

FREE EXHIBITION GUIDE



# Shiraz Bayjoo

## Searching for Libertalia

MEZZANINE GALLERY  
19 JANUARY - 17 MARCH 2019



## INTRODUCTION

*Searching for Libertalia* is a pseudo-archive presented by artist Shiraz Bayjoo linking three historical narratives about the island of Madagascar. The exhibition intertwines the island's history of piracy with the fictional story of Captain Misson, slave trading by the French East India Company between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and the Malagasy fight for independence from France's Vichy government during the Second World War. The interlinking between these distinct narratives reveals the repetitive nature of history. *Searching for Libertalia* also underlines histories of liberation and anti-colonial movements in African post-colonies such as Pan-Africanism and Négritude, and their unavoidable relationship to questions of race and identity for Africans and the African diaspora today.

In addition to the video works, *Searching for Libertalia* also includes paintings and archive materials which the artist researched and sourced from across Europe. These items are displayed in luxurious frames, magnificent wall cabinets, and an imposing wooden vitrine alluding to the influence of domestic, religious and institutional spaces in which the creation of historical narratives takes place. The assemblage of archival photographs makes visible the characters and stories that were, and are still, marginalised by Western history. Consequently, the exhibition celebrates and cherishes individuals such as slaves and queens of Madagascar, within a context of violent conquest and oppressive



**Governors - Diptych** (2018)  
Courtesy of Shiraz Bayjoo  
and Ed Cross Fine Art

colonisation. The exhibition seeks to shift dominant narratives, bringing to the fore the histories of the oppressed, the marginalised and colonised peoples to be more visible within history, challenging the dominant gaze.

The island of Madagascar is believed to have been first settled around 2,000 years ago by Indonesians, followed by Arab traders up until modern European colonisation, by the Portuguese in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and finally the French in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Each wave of settlement built the island's population and its infrastructure whilst also defining the cultural, social, economic and political systems until the island's independence in 1960.



This exhibition doesn't present these events in a specific chronological order. Rather, through three key narratives created by the artist, visitors experience three different Malagasy stories and histories together in one space.

The first video work, presented on the left-hand wall as you enter the gallery, explores the island's history of piracy. It also introduces Captain Misson, a fictional character taken from Daniel Defoe's 1724 novel, *A General History of the Pyrates*. The story depicts Misson as a hero; without violence Misson takes over a fictional place he names Libertalia and lives in harmony with the 'Liberi' population. The progressive nature of the story, which promotes

equality and freedom, contrasts starkly with the imperialist era in which it was written – a period of conquest, slavery and bloodshed. The second video work further emphasises the utopian quality of Defoe's vision for Madagascar and the Indian Ocean region. Here, the narrative looks at the real pirate and tribal history of Misson, the Sakalava queen, the story of Captain Tew and the creation of the kingdom of Betsimisaraka which all led to the slave trade. The actions of the French East India Company are introduced through this narrative – a parallel story about global power, monopoly of resources and forced labour.

Finally, in the third video work, Bayjoo explores the colonial administration of the island when controlled by the French government initially, under Joseph Gallieni, and then by the Vichy government during the Second World War. Gallieni's main implementation was the 'Politique des Races', a racial policy which administrated people according to their race, a model followed by all French colonies. The forced settlement of this government on the island led to the exile of the queen of Madagascar, Queen Ranavalona III.

Collectively, the various artworks in the exhibition connect fictional utopian stories and histories, highlighting the practices and processes of a state under colonial administration and critiquing this political system. The narratives of the queens and kings of Madagascar are therefore celebrated and given visibility, and the terrors of slavery, colonisation and forced labour are shown in their complete horror.

## SHIRAZ BAYJOO IN CONVERSATION WITH CINDY SISSOKHO

**CS:** Where does the title of the exhibition come from?

**SB:** *Searching for Libertalia* draws from the name of the settlement that Captain Misson creates, the utopian Libertalia. It is a nationless land which does not define people by their 'race'. I was using the fictional story of Libertalia as a template with which to explore the history of Madagascar and to open up questions of collective identity in the context of post colonialism.

**CS:** The Indian Ocean region, where you were born, is a dominant focus in your artistic practice. A region made of islands and multiple complex histories which are very much part of your identity. Could you tell us more about yourself and this region in relation to this project?



**Queen Rana** (2018)  
Courtesy of Shiraz Bayjoo  
and Ed Cross Fine Art



**Un Appel** (2018)  
Courtesy of Shiraz Bayjoo

**SB:** It was important for me to look into the Indian Ocean region and its complexity as someone coming from that region. In comparison to transatlantic discourses for example, the histories and the experiences of the people from the Indian Ocean region have not been as visible. With this project, I wanted to move away from the way people and geography have been categorised from academic and museological approaches. This project should make you question what creole is by encompassing the experiences of wider people including those from India and South East Asia. These experiences and histories begin much earlier than western history books describe. Extensive research on the multiple traumas in the Indian Ocean region has never been done before and it needs to be examined and shared widely. It's my intention that *Searching for Libertalia* helps to formulate and platform this narrative.



Archive images used to inform Shiraz Bayjoo's ongoing research

**CS:** The narratives within *Searching for Libertalia* are told through different media – film, painting, installation. Tell us more about the multidisciplinary nature of your practice.

**SB:** It's important for me to work with multiple art forms from paintings to film and performance. This allows the audience to experience stories and histories in different ways, and my aim is to try and subvert western historical narratives that have dominated our psyche. Afrofuturism is a great example of how certain artists challenge Western perceptions of Africa and Africans and how it replaces them with Africa's own representations.

For example, the sculptural panels in the exhibition representing Malagasy queens and kings intend to celebrate these figures who have been overlooked or erased from history books, and make them iconic. I like subverting the language of orientalism and bringing these figures to the fore.

**CS:** The exhibition presents three new bodies of work: films you made in Madagascar, narrated stories and a collage of archive materials. The archive has a strong presence throughout. What is the importance of the archive within your work, and this project in particular?

**SB:** The videos show places that are not always on the map of Madagascar, therefore not visible. Locations were picked for archaeological reasons. By putting in parallel the story of Misson and those of the slaves, I developed a certain aesthetic. I was looking for places that resonated and spoke for themselves such as the ports where the land meets the sea or the forest. For example, some of the footage shows a stone engraved with names – a place where the Dutch colonisers used to keep slaves and prepare them before taking them to Indonesia. I wanted to show how the places are heavy with the trauma of the histories that were taking place. I place archive footage alongside each other that differs from one narrative to the next to allude to

◀ *Continues from overleaf*

multiple accounts and the layering of stories. The varied media in the show also intends to add to this effect. I also play with colour to emphasise a shift in mood, drawing out positive moments such as resistance, liberation and freedom. This is where the power shifts and people of the island come together, and where créolisation logically manifests and takes place as one of the main places.

When making the film, I had in mind that question of how do you place these images into people's mind in relation to this region's history? This comes from my own memories of the place when I was a child. In the films, I present archive images to appear as if they are sliding on from one to the next, as if the viewer is clicking through slides in a museum. At times it also appears as if you are looking at scenes through a telescope. These ways of presenting the images intends to allude to looking at the world with a specific gaze and viewing these stories from a filtered reality depending on one's perspective.

**CS:** *The works and materials are displayed in beautiful wooden bespoke furniture. Why this choice of furniture in your work?*

**SB:** I remembered visiting East African museums when I was a child which had similar display furniture with panelling made of sapele wood, one of the materials used to make pirogue canoes and furniture. I liked the connection between the East and the West aesthetics. I also wanted to create



a domestic space within the gallery, to remind the audience that home is where the politics emerge – not just within institutions. Whether a formal gathering or general conversations in the home, decisions around conquest and colonisation will have emerged in these spaces as much as plans of resistance and actions for liberation. The furniture was designed to relate to domestic and human scale to create an intimate space for visitors.



*Malagasy Women* (2018)  
Courtesy of Shiraz Bayjoo  
and Ed Cross Fine Art

**Shiraz Bayjoo** (b. Mauritius, lives and works in London) is a contemporary multi-disciplinary artist who works with video, painting, photography, performance, and installation. His research-based practice focuses on personal and public archives addressing cultural memory and postcolonial nationhood in a manner that challenges dominant cultural narratives. Bayjoo studied at the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff. He was artist in residence at Whitechapel Gallery in 2011 and has exhibited with Tate Britain and the Institute of International Visual Arts (Iniva). He is a recipient of the Gasworks fellowship and Arts Council England Grants for the Arts.

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*Civilised Hova Woman* (2018)  
Courtesy of Shiraz Bayjoo  
and Ed Cross Fine Art (cover)



*Missionary* (2018)  
Courtesy of Shiraz Bayjoo  
and Ed Cross Fine Art

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**Libertalia** is a fictional place named by the fictional pirate **Captain Misson** who settled there in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It is believed to be located on the island of Madagascar.

**Captain Misson** is a fictional character from the fictional novel *A General History of Piracy* (1728), a novel popularly known to be written by Daniel Defoe.

**Captain Tew** is famous for his piracy in the **Indian Ocean region**. He is mostly known for his *Pirate Round* sailing trail. He has a role in the development of Madagascar. He was believed to have had a role in the **Libertalia** government, alongside **Captain Misson**.

**Vichy Government** (1940-1944) was a collaborationist French government which was led by **Marshal Pétain** during the Second World War during France's occupation by Germany.

**Marshal Pétain** (1856-1951) was a French general and leader of the **Vichy government**.

**Joseph Gallieni** (1849-1916) was a French military and colonial administrator who implemented the '**Politique des Races**', a racial policy categorising and administrating 'races' in all French colonies. He was the French Minister of War in 1915 and his forced settlement of the island led to the exile of **Queen Ranaivalona III**. He then became general governor of Madagascar.

**French East India Company** was created in 1664 later after the creation of the Dutch and the **English East India Company** created in 1660 by Queen Elizabeth 1<sup>st</sup>. The company gave the right to the United Kingdom to own for 20 years total trade ownership in the region; a model which set the future of the colonial empire and which gave them the monopoly of economic power.

**Philippe Tsiranana** (1912-1978) was the first president of Madagascar from 1959 to 1972.

**Ratsimilaho** (1694-1750) was a ruler of the east region of Madagascar, known as **Betsimisaraka**. He is said to be the son of the English pirate, Thomas Tew, and a Malagasy queen regnant, Antavaratra Rahena.



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**Betsimisaraka** was a kingdom led by **Ratsimilaho** and a collective of people from the **Betsimisaraka** ethnic group.

**Queen Ranaivalona III** (1861-1917) was the last queen of Madagascar. She reigned from 1883 to 1897 until she was obliged to exile when the French government declared Madagascar as French colony and abolished the monarchy in 1897.

**Queen Binao** (1867-1923) was the queen of the **Sakalava** people and reigned in the north eastern coast of Madagascar from 1881-1923.

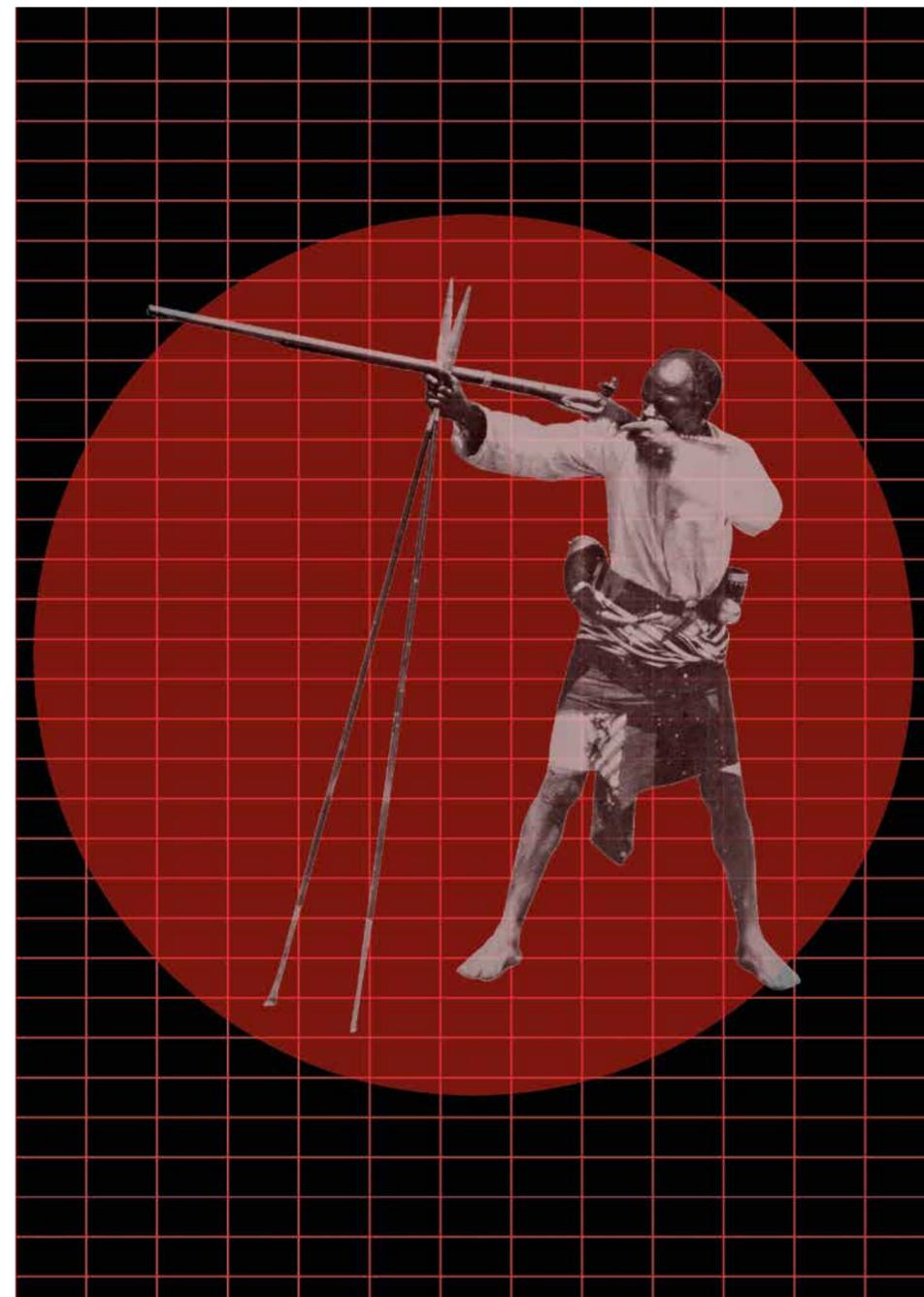
**Frantz Fanon** (1921-1961) was an anti-colonial intellectual and psychoanalyst, well-known for writing *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961).

**Négritude** is a cultural movement launched in 1930s in Paris by three black students from France's colonies in Africa and the Caribbean territories, named **Aimé Césaire**, **Léon Gontran-Damas** and **Léopold Cédar Senghor**. These black intellectuals converged around issues of race identity and black internationalist initiatives to combat French imperialism. The movement signalled an awakening of race consciousness for blacks in Africa and the African diaspora.<sup>1</sup>

**Pan-Africanism** is a movement which reflects the complexities of black political and intellectual thought over two hundred years, and a range of political views. It is a belief that African peoples, both on the African continent and in the **diaspora**, share not merely a common history, but a common destiny.<sup>2</sup>

**Créolisation** is a process in which **Créole** culture emerge in the New World. As a result of **colonisation** there was a mixture between people of indigenous, African and European descent, which came to be understood as **créolisation**. The mixing of people brought a cultural mixing which ultimately led to the formation of new identities.

## GLOSSARY



**Decolonisation** is a process that began, in most African territories, at the close of Second World War, African leaders gained greater political power under European rule. In the decades that followed independence, they worked to shape the cultural, political, and economic character of the postcolonial state. **Decolonisation** is a process as well as a historical period.

**Colonial Administration** is a procedure under which the Western world has dominated and kept its power from the colonies in order to maintain monopoly of resources, people and free or forced labour through specific mode of categorisation according to class, race and gender. **Colonisation** is the practice of establishing territorial dominion over a colony by an outside political power characterized by exploitation, expansion, and maintenance of that territory.

**Afrofuturism** is a term which was coined in 1993 in Mark Dery's book *Flame Wars*, which seeks to reclaim black identity through art, culture, science fiction and political resistance. It is an intersectional lens through which to view possible futures or alternate realities. It is as much a reflection of the past as a projection of a brighter future in which black and African culture does not hide in the margins of the white mainstream.<sup>3</sup>

**Orientalism** is a way in which writers, philosophers and colonial administrators dealt with the 'otherness' of Eastern culture, customs and beliefs by imagining, emphasizing and distorting differences of cultures as compared to that of the Western world. The ground-breaking work of intellectual Edward Said has led the cultural and political phenomenon around **orientalism**, through his book of the same name, published in 1978.

1. Bertrade Ngo-Ngijol Banoum, *Négritude*, Lehman College  
2. Minkah Makalani, *Pan-Africanism*, Rutgers University  
3. Bolanle Austen Peters, *This is Afrofuturism*, 2018