



Untitled (Eclipse), 2017. © Simphiwe Ndube.
Courtesy: Nicodim Gallery, Los Angeles / Bucharest. Photo: Lee Thompson



Untitled (Waiting for Mlungu), 2017. © Simphiwe Ndzube.
Courtesy: Nicodim Gallery, Los Angeles / Bucharest. Photo: Lee Thompson

COSTUME DRAMA:



THE PAINTINGS AND SCULPTURES OF SIMPHIWE NDZUBE

BY ANDREW BERARDINI

Raft, 2016. © Simphiwe Ndzube.
Courtesy: WHATIFTHEWORLD Gallery, Cape Town / Johannesburg



Here Gathers Those Who Meet and Dance Their Own, 2017. © Simphiwe Ndzube.
Courtesy: Nicodim Gallery, Los Angeles / Bucharest. Photo: Lee Thompson

They began with the first time I encountered death. I was around five living in Jo'burg and I was walking with my mom along the railway and we saw this really massive man commit suicide. The way the train cut him had removed his head. Just this massive body with his arms and legs. At first my mom was looking but then when she saw me looking, she tried to hide it from me. And later, when I started to paint these figures made of clothes, I felt like I wanted to give him life.
—Simphiwe Ndzube

What a strange power there is in clothing.
—Isaac Bashevis Singer

All the clothes plump and billow like loose sacks. Alive somehow, they shape into bodies to dance and strut, scattered cavalades in otherworldly landscapes. Their high-rubber boots and voluminous pants make for legs. Their buttoned-up shirts make for pillowy torsos. Hands, if any, are plumped gloves with fat fingers like uncooked hot dogs, each as nimble as a pickle. Most of their necks cinch like trashbags, the head only a coil and a knot. They stand on feet that whip like loose roots and fat rat tails or poke out with angled timber into floppy old shoes like a cartoon hobo's. Moving somehow but all still going nowhere. All the boats here wait dryly for floods on sawhorses; the cars wheelless on cinderblocks go nowhere fast.

The toxic air behind them all shade with toxic color: bluesy slates and bruised lavenders, arsenic greens and aging pinks, even the brightest yellows crackle with a radioactive sulphur that seems already so tired, middle-aged and half-lived. The clouds wisp and puff with the the stain of their own diseased chemistry, carcinogenic chromas struggling to keep form. All are sunset hues.

Is it pollution that makes the air so creamy? Under noxious skies, the patterns on these clothes and across these landscapes, the stretches of blankets and the taut fabric around the birdcages of umbrellas (no rain, no shade, they're held for balance, always a trapeze ready to topple) are almost invariably lively, wild designs and festive prints. Stripey and speckled, flecked and checkered, dappled and mottled. A leopard-print coat looks something else with a chartreuse marabou collar, the rotund fellow wearing it is made entirely of clothes. His face a wrinkly swath of fabric pulled through a collar into either a yawn or a scream. With his gloved hands rounding over that protuberant belly, perhaps he's opening wide for another bite (that tie there, wagging in just from off the frame, seems just a little suggestive).

When these shapely clothes mouth at all it's like another ripple of plastic in the trashbag, a wet fist of fabric, a grimy megaphone, an orange hazard cone, a repurposed instrument. Even so, their hollers and screams and laughs are tongueless, toothless, and silent.

These are T. S. Eliot's Hollow Men whispering meaningless winds like dried grass. These are drop-outs from a Samuel Beckett story, sick of waiting at the crossroads or crawling through the mud. They are what happens when one of Francis Bacon's gnarled screamers couple with Dr. Seuss' cotton candy manimals at a back-alley tailor's. They are scarecrows and monsters, post-apocalyptic hanger-ons and bewitched effigies, harmless dandies and menacing magnates. They're just well-cut clothing, left alone to cavort with one another.

*And now for the Dancing Pants,
Doing their fabulous dance.
From the seat to the pleat
They will bounce to the beat,
With no legs inside them
And no feet beneath.*
—Shel Silverstein

The clothes make the man, muttered somebody somewhere. And so what men are these? At least, who knows what gender really are the spirits that animate these suits? (Though the clothes are mostly

what your grannie might describe as "men's wear"). What men are these if men they are at all? Not a few unmarried young gents blow their paychecks on a fresh set of clothes, swell suits and fine threads. Well-cut and custom, designer and imported. A peacock strut not only to lure a lover, but to simply look good, to rise above. Of course, a paycheck implies a job, a worker and probably not salaried: a miner or cook, a lineworker or servant. Each knows that when well-attired you appear so very far from the pickaxes and frying pans, the bow and scrape. Here, suited up to the nines, you look fine. As fine as any, a free man with clean threads. A suit like any bosses but better because it's yours. And the bosses wear suits too, can you tell the difference in the parade of billowing clothes? Passing through courtrooms and revolutions, sometimes the difference between a boss and a striker, a politician and a criminal is not even a suit.

Suits are power. The earliest meaning goes back to Latin "to follow" and quickly meant to attend a royal court. A suit of armor. Between your body and the king, it's best to have protection. The regent and all their advisors and attendants, fools and courtesans will have their own suits, each to a station. Those bodies fill a suit of clothes, and can be replaced. The Italians have a saying: "The pope dies, another is found." Any suit can be filled when you deal in suits.

The broken can be made powerful whilst the powerful broken.

Whatever apocalypse or war, fantasy or phantasm passed through these landscapes, the low has been elevated and elite struck low, the two teetering past each other precariously, maybe those big bellies though sometimes stuffed with straw are sometimes plumped with money as they prance their headless prance through these portentous atmospheres. The corpulence of many of these characters isn't lost on any viewer. Big-bellies can be plentitude and fertility, corruption and venality, both and all. The party and the party gone too far. Plump, grinning Buddhas and Bacchuses, the Willendorf Venus and any pregnant belly, but also mocking Daumier caricatures and a million political cartoons with fat cats and snouty pigs in pinstripes suits, all gluttonously feeding off corruption flowing fast and creamy into their mouths.

Disembodied as these creature here are, their paunch and bulk carry gravity. These effigies, these bundles of clothes with their joy and pain somehow carry an aura. It reminds how much class and culture, how much origin and aspiration are carried in our clothes. All the things we want our clothes to communicate, all the things we wish they didn't. The bodies we clad and cover, what we and can't hide. Other people's opinions and judgements lurking over bodies. But these aren't bodies here, just clothes and props that suggest them, though in their lively and precarious shapes, even this suggestion can feel uncanny. On, off, and beyond their frames.

It's true. There are frames. And in those frames, paintings. And out of those frames sculptures like models left from two-dimensions to three, all of them by South African artist Simphiwe Ndzube (lately in his Los Angeles studio). These creatures and landscapes feel richly personal and curiously mythological, like characters in a play that only the artist could write who's true narrative eludes. It's easy to imagine these plays as Shakespearean dramas and violent operas, flirtatious comedies and science-fictions, tales of slapstick corruption and hard-won redemption, triumph and collapse, heroism and hubris. When does drama become satire, comedy banana-peel into tragedy, when do they both crumble into mere parody? Do these genres even matter? They all collapse into each other sooner or later. There's something about this place, this world summoned by Simphiwe Ndzube with its cast-offs and clothes, paint and canvas: such collapses are not just inevitable, but that they already happened long ago and are all still happening right now.

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Bhabharosi installation views at Nicodim Gallery, Los Angeles, 2017. © Simphiwe Ndzube. Courtesy: Nicodim Gallery, Los Angeles / Bucharest. Photo: Lee Thompson

