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Posted on Monday, 11.25.13



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VISUAL ARTS

At Miami's Locust Projects, Nicholas Hlobo explores his own historical swarm



Nicholas Hlobo's installation at Locust Projects in Miami's Design District through Dec. 21, 2013.

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BY SIOBHAN MORRISSEY
SPECIAL TO THE MIAMI HERALD

When Nicholas Hlobo's experimental opera sketch debuted at Locust Projects earlier this month, the audience responded en masse and a dance party broke out.

The reaction to his work — called *Intethe*, which means "locust" in the native language of South Africa's Xhosa people — both surprised and delighted Hlobo. It was a sign he had chosen the right musicians to accompany his art. A live performance with voodoo rhythms from a combined ensemble of two bands with Haitian roots — Papaloko and Loray Misitc — provides a pulsating backdrop to the show.

"The idea of a party was not something I had in mind, but it gives me great joy," Hlobo said via

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IF YOU GO

What: Nicholas Hlobo's experimental opera sketch, "Intethe," and Frances Trombly's monumental "Over and Under" installation.

Where: Locust Projects, 3852 N. Miami Ave., Miami.

When: Through Dec. 21, with a reception and performance of *Intethe* on Dec. 5. Gallery hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday; extended hours for Art Basel Miami Beach: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Dec. 2-7.

Info: 305-576-8570, or www.locustprojects.org

email from his home in Johannesburg, South Africa. "It shows the strength and generosity of my collaborators, the musicians of Papaloko, that they took the evening and made it their own. It also shows the role Locust Projects plays in Miami — that it is a space that brings people together."

Locust Projects, which celebrates its 15th anniversary this year, is an avant-garde art space where visitors — and sometimes even Executive Director Chana Budgazad Sheldon — can expect the unexpected. Last year Chicago artist Theaster Gates converted the space into a factory, where

visitors watched craftspeople create objects from repurposed materials found in Chicago and Miami. The year before, Los Angeles artist Ruben Ochoa literally tore up the place, cutting slabs from the foundation and elevating them on steel beams, managing in the process to give airiness to a 700-pound concrete block. "The idea is, we want people to be experimental — to even be able to fail — before they are put into a box," Locust Projects board member Doreen Lima said during a preview of Hlobo's exhibit.

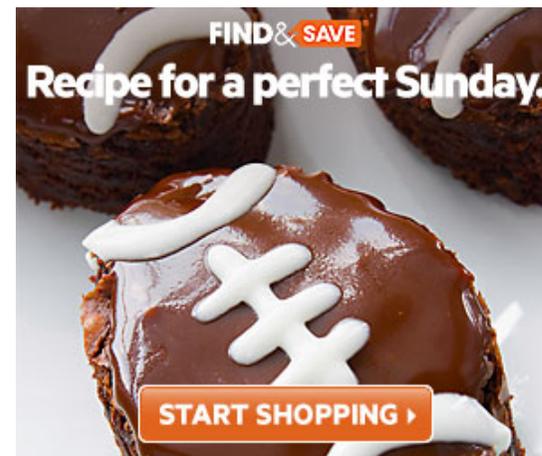
On Dec. 5, Locust Projects will hold a second reception and performance of *Intethe* in conjunction with Art Basel Miami Beach. The reception also recognizes Miami artist Frances Trombly, whose *Over and Under* exhibit features a finely woven canvas cascading from a floor-to-ceiling scaffold in an exhibition hall adjoining the space dedicated to Hlobo's opera.

Hlobo, has shown at the Tate Modern in London and the Venice Biennale, and was the Rolex Visual Arts Protégé for 2010-11; British sculptor Anish Kapoor served as his mentor. For his installation in Miami, Hlobo played on the Locust Projects name, exploring the historical importance of locusts that informs his own heritage. His work tells how a swarm of locusts near the end of the 19th century devastated South Africa, destroying not only crops but also a way of life. Coinciding with the discovery of large deposits of gold and diamonds, the locusts served as the final push that forced many of the local tribesmen off the land and into the mines.

In *Intethe*, Hlobo creates a tableau from that colonial era. The artist recalls the ghosts of the late 1890s with eight monumental sculptures, some as much as 10 feet tall. Supported by steel armatures, the sculptures are cloaked in garments made from truck tire inner tubes, lace and brightly colored ribbons. Air valve nozzles protrude everywhere, a deliberate decision by the artist as a not-so-subtle sexual reference.

"The associations of my materials — the sex and industrialization of the rubber, and the femininity and manual labour of the ribbon — are integral to my work at all times," he said. "I don't just use these materials for their formal qualities." But at the same time, he says, "I don't want to erase the purpose for which the material was originally intended. And if you think about it, it is also quite a sexual image."

The amorphous sculptures present the dualities of nature. They exude sex and yet are genderless,

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neither man nor woman. They appear menacing in size but as helpless as the ghosts they represent.

"On the stage are eight ghosts," said Joost Bosland, a director at Stevenson, the South African gallery that represents Hlobo, at the initial performance. Bosland came to Miami to set up the show based on a floor plan provided by the artist.

"They are different chiefs of the region and they would plead with the colonial magistrate to help feed their people" after the locusts ravaged the land, Bosland said. The taller works represent the chiefs, who seem to float around a being with a bloated head and eight legs fitted with shoe lasts for feet. That person, or entity, sits sprawled atop a European-style sofa in the center of the room. According to Bosland, that ghost represents British colonialism.

"Maybe there are several people sitting on the couch who share a head, rather than one character who has many legs?" Hlobo ponders when asked to discuss the meaning of the eight-legged sculpture.

From one vantage point, the creature could personify colonialism with its tentacles involved in all areas of life. Another perspective could be the collective nature of colonialism and how society as a whole must act in accord to succeed. Perhaps the creature is a subconscious reference to one of his favorite artists, Louise Bourgeois, who depicted her odious mother as a black-spider — which, of course, has eight legs. Hlobo enjoys the fact that his sculptures can convey different meaning to different people.

Following in a South African arts tradition that has fluid borders between visual arts and musical performances — most notably with William Kentridge's black box theater productions and his work on opera sets for Mozart's *Magic Flute* and Gogol's *The Nose* — Hlobo decided to combine his musical and artistic interests. The production is a behind-the-scenes look at an opera, with live music and a static set.

Chairs are arranged for visitors, who form an audience behind a taped line on the floor that represents the beginning of an imaginary stage. They simultaneously contemplate the tableau before them and absorb the art as if seated on a museum bench.

In a twist, Hlobo projects subtitles on the scene. In a typical opera, such subtitles are used to translate the libretto into English, French or Spanish. In this case, however, the chosen language is Xhosa. The point: language, as much as force, can be used to subjugate.

"English has continued to be a very dominant language long after the colonial period ended — even today," he said. "In South Africa, English is the language of public life, and how well one speaks it in many ways determines your opportunities." In other words, class status still depends on how well one speaks the language of one's former oppressors.

"By deliberately sidestepping English I chip away at its dominance, little by little," Hlobo said. "But my choice of Xhosa is not primarily a negation of English; it is a celebration of my mother tongue and its rich, layered capacity to describe this complex world."

With *Intethe*, Hlobo allows visitors a look into that world, but he leaves them disoriented, with full comprehension deliberately lost in translation.

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