



The House of Le Cap (2020)

Grace, Hope and Gratitude:

*Celebration and subversion
in Haneem Christian's ode
to Kirvan Fortuin*



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It is our pleasure to welcome three photographic prints by emerging photographic artist Haneem Christian, from the body of work *The Memorial Ball* (2020), to the UCT Works of Art Collection. *The Memorial Ball* (2020), which was exhibited at *Ebony/Curated* in Franschoek, celebrates the life and contributions of Kirvan Fortuin – who was tragically murdered in Macassar in June of 2020. Fortuin was an award-winning dancer/choreographer, a prominent figure in the local ballroom dancing scene, a queer rights activist and the founder and mother figure of *The House of le Cap*, which is well-known for creating a space for celebration, support, and education for the LGBTQI+ community in Cape Town. Pictured through Christian's striking and solemn portraits are close associates of Fortuin, otherwise known as children of the *House of le Cap*, who were loyal attendees of the nightclub at which Fortuin hosted several memorable balls. *The Memorial Ball* (2020) shares in the painful loss of a mother figure, as family members celebrate the memory of her grace in order to reconcile her loss, finding sanctum and joy through queered familial bonds. As a constructive form of disobedience against the normative convention of the memorial itself, Christian reflects the warmth, inner strength, and poise of the family of the *House of le Cap*, as a light that continues to shine even in their darkest hour.

Not only is it rare to encounter a body of work that is so directly linked with an instance of gratuitous homophobic violence, it is also notable that Christian has incorporated individuals so closely connected to the subject as active participants in the work. The result of their collaboration is thus a profoundly personal expression of celebration and gratitude in the face of mourning. The symbolic occasion of the artworks in the series reveal Christian's intention to contribute to the sharing of queer narratives, a foundational element of her artistic practice. In this way, *The Memorial Ball* (2020) feels more collaborative than independently produced. Furthermore, the intention to offer a positive reflection on the loss of an iconic figure is highly

appropriate given the significance of Kirvan Fortuin's artistic career and social influence.

As a student of Gender Studies, Haneem Christian is concerned with the marginal nature of Trans subjectivity and uses her platform as a visual artist to create a constructive space for self-representation, celebration and queer belonging. In view of this conceptual focus, Christian is conscious of the limitation of her position as someone who is not transsexual and thus proceeds to act as a point of access. Christian has also worked in and around notions of coloured identity, which is important to mention due to the general lack of coloured representation in the realm of the art market. Additionally, the case of Kirvan Fortuin connects back to the community of Macassar, which is regarded as a predominantly 'coloured' area. Thus, the inclusion of Christian's *The Memorial Ball* (2020), which is connected to issues of homophobia imbricated with the 'coloured' community, is indicative of a step towards filling the representational gaps in the collection. However, Christian's focus in *The Memorial Ball* (2020) is on the specific expression of Trans identities and is most impactful for that alignment.

As a centrepiece of the series, *The House of Le Cap* (2020) provides an alternative view of the family memorial, through a celebratory mode of representation that directly contrasts the traditional western conventions around bereavement and loss. Evading the convention of wearing all black as a signification of solemnity, the children of the *House of le Cap* congregate in bright white dresses, rose coloured pants, high heels, glittering eyeshadow, and lavish church hats. The diversity of styles, textures and patterns seen through their dress speaks to the intricate intersections of selfhood at the heart of the gathering. The champagne-like gold hue of the curtain in the background, creates the impression of a stage, highlighting the performative aspect of the ballroom. The detail of the wooden floorboards connotes the familiarity of a communal space, a dance studio,



Chenal Le Cap (2020)



Matte le Cap (2020)

a civic centre, a school hall. Standing in silent composure, the central figure holds a photograph of Kirvan Fortuin, encased in a natural wooden frame. The image is adorned with a white satin sash inscribed with 'Mother of the Year'. Three glistening silver tiaras, bejeweled with rhinestones, rest on top of the picture frame. In conjunction with the use of dress, the backdrop of the curtain and the satin sash, *The House of Le Cap* (2020) draws upon the iconography of the beauty pageant — a possible reference to the role of queer identities in the legacy of the Spring Queen pageant and Miss Gay Western Cape. Even though Christian's work is very much rooted in non-binary identities in the present moment, the timeless atmosphere pays tribute to the presence of queer bodies throughout history.

Matte le Cap (2020) is the only standalone portrait from the Memorial Ball (2020). The softness of the expression touches the tension between fragility and strength that underwrites the occasion of the memorial, in contrast to the jovial atmosphere of the ball. The image is also a declaration of Christian's technical ability as a photographer, having captured the beauty of the central figure in striking detail. The glowing light accentuates their strong yet delicate features, and, coupled with the contrast of silvery-blue eyeshadow — leaves a lasting impression of composure and grace. On the other hand, Wesley, Bernal, *Chenal Le Cap* (2020) portrays kinship and playfulness, as the repetition of reclining pose expresses the unity of queer affiliation.

Haneem Christian's Memorial Ball (2020) is arguably their most impactful work to date. Having fused notions of memorial and celebration as a means of healing, the photographic series honours the optimistic spirit of the ball. The body of work responds to an unprecedented act of violence by continuing in their refusal to conform, by continuing to redefine the nature of queer orientations by forging new familial bonds. Christian's photography honours the significance of Kirvan Fortuin's work

within the LGBTQI+ community and projects the complex beauty of the Trans identities. *The House of Le Cap* (2020) emphasises the opportunities presented by the queer family gathering as a site of refuge and kinship. The occasion of the ball draws upon feelings of hope and joy, calling for a space where multiple modalities of self can find a place to belong. Despite the loss of their mother, the community of the House of le Cap remain, unwavering, as a symbol of queer futurity. Simultaneously shouldering the burden of loss and the promise of new life, the family continues to carry the spirit of celebration as a way of redefining remembrance and showing gratitude.

Written by Jared Leite