

WALL SPACE

ROBIN RHODE'S HOMECOMING EXHIBITION REVISITS HIS ROOTS

TEXT SEAN O'TOOLE PHOTOGRAPHY LAR LESLIE



Robin Rhode. *A Day in May*. Digital animation. Duration 16 min 9 sec. 2013

ROBIN RHODE TELLS THIS STORY. FOR THOSE WHO follow the work of this lanky, dark-haired multimedia artist from Berlin, it is probably a familiar story. Rhode has been refining it ever since he came to global prominence in 2003, when examples of his early, rapid-fire, outdoor performance work was included on *How Latitudes Become Forms*, a travelling group exhibition themed around globalisation. In 2007, five years after he left SA for love and an international career in Berlin, Rhode repeated the story to a *New York Times* journalist profiling him on the eve of his second solo exhibition at his former New York dealer. The story has since spilt over onto the net, taking on a life of its own, gaining the force of a creation myth, of sorts.

This story, which Rhode repeated to a packed lecture theatre at Cape Town's Michaelis School of Fine Art on the afternoon before he opened his first solo exhibition in SA in 13 years, goes something like this. Born in Cape Town, Rhode, 37, grew up in Bosmont, a working class neighbourhood sandwiched between Industria and the N1 Western Bypass in Johannesburg. An "extremely shy" and "timid" boy, he attended RW Fick High. The school is located on Peerboom Street, just off the busy Maraisburg Road, near the stationery company BIC's offices.

It was tradition at RW Fick for older male students to steal chalk from the classroom, which they would use to draw motifs — a bicycle, for example — onto a wall or floor in the boys' loos. Young students were then forced to interact with the drawing. The initiation ritual was meant to be funny while also humiliating the victim.

When he finished school, Rhode went to study fine art at Technikon Witwatersrand (now part of the University of Johannesburg). "Don't follow my example," he told the students listening to him in the Michaelis lecture theatre. Some were furiously scribbling notes, others sneaking Facebook photos of the moustached artist in grey sweater and maroon T-shirt. "I was the worst student."

Above all, Rhode struggled with the formal discipline of making work in a studio. It didn't chime with the things youths from Bosmont and Westbury were into: hip hop music, watching older guys spinning and drifting their BMW E30 325is, hanging out, making street art, just simply being on the street. His rejection of the studio at a formative age in his career came with a realisation that the truth of what he wanted to do as an artist somehow lay in making sense of the absurdity and formal inventiveness of what happened in the bathrooms at RW Fick High.

Thinking about the initiation ritual, the silliness of young boys trying to ride an imaginary bicycle, he recognised a deeper irony. Most of the boys forced into this humiliating routine didn't even own bicycles. The cruel initiation game, he realised, also involved a kind of latent wish fulfillment. Here were kids adapting nothing into something. Hidden within the laughter that the ritual always prompted was a deep desire to engage with the world of consumer objects, with things just out of reach.

"This moment became the crux of my practice," said Rhode, still speaking to the students. One of his earliest performance works, *Car Theft* (1998/2003), is demonstrative. For this absurdist gag, Rhode dressed up like a *skollie* and attempted to break into a car that he had drawn onto a gallery wall. After trying various means to gain entry, he chucked a brick at the car, setting off an alarm. Much of his subsequent practice, including his choreographed sequential performance photographs and animated videos, repeat the method heralded in this early work. "I'm still doing the same thing now," he said. "Nothing has changed."

Not long after his talk, I met Rhode at the Stevenson Gallery. The Woodstock dealership is currently hosting his exhibition *Paries Pictus*. It includes his sequential photographs and a three-minute animated video complemented by a lilting jazz score. The gallery also includes a large site-specific wall drawing installation made in collaboration with a group of school children from the Lalela Project, a local organisation that offers arts education to kids from disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Working with

over-sized crayons, children were asked to draw and colour in shapes and images defined by the artist.

I ask Rhode about the story he repeated at Cape Town's elite art school earlier in the afternoon. Many successful artists, I propose, usually through force of habit, this after countless public engagements, tend to develop a single story that summarises the why of what they do.

For William Kentridge, it is failure. His multiple failures — as an actor, props maker and editorial cartoonist — eventually led him to his "stone-age" charcoal animation filmmaking. For German artist Joseph Beuys it was being rescued by nomadic Tartar herdsmen after his fighter plane was shot down in the Crimea in World War Two. The herdsmen smeared his body with animal fat and wrapped him in felt, these materials becoming central to his work and mythology as an artist. Beuys' relentless self-mythologising in turn gifted the English language with a new adjective, which I use in a question I put to Rhode.

"Is that school story your Beuysian myth of your creative beginning?" I asked.

"Yes it is. What is so scary is that, first of all, it is the truth. The more I have repeated this truth in artist talks, conversations and lectures, the more it has become a myth. The truth has evolved into a myth now. It is like legend. People think I'm making a joke."

Rhode's school story isn't the only story he tells that anchors him in SA. If you look carefully at many of the sequential photographs, which at the Stevenson include Rhode's *doppelgänger* trying to escape from a fleet of old-fashioned sailing boats or a flying Okapi slipjoint knife, you'll notice a big crack in the wall used as the backdrop. It often appears in his photos and videos. There's a story attached to that particular wall.

"It's a wall that I use a lot in Johannesburg," says Rhode. "It is probably one of the best walls I have ever worked on. It is not just the width and height of the wall; it is also perfectly situated." Located on an open plot in Westbury, opposite a popular liquor outlet, Rhode describes it as a "magnificent wall" and the area surrounding it as "very vibey".

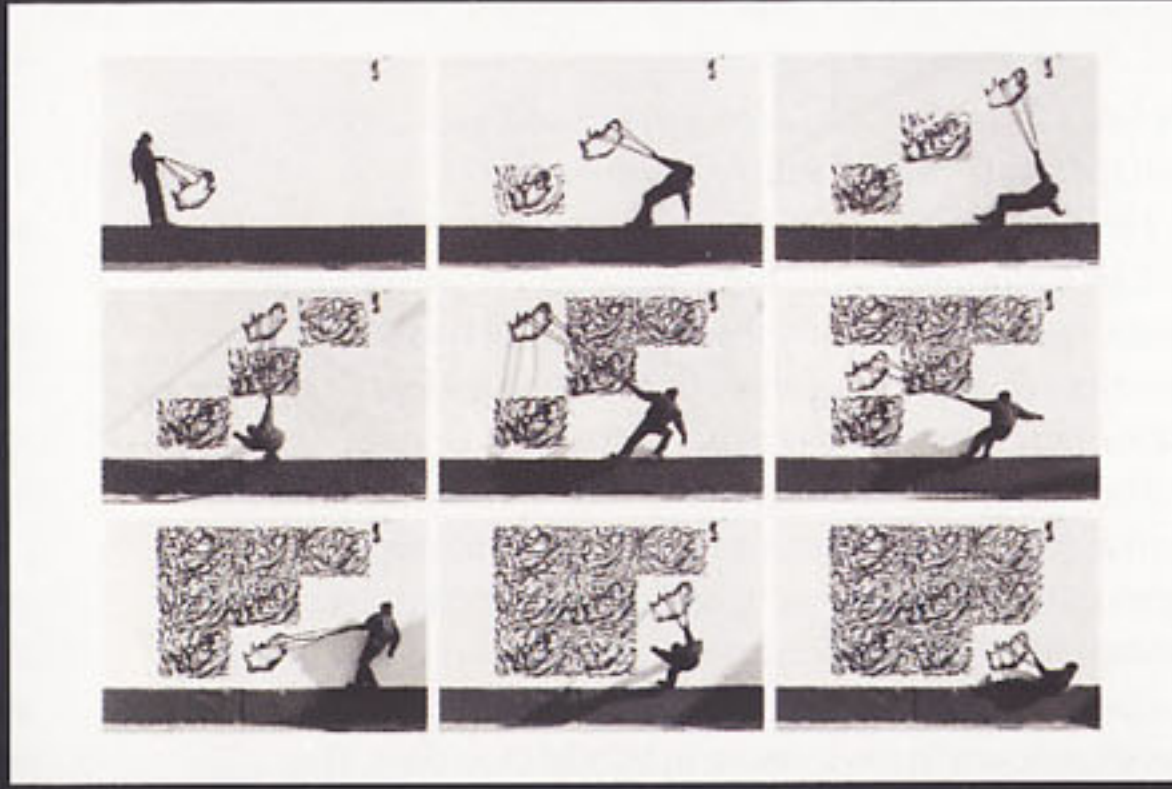
"The plot is a theatre. This is why I adore it so much."

This makeshift theatre attracts a diverse audience whenever Rhode makes a new work: school kids, factory workers, junkies, homeless people and curious locals on their way to the bottle store.

"There is such a strong social interaction that this wall is probably the best and closest wall to my home and my South African identity," he insists in his hyper-energetic manner. "The community actually waits for me to produce my work now, and they watch the process of its creation, which I think is a lot more interesting than me just wandering around the



Robin Rhode.
Untitled/Moon Stamp
+ *Ink Pad*. Wood,
metal, rubber, Indian
ink. Dimensions
variable. 2012



Left: Robin Rhode. *Bird on Wires*. Series of eight C-prints. 41.6 x 61.6 x 3.8cm. 2012-2013
 Right: Robin Rhode. *Carry-on*. Series of nine C-prints. 46.6 x 70cm. 2013

I was an avant-garde artist who hung out with graffiti crews. They appreciated me more for my conceptual impetus, rather than my graffiti skills

world and choosing a wall around the corner from wherever I'm exhibiting, quickly doing a piece, and disappearing. Now it is almost as if they wait for this continuous narrative to evolve," Rhode says.

But this is all just context. The specific story he tells about this wall in Westbury goes back a couple of months. Rhode was in Johannesburg to make a new work. Accompanied by his team of assistants, which now includes his 22-year-old brother, they went to their regular spot opposite the bottle store and began prepping the wall. This meant painting white primer over a recent piece of graffiti by a well-known Westbury tagger, Naid. It led to a "hectic confrontation" with the local artist.

"He arrived with one or two hardcore individuals," explains Rhode.

"Why did you bomb my work?" demanded Naid. "Who the fuck do you think you are? You can see you guys have money. Check the camera."

"Give me a moment, hear me out. Let's discuss this. Let me explain to you where I am coming from. Let me explain the idea," Rhode countered. "You see this wall here, this is not a wall — it is a theatre."

The disgruntled tagger presented his fist to Rhode. "It's yours," he said, "I got you."

"Now he comes with his crew and watches me. He smokes his pipe in his Citi Golf. He plays some hip hop when we are working. This is how this incredible relationship begun. He now comments on my work. I am interested in having a dialogue. He understands what I am doing."

Rhode's relationship to the street is central to his practice. Already in 2003, when he was being introduced to international audiences, Kemi Ilesanmi, then a contemporary visual arts curator at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, remarked on how his urgent and subversive

practice was a strange hybrid of influences. On the one hand, it shares conceptual links with key African-American artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat and David Hammons, but at the same time is rooted in the world of hip hop culture, consumer branding and graffiti.

Interestingly, Rhode's rise to prominence happened more or less in tandem with the growing hype around street art in the early 2000s. But his work always stood at a respectful distance from this graphically inventive, albeit conceptually conservative form of popular art.

"Very early on I adopted the rebellious attitude of street art. But street artists saw me as a conceptualist artist, not as one of them. I was an avant-garde artist who hung out with graffiti crews. They appreciated me more for my conceptual impetus, rather than my graffiti skills."

He shared with graffiti artists an interest in walls. "When they searched for walls, I was searching too. But when they did tags, I didn't. I worked in parallel with them." One fundamental point of disagreement had to do with their rejection of the gallery. "I am a contemporary artist and I embrace the gallery, I embrace the museum."

As his stature has grown — Rhode is now represented by two powerhouse dealerships, London's White Cube and Lehmann Maupin from New York — he has also, belatedly, embraced the studio. Last year I visited him at his former studio in the Prenzlauer Berg neighbourhood of Berlin. It spanned three cavernous spaces, two filled with packaging crates. The administrative area had a plush kitchen, under-floor heating and worktable with mandatory silver iMac. He looked like a hipster CEO, not someone who can negotiate his way out of a tight spot on a Westbury corner.

Just before I left, Rhode dug through a series of cardboard boxes and presented me with two flip animation books — they are titled *Parabolic Bike* and *Paper Planes* — as well as a

vinyl album featuring vocalist Derrick Adams in collaboration with composer Philippe Treuille. The projects all bear the imprint Rhodeworks — Rhode's studio. The name originates from *White Walls*, a minute-long digital animation from 2002. Rhode, a graduate of Johannesburg's South African School of Film, Television and Dramatic Art, credited the making of the work to a non-existent studio.

"I always had this idea if I cannot sustain myself as a contemporary artist I would work as a production designer on a film set," explains Rhode. Three years ago he revived the idea, registering Rhodeworks as a company. "I always had a vision of my studio becoming a house of cultural production, of a studio that produces content, not just for me but as a record label and junior publisher, to support other artist and musicians," he says.

Rhode's interest in music is diverse. In his personal capacity he has collaborated with the Norwegian pianist Leif Ove Andsnes to build the stage design and visual accompaniment for Andsnes' interpretation of Modest Mussorgsky's piano suite of *Pictures at an Exhibition*, which premiered at New York's Lincoln Center in November 2009. He also collaborated with Berlin composer Arenor Anuku for his video animation *Piano Chair*. Exhibited at the White Cube in 2011, the nearly four-minute video shows a frustrated composer in black coattails and bow tie attempting to destroy a piano. The work was executed on that cracked wall in Westbury.

Rhodeworks releases less contemplative music. The upcoming roster features work by an underground hip hop artist from Johannesburg known as Sky Clinic, as well as an Afro jazz electronica album by a Hamburg artist.

"I don't always have the ideas," says Rhode, now slumped on the floor, exhausted by the ritual of explanation and confession that is part and parcel of exhibiting. "Sometimes I am out of ideas. The stimulus I receive by trying to conceptualise an album cover of a noise collective from Lake Michigan can be extremely inspiring."

But Rhodeworks is just a sidebar to a luminous professional career. After more than a decade spent refining and perfecting his animated pictures, Rhode's homecoming show is what matters. It demonstrates just how far he has travelled without ever really leaving where he came from. For those who haven't had the privilege of tracking his career abroad, it will surely come as a revelation. A polite one, to be sure: Rhode, now a father of two boys, has scrubbed his work of the urgency and anger that characterised his earlier practice. But this doesn't lessen its impact.

Still seated on the floor, I ask Rhode about his new photographic work *Carry-on* (2013). It presents Rhode's *doppelgänger* as a kind of baggage handler. Across nine frames he orchestrates a series of repeated shapes — graphic outlines of the map of SA — into an abstract pattern. The work is about his "interesting relationship" to SA. "I am pulling, but I am also holding on. I am holding on as tight as I can," he says.

"Is that something you feel about ..."

"Yes!"

"Why do you want to hold onto SA?"

"I think," replies Rhode, "without holding onto SA I wouldn't be in the place I am today. I don't think I would be able to produce the work I am making. I wouldn't be able to conceive of a wall-drawing project like *Paries Pictus* if it wasn't for my South African roots. I don't reject it; I embrace it." Perhaps this story, its premium billing, is a measure of how SA has also embraced this absent but present artist who transformed a bathroom gag into a creative idea that could travel the world.

Paries Pictus, 11 April-1 June, Stevenson Gallery, 160 Sir Lowry Rd, Woodstock, 021 462 1500, www.stevenson.info



Robin Rhode. *Paries Pictus II*. Vinyl stencils, paint, oil crayons in two custom boxes. With the participation of children from Lalela Project. 2013