

Supplements to support the spirit

FROM Rhodes Must Fall to Open Stellenbosch, student-led movements across the country (with echoes at a few prominent universities elsewhere in the world) are demanding the transformation of the higher education landscape. This has ramifications for various aspects of campus life: staff appointments, student funding, languages of learning and teaching and, crucially, the challenge of curriculum design.

Crafting a syllabus is inevitably a process of inclusion and exclusion. It's just not possible to engage, formally at least, with the full range of thinkers, theories, texts, objects and histories that are associated with a particular topic or field.

Discussions about curricular change in the humanities, in particular, often seem to hinge on an implied "one in, one out" rule: if we want to teach more African writers and artists, for example, canonical European writers and artists such as Ovid and Shakespeare and Michelangelo have to go.

But it needn't be a case of either/or. A more productive approach is both/and — a fairly simple concept that has been reinforced by some complicated philosophical argumentation by scholarly luminaries such as Jacques Derrida and Homi Bhabha.

Derrida, father of deconstruction, tackled the false hierarchies of the so-called Enlightenment; his adaptation of the term



Chris Thurman

HALF ART

"supplement" has been useful, in turn, to postcolonial theorists such as Bhabha.

In a literary framework, the notion of the "supplement" may be understood as follows. Texts, authors and ideas that come after some pre-existing "original" (what Derrida calls the "presence") establish a paradoxical relationship with it.

These "supplements" explain, complete or alter the "presence"; in this way, they actually expose its shortcomings. The presence and the supplement remain autonomous — they are reciprocal, mutually definitive, but independent.

This is a useful principle to consider in a postcolonial context. The problem is that both Derrida and Bhabha express themselves in prose that is so convoluted as to be, quite often, inaccessible (Bhabha's torturous writing is particularly notorious).

Fortunately, their abstract musing makes more sense

when it is applied to concrete examples — and here we may turn to the work of two contemporary South African artists, currently being exhibited at the Stevenson Gallery in both Johannesburg and Cape Town.

Down south, Nandipha Mntambo's *Metamorphoses* (until October 3) is a provocative "supplement" to Ovid's famous narrative poem of that title.

In some ways, there is a certain inevitability to this project — Ovid is the perfect sparring partner for Mntambo. His epic is full of examples of humans changing form into animals, and has been a point of reference for countless artists and storytellers over more than two millennia.

Many of these stories entail sexual violence and resistance to it. Others, like the Pygmalion myth, reflect on the twin male fantasies of representing and creating idealised female figures.

Mntambo, similarly, is interested in the slippage between the animal and the human, the archetypal and the individual, and uses her own body as the site of metamorphosis. She is well-known for her use of cowhide as a material and her exploration of both the material and symbolic significance of cattle in SA.

Her work also constitutes a resistance of the male gaze, with its tendency to treat the female subject as "object".

One of the most famous human-animals of the

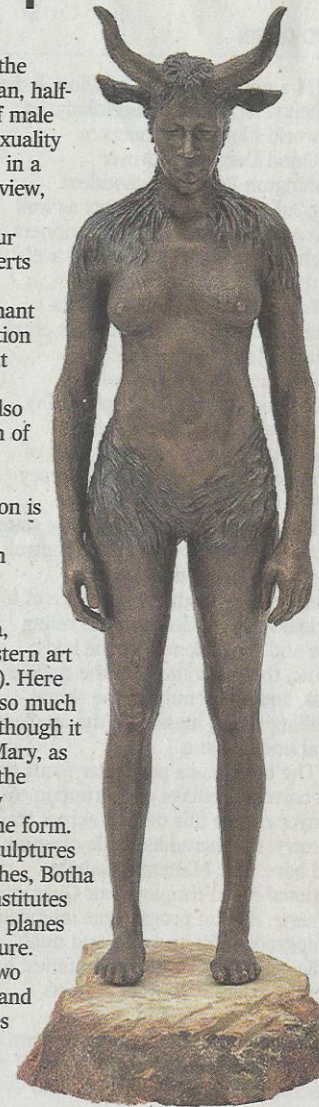
Metamorphoses is the Minotaur — half-man, half-bull, a projection of male horror at female sexuality (which is conflated, in a misogynistic world view, with infidelity). Mntambo's Minotaur combines and subverts these associations.

The other dominant figure in the exhibition is not from Ovid but from Shakespeare: Ophelia, who was also an archetypal victim of male narcissism.

In Joburg, meanwhile, Stevenson is exhibiting works emerging from Wim Botha's ongoing preoccupation with Michelangelo's *Pieta*, another icon of Western art (until September 25). Here the emphasis is not so much on the subjects — although it is tempting to link Mary, as grieving mother, to the women portrayed by Mntambo — as on the form.

In two striking sculptures and a series of sketches, Botha fragments and reconstitutes the lines, curves and planes of the famous sculpture.

Together, these two exhibitions are bold and invigorating instances of the dialogue between "supplement" and "presence". It is no exaggeration to affirm that Ovid, Shakespeare and Michelangelo are now irrevocably altered by Mntambo and Botha.



Nandipha Mntambo's Maquette for Minotaurus.

Picture: STEVENSON CAPE TOWN/JOHANNESBURG