what's below it, what's above. It's an interesting problem when hanging a work on a wall: do you hang in relation to the eye or the body?

**RB:** How has your training in architecture – a profession that usually sets out with the intention of creating something permanent – influenced your desire to work with the liminal and the ephemeral?

**JA:** As an architect you can build, but you can also destroy. When I had my interview to get into l'École Speciale d'Architecture in Paris, I said that I was there to discover, not to understand. For the first two years, I studied hard, learning about volume, social implication and history, so that I could establish some context within which to work, some grounding. For the second part of the course, I decided to try and discover the point at which ephemerality ends and permanence begins.

My final presentation was a piece of textile, a black square. As with so much of my work, the significance lay, to a greater extent, in the intention rather than in the forms that I had actually constructed—**CCQ**

*Joël Andrianomearisoa's solo exhibition, Last Year at Antananarivo was at Tyburn Gallery, London from 4 October – 22 December 2016*

[tyburngallery.com](http://tyburngallery.com)

