

Moshekwa Langa

Goodman Gallery, [Johannesburg](#),
[South Africa](#)

Dan Leers



Two People, 2002, mixed media on paper, 122 × 86 cm

In 'Ramokone', Moshekwa Langa exhibited some of his most personal and intimate work. Dedicated to his recently deceased grandmother, Mrs Elizabeth Ramokone Konyana Langa, the show was a response to a number of traumatic events Langa has experienced since returning to his native South Africa after years spent living abroad. The exhibition brought together Langa's heartfelt works made with paint, ink, thread, nail polish, car varnish and even salt and coffee grinds. These quotidian materials correspond to Langa's interest in representing his daily life – including its inherent tedium – as well as his friendships and relationships. Langa has never been afraid to bare his life to the viewer, but it was still refreshing to be given such a personal glimpse into the artist's biography.

The exhibition opened in the atrium of the gallery with a full-length painted portrait, *The Day of the Wedding* (2008), an in-your-face male nude with a whitewashed visage. Floating on a sea of blue gouache, the portrait is at once revealing and masking – a reference, perhaps, to Langa’s openness in a relatively closed society. Moving into the gallery, the viewer was confronted by an explosion of figurative and abstract work of all sizes. Most striking was a salon-style grouping of new works on paper incorporating painting, drawing and collage, which created a gallery of faces that corresponds to Langa’s extensive social network. One work, *After Muafangejo* (2011), refers to John Muafangejo, a beloved South African artist. Inscribed at the bottom is a phrase that perfectly sums up a significant trend in Langa’s oeuvre: ‘I was once loneliness’ [sic].

Other pieces in the show, such as *With a Criminal Intent* (2007), *Imagined* (2008) and *You Will Find Us* (2008), appeared to form a visual metaphor for Facebook. Names of friends, titles of novels and films, and pithy quotations connected via thought-bubbles are used to represent people Langa interacted with and ideas he contemplated while making the work. In *Imagined*, ‘Robinson Crusoe’ and ‘a man called Friday’ share space with the word *sangoma*, the name for a traditional healer in South Africa. Langa simultaneously references the isolation he has experienced in his life and the help he seeks from indigenous healers in order to cope with these emotions. These scraps of thoughts and words also symbolize Langa’s extensive travels (he splits his time between South Africa, the Netherlands and Germany) and his process of fitting his personal history into a greater context. Perhaps because of this multicultural lifestyle and identity, Langa’s work has always constituted an introspective parsing of his own life for answers.

One of the most personal and disturbing works in the show was *Khunkwane* (2008). The work, featuring spray-painted and drawn elements, is a response to the loss of Langa’s lover in a car crash. The event is referred to quite literally at the bottom of the piece, with a depiction of a stylized red car. The most prominent element, however, is a spider that dominates the centre of the composition. At once beautiful and menacing, the arachnid could stand for the impermanence of life and the intricate web of personal connections we weave as we move through it.

The most recent work in the show, *Millie (Spectres)* (2011–12), was also the largest and most impressive. A variety of collage elements combined to create a map of Langa’s experiences, charting his encounters with different people and places. Details include photocopies of ethnographic photos of black Africans, birds and shoe advertisements. A reproduction of a row of medicine bottles again referenced Langa’s relationships with *sangomas*. Layered on top of the foundation are his pointillist drawings that look like starry night skies. One can’t help but wonder if this is Langa’s attempt to better understand his own life in the context of the surrounding universe.

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