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ART IN REVIEW

Cristina de Middel: 'The Afronauts'

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In 1964 the newly independent nation of Zambia began a space program with the intention of putting the first African on the Moon. The program was short-lived, but it reflected the excitement and ambitions of a young country.

Starting with that story, the Spanish artist [Cristina de Middel](#) created "The Afronauts," a body of photographs, drawings and related sculptures. Fictional in most respects, "The Afronauts" nonetheless opens with an enlarged reprint of an actual letter from one Zambian minister to another, saying that "America and Russia may lose the race to the Moon, according to Edward Mukaka Nkoloso, Director of the Zambia National Academy of Space Research." The program needed money, though. The budding astronauts "don't concentrate on spaceflight," according to the letter. "There's too much lovemaking when they should be studying the Moon." What's more, the 17-year-old who was "chosen to be the first coloured woman on Mars, has also to feed her 10 cats, who will be her companions on the long spaceflight."

Ms. Middel's faux re-creation includes photographs shot in Spain of people wearing spacesuits sewn from African fabric, and helmets that were streetlamp globes. Archival shots of African villages are altered to include midcentury astronauts. Defunct concrete-mixing drums double as space capsules, and an image shot in Monument Valley is a reference to U.F.O.'s and otherworldly landscapes.

"The Afronauts" is a smart and charming show. Rather than ridiculing Zambia's ambitions, Ms. Middel compares them to the dreams of other nations and peoples. But the subject here is also photography. Like her fellow Spaniard Joan Fontcuberta, Ms. Middel shows how the medium promotes both fact and fiction — and how ultimately this helped fuel the space race.