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NOTES TOWARDS MOSHEKWA LANGA'S UNWRITTEN BIOGRAPHY

Sean O'Toole

is a journalist, editor and writer based in Cape Town. This essay is based on an article that originally appeared in *frieze* magazine, November 2013.

In 1996, a year after Moshekwa Langa held his debut solo exhibition at the Rembrandt Van Rijn Art Gallery in Johannesburg, he spoke at the second annual Qualitative Methods Conference, then still an experimental and largely student-run forum hosted by the Psychology Department of the University of the Witwatersrand, also in Johannesburg. His talk, part of a breakaway session from the main event, drew about two-dozen people. Speaking without a script, he showed slides of his work, including photographs of the making of *Untitled* (1995), a hybridised drawing-installation composed of found and treated paper containing gestural marks. In a short question-and-answer session afterwards an audience member invoked John Cage's silent composition *4'33"* as a reference point for negotiating Langa's work. Langa, who at the time worked as a freelance TV producer for the arts magazine show "The Works", merely stated that he didn't know Cage. My question was equally asinine. I asked him if he was a "conceptualist". Like the person before me, I didn't – as I often still feel I don't – possess the language to engage his materially enigmatic and genre-defying practice. Langa laughed, not cruelly – he isn't that sort of person – and then moved on.

Moving on and beyond is central to Langa's early biography. Born in rural Bakenberg, 300 km north of Johannesburg, in 1975, Langa first set about testing the limits and stabilities of found materials as viable means to communicate his thoughts and experiences while living KwaMhlanga, the unremarkable capital of the short-lived apartheid "homeland" state KwaNdebele. Located about 130 km north of Johannesburg, this flat and dry geographical expanse is important to thinking about and through Langa's work. The first artwork he ever consciously made, it was around 1993 or 1994, was a map drawing. His oeuvre includes numerous maps, some literal, others more applied or

implied in their visual form. Materially complex, they range from his earlier topographical chart works, which he extensively annotated and collaged elements onto, and Mondrian-esque geometric grid constructions made with black plastic and coloured adhesive tape¹; to his free-association taxonomic paintings that meld abstract clouds of gaudy colour with vertically aggregated clusters of text².

Viewed in isolation, these map works offer a richness that is discrete and intense; the works are, however, best understood collectively and relationally. Langa's maps are all 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," offered Langa in a promotional interview released during his appearance on "How Latitudes Become Forms" (2002) at the Walker Art Centre in Minneapolis³. It soon became clear to him while working on this biographical work that "it could never be limited to a few 100 pages" – nor, for that matter, would an orthodox written grammar suffice.

In a recent interview, I spoke to Langa about his unwritten autobiography. "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," he clarified. "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 offered. "Sometimes they have some 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 the artist's early biography. Langa 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 elections, which was won by the ANC. In 1993, a year before this watershed moment, Langa completed his secondary education at a mixed-race Pretoria boarding school founded on the educational philosophy of Rudolf Steiner. His classmates included the granddaughter of the modernist painter, Walter Battiss, whose practice melded exuberant colour with avant-garde tomfoolery and speculative

1 Examples of which appeared on the travelling group exhibition "Africa Remix" (2005–09) and Langa's 2011 solo exhibition "Marhumbini – in an Other Time" at Kunsthalle Bern.

2 As shown on curator Gilane Tawadros's "Fault Lines" at the 2003 Venice Biennale.

3 Statement by artist, 7. February 2003. www.walkerart.org/channel/2003/artist-interview-moshekwa-langa. Accessed 18. September 2013.

4–7 Telephone interview with artist, 19. September 2013, Johannesburg.



I was Once Loneliness

thinking. After graduating, Langa spent the next 18 months working on experiments at his mother's home, producing collaged diaries and eccentric drawings that manifested his idiosyncratic sense of enquiry in circumstances of 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," recalled Langa⁵. The construction generated waste, notably empty cement bags made of four-ply industrial paper, which he collected for drawing material. "I collected quite a few cement bags, so I didn't sit and delicately try cut them nicely and make a Judith Mason," explained Langa, lightly making fun of the hegemony of virtuosity and draughtsmanship embodied, at least in Langa's head, by Mason, an accomplished local figurative printmaker and painter⁶. Then, as now, Langa's drawing style was expressive.

"I liked drawing at school, but my drawings were regarded as very unrefined by my teachers," elaborated Langa, who had not learnt about cross-hatching or shading. "I was very much encouraged to try work in a smooth way, where you shade from black to white. You made sure you use only bold colours, if you were really drawn to that, or you had to make washes and build up your colour through the primary structures of the Goethe colour theories." Langa rejected all these prescriptions when he drew onto the cement bag paper, pursuing an open-ended strategy. He began by making abstract charcoal marks. Later, he poured candle wax onto the paper; the wax, he discovered, made its own "ungoverned mark"⁷. He also suspended the paper strips on his mother's washing line, applying beetroot, soap and the disinfectant Jeyes Fluid. The unfolding work, which was rooted in basic classroom proscriptions against mixing grey pencil with colour, was anticipating its future form as an exhibited work.

8–9 Personal interview
with Stephen Hobbs,
8. December 2009,
Johannesburg.

In 1995, confident of his aspirations, Langa approached two dealers based in the Newtown precinct for a show. Artist Stephen Hobbs, who at the time was director of the Rembrandt Van Rijn Art Gallery, remembers 19-year-old Langa introducing himself at his office in the Market Theatre, which hosted the gallery. “I’ve read about you, and I’ve come to talk to you about your work,” said Langa. “Well, who are you?” responded Hobbs⁸. Langa showed him a collaged photo album. Hobbs, whose early art hinged on strategies of dematerialisation, recognised in Langa’s work a keen “sense of materiality” as well as an enigmatic “furtiveness” and conceptual “lightness,”⁹ attributes that describe latter works like *Temporal Distance (With a Criminal Intent) You Will Find Us in the Best Places* (1997–2009), a sprawling mixed-media installation composed of bottles and spools connected by a vast weave of thread, interspersed with toy cars, plastic animals and mirrored disco ball.

Originally shown in Cape Town in 1997 as part of “Graft”, a satellite event to the second Johannesburg Biennale, *Temporal Distance* was commissioned by Colin Richards and recreated again twelve years later for Daniel Birnbaum’s central exhibition “Making Worlds” at the 2009 Venice Biennale. The work dynamically reinterpreted Langa’s experimental drawing practices into a sculptural format. Much like his new work, *The Jealous Lover* (2014), *Temporal Distance* evokes ideas of urbanity, landscape and geography using biographically resonant found objects. Resembling vast, improvised cityscapes, his installations speak to the promise and disappointment of cities, both generically but also specifically. He will often deploy objects he either never owned as a child (children’s toys) or experienced as an adolescent (disco lights at parties). In orchestrating these installations juxtaposition, colour and material relations hold more sway than any journalistic fidelity to his biography. It is a strategy he has accepted as necessary to publically showing works deeply rooted in biography.

Take his landmark work, *Untitled* (1995). During his planning of Langa’s debut exhibition at the Rembrandt Van Rijn Art Gallery, Hobbs visited KwaMhlanga. It was here he encountered Langa’s drawing experiment suspended on his mother’s



Ngwana

washing line. “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 exhibition¹⁰. He addressed these challenges head-on, Hobbs opting for a curatorial strategy of “manipulation and invention” as a way of accommodating Langa’s KwaMhlanga experiments in a gallery environment that also functioned as a corridor to the various stages within the Market Theatre. Hobbs’s strategy was astute: Langa’s debut reverberated. Critic Hazel Friedman famously likened the show to a “tidal wave”¹¹ in the *Weekly Mail & Guardian*, while Clive Kellner, who later went on to briefly direct the Johannesburg Art Gallery, wrote in *Atlántica*: “Langa provides a sense of the future”¹².

In a way, Kellner was spot-on: Langa’s method, especially his manner of fashioning sculptural instillations using found materials at his immediate disposal, was anticipatory. Nicholas Hlobo and Dineo Bopape are both indebted Langa, in particular to his eccentric washing line installation of drawings, *Untitled* (1995). I have already paid some attention to its making and reception, although it by no means offers sufficient account of this remarkable work. If, as Sarat Maharaj¹³ proposed in a 2009 issue of the journal *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, deserves careful disassembly.

“It has always been an extraordinary work,” says Emma Bedford of *Untitled* (1995).¹⁴ In her former role as senior curator at the South African National Gallery (SANG) in Cape Town, Bedford 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 they are so rich in multiple references.”¹⁵ Take the drawing paper. Pretoria Portland Cement,

10 Stephen Hobbs, “Somewhere at a Distance from Both”, curator’s introduction to 1995 exhibition featuring Moshekwa Langa and Roger Palmer, published 1996. Accessed from archive of South African National Gallery, September 2013.

11 Hazel Friedman, “Scratching beneath the skin”, *Weekly Mail & Guardian*, 15–21 September 1995.

12 Clive Kellner, “Moshekwa Langa”, *Atlántica*, No 17, 1991, pp. 156–162.

13 Sarat Maharaj, “Know-how and No-How: stopgap notes on ‘method’ in visual art as knowledge production”, *Art & Research*, Volume 2(2), Spring 2009. www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n2/maharaj.html. Accessed 18. September 2013.

4–15 Email interview with Emma Bedford, 12 August 2013.

whose bags form the basis of Langa's work, is one of South Africa's oldest companies. Founded in 1892, in the symbolically named Pretoria industrial suburb of Hercules, the company was initially propped by the pre-British Afrikaner government, buoyed by the gold mining boom that followed the South African War (1899–1902), and, in the decades after the National Party came to power in 1948, sustained by the massive public works infrastructure that accompanied the roll-out of the apartheid idea. In the mid-1990s, as Langa was making his drawings on the company's discarded cement bags, an adolescent Nicholas Hlobo worked at the company's Johannesburg factory, as a scale attendant, for two-and-half years. It is not a stretch to speak of *Untitled* (1995) as a kind of monument to labour, possibly even to the apartheid idea.

When it was first exhibited in 1995 on 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 imagination. In a fax sent to SANG'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"¹⁶. His headspace arguably remains in arrest, if not to the work itself, which he eventually sold to SANG, 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. The peculiar but unavoidable role of colour in Langa's work is often overlooked.

Writing appreciatively of Langa in the book *10 Years 100 Artists: Art in a Democratic South Africa*, Colin Richards described Langa was a bit like Houdini: "a magician, an enigma, a stranger, a 'mobile subject' before such things were faddish"¹⁷. Up until recently I thought it a fitting summary of Langa. Then, belatedly, I arrived at a different conclusion, this after he told me "how very important a part of my background" his

16 Fax sent by artist
30. June 1996.

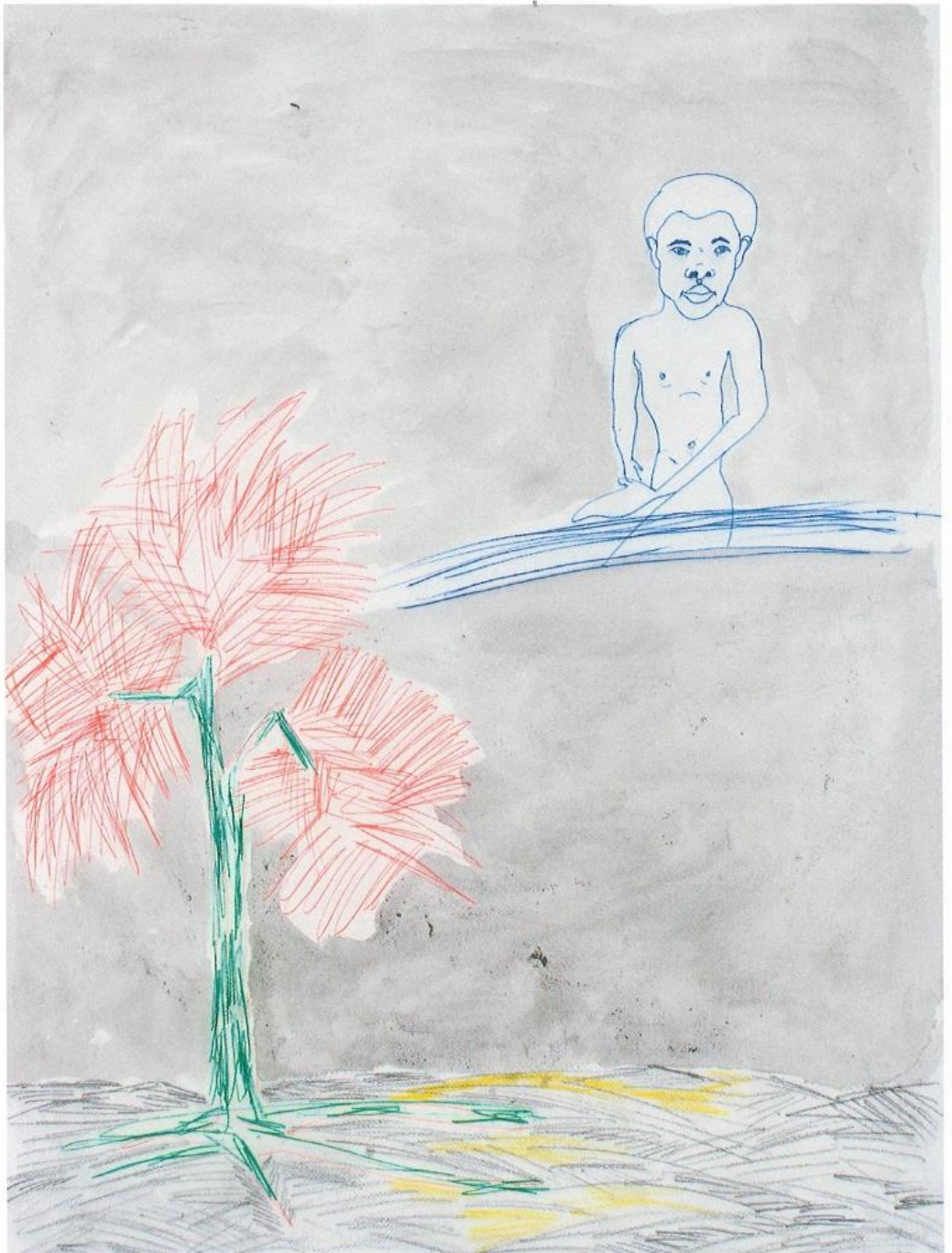
17 Colin Richards,
"Moshekwa Langa",
*10 Years 100 Artists:
Art in a Democratic
South Africa*, edited by
Sophie Perryer,
Bell-Roberts Publishing,
Cape Town, 2005.

18 Telephone interview
with the artist,
19. September 2013,
Johannesburg.

schooling was, in particular the “strange handicap” the inflexible colour regimes he was taught represented in his subsequent unfolding as an artist. “After a certain point I was really afraid to use grey pencils with coloured because, even though they did not prohibit that, they strongly discouraged it. This proved a strange handicap for me for a very long time.”¹⁸ But, as with my gauche question when we first met, he moved on, past the constraints of a black and white society, past its stunted horizons, to a colour-filled plenitude. Paradise is always provisional, but that’s another chapter in his unfolding, always in the process of being written biography.



The Wedding



All That Heavens Allows