

Sean O'Toole considers
biography and timeliness in the work of
Moshekwa Langa

Another Chapter

This should have been written long ago: ideally in 1995, some time after Moshekwa Langa – the expatriate South African artist who lives in Amsterdam – staged his debut exhibition at a now-defunct gallery attached to the Market Theatre in Johannesburg. A year later would have been fine too, when critical opinion was growing around him, although that didn't happen either. But never mind the handwringing – about the selective reverberations of far-flung careers in other geographies, about punctiliousness, too – lateness, as it turns out, is helpful when navigating the polymorphous nature of Langa's work.

In thinking about his shape-shifting practice – which has variously manifested as drawing, collage, painting, abstract and representational photography, video and installation – I plan to shuttle between distinctive temporal zones: Johannesburg in 1995; Amsterdam in 2006; Cape Town a decade earlier; Venice circa 2009 and, unavoidably, early 1990s KwaMhlanga, a settlement 130 kilometres north of Johannesburg where Langa, who was born in 1975, first set about testing the limits and stabilities of found materials as viable means to communicate his thoughts and experiences.

Let me start in Amsterdam, with *Moshekwa* (2006), a portrait of the artist by Marlene Dumas, another South African based in the Netherlands. Exhibited to widespread interest two years later – in 'Intimate Relations' at the South African National Gallery in Cape Town, and 'Marlene Dumas: Measuring Your Own Grave' at New York's Museum of Modern Art – the painting describes the artist's face in wine reds, bruised purples and dashed applications of blue. His expression is deadpan, his greying pupils intently returning the viewer's gaze. However, Langa, whose face crowds the rectangular frame of the canvas, never sat for the portrait. In fact, it was based on a wanted poster featuring his photographic image.

In 2002, along with 22 other artists, Langa participated in a workshop at Grand Rivière, a fishing village in the northeast corner of Martinique. While out socializing one evening, he struck up a conversation with another visiting artist, a woman who happened to catch the eye of some local men. The night eventually ended

in a loud standoff involving Langa, an out gay man, and the locals. The next morning, hungover and glum, he had his picture taken by Trinidadian artist Marlon Griffith. Langa used the photo to make a wanted poster, a copy of which he later presented to Dumas. When, four years later, he was offered the painted portrait in return, he declined. Dumas' work, which had originally depicted a Japanese playboy until she painted over it, was too big for his Amsterdam apartment.

Langa befriended Dumas a year or so after his eponymous 1995 debut solo show at the Rembrandt van Rijn Art Gallery in Johannesburg. Curated by artist Stephen Hobbs, then director of the gallery, the exhibition was composed of a selection of Langa's mixed-media drawings, assemblages and metal wall reliefs produced over a two-year period in the backyard of his mother's home in KwaMhlanga, the unremarkable capital of the short-lived apartheid 'homeland' state KwaNdebele (famously documented in a 1983–4 photo essay by David Goldblatt). The show immediately generated notice. A year later, now a resident of Johannesburg and working as a freelance TV producer for the arts magazine show *The Works*, Langa travelled abroad for the first time, to an exhibition in Berlin. It was around this time that he encountered Dumas.

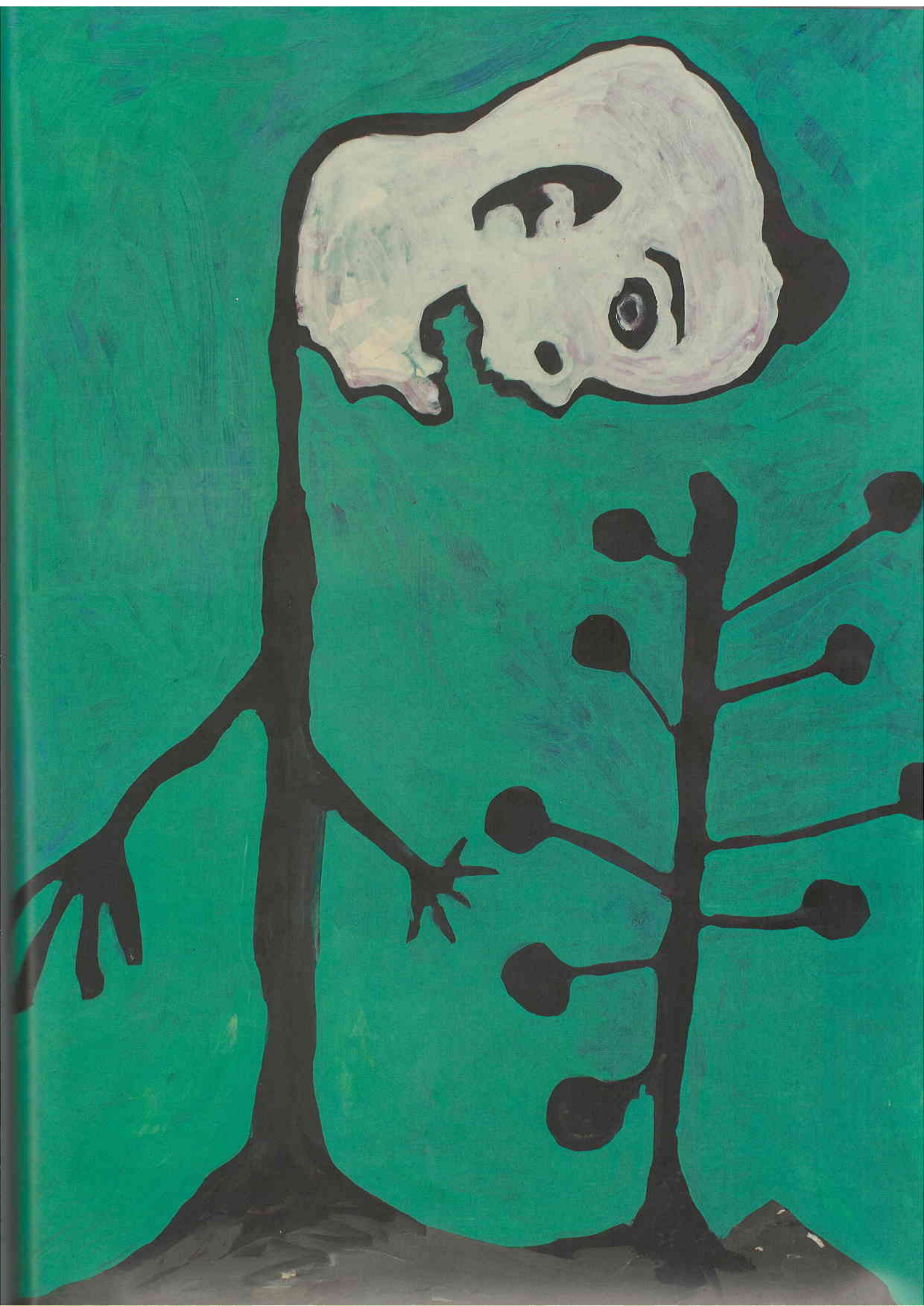
'Someone said I should meet that girl,' Langa told me in his endearingly flip manner.¹ So he did just that. The pair traded polite greetings on their first encounter. Later that day, while walking to where he was staying, he bumped into Dumas again and struck up a more casual conversation. They exchanged addresses and began corresponding. The letters continued even after Langa left Johannesburg permanently for Amsterdam in 1997, initially to take up a residency at the Rijksakademie: 'We didn't really have a connection because I was doing my stuff and she was doing hers. We would write each other postcards across town. And that, actually, is still how we really communicate. The only really precious thing I own is those letters.'²

Writing is both an invisible armature and present cipher in Langa's practice. The first work he ever consciously made as an artist, around 1993, was a map drawing. His *oeuvre* now includes numerous maps, some literal, others implied. They range from the early topographical chart

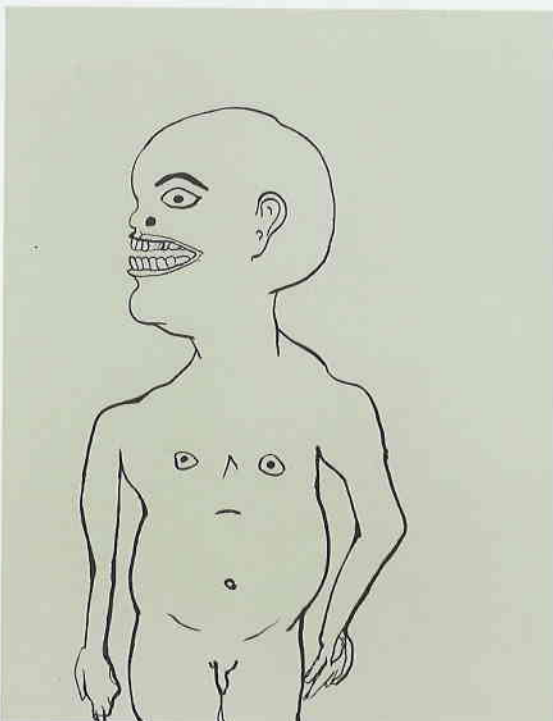
works, which he extensively annotated and collaged elements onto (such as the undated *It came from outer space*), and Mondrian-esque geometric grid constructions made with coloured adhesive tape (included on curator Simon Njami's travelling jamboree 'Africa Remix', 2005–09, and his solo exhibition 'Marhumbini – in an Other Time' at the Kunsthalle Bern in 2011); to free-association taxonomic paintings that meld abstract clouds of gaudy colour with vertically aggregated clusters of text (examples of which appeared on curator Gilane Tawadros's 'Fault Lines' at the 2003 Venice Biennale). Viewed in isolation, these works offer a richness that is discrete and intense; the works are, however, best understood collectively. Langa's many maps are all the material flotsam of a biographical novel, one that he failingly tried to evoke in orthodox written form during his late adolescence.

'I had aspirations to become a writer,' Langa claimed in an interview around the time of his inclusion in 'How Latitudes Become Forms' (2002) at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.³ It soon became clear to him while working on this biography that 'it could never be limited to a few 100 pages' – nor would an orthodox written grammar suffice. I pressed Langa on this during our recent conversation in Johannesburg, where he was spending time with his mother. 'If I had to explain what I do to someone, to myself if I was not an artist, I would say that I make kind of dreamscapes,' Langa offered. 'I try to record aspects of waking and sleeping time.' Naming or classifying the material forms his work takes is irrelevant. 'I am simply producing things,' he said. 'Sometimes they have social repercussions, maybe, or they reflect something in the collective consciousness, but I work best if I am thinking about me first, and go outwards.'⁴

Looking outwards is integral to Langa's early biography. He was 14 when, in 1990, the African National Congress (ANC) was unbanned and non-racial political opposition acknowledged by the white minority regime; four years later the country held its first democratic election, which was won by the ANC. In 1993, Langa completed his secondary education at a mixed-race Pretoria boarding school founded on the



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educational philosophy of Rudolf Steiner. His classmates included the granddaughter of the Modernist painter and geriatric avant-garde trickster Walter Battiss, one of many early and important Pretoria friendships that extended to painter Robert Hodgins who, like Battiss, was an exuberant colourist. After graduating, Langa spent the next 18 months working on experiments at his mother's home, producing collaged diaries and eccentric drawings that manifested idiosyncratic enquiry and material impoverishment.

Interested in drawing – albeit confused by the strict Goethe-inspired colour theories pressed on him at school – Langa looked to the immediate landscape for cheap materials to work with. 'They were building a lot of new homes in KwaMhlanga,' he recalled.⁵ The construction generated its own productive waste for the artist, who set about collecting the empty cement bags. Made of four-ply industrial paper, they supplied ample drawing material. 'I collected quite a few cement bags, so I didn't sit and delicately try to cut them nicely and make a Judith Mason,' he elaborates, lightly making fun of the hegemony of virtuosity and draughtsmanship embodied, at least in his head, by Mason, an accomplished local figurative artist.⁶ It was a dominion he could neither compete with, nor was interested in mimicking.

His drawings, which at school already leaned towards the expressive, were little more than abstract charcoal marks on the torn paper strips. He later poured candle wax onto surfaces to preserve them; the wax made its own 'ungoverned mark' he discovered.⁷ Langa's process was generative and organic: he suspended paper strips from his mother's washing line and applied beetroot, soap and the disinfectant Jeyes Fluid. The unfolding work, which is rooted in basic classroom proscriptions against mixing grey pencil with colour, was anticipating its future form as an exhibited work.

In 1995, confident of his aspirations, Langa approached a number of Johannesburg galleries for a show. Hobbs remembers the 19-year-old Langa introducing himself at his door one day. 'I've read about you, and I've come to talk to you about your work,' said Langa. 'Well, who are you?' responded Hobbs.⁸ Langa showed him a collaged photo album. Hobbs, whose early art hinged on strategies of dematerialization, recognized in Langa's work a keen 'sense of materiality' as well as an enigmatic 'furtiveness' and conceptual 'lightness',⁹ attributes that define works like *Temporal Distance (with a criminal intent) you will find us in the best places* (1997–2009), an installation comprising bottles and spools connected by a vast weave of thread, interspersed with toy cars, plastic animals and a disco ball. Originally shown in Cape Town in 1997 as part of a satellite event to the second

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

1
Untitled (Skins),
2005, installation view
at South African National
Gallery, 2011

2
Temporal Distance,
2009, installation view at
53rd Venice Biennale,
'Making Worlds'

3
Night Life II, 2002,
mixed media on paper,
1.5 × 1.1 m

4
Mokwena meets Mujaji,
2013, mixed media on
paper, 2 × 1.7 m

3

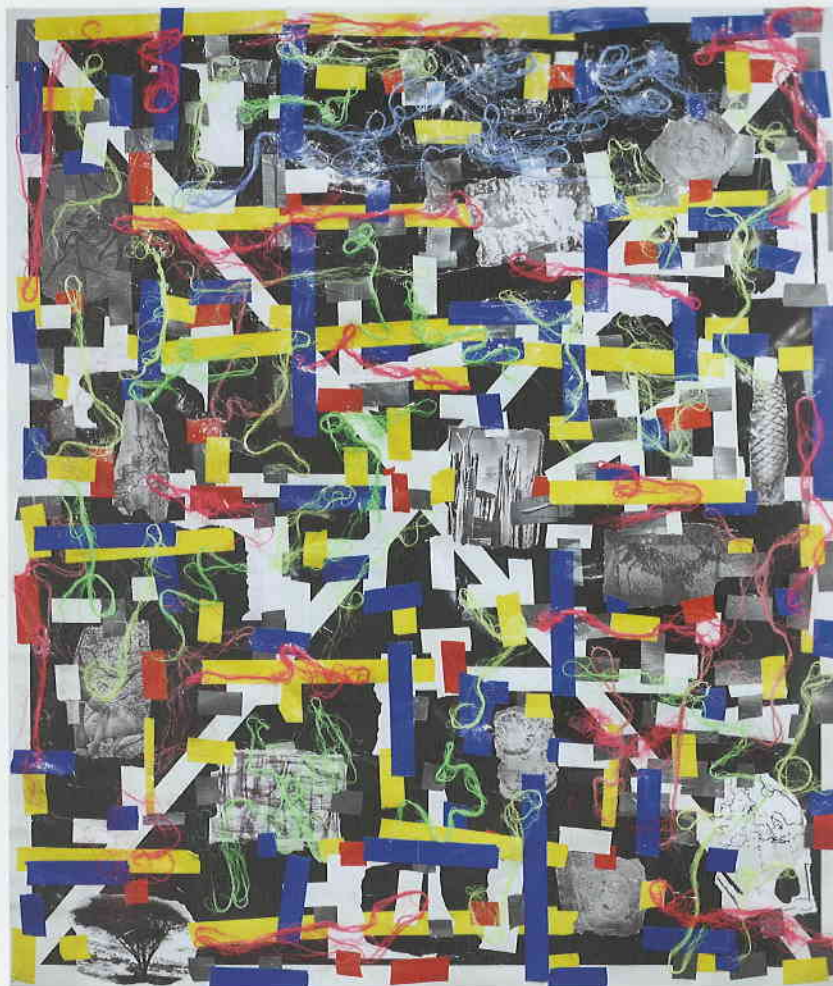
Johannesburg Biennale, *Temporal Distance...* was re-created for Daniel Birnbaum's exhibition 'Making Worlds' at the 2009 Venice Biennale. The work reads as a map, as an elaborate metaphorical cityscape, but, as Langa suggested to me recently, it also speaks to wish fulfilment: for things he never owned as a child or did as an adolescent.

Crucially, Hobbs made a site visit to KwaMhlanga. There, he encountered a fractured car windscreen and Langa's washing-line experiment. 'On account of the material nature and its rootedness in the context in which it was conceptualized and produced, it was clear to me that the shift from backyard to gallery would alter the reading of the works dramatically,' wrote Hobbs in 1996 about the difficulties that attended staging Langa's debut exhibition. In response, he opted for a curatorial strategy of 'manipulation and invention', one that erased the backyard in KwaMhlanga 'in order to deal with the spatial issues of the gallery'. Violation or practical necessity? Whatever one's conclusion, Langa's debut reverberated. In the *Weekly Mail & Guardian*, critic Hazel Friedman famously likened the show to a 'tidal wave', while Clive Kellner, who later went on to briefly direct the Johannesburg Art Gallery, wrote in *Atlantica* that 'Langa provides a sense of the future'.

In a way, he was right. Langa's method, especially his manner of fashioning assemblages with materials at his immediate disposal, was anticipatory. The practices of Nicholas Hlobo, Dineo Bopape and Nandipha Mntambo all owe a particular debt to Langa's, and in particular to 'Untitled' (1995), as his washing-line drawings were collectively titled. The work deserves studied pause. If, as Sarat Maharaj proposed in a 2009 issue of *Art & Research*, engaging a work of art involves more than simply 'thinking by means of the visual, via its sticky thick as it were', but also demands 'taking apart its components' and 'scouring its operations', then this work by Langa, more so than any other produced by a South African artist in the last two decades, is deserving of curious disassembly.

'It has always been an extraordinary work,' said Emma Bedford.¹⁰ In her former role as senior curator at Cape Town's National Gallery, she actively lobbied for Langa's work to be acquired. 'At the time there was nothing like it at all. It inhabits that space between referential art and Conceptualism. In some aspects, it is pared of all external references and exists merely as torn fragments. On the other hand it is so rich in multiple references,' she told me.¹¹ Pretoria Portland Cement, whose bags form the basis of Langa's work, is one of South Africa's oldest companies. Founded in 1892, in the symbolically named Hercules, an industrial suburb of Pretoria, the company was initially propped up by the pre-British Afrikaner government, buoyed by the gold mining boom that followed the South African War (1899–1902), and later sustained by the massive public works infrastructure that accompanied the roll-out of apartheid. In the mid-1990s, as Langa was making his drawings, an adolescent Hlobo worked at the company's Johannesburg factory for two-and-half years. It is not a stretch to speak of Langa's drawing installation as a kind of monument to labour, to apartheid even.

When the work was first exhibited in 1995 at Langa's debut solo exhibition, Victor Metsoamere, a theatre critic and arts writers for *The Sowetan* newspaper, saw something entirely different: flayed animal hides. His designation, 'skins', acquired a life in Langa's own mind. In



a fax sent to the South African National Gallery's then director, Marilyn Martin, Langa acknowledged the use of the 'operational term Skins' before stating his unwillingness to sell the work. 'I feel that even though the work itself is physically complete, I am still grappling with the same and related issues so feel that I have not finished with it yet.' He added: 'My headspace is very much cluttered with various references to the work in question.'¹² His headspace arguably remains in arrest, if not to the work itself, which he eventually sold, then to its animating ideas: that it is possible to think past drawing as a set of codified rules, that colours can stray, mix and intermingle. For this, he was dubbed a rural savant.

Writing appreciatively of Langa in the 2005 book *10 Years 100 Artists: Art in a Democratic South Africa*, Colin Richards, who originally commissioned *Temporal Distance...* for his show 'Graft' in 1997, remarked that Langa was a bit like Houdini: 'a magician, an enigma, a stranger, a "mobile subject" before such things were faddish'. Until recently I thought it a fitting summation of Langa, who earlier this year built another idiosyncratic floor-mounted assemblage work for his solo exhibition 'Counterpoints' at the Krannert Art Museum at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Then, belatedly, I arrived at a different conclusion, after he told me 'how very important a part of my background' his schooling was. The 'strange handicap' of inflexible colour regimes it imposed on his imagination took him 'a very long time' to understand and reject.¹³ Listening to Langa, whose next solo

exhibition will be hosted by the ifa Gallery Stuttgart in spring 2014, I recognized something else, something far simpler about him. Langa is a colourist, someone who dreamt his way out of a black and white society, past its stunted horizons, to a plenitude. Paradise is always provisional, but that's another chapter in his unfolding biography. ♦♦

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Moshekwa Langa was born in Bakenberg, Limpopo, South Africa and lives and works between Johannesburg, South Africa and Amsterdam, the Netherlands. In 2013, he has had solo exhibitions at Goodman Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa and Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA and was included in the group show 'My Joburg', La Maison Rouge, Paris, France. In spring 2014 he will have a solo show at ifa Gallery, Stuttgart, Germany.

- 1–2 Author interview with the artist, 8 May 2009, Cape Town
- 3 Statement by the artist, 7 February 2003, tinyurl.com/q2pxmdx
- 4–7 Telephone interview with the artist, 19 September 2013, Johannesburg
- 8–9 Interview with Stephen Hobbs, 8 December 2009, Johannesburg
- 10–11 Email interview with Emma Bedford, 12 August 2009
- 12 Fax sent by the artist, 30 June 1996
- 13 Telephone interview with the artist, 19 September 2013, Johannesburg