

Looking Both Ways

ART OF THE CONTEMPORARY
AFRICAN DIASPORA

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Moshekwa Langa

In Conversation

Kobena Mercer

Stretching across painting, drawing, installation, photography, and video, Moshekwa Langa's practice has created a unique realm of experience in the contemporary visual arts. By turns poetic and provocative, it is an art shaped by a fearlessly inquisitive journey of exploration through the imaginative spaces, both intimate and extreme, that are opened up in a world thoroughly reconfigured by the interplay of the local and the global.

Born in 1975 in Bakenberg, in one of the northern provinces then known as the KwaNdebele homeland, Langa matriculated from the Max Stibbe Waldorf School, Pretoria, in 1993. After moving from Johannesburg, he studied in 1997–98 at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten, Amsterdam, where he currently resides.

Langa has exhibited internationally in numerous solo and group contexts, and his work has elicited a wide range of responses among audiences who are often equally beguiled and bewildered by the sheer variety of ideas and materials on display. Touching upon the diverse facets of his practice, and teasing out some of the connective links among them, so as to illuminate the overall context of his most recent abstract landscape works, our conversation took place in his Amsterdam studio in July 2003.



Fig. 48 *Skins*, 1995-96, by Moshekwa Langa. Cement sacks, Vaseline, turpentine, creosote, tea, coffee, beet root juice, sunflower oil. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

Kobena Mercer: *What was the context in which you began making works in South Africa?*

Moshekwa Langa: One of the first things I did after matriculation was to try to write the story of my life—how I came to be what I am. It was frustrating because every time I thought I had encapsulated in words everything that could have influenced me, there was always something just hanging on the outskirts of what I wanted to say, and there was no audience to reflect back what I was engaged in. So I'd go outside into the yard—I wanted to make drawings on a big scale. I didn't have the resources to do that, but the village where I was living was a kind of huge building site, so I thought, *Why not use these cement bags that were blowing around.* So I made the first drawings using discarded elements like that, and this led to "*Skins*" (1995-96) (Fig. 48).

I was drawing with natural charcoal, which wasn't very effective as it kept rubbing off. Then I noticed that if I rubbed soap or candle wax onto the drawings the image would

Cat. 14 *Landscapes* detail, 2003, by Moshekwa Langa. Mixed media on paper, 140 x 100 cm.

fix, but as the sun got hot, the oil would spread on the paper. I found these stains quite interesting so I started adding other things, like beetroot juice, to stain the paper even more. In the end what started as a drawing became an object. I put them on a washing line to dry and they looked like skins. In the next project that came about, *Body* (1995), for an exhibition about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, I tried to make a kind of separated body using brown paper bags with molasses, syrup, Jeyes Fluid disinfectant, Dettol antiseptic, eggs, and condensed milk (Fig. 49). I found these sorts of materials very suggestive and at the same time somehow innocent, because they were things that could be bought from a local store.

KM: *The improvisational approach also runs through the "Map" collages, which feature materials such as garbage bags and masking tape as well as official maps. What led to the interest in geography and landscape?*

ML: When I took my matric examination I was given a satellite photo of an urban area; later on this provided an inspiration for *Temporal Distance* (1997). Another thing that motivated me in the collages with maps was the homelands system operational in South Africa at the time (Fig. 50, 51). When I was looking at maps, I'd notice that all of a sudden a place would end, although the same people would be living on this side or that side of a straight line. It didn't make sense that whole areas of bush could be divided by a straight line or a wavy line. It struck me that the whole process of making



Fig. 49 *Body*, 1995, by Moshekwa Langa. Brown paper bags, condensed milk, Jeyes fluid, Dettol, eggs, molasses, syrup. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 50 *Untitled* 1996, by Moshekwa Langa. Map collages with garbage bags, masking tape, 93 x 73 cm. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Sally Shorkend.

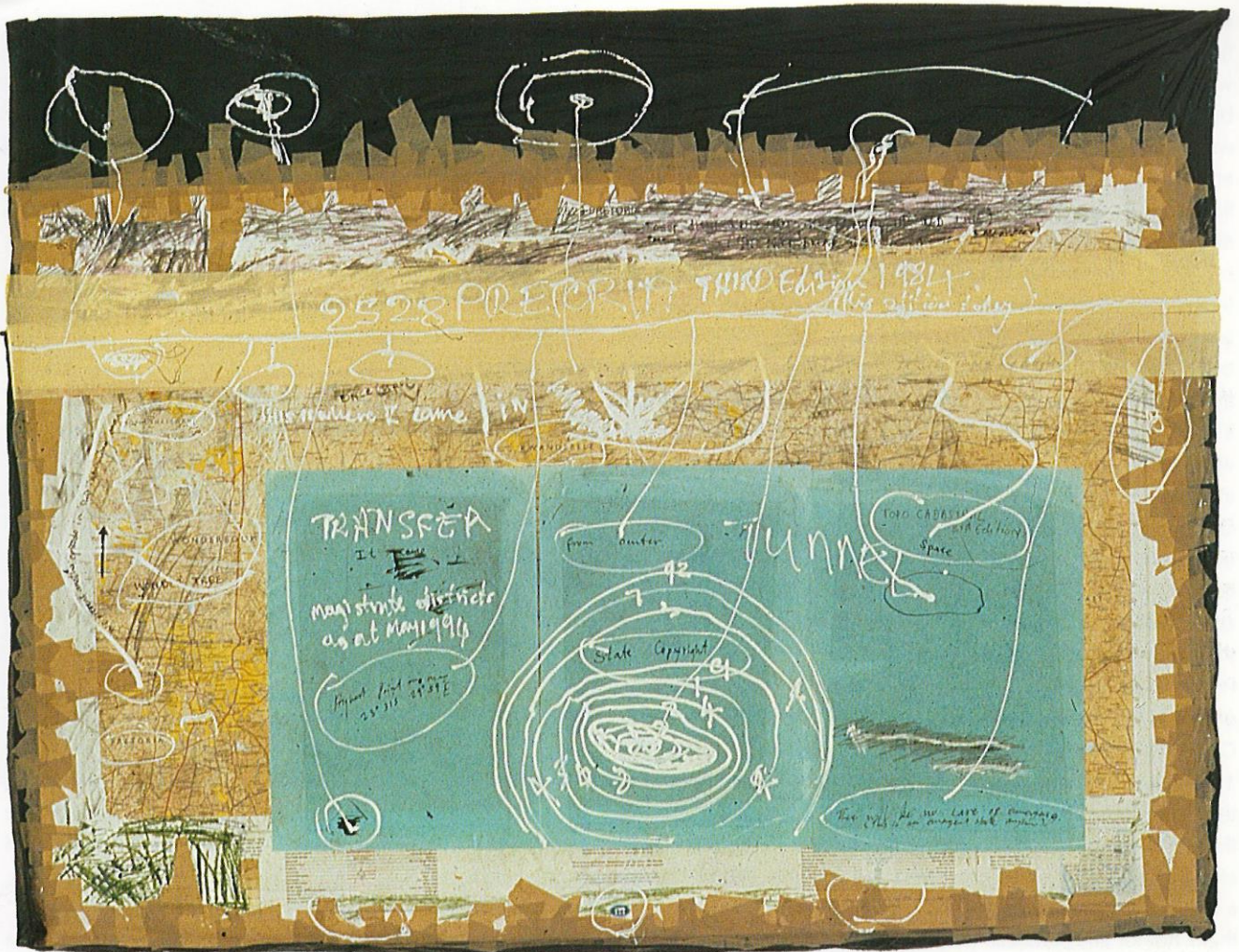


Fig. 51 *Untitled* 1996, by Moshekwa Langa. Map collages with garbage bags, masking tape, 73 x 93 cm. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Sally Shorkend.

territories is a random one. Trying to get my head around that, I started to find maps quite useless and unauthoritative, so I started working with them by reinscribing the lines. The series developed from there.

Later on I went to the South African state department to buy more of the maps, but they refused to sell them to me. A year or two after that, when I went back to South Africa to visit, I tried again and they sent me these new maps, which were nothing like the ones I had worked with initially: they looked like computer-generated copies, and of course they reflected the new situation in South Africa, with the nine new provinces instead of the homelands. Overnight things had changed, so the maps were again useless: here today, gone tomorrow. As government documents they were meant to be accurate, but it just depended on which edition you were looking at. One of my fascinations was that the map is supposed to be an authoritative document, but really it can't help you with anything, particularly in South Africa, where what will happen is unpredictable, since there have been so many changes in such a short time. I was interested in maps because they were useful and useless devices at one and the same time.

KM: *Temporal Distance* has been widely exhibited and has become a kind of signature piece, evoking movement or displacement through global or local spaces. Did it evolve during the transition when you came to the Rijksakademie?

ML: Yes, the starting point for that piece was that I had been to a flea market in Amsterdam and found these balls of wool, which were quite thick, very colorful, and all tangled up together. I took bags of it back to my studio and started trying to unravel the wool, but there was so much of it that it seemed futile to straighten it out. So I used whole blobs of it, arranged by color on the floor, and through that process it struck me how much the balls of wool looked like mountains. It so happened that I had also bought some candleholders in the market, which, tipped onto their sides, made the whole thing look like a landscape. Eventually I elaborated on that by putting toy cars and plastic mice and bottles into what was almost an architect's model of a city. I didn't try to impose order onto the arrangement as I thought that leaving it to chance would be more interesting: it looked like a city but it wasn't a city. So it seemed appropriate to leave it in that chaotic state. Each time it's been shown, though—in Johannesburg, Cologne, Barcelona, and other places—I've found that it's very difficult to re-create chaos (Fig. 52). I'd empty the material onto the floor, but with each successive presentation it became more difficult to keep it from looking a bit contrived. I had to improvise, so the piece changed daily throughout the time it was on exhibition. I think the blobs of wool on the floor reminded me of the contours of hills in the map pictures. The toys came about after I went to Cuba in 1997 and saw these marvelous American cars from the 1950s in the streets. When I moved to Johannesburg there was this lime-green Volvo for sale, and I wanted to have it, even though I couldn't drive! I had never had toys when I was a kid, and I thought, What an elegant car. Anyway, later on when I was in Berlin, I was shopping one day and found a store that had toy cars like the ones I'd seen in Cuba. I bought about seventeen of them, not for any particular purpose but just to have them. Then when I started to add the cars and toy mice to the wool, I thought the different scales were interesting. The wool could be mountains or arterial roads, the bottles could be buildings, and the giveaway was the toy cars strewn around.

KM: *Did the transition from South Africa to the Netherlands affect your way of working?*

ML: When I came to the Netherlands I felt stunted in a way: I was new, I was foreign, I was a guest, and I felt it would be inappropriate to make work about this new social space, because I didn't know anything about it. Part of that experience led to my more abstract or playful works. As soon as I came to the Rijksakademie I became impotent because I was without a map, so to speak. I was in the unknown, although that was an interesting situation to be in.

At the Rijksakademie I already had these map works, but in the first few weeks I found that when people came to my studio the first thing they asked me was, "You're from South Africa. How does it feel to be here?" When I spoke to colleagues next door, on the other hand, I felt that their work was being addressed more directly and that their personal histories were left outside. I found that showing my maps pushed me into an impossible corner. At a certain point I decided that I was going to make works that had no text or image, because I was feeling very uncomfortable with the situation of finding myself engaged with people who were not knowledgeable about South Africa but who repeatedly wanted me to tell them about South Africa. People would point to



Fig. 52 *Temporal Distance, (With a Criminal Intent) You Will Find Us in the Best Places...*, 1997, by Moshekwa Langa. 2nd Johannesburg Biennale installation view of landscape created from wool yarn, candleholders, toy cars, plastic mice. Photo: Werner Maschmann.

my accent, saying I was from an African country but now I was in the art system, and somehow I felt accused of being an artist and not struggling enough. It made me very angry—it was tough.

KM: *Was this the moment when you produced the photography-based works?*

ML: As a direct consequence of my situation at the Rijksakademie, I stopped making drawings. Instead I made a series of installations, using glass and wool, to be shown outside. At the end of the first year I felt I hadn't made much progress, so I thought, What would happen if I did something with my body? Perhaps that would challenge people. So with the series "My Life as a Disco Queen" (1999) I worked alone with a camera and tripod.

The first pictures were based on an image that had been frightening to me when I was little: the cover of a Miriam Makeba album, *Live for My Brothers and Sisters*, from a 1977 concert in Paris. Makeba has her hand stretched out holding the microphone, and the photo is shot from a low vantage point, so her fingers are prominent—they have an oversized, hedgehog quality. Also the designer has stripped out the context, so she's on this orange background. The photograph has an unearthly quality; it's not flattering but rather dramatic. Another picture came back to me from a photo-story character called She, a black woman superhero dressed in white cape and boots; this was my reference for "How I Left the Couch" (1999). I made one series with the microphone, another with my shirt off, and then another where I wore white socks and underwear and hung from the rafters of the studio as if I were flying through the air. If I used my naked body in this setting, what would the reaction be? I noticed at the Rijksakademie that when pictures of black people were being discussed, there was always a big problem about who had made them. So I thought, if I was making those pictures, maybe we could have a discussion. But there was no discussion whatsoever (Fig. 53 a-d).

KM: *Was there more of a response to "Far Away from any Scenery" (1999)? This series' iconography of the corpse is very different from the staging of the body in the "Disco Queen" series, which has a kind of amateur porn ambience.*

ML: In 1999–2000 I had an exhibition at the Renaissance Society in Chicago that had a lot of things in it coming from very different angles, and I realized that some people might be overwhelmed with so many different aesthetics. Perhaps the pictures that looked like cheap porno, next to the death pictures, next to the more flowery installations could all together seem too much. But it was important for me not to isolate these different elements, because when I made them, while still making the installations with threads on the floor, I didn't make such a big separation myself. It was important to present my creative output at its most extensive.

KM: *If the audience feels overwhelmed by the variety of works shown, is that part of your intention?*

ML: Yes, because it comes from the way I've experienced things. Having seen the reaction that the maps could muster, and knowing that this could stay with me, I felt that putting different materials together was a way of making a strong statement without resorting to a one-liner. In my show at the Venice Biennale this year, there's no one place to focus, and that's deliberate: it's important to me that there's no sense of isolation among the works.

KM: *Coming back to the floor-based installations, could you describe the evolution of the piece called The Mountains of My Youth—A Novel—(1997)?*

ML: I made that work, which was very sparse, and *Temporal Distance*, which was quite baroque, in the same year. *The Mountains of My Youth* was composed of cones of thread placed on red linoleum on the floor with strips of white fax paper, and some

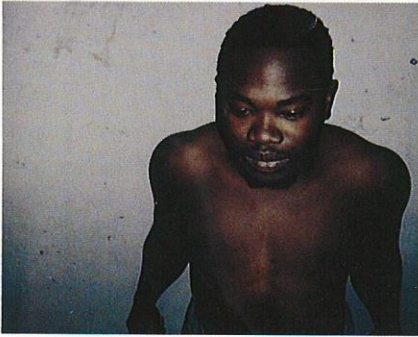
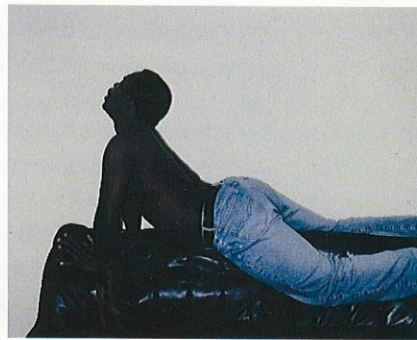
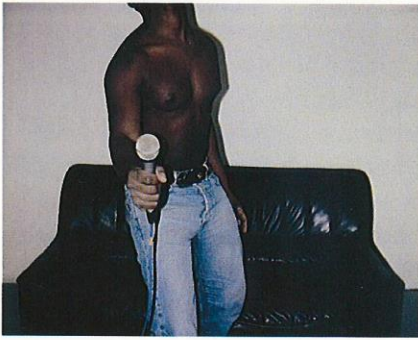


Fig. 53 a-d
True Confessions: My Life as a Disco Queen, 1998, by Moshekwa Langa. Photographic series, vinyl print mounted on di-bond, 120 x 150 cm. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

How I Left the Couch, 1998, by Moshekwa Langa. Photographic series, vinyl print mounted on di-bond, 120 x 150 cm. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

Far Away from any Scenery He Knew or Understood, 1998, by Moshekwa Langa. Photographic series, vinyl print mounted on di-bond, 120 x 150 cm. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

of the threads were stuck to the wall. In that year after matriculation when I was working out what to do, I found one book very interesting in the way it combined various events that all happened in one day, and that was James Joyce's *Ulysses*. So in *The Mountains of My Youth*, instead of using words, I used threads to represent different people and different areas. By overlapping them and trying to superimpose a family tree, I wanted to create an area map and a chronology of various events—there was lots of crisscrossing among the threads. Reading *Ulysses*, I was taken with the different styles of writing and how each flowed into the next, so I used a title that sounded quite bombastic, as if the piece were going to be a personal revelation, but really I was saying that this was a work of fiction, only possibly based on real events. But nobody seemed interested in it and I felt it was dismissed (Fig. 54).

KM: *An interest in language, and in combining different language systems, appears to be another key thread running through the works, and it's been suggested that this is a search for a kind of "private esperanto." Is language something that intrigues you?*

ML: When I presented *The Mountains of my Youth* in Austria I was told that somehow it wasn't "African" enough. That happened within the first three months of my leaving South Africa, and it's a response that has followed me over the six or seven years since. Maybe some audiences are looking for a particular language form; unfortunately for them, I simply use what I've gathered, what I've had to learn, what I've been force-fed—it's all part of my language.

There seems to be a purist attitude to art that I find difficult and clinical, so it's important for me not to make heavy productions. I like to keep an incidental element in the work, to keep it "unproduced" in the sense of being almost a found piece rather than a heavy production that sits around for months on end while you wait to make it happen. I like to keep things loose. I find the heavily premeditated approach uninspiring. A large part of me is drawn to impulsive behavior and making, because then I know soon enough if it works or if it doesn't.

KM: Did the shift in location affect your improvisational approach to found materials?

ML: To the extent that the installations with wool and threads were being shown in museums and *Kunsthallen*, a certain amount of preproduction went into them. In South Africa I could create collages with materials in the yard, but when I'm working with ten people to install a single piece, and the museum wants to know the plan, it's a different situation.

KM: As you've made this journey, have earlier artists acted as models or precedents?

ML: There was Penelope Siopis, whom I found quite interesting—*Piling Wreckage upon Wreckage* was a favorite of mine. In the syllabus at school we had to do the Expressionists, but we were discouraged from using black, so we were making either flowing, watery pastels or gray-toned drawings, and in the beginning I never mixed black with colors. Later on I found it interesting to work with hard edges and strong lines together. For a long time I liked the works of Francis Bacon, particularly the ones that combine loose newsprint or Letraset with his convoluted figures. I was very excited by those at a certain point, although that's cooled off a bit.

KM: Given the diverse media that you work across in your practice, what would you say connects the variety of forms that you've explored? There's a sense of journeying between different media and materials, and I wonder whether this agile, mobile approach connects with your life story in any way.

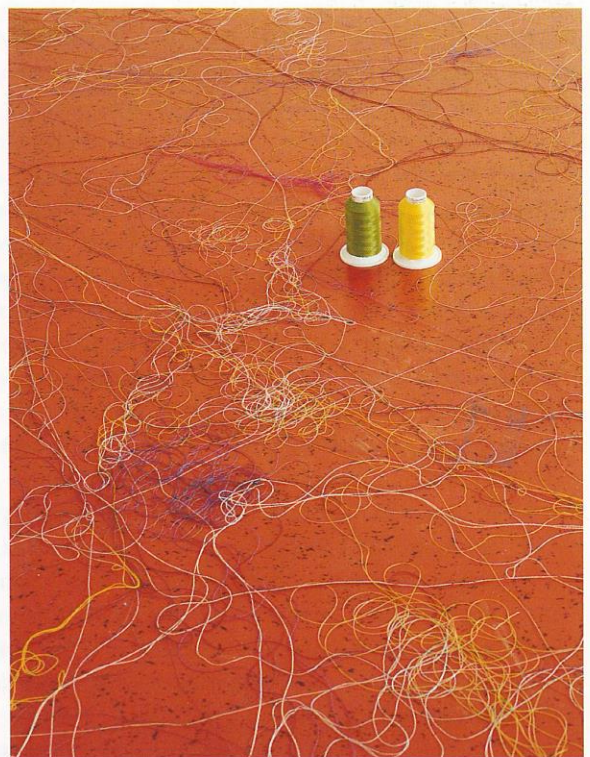
ML: It's clear that I collage different elements, and I would also say I'm very wary of making "complete" statements. A loose aesthetic runs through all the works so far, they're handmade and home-fabricated in feeling. If you look at the photos, they're not exactly snapshots but they're not exactly photo-studio productions either; if you look at the drawings, they're not meticulously rendered or shaded, there's a drippiness to them; the videos are shaky, the camera is handheld, and the montage has a loose feeling that's not Hollywood-cinematic; if you look at the installations, they have an improvised quality. All this gives the whole body of work a light feeling.

I'm moved by a kind of journeylike, almost dreamy approach, and perhaps my early days have tinged me toward this side, but I have nothing particularly exciting to tell about my life. I've taken the liberties afforded me to use elements of the real and the fictitious and to make something from that. You could say I make an analogical trace of the steps I've taken to come to this point, and one thing that certainly feeds my work is the traces I gather when I travel. The works are also tagged onto each other: there are lots of independent pieces, but it comes easily to me to put together something from 1987 and something from 1997 and to make a connection there. So although there's what looks like a biographical dimension, on careful examination it's not really there.

KM: The *Banners* (1999) looks like unreadable symbols from an unknown culture. How did this strand of work come about?

ML: As I was thinking how I could expand on the *Temporal Distance* project, I started collecting studies of architectural details, such as windows, doors, and drainage grates on the streets, and I found interesting symbols from books about nature. So the idea was to have real elements flowing above the cityscape on the ground. One or two of the symbols I used may have been taken from the idea that certain poisonous flowers were used at one time by beggars to leave messages for one another. Others, like the pigeons, are more concrete—they're things

Fig. 54 *The Mountains of My Youth – A Novel*-1997, 2000, by Moshekwa Langa. Installation view at Museum Fridericianum, Kassel. Mixed media. Photo: Werner Maschmann.



that are always found in city life. The banners were meant to allude to aspects of the city rather than act as an informative pictographic code (Fig. 55).

KM: *You've been back to South Africa several times: would you say you work "between" two locations?*

ML: There was a time when I hadn't been back for two years, and I realized that a lot of what I was doing was emanating somehow from the place where I was, Amsterdam. That gave me a jolt. In the late 1990s there was a lot of discussion in the Netherlands of a postapartheid South Africa, but when I went back there I found that this postapartheid reality was hard to find. I found myself more exposed to apartheid than when I was a child, or maybe I just saw it from an adult's point of view. I became aware that South Africa may not have changed that much; there's still acute social segregation, to the point of parallel ways of living, and a great deal of interracial resentment.

KM: *The concept of "diaspora" often involves a tension between forced and freely chosen movement through space. The word is loaded with different connotations for different groups, sometimes sinister and sometimes utopian in its range of meanings. What does "diaspora" mean for you?*

ML: Oh, but I didn't know I was in the diaspora. It's very uncomfortable to think of myself in such a setup, because "diaspora" is very definite. It makes concrete what I'm afraid to confront in my daily life: for me it means having definitely left the place of origin and being a free-floating agent. In some aspects I can accept this as a description of what I am, although I don't fully accept it yet—I prefer to see myself in a transient mode. I resist the kind of total description that doesn't allow for other, additional parts of myself. Perhaps "traveler" would be a better word.

Maybe I have a different experience because my initial move was such that I was going to go back. Even so, I was in limbo when I got here: I wasn't thrown out, but I wasn't exactly welcomed, either. Also I suppose "diaspora" would mean having a community that you're part of, but I live in a Dutch neighborhood, not a separate community. My situation is unfixed, so "traveler" is much more resounding for me.

KM: *Some have used the notion of "imagined community" to describe a form of belonging defined not by territory but by choices. Does this resonate with you? Equally, does the gay world, in a global perspective, provide a sense of community or belonging?*

ML: When I came to Amsterdam I'd heard there was something called the "gay community," but it wasn't a community I got to know. I looked into it to see if it could provide a framework for me, but over time maybe I've become disillusioned with the idea that you can have a community with people you don't know. On the other hand, I don't really know what it is to be an exile. Sometimes I wish I knew someone who spoke my language, but that hardly ever happens, whether in gay life or even among other people from southern Africa.

Imagined communities don't really resonate with me—I may be too much of a loner. A



Fig. 55 *The Banners*, 1999, by Moshekwa Langa. Drawings actualized on fabric. Installation view at The Renaissance Society, Chicago. Photo: Tom van Eynde. Courtesy of Gallery Tanya Rumpff and the artist.

lot of my time is soaked up in the art world, which I'm part of even if it doesn't really know what to do with me. Part of my life is being very mute, just getting on with what I want to do. I've had to create a place and now it's there. Also, in the Netherlands my impression is that people aren't supposed to have such problems, because everyone is equal. I've tried to talk with people from Surinam and Curaçao and the feeling is that if you participate in normal life, everything will be alright for you. People don't have problems here, it would appear; although it's difficult to gauge whether they're just being very conventional. In any case there's not much of an African community that I could say I might share a language or values with.

Perhaps part of the problematic of being a foreign person here is the idea of "we have everything and you have a different experience." Yes, I say, I have a different experience, but let me have my grief alone. I can't satisfy your curiosity because I really don't feel the need to demonstrate my difference to you or to anybody else.

KM: *Would it be fair to say that the illusion of a postapartheid South Africa that you just mentioned could be a symptom of what one could call a postpolitical predicament? Is the whole interplay of art and politics that was involved in the twentieth-century idea of an avant-garde simply no longer available to contemporary artists?*

ML: In these days of a global setup, I find that you're expected to have a strong statement, but I don't need to justify myself to anyone. If you're from a different context you're pushed into that position of "demonstrate your exoticness, demonstrate your otherness," but I say no, find somebody else to do that.

Let's say I'm inspired by dreams and mythologies. Refusing to justify what I do in terms of a social condition, refusing to make social-protest work, making work that's more enigmatic or just quiet—this is for me another position. It's not a position of negation or acceptance; it's a very light form of resistance. When I came here I was very engaged with my history and background, because that was a very natural thing to do. I was examining the legacy that apartheid had embedded in the South African landscape. Now I'm here, though, I don't wish to engage with that discussion. When you're not Anglo-Saxon you're expected to speak up, but for what? I have problems with artworks that masquerade as a political voice or a social comment. I have yet to see an artwork that can make an impact on millions of people.

KM: *Turning to the videos, which were filmed in a South African setting, I'm intrigued by the way they explore themes of flight, escape, or even a sense of being trapped. They evoke journeys, but without a narrative beginning or ending. How did these works come about?*

ML: *Marta* (2002) was a commission from the ethnology museum in Leiden, the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde. It was going to be part of a triptych commenting on the collection. I noticed that although the museum had artifacts from every corner of the world, there was nothing from Holland—nothing focusing on their own cultural heritage. My suggestion was for a series of videos where you had people trying to go and get something. For *Marta* I thought of the Expulsion from the Garden of Eden, and I wanted to create a situation where someone is in a state of excitement, trying to get somewhere, but at the same time they're being pursued, and you don't know what they're trying to get or what they're running away from. The piece was meant to convey this sense of being in the middle of a space where what's in front of you and what's behind you are equally unknown. This transient moment was the most important thing I wanted to focus on. It related to the idea of people not studying their own artifacts: they claim expertise on all these other cultures on the outside, but we don't know anything about them.

Where Do I Begin (2001) wasn't exactly found footage but came about as a kind of

home video. While filming people getting on a bus, I noticed that just by looking at the hemlines of people's skirts, or the shoes they were wearing, you could tell quite a lot about them. The fact that they were all getting on the same bus was interesting, although you didn't know where they were going. I couldn't have tried to create such a scene myself. I had the material for a long time, and eventually I decided to edit it together with the song "Where Do I Begin," by Shirley Bassey, from the film *Love Story* (Fig. 56). The song seemed to have a rhythmic connection with the people stepping onto the bus. That was one of twelve pieces together called "Waiting" (2003) that I presented at the Venice Biennale.

KM: *Talk me through the way landscape informs your "archive" paintings, which contain lists of names. Rather than the fictional quality of the cityscape pieces, these paintings seem to suggest an imaginative topography that arises from a process of remembering.*

ML: They started as an attempt at a family tree, trying to recount the names of relatives from memory, but that started to become unclear because even at the age of thirteen I was being introduced to blood relatives for the first time. So I began to include others who were important figures to me—people who weren't directly related to me but were part of South Africa's social or political life. So it got in a tangle. The paintings started to become recitations or free associations from a particular segment in time, say 1981, and then there were lines from books and novels I'd been reading at the time that came back to me. In the end each painting was a mesh of names and dates and utterances, without a beginning or end. The plan initially was a random list, but in the end it took the form of a schematic map, with some of the names being filled in with blue to suggest rivers or empty spaces. In one of the new pieces I have drawings of landscapes with lists towering in the landscape, so abstract information is enmeshed with physical description (Fig. 57). And this leads to my work for "Looking Both Ways": paintings that make a blur between a landscape of memory and the one I inhabit at this moment (Cats. 14-16).

KM: *The strong horizontal bands evoke strata, with buried layers beneath the surface of the soil: does the idea of archaeology resonate with your exploration of memory?*

ML: The idea of geological strata is relevant but my archaeology is very imprecise. I am stimulated at every turn both by what I remember and what is around me, so there's a dual aspect: at the same time that the paintings go deeper into the ground, they suggest an aerial view, with fields, hills, mountains, and lakes going into the distance.

KM: *Journeying seem to be a connective motif across many aspects of your work.*

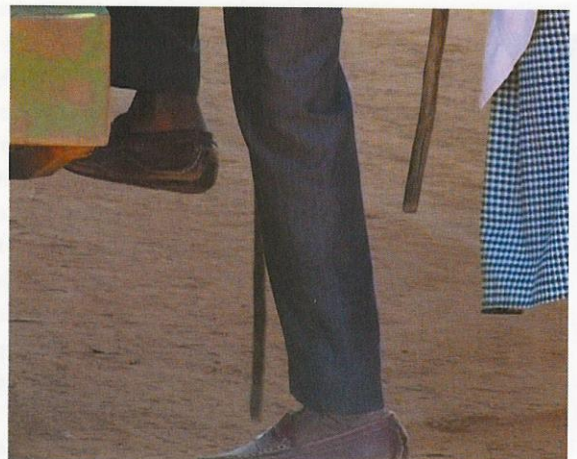
ML: My landscapes do have a sense of actively roaming about. That does seem to be in the foreground, but at the same time it's stalled by the archive setup: you have all this information, which I suppose could be taken as a set of legends for the journey. The landscape paintings are retrospective and forward-looking at the same time—there's a kind of seesaw movement going on.

KM: *Do the landscapes have a relation to the oceanic feel of the deep blue monochromes?*

ML: Those were made during my struggle at the Rijksakademie, where everything I did was interpreted in a very simplistic way that called my origins into question. I was looking for an empty situation, and I thought, If I have a big black square on the floor or the wall, how will they confront it and construct meaning? So I tried to make a very dark painting without

Fig. 57 *In the Meantime*, 2002, by Moshekwa Langa. Mixed media on paper, 140 x 100 cm. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Laurie Ann Farrell.

Fig. 56 *Where do I begin?*, 2002, by Moshekwa Langa. Still from video. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.





Zuluqivi

Nonquise

Paterfamilias

Telefina
Moket
Lydia
Mabu
Mona
Lesey

Gobabis

mmadi kaathwa
god
NNANKI Gladys

INNY

Zemulele

Nomathemba

Delwe

Patently

Lobengula

garama
Baloj
lek
Jowa

ORABJE

Shutlone

dla
ambisa

Kwa fika o munye o mama

In the

meantime



Cat. 15 *Landscapes*, 2003, by Moshekwa Langa.
Mixed media on paper, 100 x 140 cm.

using black. About twenty layers of different blues and greens went into that; you could say these paintings were the result of a plastic experiment. They were meant to be very still, as a counterpart to the more squiggly drawings of grasshoppers I was doing at the time. I wanted to make two parallel worlds where one was totally calm and the other vibrant and full of life.

In relation to landscape, my recent black and blue paintings are also the result of many experiments and corrections. As I've said, execution of the quickest order is the most interesting thing for me. Sometimes when I'm making something I see so many suggestive forms that I feel it's a shame not to explore the different possibilities the medium offers me. Also, when the archive and landscape paintings get too much, I want to get into a more restful situation—not something meditative as such, but a place where I can leave behind the cares of organization and just get into the activity of being in the studio. Perhaps part of the watery, dreamy quality comes from my Waldorf School training, where we were discouraged from sharp lines and edges, and even figures were made with circular, swirling gestures. Despite my attempts to get away from that training, these paintings made me realize that it had a deep influence on me.

KM: *Did that school experience affect your approach to drawing, or your figurative vocabulary?*

ML: Perhaps I make a lot of suggestive marks rather than a fully formed work of drawing. For me the engagement with ideas and materials is such that putting it down in a notebook is enough to form a completed work. I use different sketches and drawings to create a baroque kind of setup where every element can enliven the whole. My current work-in-progress involves figures that look slightly comic, exaggerated, and quite violent. They have gritted teeth and some of them are sexless, with bulbous heads. Perhaps they're a composite of figures from childhood stories, especially the *tokoloshe*, who comes when people are jealous of you and uses a kind of witchcraft to make you work or steal you away. I'd say I'm more interested in drawing something like that, which hasn't been represented before, than in, say, drawing from life. In a certain way my drawings are childlike, because they come from the imagination rather than being drawn from life.

KM: *Your drawings have been described as playful, spontaneous, or automatic, by virtue of the energy they convey. Does it bother you that such descriptions as "childlike" might also merge with terms such as "primitive"?*

ML: I used to be against certain forms of description, but as I'm not a master of language I've come to accept that it's beyond my reach to control what others say about the work. So I'm not resistant to the idea that some people might call the work "primitive"; these words are only a connective form between me, the works, and the audience. I deliberately try to use a preformed, childlike approach, but I don't know to what extent I succeed. I've used the word "playful" in relation to *Temporal Distance*, which is a maquette for a city but is more like a child's playpen than a city planner's model.

KM: *You've shown me the scrapbooks you made at school, and I'm fascinated by the continuity of your interest in maps and atlases. Do you ever go back to these books in any way?*

ML: There were four: the *New Visual Atlas*, the *Atlas for South African Schools*, a book in Afrikaans about Namibia, and a ledger book. The first two were textbooks I used at school, and after I left I became actively aware of the separations of the different communities in the homelands. So I started picking up cuttings from the newspapers that shed light on how the whole setup came about. I also had pictures from my schooldays showing happy situations in direct contradiction to what the maps of the homelands represented. There were also adaptations of mathematical equations and biological sepa-



rations for genomes, all of which interested me because mathematical signs are taken to be accurate and precise, but life and history aren't governed by such equations at all.

KM: *The collage aesthetic in the scrapbooks—for example in the distinctive use of masking tape—has also carried through. Is collage a key strand through your work as a whole?*

ML: Collage is my life, to put it simplistically. As a nonlimiting way of bringing together different sources, it seems the most appropriate form for me. Although it's labor-intensive, it's unrestricted. Somehow it can be done in both a dry environment and a wet environment, as opposed to making paintings or carving wood. I'd venture to say that works like *Temporal Distance* arose in a collagistic way as I assembled the different elements together.

In the beginning, at school, I kept diaries, but writing these wordy sentences was such a time-consuming thing, so I tried to distill some of my experiences in the scrapbooks, which incorporate things I heard on the radio that I found moving or disturbing. As I took things from around me, the scrapbooks became less and less private; they became a running commentary on what I was receiving from the situation around me.

KM: *The multiple layering of the cosmological and the quotidian also prefigures the way you work with different spatial scales. I was struck by the resemblance between the coils of thread under Cellotape and the relief maps and balls of wool that you've worked with.*

ML: The ledger was the book where my stepfather kept the accounts for his small grocery store. It's one of the most personal of the scrapbooks, in terms of combining aspects of my biography with things I'd been taught and that in a way I was trying to unlearn. The archive paintings I've been doing go back to the scrapbooks in a different way: they use a similar process of compiling information, but whereas before I'd cut up things and paste them into the books, now I try to recount them from memory and write them down.

KM: *So much of the work seems to be testing the arbitrary limits of language, including languages such as trigonometry, geology, or biology, by questioning or dissolving our confidence in representation. Is this another connecting thread in the work?*

ML: When we were talking about what language can be used to describe what I do, it made me think that this is all something that started for me at a very early age. We had a shared language at school, but the fact that I spoke a different dialect, and that in the beginning people decided that they didn't understand me, is something I now feel was very significant. As time went on, I became conscious of how limiting it can be just to use words. I was being taught that if you use the right formulas, you will arrive at the right conclusions, yet at the same time the experience I was encountering made it clear that the more formulas you knew, the less you were able to cope with what was at hand, because things aren't predictable and rarely give you the satisfaction of putting everything into neat columns. As I said, the way *Ulysses* is written, sometimes in very scientific language and sometimes in very flowery forms, was something I found so exciting. I think it was one of the formative influences that led me to follow my creative impulses. Somehow this was one of the most exciting things I came across when I was young, because it was unlimited, and it put all these things together to make one whole. In large part, I think, I'm indebted to that discovery in my attempts to explore different forms.