

EXECUTION OF HIGH QUALITY

Nandipha Mntambo's underworld grapples with duality

METAMORPHOSES. A solo exhibition by Nandipha Mntambo. At Stevenson Gallery until October 3. **DANNY SHORKEND** reviews

IN the first room, one is met by a large video projection. A figure trudges wearily and stealthy in snow, the music is eerie and evocative as the figure makes its way in the harsh environment. The tempo changes as the figure spots large mammals – bison. The strength of the animal and the end of the figures' search lingers on the creatures for a short time. Then the film repeats. Later I learned that this is footage from the wild of Canada and the figure is the artist as she explores the terrain and comes close to the animal she loves. Animals suggest a duality to the inner realm: merely brute and instinctual as well as magical, and a means toward self-understanding.

This binary is at the heart of the artists' search in an attempt at reconciling opposites: human: animal; male: female; birth: death.

The title of the exhibition, *Metamorphoses* is taken from the epic book by the Roman poet Ovid. These mythical tales resonate with the artists thematic and well-worked use of materials. Thematically, one sees the transformation, or rather integration of human and animal, the looming presence of the minotaur, of larger than life bronze figures of herself, or herself transfigured, caught between the alluring world of mythology and the gods, between nature and transcendence.

A beautiful example of such bronze sculptures is her *Ophelia*. The body, a reworking of self, laments the tragedy, the very human tragedy of unrequited love. On the precipice between life and death,

one may reach out while the other may reject. Yet there is still love, a love that is pure because it expects nothing in return. And the artist reflects that in this work: Ophelia is submerged in what is at once a bath and a tomb, and sculptured fauna that is at once a funeral pier and a rebirth. Now one begins to connect the trudge in the wintry snow of Canada and Ophelia's tragic end – for her meeting with the bison and the love that could not be are encounters that can only happen at a distance, within safe confines.

One marvels at Shakespeare's construction of the character Ophelia, but like the promise of pleasure unfulfilled, the longing to touch the fierce bison remains elusive. Nature can be too rough and brute. And love too painful. These concerns are iterated materially in the carefully selected works: A "drawing" with cow hair; large somewhat abstract paintings; shapes made from cowhide, resin and polyester mesh form an interesting dialogue with the more traditional bronze works (which oddly stand on a "pedestal" or plinth that is but rock).

Mntambo's use of material and execution is of a high quality and the content is weaved through the exhibition. Her paintings for example, reveal a kind of underworld, what she calls a "hump-form", a

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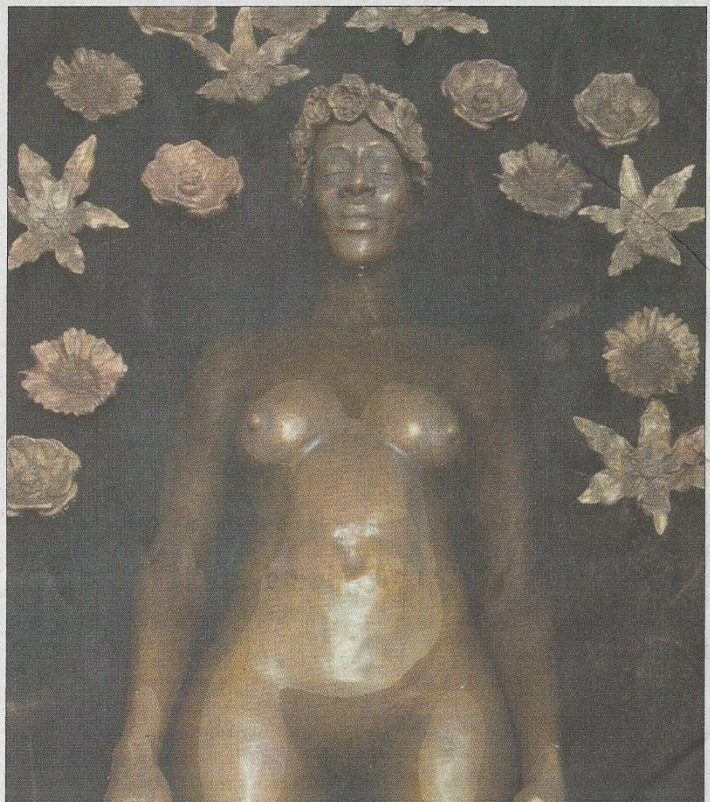
LOOMING: *Minotaurus*, 2015, bronze and sandstone base.

sense of going into something, or of incubation only to then be transformed to another dimension. These paintings are a brown-black colour with impasto oil paint and even cow hair. There is a silent energy of foreboding in these works and at the same time, like the *Minotaurus*, a sense of dynamic movement, aggression – a bullish market for meaning-making.

I attended a "walkabout" by the artist and was pleased to hear the exchange of ideas within the circle of interested viewers. My impression is that this grappling with dualities, with binaries, is no less than an attempt to produce what I call "a third term" – that which is above polarities, that which unites opposites.

The bison, the human – these are not simply in opposition, and distinct, nor should one discount that both may be scrutinised as animals. Somehow, there is that which combines and unites, not so that the result is a pantheon of gods orchestrating the human realm between heaven and earth, but rather a sense of the connectedness of humans, forever evolving, and Nandipha Mntambo's art – its coarseness, sensitivity and humanity – reminded that the harsh environment in some parts of Canada is also beautiful.

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AT PEACE: *Ophelia* submerged in what is at once a bath and a tomb, 2015, bronze and mild steel. Pictures: STEVENSON/MARIO TODESCHINI