

COVERS

Art, Decolonisation and Care

Pierre Mertens
Moshi, 2025- 2026

COVERS – Moshi Tanzania

The exhibition COVERS in Moshi (2025–2026) is not a standalone project, but part of a longer artistic trajectory rooted in contextual art.

In Africa, Pierre Mertens has developed interventions in postcolonial contexts, including several participations in the East African Biennale.

The exhibition brings together a selection of these earlier works, shown in dialogue with new contributions by Tanzanian artists, in the context of the opening of the SHARE Global Knowledge Centre, a place dedicated to accessible and affordable care for children with birth defects.

At the centre of the exhibition is a collaborative work, based on a concept by Pierre Mertens, developed from a reproduction of Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*.

Picasso's painting was informed by African masks he encountered in Paris, objects that had been removed from their original cultural context.

Picasso was fascinated by the formal strength and expressive power of these masks. At the same time, he appropriated this visual language without engaging with its origin or context.

In Moshi, African artists reclaim this image within their own context.

The reproduction was divided into four parts and given to four Tanzanian artists. Each worked independently on one fragment, without coordination. The work only comes into being when the parts are brought together.

This method builds on earlier collaborative projects, including a work developed for the East African Biennale in 2011.

The exhibition in Moshi forms a first moment of concentration within this trajectory.

It opens the possibility to bring COVERS into new contexts, including Europe, where questions of decolonisation, authorship and responsibility remain equally urgent.

Les Demoiselles d'Avignon (2011) East African Biennale, Tanzania

For the East African Biennale, Mertens divided a reproduction of Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* into four equal parts and invited three artists : Ricardo Brey (Cu), Mulugeta Tafesse (Et) and Willo Gonnissen (B) to work independently on one quarter of the image. He retained the fourth fragment himself.

Each artist intervened without prior coordination. The composition only emerged when the four parts were brought together and presented as a single work.

The process echoes the Surrealist *cadavre exquis*, in which chance and discontinuity were embraced as generative forces rather than flaws.

In Moshi, Mertens extended this approach further. The reproduction was again divided into four parts, but this time the entire image was entrusted to the four Tanzanian artists.



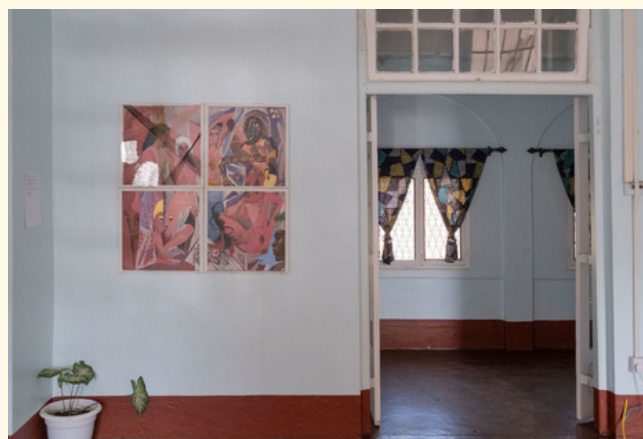
Ricardo Brey (top left)
Mulugeta Tafesse (top right)
Pierre Mertens (bottom left)
Willo Gonnissen (bottom right)



Les Demoiselles d'Avignon
fragmented intervention by:

- Lilian Munuo (top left)
- Lightness Jonas (top right)
- David Valerian Mlay (bottom left)
- Prince John Hugo (bottom right)

Moshi, 2025



Crying Stones for Sleeping Angels (Mwanza 2018)



In Mwanza (Tz), parents who were unable to pay the hospital bill for their deceased child were denied the release of the body. Without burial, there was no place to mourn.

At their request, Mertens designed a memorial for children with spina bifida and hydrocephalus who died on their way to treatment.

The work emerges from the artist's own experience of losing a child.

Set within a rocky landscape near Lake Victoria, the monument grows through the participation of the parents. Each chooses a stone, carves the name of their child into a drop of red sealing wax, and adds it to the stack marked Malaika Wamelala — “sleeping angels”.

The work transforms absence into presence.

Grief becomes part of the landscape.



Tingatinga (Dar es Salaam East Africa Biennale 2003)



Tingatinga project: Mussa A.Wasi, Pierre Mertens, Kyle Quint and Evarist Chikawe



The mural was first realised on a house in Dar es Salaam to engage Tanzanian artists in a public awareness campaign on HIV prevention, extending the intervention across the city. The broader project was never fully implemented.



Entrance Gate (Moshi, 2025)

In Moshi, the image reappears in a transformed architectural context, no longer covering a house but becoming a gate marking the entrance to the SHARE Knowledge Centre.

For this version, the human figures were painted in blue. The choice emerged collectively. In the context of an international knowledge centre, blue avoids attaching the figures to any specific racial or cultural identity, establishing instead a shared human presence.



Mertens, David Valerian Mlay and Prince John Hugo.



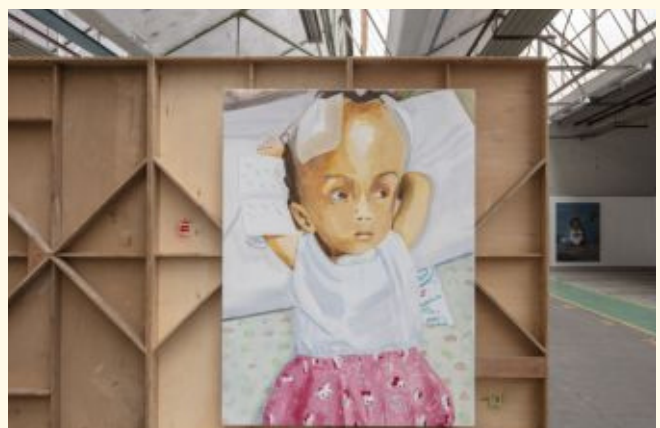
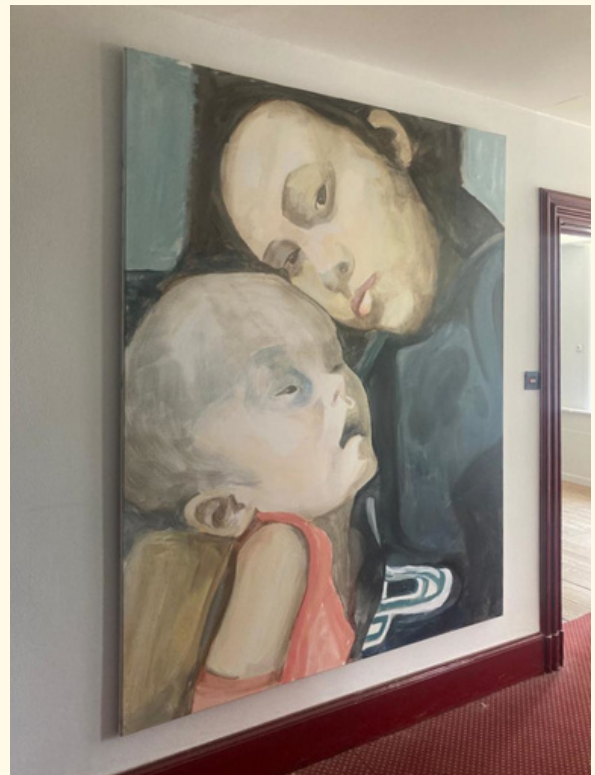
Loving Care (Antwerp 2020)

With Portraits of Children, Mertens returned to large-scale painting, a medium he had largely set aside since the 1970s. For him, painting creates the necessary distance through which vulnerability can be approached without spectacle.

The series began from photographs shared online by Filipino mothers of their children living with untreated hydrocephalus. While the enlarged heads confront the viewer, the paintings attempt to render the children as seen through the gaze of those who care for them.

By transferring these intimate snapshots into monumental canvases (approximately 2 × 1.5 meters), the work relocates private images into the space of painting.

Here, studio practice and lived reality intersect.



Portrait of a Child (Moshi, 2025)

For Moshi, Mertens added a thirteenth painting to the series Loving Care.

The portrait depicts the first girl received in the first House of Hope in Moshi — a child who underwent treatment and found temporary refuge there.



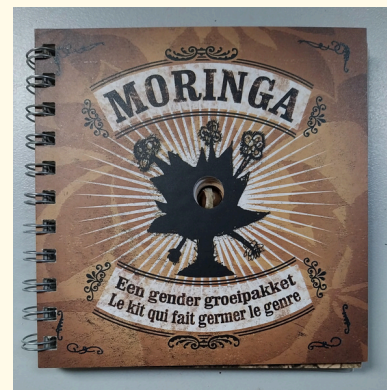
Moringa (2002) Houthalen, Belgium

In 2002, a training centre for immigrant women invited Mertens to develop an image that could articulate their work to the outside world.

He brought Moringa seeds from Sudan and planted them together with the women. The question was simple: how can a tropical tree grow here, and what conditions are required for it to survive?

The Moringa became a metaphor for displacement, adaptation and care. Growth was not taken for granted; it depended on context, attention and shared responsibility.

The project resulted in a publication and a small “growth package” containing a Moringa seed – a gesture linking image, ecology and lived experience.



Seven Moringa Trees (Moshi, 2025)

During the opening of the SHARE Knowledge Centre in Moshi, seven Moringa trees were planted around the building.

The gesture forms a living reference to 7000 Oaks by Joseph Beuys, realised for Documenta in Kassel.

Like Beuys' oaks, the trees function as carriers of time. They grow, demand care, and orient the site toward the future.



African Heroes (East African Biennale 2009)

print on Kanga fabric

'African Heroes' departs from a city map of Dar es Salaam.

Together with Willo Gonnissen, Mertens overlaid the map with the life lines of a hand and the structure of a star chart.

The names of the stars were replaced by those of African heroes who had been forgotten due to colonisation. Geography, biography, and cosmology come together in a textile cartography of memories.

One kanga was presented stretched against a wall. Others were worn by women, allowing the work to move through the exhibition space and into the city.



African Heroes (Moshi, 2025)

In Moshi, the work became participatory.

Visitors were invited to choose their own hero and select a corresponding star, adding the name directly onto the fabric.



Values Under Pressure (2025)

Mertens wrote words such as democracy, equality, freedom, solidarity and human rights directly onto the wall.

Transparent infusion bags hung in front of them, making the text on the wall legible.

The installation suggested a state of fragility.

The values appeared as if hospitalised — depending on care, vulnerable within an increasingly neoliberal climate.



Values Repositioned (Moshi, 2025)

In Moshi, the work was reconstructed using hospital materials sourced locally.

Instead of the transparent intravenous infusion bags used in the earlier installation, plastic saline bottles from the Moshi hospital were suspended throughout the building.

By using these materials, the work adopts a local visual language.

Through the transparent bottles, values written in Swahili became visible — words rooted in communal life yet long suppressed or displaced by colonial history.

Visitors were required to search for them across corridors, corners and shared spaces.



Ubuntu – Shared humanity

Umoja – Unity

Ushirikiano – Cooperation

Heshima – Respect

Huruma – Compassion

Wajibu – Responsibility

Uaminifu – Trust, faithfulness

Haki – Justice

Ukarimu – Hospitality, generosity

Subira – Patience, perseverance

Amani – Peace

Uhai – Life

Lilian Munuo



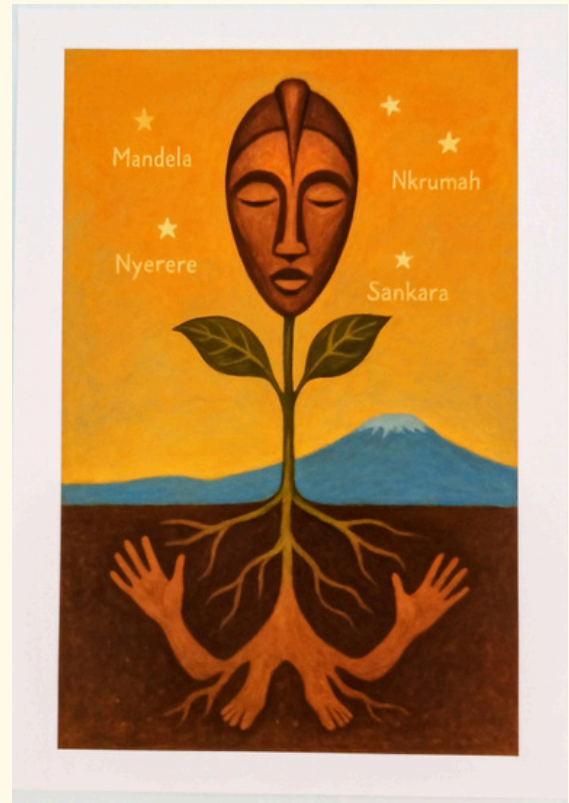


David Valerian Mlay

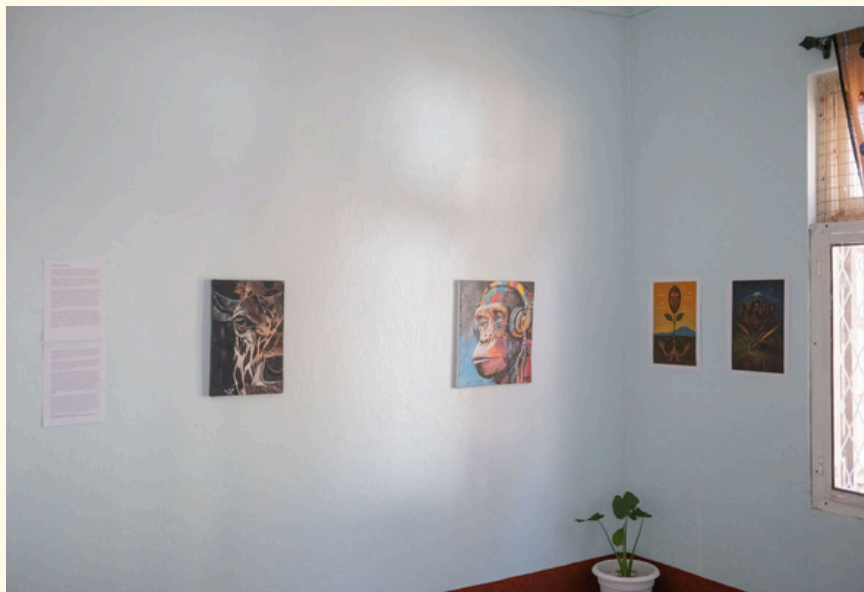


Prince John Hugo





Lightness Jonas





Daniil Zozulya (Kz)

Kazakh artist Daniil Zozulya created an installation with photographs from the Child-Help project in Uganda.

Les Demoiselles d'Avignon in Pierre Mertens' Covers

Within the exhibition in Moshi, the reworking of Les Demoiselles d'Avignon forms part of a longer artistic trajectory. It does not stand as an isolated intervention, but as a continuation of a method that has been present in Pierre Mertens's oeuvre for more than four decades.

Since the 1980s, his practice has developed in dialogue with existing surfaces.

Early abstract-expressionist paintings were executed on used billboard posters, supports that already carried traces, images, and prior meanings. The ground was never neutral; it functioned as an active component of the work.

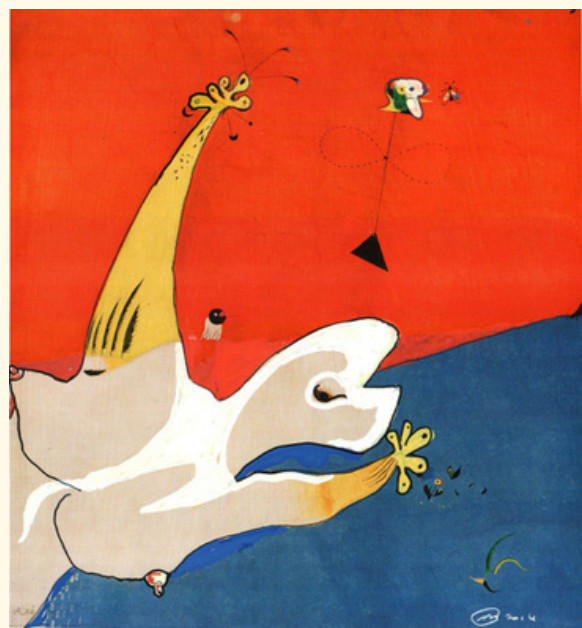
Over time, expressive gesture evolved into figuration.

Repetition gradually structured the image, resulting in the recurring motif of naked, sometimes dehumanized figures.

This pattern addressed the tension between the individual and the collective, between vulnerability and mass.



Ilventuno (Hasselt 1988)



covering Miro (2025)

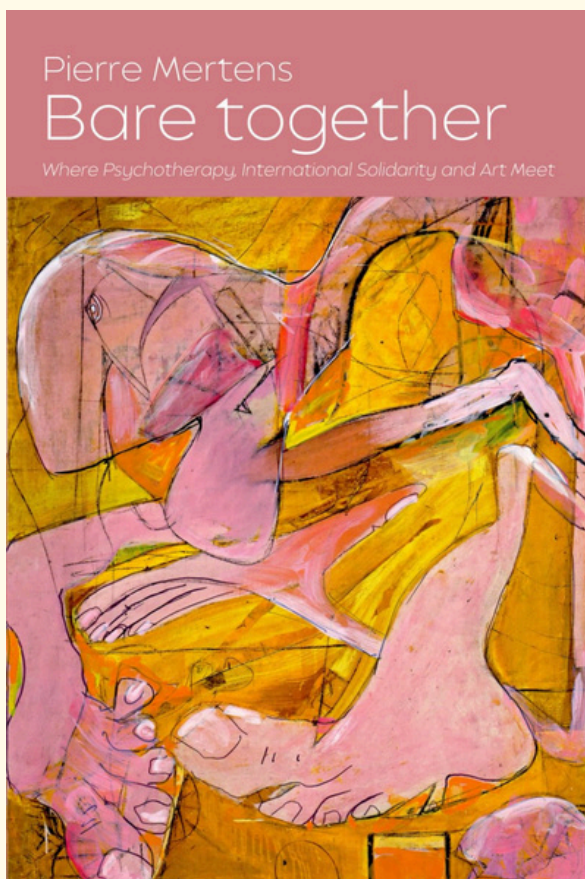
At a certain point, however, repetition risked becoming stylistic rather than urgent. In 1993, Mertens chose to withdraw the motif from exhibiting and stepped back from the commercial art circuit. The questioning of his own visual language became part of the work itself.

In the following decades, his practice shifted toward contextual and socially engaged projects. The form of the work adapted to specific locations and communities. Materials and symbols were drawn from the environments in which he intervened. The image became increasingly relational.

Parallel to this evolution, the studio practice of working on existing images continued. Mertens painted over flea-market paintings and later reproductions of art works. In these works, the underlying image functions as a structural presence. What is already there determines compositional possibilities, absences, and transformations.

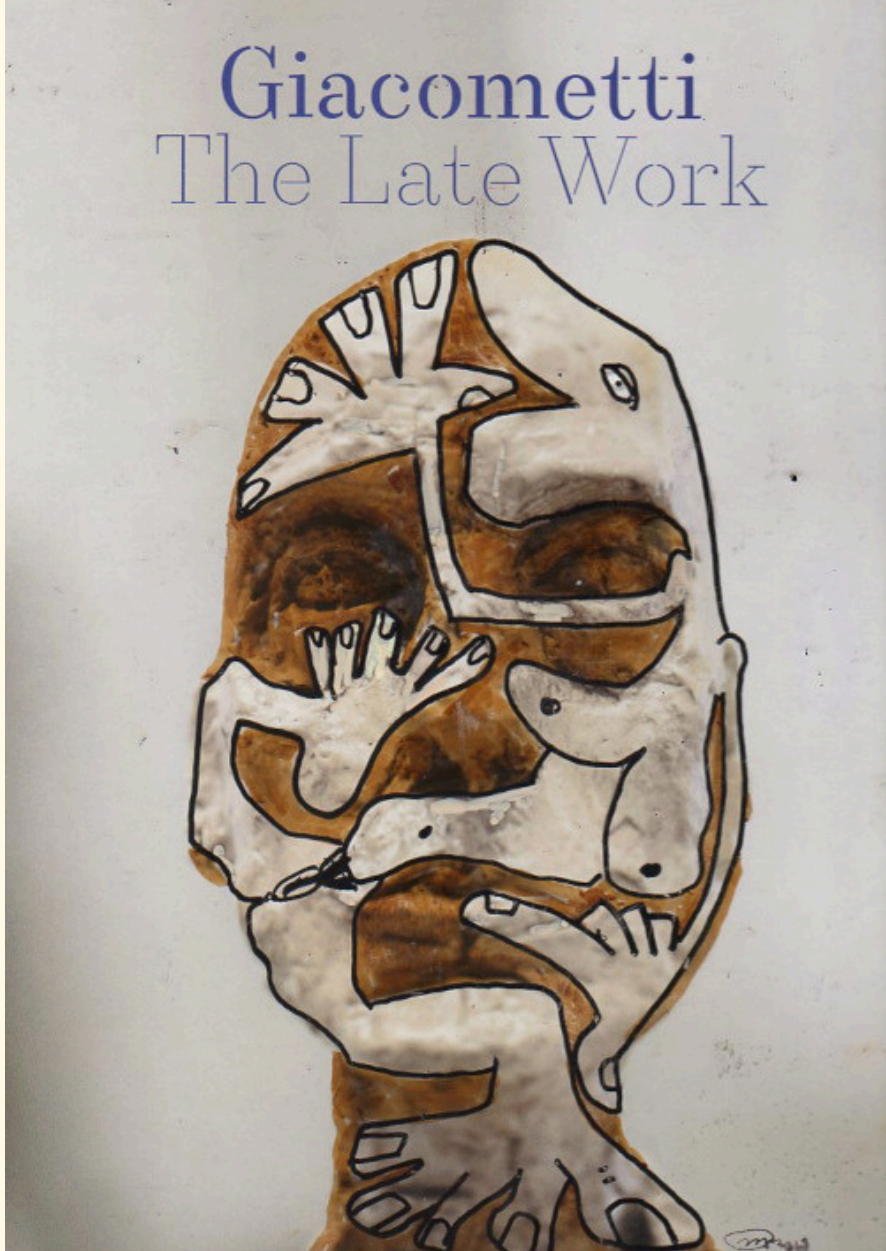
This method gradually crystallized under the title *Covers*. A cover is understood not as erasure, but as layered engagement. It acknowledges the authority of the original image while introducing a new visual and temporal context.

Within this framework, reworking *Les Femmes d'Alger* can be understood as consistent with the artist's long-standing approach.



covering De Kooning
on the cover of Mertens's
book 'Bare Together' (2025)

Giacometti The Late Work



Selections artists and concept exhibition: Pierre Mertens
Curation: Pierre Mertens & Edith Doove
Photo's among others Daniil Zozulya

