

INTENT AND MATERIAL

South African art in conversation

interviews commissioned and edited by Joost Bosland

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LEAPING UP WATERFALLS

Nicholas Hlobo and Kesivan Naidoo

Were you confident as a gay man before you were an artist?

To myself, yes. I only came out to my parents later, long after I had come out to my cousins. The stubbornness and the solitary character that my grandmother encouraged in me made me feel like I did not need to announce myself.

Particularly to your parents?

I decided it was not really important because I was happy. It was my dad who would tease me, he would say, “look at that girl” and I thought this dude is trying to find something out, and so I had to spill the beans. And to my surprise he did not react badly at all.

How do you represent these tensions on a canvas, or in a visual way, without being didactic?

I like the idea of making things obscure, because I think when life is too direct it is not interesting.

Because there would be no questions left.

I like the idea of simplicity but it is difficult, because even when I am sitting by myself, trying to be simple, it is never simple. I change my mind all the time, and the ideas grow all the time.

And there is no absolute answer.

The beauty of the works that we create, whether it is a book, a poem, or working with objects like I do or sound like you do, the

beauty is that because it comes from you it becomes a reflection of you. That it becomes the reflection of how you see yourself in relation to the world. You know that if you are a miller and you want your brew to be pure, you make sure you sieve it until there is no sediment at all, just fluid. You do not want gunge.

All you care about is flavour.

To me the process of making work is like seeing a shrink. It becomes my punching bag, it becomes my treadmill, I am burning fat and I am building muscle and improving my stamina. I stitch, I cut, I make blobs, and those are metaphors for my subject matter. I am talking about myself in relation to my point of origin as well as the nation to which I belong and the things that I have inherited that have molded us to be what we are. I am Xhosa, I grew up in the Transkei, a place with a very confused genealogical history. Now we call ourselves South Africans. We are still far from saying ‘this is it,’ we still hold it in bits and pieces. It is still not whole, and I do not know if it will ever get to be.

Think of a fungus. We might think we belong to a mushroom, but from that mushroom the roots go far, they stretch well beyond the physical thing that we see. When it is time for germination the spores fly out and colonize other areas. As cultures, and even as individuals, we behave more or less in the same way.

Instead of questioning my gender, my ethnicity, my nationality, now I am in a state where I embrace them all. I just take advantage of these pillars that were erected before my time. I use them as stilts and start walking through the field so if I get to the swamp I do not have to get wet my feet in the muddy waters; I am just walking and enjoy the beautiful blossoms of whatever vegetation might be growing up in the swamps.

Tell me about your stitching.

It is mending. I am talking about rebuilding one's identity anew, and doing that for myself and no one else. It is not my endeavor to educate people, I am doing what I do for my own joy.

I like the analogy of the stitching; particularly where we are sometimes we need a bit of mending.

When you look at the state of affairs in South Africa now, it needs a dressmaker.

There was a trajectory at some point, particularly when you and I were young, dreaming about the future of this country...

The dream we had before 1994 was very surreal. We had very little preparation for what would come after.

A lot of people never saw it coming. The day before we were enslaved in a certain way and now we were all of a sudden free in other ways.

But we are still not free.

No, not even close. There is a lot of work to be done.

That is why I am building my own new world, as if it were a play. *The World According to Nicholas*.

That sounds like a John Irving book. Where was Nicholas born?

They say I was born in Cape Town in 1975 to parents from the Transkei, and we moved back with my mother to Idutywa, her hometown, in 1976 during the uprisings.

And when did you know you were an artist?

Not until I went to Technikon Witwatersrand, now the University of Johannesburg. Before that I worked in a cement factory, and I was attending print making classes at Artist Proof

Studio. I was also working with set builders, building sets for movies, television, adverts, that sort of thing. I thought I should go and study art so that I can get work in the film industry. At Wits Tech it dawned on me that there was more to the art world than I had thought, that actually I could assume art making as my practice.

But I was always drawing in the sand or in books when I was in school. Growing up at home with my cousin we were always making things, building little houses out of left-over cement, for example. But I did not know what was happening within me.

By the time I finished high school I wanted to be a musician. I wrote to the University of Natal requesting a prospectus. When I realized it was a four-year degree, my interest faded. I just thought instead of spending four years in university, why not come to Johannesburg and join a band?

Four years of studying music could drive anybody nuts. Did you play any instruments?

No, it was just voice. I wanted to be a singer. I wanted to be Brenda Fassie, or Hotstix Mabuse. I just wanted to be on stage and entertain the crowds and be on tv.

That is not too far removed from where you ended up. Did you sing a lot in school?

I was in the junior choir at my school in the Transkei. I was fortunate to grow up in a homeland. They had no cultural extra mural activities, no theatre, no drama, and no music in black schools in apartheid South Africa.

What did you sing?

Some music that is written by South Africans, but a lot of the music we sang was from Britain. Remember this one? [Sings: *Oh, dear! What can the matter be?*]

Late 18th century I think.

It is very old. So we sang traditional choral music both of British and South African origin. Another song I clearly remember was a Zulu song about a dog. [Sings: *Ngiziqhenya ngenja Yami*] I could have ended up in the Drakensberg Boys Choir!

So did you go to Joburg and join a band?

It took me one whole year to negotiate my move. I proposed it to my parents in 1993, when I was in matric. My dad would not allow me to come to the Transvaal on my own. I remember him saying, “I don’t have money, I won’t be able to support you when you’re too far away from me. You’re going to be a burden to my mom and my sisters.”

How did you convince them? Something must have changed.

We reached a compromise. I went to live with my uncle, who was a school teacher in Butterworth. I told him my plan to go and study music. One time I saw one of those little flyers from Ellerines—remember those?

Of course.

So they advertised drums, guitars, and keyboards, and I said to him, “Why don’t you buy drums so that we can play drums at home?” My uncle asked me if I could play drums, and I said “yes” just so he would buy the instruments. Kids would make what they called *Indimoni*—I find that word to be very curious because it sounds like you are saying ‘a demon,’ I do not know what it derives from—you take a tin and you stretch an inner-tyre tube over it, and it becomes a drum. We would make those and play them when we just wanted to have fun. Growing up in the Transkei there were also older guys, teenagers, who would make their own instruments. I am sure you have seen them...

Those guitars made out of Caltex oil tins?

Exactly.

So did your uncle buy you the drum set?

He just laughed at me and said, “You want me to buy you drums so you can make noise all the time?” He told me to focus on books instead. He encouraged me to enroll in some lousy computer course. Whenever I visited my parents in Umthatha I would beg them to let me move to Johannesburg to pursue my music career. Eventually my dad let me go. Perhaps he had been testing my resolve, or he finally got to a stage where he could let go of his little son.

How old were you at this point?

I must have been 18. So I booked my ticket and I wrote to my aunt in Thembisa and told her I was coming. I knew a guy from the same village in Umthatha—actually my namesake, his name is Bathandwa as well—who studied music at the Funda Centre. He was working as a backing vocalist for several big acts.

So he was in the scene already?

There was also another guy from Umthatha, I think his name was Zuko Sowazi, who was a producer. I would go to his studio twice a week, and occasionally they would give me a mic and tell me “show us what you got.”

“What’s inside you? Bring it out!”

I got discouraged when I realized these guys were struggling financially. I told my aunt I did not think I was prepared for that, and my aunt laughed at me. At that time I had already found an agent, and I was doing work as an extra.

As a television extra, an actor? Is that how you got into stage production?

I started working as a set builder for a company called Set Shop Boys, based in Wynberg, about three years before I started studying at Wits Tech. Even as a student I

would still work for them on weekends, because I could use the money.

How long was the degree?

Four years. Finally I got to do the four years, even though I was scared of doing the four years in music.

What was the curriculum like?

Our lecturers gave us the impression that we were the worst cohort they had ever encountered, because we critiqued them a lot. They only taught us African art when we were in our 3rd year of study. That is when they introduced us to people like Dumile Feni and Fikile Magadla. The first two years we kept asking them when we would be getting to learn about what happens here at home, but they said we needed a 'foundation' first. I believe to this day local institutions have kept this tradition.

At music college it works the same way.

We are being conditioned to have European eyes and ears.

Did you have access to living artists while studying?

We had the pleasure of having William Kentridge come to talk, as well as Steven Cohen and Robert Hodgins.

As a musician I remember a specific composition that marked a turning point. Do you have an specific work that marked a turning point for you?

In the beginning of my third year my art became a way of understanding myself. That was the period when we started meeting one-on-one with our lecturers, we were growing and we were being initiated to be adults in the art world.

I was questioning my identity, whining about it. Interrogating myself as a black man, as a

Xhosa man, as a South African, as a homosexual South African Xhosa man. And making comparisons or digging in the Xhosa traditions and value systems in relation to how a man is supposed to carry himself, what are the expected responsibilities of a man, what sort of duties you ought to carry out, how to carry yourself when walking down the road or visiting the house next door, how they ought to receive you and how you are supposed to regard them. Maybe I could find a way of communicating, of sharing my thoughts of how I see myself in the world, in this country. So that grew and I explored it and now I am here.

At the end of the year we had a show in Museum Africa. When I think back to that show, it was wonderful. It even got a review in *House and Leisure* magazine.

And then you thought “ok I can really do this?”

I had already made up my mind before. Now I was going to take my shoes off and walk on those various surfaces, whether it is sand or it is stone or it is thorns. Our lecturers emphasized the need to be independent, and that need to be alone is something that was drilled into my head long before; growing up my grandmother always said in this world you are going to be on your own that is how it is. Never depend on someone else.

Do you mind if we speak about your stroke?

I had a stroke in 2013. I still have the pile of wood from that time that was supposed to become a labyrinth, which never materialized. That year I was supposed to go to Miami, all sorts of things had to happen. The stroke forced me to cancel everything and take things very slowly as I recovered.

How beautiful that we are now sitting here together.

It was a wonderful and hard experience. A spiritual, psychological, physical and emotional education. I gained a lot of strength, I learned a lot. You are a drummer; imagine being unable to use either the left or the right side of your body.

In 2011 I broke my legs and could not play the drums anymore. It was horrible.

When it is taken away from you, you are not sure whether it is going to come back.

Exactly!

You fight like a dying horse. You do what the salmon does and go upstream. You go “hell no!” And try and leap up waterfalls and if you are determined enough you make it. It was a revelation, it taught me to understand myself, appreciate the value of being able to flex my muscles.

To just move, a thing that you took for granted.

Getting to respect the lousiest of things, like a piece of paper or a toothbrush that feels like it weighs 30 pounds. I got to understand myself much better. When the stroke happened I was aware of it, I dreamt it was happening. I thought it was just a dream, then I woke up and realised that it was not just a dream. That moment brought out a different person; it just made me more aware of what I was not aware of before.

It taught you to be mindful.

To be mindful, yes. So that was the beauty. I was forced to take a break. It encouraged me to be even lazier and not do things because I had to do them but do things because I would love to do them.

Do you have your voice back now?

Partially.

I remember when we performed together, it was magical. Other things started opening up, and hearing your voice and the drums and seeing the cocoon and all of that crazy madness... It was one of the few times where I truly experienced disciplinary dimensions merging. Your voice was a thread, just like in your art, that bound us together.

What makes us who we are is not what is happening on the outside, it is what is happening on the inside but just reflected on the outside.

How has success affected your personal assessment of yourself?

What is success, Kes?

I mean, you are relatively successful compared to some other people. Have you ever wondered if you would be a different artist if you had not received as much recognition?

I would be miserable, truth be told. But the important thing, which many people have said before me, is to remain true to oneself and be content. To not be like the moth, which is supposed to be nocturnal but as soon as the sun sets and the candles are lit it rushes to the light. You need to be very careful, protect yourself. Do not be too excited by the light because the light can burn.

THE DREAM MATERIAL

Zander Blom and Jordan Casteel

What makes a painting weird?

A weird painting is a fucked-up painting. You look at it and the one half of your being says “No! This is total bullshit!” and the other half says “Yes, this is magical!” It is not really all that dramatic but that is the best way I can describe it.

Sometimes I have to wait until the hyper-critical part of myself is asleep inside of me, and then act quickly: throw paint around, change colours, change the size of my brushes and tools, make random marks everywhere, draw shapes without thinking about it, move the furniture around, etc. So that by the time Criticality wakes up it has no choice but to deal with its new reality, and somehow find a way to make it work.

Where is the line between “bullshit” and “magical” in your studio?

You can draw a line between being critical and following your intuition. But you cannot draw a line between ‘bullshit’ and ‘magical’. Because you cannot quantify exactly what will make something into a ‘bullshit’ or a ‘magical’ painting. If you could there would be no reason to make a painting. I think you have to leave room for the possibility of alchemy, even if you do not really believe in it, otherwise things can become stiff and academic very quickly.

Courtney Martin writes that your paintings reflect “street smarts,” and Nicola Trezzi invokes hip-hop in relation to your work. What do these references mean to you?

I think Courtney means that my works make visual sense within the lexicon of painting, but what it is exactly that makes sense is hard to define in an academic way. Which is to say that we can understand the paintings intuitively. The way I understand the hip-hop reference in Nicola’s text is that it relates the practice of sampling in music to my habit of pillaging Modernism for things that could be useful in my own project. Of course this is by no means an original gesture, this kind of thing is everywhere in contemporary art.

Both of those things make sense to me as metaphors, or perhaps similes is the more accurate term, but not really as reflections. When you put hip-hop and street smarts together in one sentence it implies a more literal connection with American popular culture, which of course is something quite alien yet weirdly familiar to a South African. This does not figure consciously in my practice at all.

What music do you listen to? And when?

At the moment I am listening to everything that gets a semi-decent review on *Pitchfork*. I play music when I work, but beyond that it does not play a very influential role. Perhaps this is because I do not make music anymore myself. I used to create my own ‘art music’ experiments for years, but it has sort of phased itself out recently. There are multiple reasons why I have moved on from working with sound. I had a series of small epiphanies, but it comes down to the fact that I had a visual image in my mind of the music I wanted to make, instead of having a sound or melody in my head.

I also realized that one lifetime is barely enough time to do one thing properly. If I keep painting I may be able to become an interesting painter, but if I split my energy between music and art, I will most likely end up being mediocre at both. I could also just be at an age where the lesser impulses are giving way to the more permanent concerns. Music also used to be a release from painting, but it

does not give me the same satisfaction any more. I also realised that just because I love music does not mean I need to make music, I can allow myself to enjoy and appreciate some of the incredible things in this world without having to be an active participant. Sometimes there is nothing wrong with just being a fan.

When I entered your studio, my first thought was “oh my god, this is the dream.” The space you work in romanticizes the artist’s studio as an idea. So much so, that it seems central to the way people relate to your work. Is there a confliction for you between what is sacred and what is shared? What remains for you?

It is all for me, but it is also to be shared. There is somehow no conflict. There is nothing sacred— perhaps precisely because we know it is a construct. And it is a construct that lives in service of both the ‘work’ and the ‘life.’ But I do not see it as a performance, and therefore I do not enter into my own work as a character in the way people like Beuys, Acconci, or Nauman have done. My life remains relatively private and the ‘art’ becomes the objects that I labour over, edit heavily, and leave behind like a trail of clues.

Can you share a little about the materials you work with? I recall being in your studio and noticing tons of stacked tubes of paint – at the moment I can not recall the brand. How did you come to work with those specific products?

There is so much paint in the studio because it is just the unavoidable requirement of this heavy impasto work I have been doing. It is like a black hole. I have run out of paint so many times, and then end up driving all over town scrambling around for whatever bits of stock I can find at the art shops. After years of this kind of stupidity I started ordering in bulk.

I am working almost exclusively with Winsor & Newton’s Winton range. Every brand of oil paint has a different texture and consistency. Of the paint available in South Africa I found

the Winton range to be the best suited for work I am doing with the palette knife. Because I am sculpting generously thick shapes directly onto the canvas with a blade, the paints have to be smooth and firm, a creamy paste. The different colours need to be very close to each other in consistency in order to combine well when smeared over the canvas. I have come to learn exactly how these paints react over time, which is helpful. The drawback is that Winton’s pigment range is quite limited. So it requires a bit more problem solving when it comes to mixing colours. Even though my colours often look like they come straight out of the tube, they hardly ever do; to get electric pink I mix white and permanent geranium lake together, to get something similar to Buff Titanium I mix white, black, brown, burnt sienna, raw sienna and yellow ochre. For toxic lime green I mix a lot of lemon yellow with a tiny bit of emerald green. My favourite purple is a mix Dioxazine purple, cobalt violet hue and a bit of white—the list goes on.

Because you work with the canvas in a raw state, I assume the weaving of that canvas is very important. How does that play a role in what you ultimately paint on the surface? Does it matter? Or ever change?

I have mainly been working on the unprimed reverse of a roughish, primed Belgium linen. The weave grips the thick chunks or islands of paint well, and is also beautiful in relation to the rubbery feel of the paint. Another thing I like about the raw linen is that the empty surface in itself is quite seductive, and it makes every single mark you make on it feel like an important gesture. It also creates a certain depth: marks tend to feel like they are suspended, floating in space—especially with the oil stains that occur around the paint.

Recently I have been able to make a painting on a white gesso primed canvas, which was an experiment I feel worked out well. It excites me because primed canvas is a whole new universe for me.

How do you push how color functions in your work? Are there colors you find yourself particularly drawn to?

I am very drawn to particular colour combinations. There is an image up in my room of an early Ellsworth Kelly work that consists of only four flat bars of colour: lime-green, black, red and blue. This combination influenced almost everything that came out of the studio in 2016. Now I am working in a more dirty, earthy palette, like Monet's *Waterlilies* meets the South African Highveld. This is probably because I recently saw the Monet room at MoMA in New York for the first time. It really moved me.

I am also consistently drawn back to Bacon's use of colour; the Bauhaus/Mondrian colours have been important; Matisse's cutouts too. Watching *Picasso and Braque Go to the Movies*, the 2008 Scorsese documentary about the influence of early cinema on early cubism, made me want to go back to those somber tones. To a lesser degree the colour and texture of different minerals, plants, and animals have been important too.

My interest in colour is dominated by art history and sometimes nature. I should really give my immediate environment more space in this regard. For example, I used to be inspired by Joburg winters when I lived there: nature dies, half of the *veld* burns down, the city is all greys, ochers, creams, browns, charcoal. The air is razorblades, while the sun still beats down so relentlessly that the sky feels white when it is actually bright, bright blue. The place becomes a magnificently bleak wasteland. But this influence is hardly visible in the work of that time, sadly.

Is there a material you have always wanted to work with but, perhaps because of time, funds, or location, have not been able to try?

Oil paint has always been the dream material. I spent years living in a small room, making drawings and prints with ink and paper, and

building things out of cardboard and other scraps, before I could afford to work with oil paint. I do experiment with other materials from time to time, but oil paint has remained the most compelling and magical. Recently I decided to try every different kind of glue, paint, silicon, resin, whatever, that I could find at the hardware store. I bought a bunch of stuff and played around for about a month. None of it really excited me.

A part of me would love to be an artist who uses the technology of our time, like Jordan Wolfson, who makes animatronic sculpture installations and videos with 3D animation. But my practice today is the result of limitations like time, funds and location. In order to survive, I have had to be realistic and practical about my situation. I was broke with no institutional or commercial support for years, so I worked with the most basic, traditional materials. The art market is very conservative, at least at entry level, and forced me to apply my mind in ways that I would not have if money had been no object.

When I say art market I am really talking about it in the most basic sense; it is far easier to sell a small drawing to a friend to help pay the rent than it is to sell a video or an installation or even a photograph. This shaped the kind of artist that I became. Perhaps I dream smaller than I should. I do not see 50-foot shiny sculptures and high budget video installations in my dreams; instead I see perfect paintings that can fit through normal doorways. It is my Stockholm syndrome—my brain can not take that step beyond oil painting and hand-made stuff yet. Maybe this is good, maybe this is bad. Should I work with it, or try to overcome it? I do not know. We are all captives of our contexts to a certain degree.

Do you feel any part of your gestures hold your biography? Where does history separate itself from material? Can it?

If you mean the physical gesture, as in the particular way in which one person makes marks on a canvas, which would be different

from the way another person makes marks on a canvas, then I would say yes, it does hold my biography. Of course you cannot tell my life story by looking at a smear of paint, but with the kind of painting where it goes directly from your brain to your hand to the canvas it is very hard to lie about yourself or obscure who you are. Here our intentions and limitations tend to become glaringly obvious, staring us right back in the face.

My gesture *is* my obsessive pre-occupation with Art History, Oil Painting, and the Studio—which also holds my biography. I am still caught up in the mild psychosis of being a child who locks himself in a room to be alone, to dream, to escape, to transform his reality. As much as I have become an adult who interacts with the real world, I am also still that child in a room with an art book on his lap dreaming of doing something extraordinary. There is an irony here that is not lost on me—spending all this time in a room dreaming is exactly what has given me freedom and independence as an adult. Today I do not have to be trapped in a room all by myself; I could have a big studio with assistants. I could have objects realized by other people or machines. I could have a bit more of an actual life. But I somehow still prefer being alone in a room, making objects with my hands and dreaming the impossible dream of being an artist.

Reading about your work I cannot help consider you and your voice behind it all. Where would your ‘red pen’ land? What do you personally perceive to be the essential and non-essential parts of the conversation about your practice?

For me it always circles back to three connected motifs: the artist’s studio as romantic construct; Western art history, particularly Modernism, as perceived from a peripheral position; and oil painting as an old and loaded tradition, approached with a kind of necessary blind optimism for its potential.

I am open to new conversations. Often things I have not considered myself end up being very

useful. I write a lot about my work, so my personal voice is out there. But there is only so much control I can exercise over how I am perceived. At a certain point I have to let the chips fall where they may. Moreover, if I were to take out the red pen I would probably have to start with myself, because my voice often seems to confuse more than it clarifies.

Is there a question with regard to your work that no one asks but you wish they would?

I think a good question to ask anybody is this: what would you criticize about your own work? My own practice is sometimes too backward looking, too inward looking, and too narrowly focused on art. But more than that I think my biggest criticism would be that my efforts, as much as they can be hopeful or optimistic, are still rooted in a kind of futility game.

I have tremendous admiration for the work of someone like Olafur Eliasson, who is hyper critical but also incredibly hopeful and forward looking—engaging with the problems of our time, and making a positive impact on the world. In comparison, you could argue that I am stuck in an endless loop, out in the sticks, with my head in the sand. It may be a useful position to occupy, but I am also very aware of its limitations.

FEELING THOUGHTS

Jody Maria Brand and Thuli Gamedze

Your last show was called *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*.

It is the title of a collection of Alice Walker short stories. They usually start with a whole fucked up scenario, and then there is this really delicious moment. That is what my work is looking for, that delicious moment that gives me life, even if it is fleeting. One day I was reading this book on the train, and a woman sat down next to me and said, "you can't keep a good woman down, that's true." From the look on her face I could tell that just saying that sentence gave her complete affirmation.

Going back to the beginning, it started with *Choma*, the Tumblr blog. What do you feel the internet lends to your work?

For the last couple of years my strategy was really about building connections with other young people of colour, and creating and sisterhood within those communities. There are so many challenges that face femme people in this world, that sisterhood is literally the only thing we have. I could not afford to wait for institutions to understand or to validate my project, which is why I started Tumblr.

Books have a magical way of having information in it that you need right at that moment. I felt the same could be achieved with Tumblr: that someone could stumble on something, completely by chance, and it is exactly the type of representation that they need to see at that particular point in their life. The most important thing about the internet is that anyone can access it, and anyone can randomly stumble upon anything. That is not possible in art spaces.

I noticed you have stopped posting as much. Why is that?

It is funny. I moved to Johannesburg, where everyone perceived me to be white. It is extremely difficult to photograph people in the street in Johannesburg as a white person, when you are not a white person. Having to negotiate that exchange was really difficult, and I was frozen. I am getting back into it now.

How do you feel about the difference of working with an immaterial online image versus working with an object, and how do you feel the meaning changes, if at all?

Of course it changes. As much as I have benefitted from using the internet it is also something that causes me distress and anxiety, the whole issue of hyper-consumption. Your value is your social capital, and you are pressured to be relevant and pushing out content all the time. That pressure also contributed to me working with the Tumblr less. It became gross, and I wanted to try something else.

In a sense you work as a historian. Does history as an academic discipline seem relevant to you?

A lot of what I am doing is anti-academic, and I have not quite figured out where it fits in. But I had been interested in history at least since I was twelve. My brother is 13 years older than I am, and we spent a lot of time together—he used to give me lifts to school. We would listen to Rage Against the Machine together, and he had a DVD of Rage Against the Machine in Mexico. It contained a lot of background context on Mexico, the Zapatistas, and guerilla war fare, including an interview with Noam Chomsky. From then I was really fascinated by resistance movements. I was in love with Che Guevara. So even though my degree in history did not materialize, it still informed a lot of my practice, especially in the beginning: taking photographs and focusing on documentation and archiving. That is what I really wanted to do with the Tumblr: writing alternative history, outside the dominant narratives. And I feel a large responsibility to be doing that.

You did not finish your studies at the University of Cape Town, right?

I was concerned about who is included and excluded from historical narratives and I felt that as a journalist, telling people's stories, I might be able to make a difference. So I decided to study history. I had no idea what I was getting myself into, and I became extremely depressed at UCT. I did not graduate. It was a fuck-up; a rebellious, very messy, and beautiful and perfect fuck-up. I do not regret any of it.

You document people who are often left out of spaces, and you left an institution...

I have never thought of it that way, to me it always seemed like a little bit of a failure. What caused my depression, outside of UCT itself, was that I did not agree with a lot of what was being taught. Because of everything

that my parents went through for me to be able to go to university I felt I needed to pursue a straight-up job. To this day, I still have to convince my mom. She is like “you should get a job” and I am like “I’m gonna do this art thing.” Black parents and being an artist is a very complicated thing to understand, but they are trying, and I am just going to do what I have to.

I would describe the Cape Town art world is incredibly racist, patriarchal and violent.

I would agree.

So I want to ask you about the dynamic of entering a new archive into this institution, where it is received by very specific people. How do you cope with that? How do you navigate the fact that, when you make these precious objects, the consumer is not always who you were trying to reach at the beginning?

I had an awful experience with a white woman in my installation for *Quiet Violence of Dreams*, a group show at Stevenson. My installation was a tribute to Nokuphila Kumalo, the young woman murdered by Zwelethu Mthethwa. There were rose petals on the floor, and I saw this woman picking them up and throwing them all over herself while taking selfies. I watched in horror. I tried to be really kind and generous to her, and asked her “can you please not do that, it’s a memorial for someone who’s passed and it’s not appropriate and this is my work.” She started arguing with me that I should be grateful that she was engaging with my work at all.

To be honest, all of this has put me in a really fucked up space, especially with the recent show in Paris at the Fondation Louis Vuitton. There are a million micro-aggressions that I have had to deal with in the last few months. Small comments that remind me of my place, regardless of the fact that I am an artist showing in these spaces. They let me know that I have zero actual power.

But at the end of the day I still got their money, and that is really what all of this is about for me. I constantly remind myself that I am really working in these spaces to come and claim and take what is actually ours. I am still figuring it out and learning how to deal with it and to cope.

I am reluctant to quote Fanon because it makes me roll my eyes when other people do, but he talks about the palatable negro entering into these institutional spaces. That is an interesting idea, because if you enter into these spaces, how can you critique them effectively?

It is something strange that as black and brown femmes we should feel guilty about success. White men don't feel guilty. At the same time, I am very conscious of my relative agency within these negotiations. I am really inspired I guess by the whole idea of being a scammer, or like having a blessing, you know? My new work is trying to create something really cunty.

Do you the writing of Robin Kelly? He talks about thieving from the institution.

That is literally what I am trying to do; I am not even shy about it. The people I am representing in my work have been forced into these situations or whatever, but I want to show them as agents and tacticians. The conversation I really want to have is "yes, I don't have the same privilege as a lot of people around me, but I can use the same skills and resources that are available to me to be able to get to where I want to be." That is what I did with my photography, my 'naïve' photography, with my plastic cameras. It is now hanging in the fucking Fondation Louis Vuitton.

We like to think of the artworld as a disconnected bubble, but the case of Nokuphila and Zwelethu shows that the artworld is mimicking everything else that is happening. The phrase institutional

critique feels too harsh, because there is something deeply personal about your work, but I wonder how you feel that your work talks to the spaces it inhabits now.

My work is very much about space. The documentation work that I was doing was not just about the people, but specifically about the people *in spaces*. That was true for Tumblr, and I wanted it to function the same within art spaces. That is why scale became important to me. It goes back to the notion of guerrilla warfare. I force people to engage, which is important especially in Cape Town where it is so easy for people to not engage with reality because of the continued spatial apartheid.

The people I work with are often made to feel invisible, so I want to make them hyper-visible in a way that is glorious. I want them to be admired, or even revered. When I started taking pictures, all of the work that I was seeing exhibited was being done by white male photographers. Often pictures of all of these black kids—it looked like *National Geographic*, and I thought 'what the fuck is this!?' It is so often exploitative.

I was considering going into all of that, the gaze and whatever, but part of me did not want to go there. For me your work does not bring up the same issues as the work of many white male photographers. Do you think that is because we know the history?

I think it is also about my process and practice. It involves way more than just taking someone's picture. I think that people can see that when they see my photographs. When I look at my pictures I can see the love between myself and my subject.

I recently had my picture taken by a German photographer. That is not something I would normally do, but I wanted to put myself out there. Wow, the exchange was weird. And then he just shoved a few hundred rands in my hand afterwards. I was like "oh, I don't even want your money this is gross." I ended up

pulling out of the project. They were trying to sell this really grimy, raw South Africa—which is real for a lot of people, but as a fucking German man coming here? I do not think it is right for you to be exploiting this for aesthetics, or to be edgy.

In the past, you have said you use photography to be a witness. That is an interesting word choice in relation to building up evidence...

The evidence that I was here, and no one can say that I wasn't. But I hate calling myself a photographer.

Are you interested in other photographers?

I love Instagram, I follow so many people. One photographer that I am obsessed with is Lesedi Mogale. There is a sensitivity and humanism to his work that is beautiful and otherworldly. There are tons of people who take really cool pictures, but that is what really moves me.

Do people always ask you about Nan Goldin?

She is totally an influence.

There is something invested in her work as well. What is important about your work is that while the gallery is such a limited space, you are thinking about the people you photograph, and are connected with the people that you photograph. You are often thinking more about context than...

Than form...

Exactly. The work is a photograph on a wall, but it is also an interaction, or an exchange, that exists outside the space. The experience of being photographed by you is almost as much part of the artwork as the final photograph.

That makes me wonder about your aesthetic. Your portraiture often depicts

people moving in and out of spaces, hot flashes, odd angles. What is the relationship between what you photograph and how you photograph it?

I am not trained as a photographer by any means. I went to the Market Photo Workshop for like two months of my life. But I had known for a long time I wanted to create images. Growing up I was feeling thoughts that I was not able to express. I needed to see these representations, so I also felt that I needed to create them myself, I needed to create the thing that I needed.

I found a film camera in my dad's garage, and when I first started taking pictures I had no idea what I was doing. At that point in my life I was looking for spaces that were expressive and where I felt free in that way, so I gravitated towards art spaces. But if I stopped to think about it, those spaces were always white spaces, and I always felt trivialized, like I was the entertainment. I was always told "oh your picture is so cute, you forgot to take the flash off during the day like," always told that my aesthetic was naïve, which was extremely frustrating.

But at the same time, I built this shit and it is what has brought me here, and my aesthetic is one thing that separates me from all those other million white male photographers whose work all looks alike. So that is how I came to be a photographer, or an artist, trying to figure it out myself like DIY. And I am grateful for it, because I have heard from a lot of people who trained as photographers and they become too critical. Everything about my process is about doing something that feels organic: the way I move through spaces, the way I engage with people. That is why it makes sense to shoot my friends and to shoot people I engage with on the street.

That brings me back to the fact that you are writing history; we have had so many of our histories erased, and we have to write them in a different way, with different tools...

Different languages...

Exactly! That is why visual language is so important.

I am also just obsessed with color. I recently went to Europe for the first time. It is so boring! There is no flavor, which and that is what I really like about creating work in South Africa. Yes, this country is wild, but at the same time the layers make it so much more interesting. I like to saturate everything in my photographs, when I am taking pictures I do not really give a fuck about lighting. What I am interested in is context, and a lot of the time the work relies on an inside joke, or hidden information.

Could you give an example?

The photograph *Presently, here standing, Ntombi*, that I first showed in *Quiet Violence of Dreams* in 2016, was taken on New Year's Eve 2015. My friend Sam and I ended up at this house party where everyone else was white, real art bro vibes. It was the most uninviting space I had ever been in, it was extremely violent. No one would talk to us—as if they were afraid that if they talked to us they would have to share their drugs. We were like “we don't even want your drugs, but ok.”

Sam was getting bored. Then she took my hand and said, ‘come with me to the bathroom.’ There she took her clothes off and said “I want you to take a picture.” I took a picture and she went and slept on the couch. The whole idea of that was so Cunt, I loved it. My instinct told me that I wanted to print on fabric, and I wanted it to be huge. The picture was taken with a disposable camera, and blowing it up to 3 meters is crazy—but it made me like it even more.

Did this feed in to the work you made for the show at Fondation Louis Vuitton?

For that show I shot 8 new works. Their deadlines were insane, they gave me a week to

shoot the first half—I mean, a week!? That was not just hard logistically, but also because I am emotionally invested in all of the people that I work with, and it is not just about taking a photograph.

So the process was fraught, but it was a nice moment for Quaid, one of the people from my sister circle who I photographed—they deserved it. At some point in the lengthy negotiations about my contribution to the exhibition, the curators emailed me on Monday and said we need a new work by Wednesday. So Quaid and I went to the Irma Stern museum, and had a fabulous time. Our circle was created particularly in response to the violence we encountered in white art spaces. The thought of us being at the museum together was so radical and life changing for all of us—we were high off that for a long time.

I have been researching art education spaces for people of colour in Southern Africa during apartheid. In Cape Town there was the Community Arts Project, and they provided a place to live, and were committed to the principle ‘each one teach one.’ It was about disseminating knowledge. Someone would come in, take knowledge, and disseminate it to their communities. In the 1980s they became super radical, and started painting posters and joined the UDF. I mean I do not want to glorify it too much, because in that history femmes are of course also underrepresented. But there was this incredible sense of community and urgency. What do you perceive as the potential for us to use spaces and build something similar?

I am driven by this idea, but it is difficult to maintain it. The people I create the work for are not necessarily the ones who get to see the work. Why not? Because these spaces are not inclusive, because they are not inviting to people like even myself. So what I do is create programming, and bring in organisations that work with communities that I am most interested in. It goes back to Rage Against the

Machine, the idea that you can create something that can change someone's life in a meaningful way.

There is a growing tendency amongst women of color in Cape Town towards collaboration, both as a mode of protecting oneself but also as a way to respond to the fiction of the individual artist as a genius, operating on their own and without community.

We are demanding space for all of us through solidarity, and I think we need more of that. I am really grateful to the generation before us, but at the same time I feel like a lot of the people got satisfied once they were at the table and really did not care if there was space for anyone else to join. That is something that I want to push, and I think that something you guys in iQhiya are also doing. How is that experience?

Of being in a collective?

Yeah.

It is difficult, but it is also a lifeline. I only started going to openings again after we started the collective, because before I could not handle it, I would have a panic attack.

Same here. I think it is the lighting.

Yeah. So even if the work sometimes does not feel that important, what is important is what happens when you make stuff together. That process changes you.

You have to create work because you have to survive, but the process of creating work is intense. As a person of colour it is always personal and always political. You know that doing it on command will take you places, but it takes a lot out of you. Who can afford therapy out here? Many people I spoke to are struggling with the same thing. How can I tell my gallerist "I'm actually really depressed right now and I can't answer your emails and won't be able to meet this deadline?" It will be

the end of your career. So creating community is essential to our survival, just to have someone to talk to who actually understands what you are going through.

You called yourself anti-academic. Are you aligned to any kind of ideology, whether feminist, womanist, intersectional feminist, or something like that?

I am really lucky to be around some really amazing people. Do you know Fanny Sousa and Tabita Rezaire? They really describe it best. It is about being pro-black, pro-femme and pro-hoe. I struggle to get into that other stuff.

FEAR AND OTHER MISUNDERSTANDINGS

Mikhael Subotzky and Lwandile Fikeni

Let's start at the beginning—when did you choose to become a photographer?

When I was 18 and had finished school I worked as a waiter to raise money to go to London, and in London I worked in a bar to earn money to go to South East Asia. I thought I needed a camera for my backpacking. My uncle, Gideon Mendel, is one of those so-called 'struggle-era' photographers. He taught me a lot about photography at the beginning. After my gap year I was going to study architecture, but I loved taking pictures so I decided to go to art school and focus on photography instead.

It was at Michaelis that you started working on *The Four Corners*?

Yes. In 2004—an election year—there was a big constitutional court case about whether prisoners could vote; it struck me as kind of crazy that this was even up for debate in a country where almost all of our political leaders had spent time in prison. But the other, unspoken, context of this case was the middle

class freak-out about crime. For some reason Justice Chaskalson's ruling got to me: it spoke of the cherished right to vote and how important it is to protect that right for everybody, including prisoners.

By coincidence I met some people who were doing the special voting in one of the prisons, and managed to get permission to photograph prisoners holding up their ballot papers. When I went into the prison I realised that it is a fascinating space, particularly because of the political history of incarceration.

I read Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. The project became about making links between inside and outside, because it is not a sealed off place for bad people – people go in and out all of the time. It serves a very specific socio-political function in relation to race and class and power, as much as it serves (and disserves) a criminal justice function.

South Africa, especially between 1948 and 1994, was in itself divided almost like a prison. You had sections, and a government that had surveillance on both those who were in suburbia and the people who were marginalized.

Absolutely. In 2005 I did *Umjiegwana*, which was the follow up series that focused on ex-prisoners. That came directly out of wanting to break down the distinction between the inside and the outside. I was beginning to be very aware of the representational issues around the body and particularly masculine black bodies, and I did not want to fetishize the inside as this otherised place.

Showing 'the outside' in this context was also an important further step in linking contemporary prisons with the history of apartheid. A third series I still want to do is about the security industry in Johannesburg. I want to present, to put it crudely, wealthy suburbia as another kind of prison which is informed by fear and all those other kind of misunderstandings.

Your next project was *Beaufort West*, which is one of my favourite books of yours.

Beaufort West has a prison at its centre, which one would not know about as a casual visitor to the town. The series deals with this prison, and how porous it is.

I must have driven past there many times before I realised that it was a prison. And the history of the town is quite bizarre: there was a lot of highway robbery on the transport route through the Karoo, and the colonial administration literally set up a town so that there could be a courthouse and a prison and a church. Now it feels like a god-forsaken place that has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country. Spending time there, you get a sense of how the lives in this town all spin around the prison.

You mentioned in the book that it was inspired by the *In Boksburg* series by David Goldblatt. What kind of conversation were you trying to have with the old man?

I have always looked up to Goldblatt, and *In Boksburg* is my favorite book of his. It is incredibly effective in how it used the constraints of a small town to tell a broader story about South Africa in a particular time.

In the book you start from the marginal spaces and then you go into bits of suburbia and the typical idyllic Beaufort West suburban life. For me all those were violent instances of violent existences. The logical conclusion to such a society is that you go to the center, which is the prison. The prison informs everything and everything is pulled to prison and everything pulls out of that prison back into society. You have illness both in- and outside.

That is putting it in much better words than I was able to. In some ways that prefigures my later work which deals with my understanding of violence.

And then the very last picture, once we are back inside the prison, shows a prisoner lying back against a mural (painted by the prisoners themselves) of an idealized, unpeopled West

Karoo landscape. It is so interesting to me that the people at the centre of all this violence are imagining their landscape as an idealised and essentialised version of the very landscape that Beaufort West bleeds into at its edges.

Jonny Steinberg writes in his essay for your book: “For these photographs give expression to something one understands - even while choosing to forget - whenever one passes through a distant rural town: that the South African countryside has lost the discrete identity it once possessed; that it is becoming a repository for the people and things the cities cannot contain.” This is especially true for Johannesburg, and one can go so far as to say they move to Ponte; that is the promise, is it not?

Yes, and I never made that clear a connection between those words and the two bodies of work. Actually, when working on the Ponte City series, one of the people in the building who we got to know had a friend who had come from rural Eastern Cape, and I happened to be there visiting on her very first night in Johannesburg, in Ponte. I never managed to make a good photograph in that situation, but I was deeply struck by the combination of her excitement and her vulnerability on this, her first ever night in the big city. So you are exactly right, the people from Jonny’s words might often go straight to Ponte.

Tell me a little bit about the *Ponte City* project, and how it came about?

So I finished *Beaufort West* in 2008, and I started spending more time in Johannesburg and really enjoyed it. Then a journalist friend of mine who was going to Ponte asked me to go along and take some pictures for her story about two investors and their grand plans to renovate the tower. I never thought I would spend the next six years doing a project about Ponte, because for me it was such a cliché. Hundreds of photographers had taken pictures there of that view up the core, and Guy Tillim had just done the book called *Jo’burg* which felt closely related to my ideas about Ponte.

But when I went there, I realised that both these presumptions of mine and the visual clichés were hiding what was really there. The building was built in 1976—a significant year in South African history—as an attempt at being a modernist icon that you cannot avoid in the skyline. In some ways I have come to see it as the product from an unholy union of modernism and apartheid. The modernist fantasy that a self-contained ‘city in the sky’ could function on its own was doomed to fail, just like the impossible fantasy of apartheid that you could keep people living in separate areas and keep races apart.

Ponte is reminiscent of panoptic structures that informed my earlier work, but where the guard should be there is a huge void.

Psychologically that was really interesting to me. The previous year, in 2007, I met Patrick Waterhouse during my Fabrika residency in Italy. I wrote to him and said, “Why do you not come to South Africa and we will just see what can happen?” So we started working in Ponte.

Why the fascination with violence? Are you not concerned that your images kind of relish violence?

I do not think I would use the word ‘relish,’ but I was drawn to it. I strongly believe that photographers do not acknowledge nearly enough how much their internal world informs what they seek out in the external world.

I was drawn to see the extent of the violence that my particular experience of Cape Town had sought to hide from me. I grew up in a liberal suburban existence. My parents obviously opposed apartheid in principle, but I still grew up in the 1980s with all the benefits of that system. And Cape Town now is still so different from Joburg; in my experience of the city you still go to a restaurant and are surrounded by other white people and are served by black people. I find that deeply uncomfortable. The geography in Cape Town is so well-suited to apartheid—the division of the Flats and all the niceness here in the city centre. In Joburg everything is mixed up.

That’s weird. In terms of what you are saying your idea of home is obviously like a serene space, and for a black boy going into Cape Town, this place is so violent, you know? I guess it is a South African logic: for blacks or whites, what is home to one is actual violence to the other.

There is a beautiful short story by Mango Tshabangu called *Thoughts on a Train* about being on a train from Soweto to Joburg. The writer is not able to bear walking the streets in the suburbs, because the fear that surrounded him was just so terrifying. I was born in 1981, so I was 9 years old when Mandela was released. I always feel like I am in a weird in-between generation. I am not of my uncle or my parents’ generation, who could make adult decisions in relation to apartheid. I am also not of the younger generation that was born after ’94. While I never consciously experienced apartheid as an adult, I lived through it as a child. A lot of my work is about trying to understand that, and trying to understand that awkward in-between existence that I was born into, and I think that the draw towards representing different forms of violence somehow relates to that.

Let’s speak about *Retinal Shift*. It is a big book, and it is like it reveals the creative process; certain shots seemed perhaps less deliberate?

I was consciously trying to break down the neat documentary narrative which I had relied upon before. I tried to organize my work in terms of the gaze, and the return of the gaze by the subject. Or their deflection of it. One regret I have about that book is that, because I had to produce it before the exhibition as a catalog, it does not feature installation shots. I think for someone who has not seen the exhibition it is very hard to get into the work through the book alone.

You come from a tradition of photographers like David Goldblatt and Alf Kumalo. Is it difficult to find subject

matter in our ‘post-’state that is just as engaging? Is that a conversation that young photographers have, asking how do we construct or how do we frame the post-state?

My answer to that question now is very different to how I would have answered in 2008 or even 2010. There was an element of wanting to bring the post- state into conversation with the pre-, like with Beaufort West and using that town as a kind of picture of post-apartheid South Africa. We have been through different stages of disillusionment with the post- state. Perhaps the violence, especially the structural violence that I have described in my work is an attempt to show the degree to which the historical violence is still embedded. *Moses and Griffiths*, the film in *Retinal Shift*, was an important work for me. It is a portrait of two 70-year old black men who are tour guides in Grahamstown, which is an even more fucked up city than Cape Town.

And it has a mental hospital, which is central.

Yeah, fuck the prison, let’s put in the mad guys here. Anyway, Moses and Griffiths give tours for school kids and tourists, tours that present Grahamstown’s history completely from the perspective of the white English settlers. On his tour, which I transcribed for the book, Griffiths literally says “the English were suffering after the Napoleonic wars and they came to South Africa to find greener pastures where they met these unfriendly tribes.” But those ‘unfriendly tribes’ were his own ancestors! That our institutions could still be narrating that history through this man in 2011, that is as violent as anything I have ever photographed.

When I asked Moses and Griffiths to tell their own stories as tours, it brought out the most extraordinary, richly personal, descriptions about Grahamstown, its history of apartheid and its current lack of change. The fact that all of that was never told in their official tours

blew my mind. On the four screens of the work I contrasted the professional and personal tours, and explore what these contrasts reveals of the almost schizophrenic divisions within each man—divisions which are coping mechanisms we all develop to deal with structural violence. At one point in his official tour Moses points out an old building as an old hotel. I struggled to understand why he would draw attention to this particular building, it did not seem significant. But in his personal tour he suddenly says, “my mother used to work there and she was a dishwasher and our favorite thing was that she used to bring the left overs back home after work.”

In a way he is a metonym for post-apartheid South Africa. The structures that created apartheid are still pretty much there, just without the sign. When I think of the project of nation building I think it was executed badly. The premise of justice without reparations was a complete lost opportunity.

You are right. So it is about that internal thing that’s in Moses’ head and Griffiths’ head, but it is also about me and the psychological state of having to hold two contradictory things in your head, and keeping them separate because it is too painful living with both. That is why I moved to Joburg, because Joburg wears its fucked up-ness on its sleeve, whereas in Cape Town half the people in Camps Bay pretend that they are in the South of France.

It is true you can live in Cape Town and if you wanted to, not see a single black person.

Well, you would have to be served by them.

You do not have to see them when they serve you.

I think the elephant in the room is that I feel like I have lost faith in photography, or at least I have lost interest in practicing it myself. Photography is burdened by the misconception that it just reproduces the world where actually

every aspect of the technology of photography changes the world and interprets the world and involves choices made by the person wielding the camera. I am very aware of the complex politics of looking at the body of any 'other,' nevermind as a white South African photographing often black subjects. At the same time I believe in looking and I believe that it can be a really productive thing to make representations and share them with others. I want to look at the world around me and I want to do so unashamedly but also with consciousness of how fraught its history is. It is a minefield.

In *Retinal Shift* I smashed my own photographs. In retrospect, by doing this, I was writing my own subjectivity, my own violent feelings into the photographs themselves because I was frustrated that my images of violence could be put on a gallery wall and consumed for their beauty. At the same time I had a studio in Joburg, and I became interested in studio practice. I started reading and doing collages which I call sticky tape transfers, and writing in relation to film-making. I have come out completely from the world of making photographs.

Now I am working on my first fictional film, which I see as a follow up to *Moses and Griffiths*. It is completely shot in Port Elizabeth. It is so easy to blame all of South Africa's problems on apartheid, but there is this liberal tradition of English-speaking whites who somehow think of themselves as less conservative and racist than Afrikaans-speaking whites. That is completely fucked up if you look at the actual history of English colonialism in South Africa.

Like the French, they created Voltaire but it seems they lose their decency the moment they step into the colony. It was where their imperial power could find release for all its internal violence.

Yes, but it feels like French or German or Belgian colonialism is more recognised as having been genocidal, but so was British

colonialism. Have you read that book *Frontiers*?

I have—I have it at home.

I have always had a copy and I had never read it until now because it felt so daunting. The film that I am making draws on it and mentions the clearing of the Zuurveld (which is the area where Grahamstown is located) by Colonel Graham. That the town was named after this genocidal man is understandable in a historical context, but the fact that it is still called Grahamstown is like twice as fucked up as the Rhodes statue, which of course is fucked up in its own right. So I don't know, there is a whole lot of conversations to be had. I would like to... maybe we can meet again sometime.

GENERATING CONSCIOUSNESS

Bogosi Sekhukuni and Pamela Dlungwana

You said as a kid you read a lot. What do you read now?

When I learnt how to read I literally thought I could do magic because I thought reading was magic. This was in kindergarten, and I just ran with it. Now I struggle with reading fiction because I am used to movies. When I approach a narrative I am used to that narrative being able to exist in a certain amount of time. So I mostly read newspapers. Then there is the Susan Stone paper *Of Virtual Communities on the Internet* to which I keep going back.

How did you arrive at the internet as a space?

Mxit was the first Facebook. Mxit does not get the credit it deserves, in terms of its social importance for my generation. You could flirt online – especially for gay and lesbian youth that was the place where you would go to get off if you were a teenager.

Do you see the internet interacting outside of itself?

There is supposed to be a conflict in spaces between IRL and URL, but I do not see it as a clash. I just see it as an expansion of an experience that could be online. I recently resolved my issues with gallery spaces, or at least I have come to an understanding of how they can work for me. I see gallery spaces as purely industry showcases – other industries, like aeronautics and cellphones, have expos to show their shit as well. Once you start to attach this aura of social significance it becomes dishonest. It is just another industry.

Speaking to a friend I was told, ‘Oh Bogosi comes from a very pan-Africanist background.’ What does that mean, a pan-Africanist childhood?

I grew up with a single mom and she is an OG in her field. She studied film and she was one of the exiles that went to the UK, where she did a lot of media stuff, studying while writing music reviews for *Drum*, that kind of thing. When she came back in the early 1990s they started an initiative training black kids from Joburg and the rest of the continent to work in TV and film. That project later turned into Newtown Film and Television School, which was our life up until 2001 when there was a big fire. Basically I grew up going to a film school my whole childhood.

And you had no siblings, right?

No, and being an only child you just live in your head like a motherfucker, it is insane. I had a basketball that I attached personalities to and I had teddy bears and I would christen them with black names instead of names like Mike, which were typically used for toys. I named my teddy bears Tsepo, Tsepiso, Thabo.

My mom stressed the fact that I needed to identify with black imaging. She also did a lot of travelling on the continent when I was younger, and I was always surrounded by people from other countries. We had really strong ties with Ghana and we used to go every second year for the student film festival and she used to buy me books about Anansi the spider.

I guess one would consider your mom to be ‘woke’ these days.

Dude, 8th generation woke. Haile Gerima was a regular visitor, he used to stay at our crib when he came to SA. I was around all those conversations as a child, even that classic time when he came in 2003, when they were premiering *Sankofa*. Mutabaruka was around and I was a kid amidst all that stuff.

You were the kid under the table.

It is that single parent thing: you are just going to go everywhere with your kid.

I seem to come across artists whose mothers are pivotal characters; Mancoba, for instance, whose mother impressed the value of language on him via poetry, and here you are with a mom with the same kind of demands.

Yeah, my mother used to lock me up during the holidays, and force me to write one poem each day. I used to hate it. I literally thought that she hated me.

She wanted me to be an artist. Obviously I rejected the idea. I was going to study fashion. Because fashion was something I was *not* really exposed to as a kid.

What about the people around you? When you describe the set in which you grew up I immediately get a sense of a particular aesthetic. Did their sense of fashion not influence you?

I would look at my mom and think “that is really cool,” but I still had to deal with the social pressure of going to school and have kids shit on you for not wearing labels. I was not trying to be in no African print nothing, no ‘loincloth’ nothing.

Your generation has somehow smashed the notion of “this is me and in Kente and I’m black and I’m in the space.” You point out that there are other modes. In *Dream Diaries*, it’s “here’s video, it’s a medium but I’m going to use it for what I’m going to use it for, to achieve this other thing.” How did you get there?

Dineo Bopape is a big influence on *Dream Diaries*. Her videos are just like fuck; I mean her editing process is something I had never seen before.

But there is still a great difference between the works technically. Her videos are clean and they are crisp, because as much as the edges fray, even when we go into a distortion, all of it is beautifully rendered – even when you go into snow mode, it is virginal white, clean. Your images are smudgy and they bleed. It is like you went into that clean lounge at your grandmother’s and just pulled everything to the floor. It’s a statement, ‘You’re going to see that I was here.’

For me clean, finished, factory level stuff – you can do that with a machine and so for me that value is dead. I like the noise. When I heard *Venus in Furs* by the Velvet Underground for the first time, I did not know music could be like that.

It is as if these videos are constructed mainly out of synthetic dirt, the ‘etcetera’ that the internet and our South African experience have to offer. *Dream Diaries* opens one up to a host of emotions. There is you laughing and jeering, wanking and then ... Kentridge. I died.

Siyabangena! That episode is the wet dream in the series, and I was really trying to build a cheap mythology around some daddy shit, me finding William Kentridge as the dad that I never knew about. “William, I am your son. Pay my school fees.”

Which brings us to the *absentblackfatherbot*. The characters were so universal, even though it began as a transcript of an actual conversation. How did you come to produce that work?

I was doing a residency and the original project was not working out because the French government has really weird attitudes towards DNA testing.

I am generating consciousness. If you take the notion that consciousness is something that we get to through engaging with what’s around you, then you can, in a poetic way, generate

consciousness between two semi-autonomous beings or objects by having them interact with each other. I treat the videos as simulations of my entire relationship with that guy.

Consciousness Engine I is about the idea I had to try and make a copy of myself using a script of my genome. I am trying to do a full sequence of my genome. I would be printing out my genome into a bucket of water and it would evaporate as it comes out.

Do you not run the risk of being mistaken for an item belonging in the Afro-futurist laundry bag?

I am trying to work this out myself, but the conversation is very shallow and a lot of it has to do with the fact that we actually do not fully acknowledge the conversations or knowledge our ancestors were having before ...

The colonial interruption?

Yeah. I am trying to understand how people back then understood reality, physical reality and their place in it. And I think that is where the answer is going to be. Afro-futurism to me is nothing. In present times it is really a kind of cultural imperialism.

I watched the three videos you made titled *So Saith the Lord?* Who is that guy?

That is the future! I'm really excited about what he is doing, for me it's history. Maxwell is a guy from Zimbabwe, and he's a self-taught engineer.

Or divinely taught, as he says.

He is self-taught, he has been doing this since the late 1990s. He first built a radio broadcast transmitter and made illegal broadcasts. His company went viral because they had an open day where they invited school kids and media. What he is doing is actually revolutionary – he has tapped into free energy, which for a long time has been a topic for conspiracy buffs, and then he comes with this divinely attributed

way of working as well. What is interesting to me is his process, and how it differs from dominant scientific ways of doing things.

God speaks to you? Bra, come on.

No, leave him, these things happen. What we are trying to do is disrupt our culture of knowledge systems that are deeply rooted in how white people think or how Europeans understand reality. This idea of experimentation through data accumulation solely as a valid proof of an idea is very European.

We were interested in seeing what an African perspective on those scientific processes could be, and we wanted to treat his visions as just as valid. There is a whole history that is repressed within scientific circles of discoveries being made through divine inspiration, people like Einstein and Dmitri Mendeleev. Because Maxwell is Christian his angle is that it is the glory of God, but we see him as in tune with a metaphysical pluri-dimensional perspective on reality; we see him as communicating with an entity in the fourth dimension or the fifth dimension, who may describe themselves as God.

There are so many layers to this. Science increasingly accepts that physical reality is not all there is, which is what black people have known since forever – there are forces outside of us that interact with our world.

A COLLAGE OF INTENT AND MATERIAL

Bongani Madondo and Ernest Cole

Uncle Erny, I am honoured to have this rare and mystical opportunity to speak with you (which is awkward concept, given your work was so rooted in realism). First off, the basics: your father was a tailor and mom a domestic worker. How did that shape the person, photographer, activist and artist you became?

You are welcome. In fact not enough cross-generational conversations are happening. And that is why each and every generation believes its challenges are new, or unique, or pertain to them alone. Life is a cyclical continuum. I am glad we are finally doing this. As for the role my family and my upbringing played in shaping me... Look at it this way: tailors are all about detail. My father was about detail, all about seeing and feeling. His job was about stitches, patches, sewing, working with garments, colours, even though he was not a manufacturer *per se*. His craft —and that is the word I was looking for! — was all about paying attention and assembling... Like a collage artist in a way. First of all, photography is a collage of intent and material. All its components and layers and colours play themselves up in the head and out before your eyes.

That is an interesting way of looking at it, parallels between your father's craft and yours. What about your mother's? I heard she was uneasy about you dropping out of school and taking up photography.

My mother was a domestic worker. They called them 'maid' or 'girl' back then. Imagine your mother being referred to as someone's 'girl.' But these girls wielded real

power. They ran (and still run) multiple households all at one go: theirs, and their bosses' homes. Imagine the responsibility involved right there. So yes, their different but ultimately similar jobs, and who they were, had an impact on the person, and the 'seer' I grew into.

The current *real* remember you as a photo-journalist. Am I correct to infer you were more than that? That you were also, to quote my colleague Zanele Muholi, a 'visual activist,' as well as an artist?

Journalist I was. Not sure about 'visual activist.' It proposes multiple meanings to me even when it appears to be a single description. As for 'artist,' I am not really sure. My musician friends, such as Phillip Tabane (Malombo) and Julian Bahula for example, were real artists, although then everyone used the term 'entertainer.' Artist sounds quite aloof. A genius, hermit: Rembrandt, Da Vinci, Picasso... Sekoto. I prefer 'witness.' I was a witness to two things: my people's surroundings, and their movements. But also, I made an attempt to peer into their soul, if one believes a camera is capable of that.

The person who gifted me your book *House of Bondage* inscribed these words to me: "This is a testament to the power of images and the power of books." Do you believe images have the power to alter, or morally redirect, the world, to render it a tolerable space in which to live?

In ancient times art occupied the same space as faith; in some cases it was the physical symbol of faith. I do not know whether it can alter the world. I know that it plays a key role in how people see and hear and think of themselves. Although all nations have their expressive cultures, art was often presented as a luxury, an indulgence of the elites. In that case its impact is quickly diminished. But what do I know about 'art?'

You dedicate the book to among others your dad, to Struan Robertson and to “my brethren in bondage.” Which chimes in with the intro on the inside flap of the book jacket: “The House of Bondage is the dwelling-place of black people of South Africa, whose bitter life is one of the tragedies of our century.” Is that all you felt about black folks and the country then? Was there no sense and creative attempt at living and experiencing some kind of thrill, spiritual aspiration and talking back to power that was worth remembering?

Indeed my people in bondage could not really be caged. Bondage here is a metaphor for subjugation. At attempt to turn people into solely unthinking cheap automatons, with no sense of humanity. Yes, they—we!—created our own parallel inner lives within this bondage. The system could not capture and enslave our souls. But the bondage, in actual jails and as experienced in the locations, was real. I cannot separate the two. Look at these two ‘heart-forms:’ jazz and the blues, or in our case in South Africa jazz and *marabi*. They were serious expressions of people literally enslaved in one way or the other. Creative expression of experienced joy, and living under systematic as well as, how do I say it, spiritual hardship, are inseparable.

Would you please tell me about your formative years, and why you picked up photography as the instrumental eye and voice in your life, as well as your way of making sense of *your* world?

I believe we have covered that. I grew up in an area called Vlaakfontein, the current Mamelodi, in the eastern black locations of Pretoria. Life was actually not all traumatic. Parents worked hard and made even harder choices about their families’ survival. I realised early on that the manner in which education was being formulated for us Africans was not going to empower us. Late 19th and early 20th century missionary education was excellent, they said, but I came up in the era during which Apartheid was

being legislated, and the powers that be could not deal with the reality of a truly learned African person. I knew my future was doomed. Fortunately my dad had bought me a cheap camera in my early teens. I was instantly drawn to it as a technology, a way of recording, more than anything else. That probably had a hand in the direction and craft I pursued later on. And no, my surname is Kole, and not Cole. I was not born a ‘coloured’ person. That is a long story though. Heeee- heeee [coughs].

Early on, after quitting school, you worked for a Chinese studio photographer as a dark room assistant. And later on, while enrolled for a distance learning photography diploma through the New York Institute of Photography, *Drum* magazine’s famous picture editor Jürgen Schadeberg gave you a freelance job. It seems to me things looked bleak after you quit school at the age of sixteen, and then all of a sudden you were gifted with a previously unimagined buffet of life-altering and career-shaping opportunities. Did you, by then, have a goal—say a book, a museum show, a film, or worse or better, becoming spokesman of a race?

Yes and no. I knew I wanted to do photography and tell my people’s stories in that medium. Of course in my late teens and early twenties it was not all tightly planned. After doing a series of menial jobs like all ‘boys’ around the time, I started to submit work to *Drum*. In the 1950s and 1960s, the horrors of my existence took on a more dramatic and expanded dimension. I could not turn a blind eye. I knew, like everyone who could see and be enraged by the conditions of the time, that my life and time in my country were limited. You could not see, act, and remain unmolested or removed and carted to jail. All those who could see and hear, hear and do something about it were threats unto themselves! All that exposed you to death, or jail. Early on I knew I wanted to create a massive body of work focused on my people, and yes, I aimed to do a book from then on.

There's something cinematic, *auteur*-istic if I may, in the larger body of your work in both South Africa and the United States: a sense of palpable drama in which you were a participant. Not unlike Diane Arbus' silent complicity in the work she did around the time, you were deeply invested in photographing South Africa's freak social conditions.

I have just mapped out the answer to this one above. In short, journalists, and especially photo-journalists, could not help it but become active, physical participants in the joys, subversions and dramatic tableaux unfolding before our eyes. The means of telling those stories, by this I mean the device by which you search, find and share those stories, the camera, brings you right into the center of lived life and action. On assignment, you would assume you were looking at them, but these people were and are watching you watching them, in return. You are one of them for all intents and purposes, while the device itself is the only outsider, because, you know, it is a machine. It does not see or feel. *You* see and feel, through and without it. Although we saw the worst, my people were never freaks.

I am moved by the empathic and celebratory manner in which you captured varying degrees of black South Africans' skin textures and tones. While there is something organic and realist about the black and white medium in which you worked, not many photographers master the variant shades of brown, chicory coffee, and beiges quite like you did. Was it your goal to achieve that, over, say, the story you aimed to tell?

I love this question. Thank you. Indeed with black and white, which is all I shot back then, you can get the grading and the different types of black skins—black includes brown and beige people for me—quite wrong. We are not the same and we have different textures. That knowledge was important for me, and lighting was instructive in this, to edit in the very process of shooting. Luckily I grew up in

a place where we all internalised these same-differences, the colouring and texturing happened by osmosis during the process of photographing people. As you can imagine, some of the photos were shot in a hurry. You had to get your picture and move on. But I preferred to lurk, stay behind, establish personal bonds where I could. That helped to imprint people's faces and skin types in my memory. Also, remember I started as a darkroom assistant. It is like starting to write as an editor before you are assigned reportorial and writing duties. You already know how you want to carve the story and the space you are working with. You are not, as it were, shooting in the dark.

Do you have a favourite Ernest Cole photograph?

Hmmm [caughs]. That would be all photos of those people—including terrible people who oppressed, robbed and lied to their countrymen, bosses at work, partners and so on—all those who gave themselves to the moment, thus allowing me to record that particular moment. But I believe there is no such thing as an Ernest Cole photograph, unless you are insinuating that I have become short hand for a movement, or stuck in sepia-time, a Cartier-Bresson or Man Ray sort of cultural moment?

Post-independence photographers like Alf Kumalo and the German expat Jürgen Schadeberg in South Africa, and Sory Sanlé, Malick Sidibé and Seydou Keïta in francophone West Africa earned (belated) international fame for showing an Africa gripped in delirious *joie de vivre*: riotous colours, music and dance, play, pleasure, and so on. Their preferred medium was portraiture. What was it about photo-journalism *per se*, that concentrated all your energies, and why did you choose social documentary as your way of seeing an evolving Africa?

But that is a myth. Not all African photographers were studio photographers

telling stories of *joie de vivre*, as you put it. Studio photography was particularly, as we later learned from colleagues, a West African ‘modern’ cultural thing. Take for example Priya Ramrakha, my colleague, so to speak, at *Life* magazine in the US. He was from Kenya and learned the practical aspects of the trade in the newsroom in Nairobi, before advancing his studies in the US. He was never a portrait photographer, although he shot really warm and intimate portraits when his heart grabbed him by his lapels. Priya died doing what he did best: being a roving photographer. He was caught in between warring factions in Nigeria’s Biafra war. Alf Kumalo, too, was not a studio photographer. There were and still are so many unexplored ways of seeing not only an evolving people, but evolving landscapes: rivers, lakes, vegetation, the colours of the season and how they all played out on different skin textures and surfaces. Africa was and, I believe, still is an embarrassment of visual and performative as well as sensory riches.

In *House of Bondage*, in a chapter entitled ‘Banishment,’ you speak of your experience driving from Mafikeng to a ‘banishment camp’ in town of Frenchdale, near the border of Botswana:

Late at night we reached the banishment camp. At first all I could see was the faint glow of hot coals, the remains of an open cookfire. Then a few black huts took shape, a dozen of them squatting forlornly in a cluster against the long, low skyline. ... Soon everybody in the camp came together to greet us. They were so glad to see us, to see anyone. There were six of them—five men and one woman. For five days and nights I stayed in Frenchdale with these people. I shared their cookfires and slept in their huts. As I listened to their stories and took the photographs shown here, I got to know something of their feeling of emptiness.

These were real people with real feelings and emotionally stirring if challenging stories. But they are also just a sample of hundreds, thousands of communities strewn and totally erased from their families, and from the country’s map, under the Native

Administration Act of 1927. These are the ‘banished’ people, the erased (non)-citizens. In your words, from that same chapter, “Banishment is the cruelest and most effective weapon that the South African Government has yet devised to punish its foes and to intimidate potential opposition.” This passage sent my spirits into a tailspin. It pierced through my emotional storage. It struck me how in the time I live in —post-Apartheid— we tend to theorize about the monstrosity of racism. We do not pause to think and imagine how, effected and executed upon the lives of individuals, family units, on people’s psyches, how destructive and possibly unhealable racism is; how did photographing such desolate and defeated people in such nooks of the country affect you as the photographer, and the artist in you?

On a bad day, what I saw there would sap the air out of my surroundings and the air out of my lungs. It also compelled me to tell the story as it was, since the dramatic setting of nothingness out of nowhere is already established. It was all there. I felt I needed to connect as honestly to the surroundings and its people, or the people and *their* surroundings, in the ways they needed to be seen, heard and felt. There were none of the news-set props that busy urban life might provide. There it was, like witnessing the stark contrasts between snow-whiteness and bottomless blackness, chilling life and equally chilling death. That moment also taught me that you, the photographer, might wish to lie, for whatever reason, but the camera would never.

May we talk about the conditions in which you and other photographers and reporters worked? What was it like?

We had to negotiate the system and play with and around the hardships, the constant demands on identification, to prove that we indeed belonged in the urban areas and not some far flung bundus. That we *mattered*. That we were grateful for being allowed visitor-status in the ‘white’ cities,’ which of

course we had built and still labored in and for. Fortunately, our people loved being photographed, especially that new menace to society: the *tsotsi*. They were both outlaw heroes and a nuisance. But they enjoyed attention. This story of black strife and *Drum*, *Zonk*, the *New Age* and others has been told to death. I would not be adding anything particularly enlightening to it. Let the photographs tell their stories.

There's something refreshingly single-minded about your body of work, when viewed collectively. It is not made up only of stories of what, in Jamaican patois, would be called *sufferance* or *sufferay-shon*: a couple of images show people reading bibles; images of beauty pageants; shebeen revelry; live music sessions; religious rituals; some haunting landscapes, and so on. Would you say all these people believed themselves to be living in some kind of country of bondage? A country to cry for, or one that, according to Alan Paton, evoked deep regret and pain through its beauty and meanness of spirit?

We have answered this question long ago.

Fair enough. You eventually escaped and went into exile, via Paris, London and ultimately settled, for a while, in the United States. Why did you go, and did you nurse intentions to come back to South Africa? All of us artists, writers and activists knew that our time was up here.

There was no way of surviving the state-sanctioned spiritual warfare, nor the physical elimination of a people and its dreams, and remain intact. Did I plan on leaving, never to come back? No. I did not leave on an exit visa, unlike my friends Lewis Nkosi and Nat Nakasa, and plenty others. I left the country under the pretext of joining a group of art tourists on an educational excursion to Paris. Of course that was a ruse. Even at my age—I was in my mid 20s—I knew I was heading into unknown worlds, each country of our chosen exile with its own set of traumatic

stories and brutalities against its poor, black and brown people, artists, women... Yes, the very minute I flew out I had deep desire to come back to a free and decent country and people; the only thing worse than subsisting in a hate-filled country is being cleaved-off from home, and into exile. Exile? I will never wish it on my worst enemy.

What gifts did the United States offer you? Was it welcoming? Your childhood friend, the musician Phillip Tabane, once told me: "I knew as soon as I arrived in America that I could not make that place home."

It was a land of possibility and dreams. Replete with horror stories and maddened by its history of slavery, but also with testimonies of a people who fought the Civil War, abolished slavery, got rid of Jim Crow and were in the midst of the most inspiring civil rights battle for America's soul and heart. Americans are fighters, but they are also dreamers. It dared me to dream. But with dreams emerge nightmares. One thing I will say about it is that in the United States your work, *hard* work, discipline and talent are more than likely to be appreciated, encouraged even. I would not and could not have published *House of Bondage* anywhere else.

I am speaking with you soon after sitting through an exciting book seminar featuring the Congolese author Fiston Mwanza Mujila, whose book *Tram 83* is lauded for its timelessness, but not in the surrealist, magical kind sense of the word. Its timelessness is rooted in his subjects' and story's hyper-realism. Which is what your work, whether focused on South Africa or your exiled home, the United States, achieves, too.

Say, have you read Graham Greene at all, or Papa Hemingway? Man, I find that the people and their stories are timeless, not the storyteller. We are really in service of people's magic, and not the other way round. The beauty of stories about Africans, or any other people locked in a cycle of survival, is that

even when they create magic and, as you intimated at the start of this conversation , alter the world, they do not do so knowingly. Usually they do not have the luxury of time nor the gallons of hubris required to sit back and admire their achievements. That is left to you scholars to theorise [laughs].

You studied filmmaking in Stockholm. Is it because you had exhausted the challenging limits of still photography?

My father used to say, “Careful, boy, if you move further East you are most likely to come out in the West.” Go figure. Photography is my true and first love. Film is my love evolved. The next step. They are, principally, two separate modes of photography. The technology and theatricality are different.

In exile you moved a lot between the United States and Europe. Was it because of the restlessness that exile induces? The restlessness that we know afflicted your colleagues Nat Nakasa, Lewis Nkosi, and Joe Gumedde, Todd Matshikiza, and others?

Indeed. Exile is like being invited to this grand *soirée* where everyone fawns over you, if you are lucky or exotic enough, but on your way out, you feel like someone cruel held you down and poured a bag full of ants down your pants. For exiles all cities are restless cities.

Kindly take me through this thing: exile and depression, or to be more precise, exile as the source of depression. I know Dumile Feni and a whole lot of other artists in exile were said to be terribly depressed, clinically so. I am compelled by examples of artists, rather than, say, economics students living abroad, or activists for that matter, because I believe exiled artists are doubly-exiled. First, as artists they are some kind of outsiders in their own communities, and second, they find themselves in legalized exile with no assurance that they will one day head back home. That is some tremendous yoke of blues to carry in one’s soul. Would you say?

I cannot indulge you on this one. It is depressing. But as an artist yourself you probably have a sense, at least philosophically, in your everyday life, what exile as a concept and reality might entail. Just like women would, too. There is a reason why women handle exile far better than men. Because, I believe, they live in a state of constant exile of the soul even in their homes.

One last question... Had you not become a photographer what other careers or ways of expression might have appealed to you?

In hindsight: a painter. Or an old shoe cobbler in post-Depression Paris with the young Edith Piaf, in the early stages of harnessing her voice.