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Simphiwe Ndzube



Being and becoming

A 2016 YouTube video by SABC Education ends with a scene in which Simphiwe Ndzube donates a new artwork to the municipal library of Masiphumelele, an area where he spent his formative years. When the camera pans across the walls of the library, viewers see early works he previously donated; he contextualises the new offering saying, ‘This is the continuation after completing my studies.’ The old works depict moments in an informal settlement. In one, two men read together on an outdoor bench at twilight. In another, a portly woman is seated in a yard, washing clothes.

The new painting resembles Ndzube’s recent works. It is a surreal mixed-media landscape of faceless people dancing. It seems to answer the question of how the Malebolge in Dante’s *Inferno* might have looked had it included amaPantsula and Swenkas. Serpentine neckties are either poised to strike or complicit in the camaraderie. In isiXhosa, Ndzube says his intention is that the work make people think deeply, that ‘people should think about the dancers and being free. Being free to do anything and wear anything even if there are things chasing you along the way.’ He concludes with an assertion that people should interpret the work as they wish. In his advancement of openness and freedom, this recorded event is totemic of the cogitations that now inform Ndzube’s practice. He has exchanged realism for scenes resistant to easy description. In the following conversation he outlines why.

It is over Skype, while pacing through his studio in Los Angeles, that Ndzube remarks, ‘I seem to be obsessed with things transitioning and inhabiting multiple dimensions of being and becoming. Magical realism affords me a way to tap into those spiritual connections – between life and death,

the obscurity of time ... but always with a foundation in the physical and socio-political world of those existing in the margins.' Over the course of this discussion, Ndzube highlights writers, artists and thinkers making work that questions the texture of reality such as Haruki Murakami, Ben Okri, Luigi Serafini, Mawande Ka Zenzile and Credo Mutwa. He continues: 'I'm slowly building a cosmology of content to explore myths, theosophy, the esoteric, memory and other related mysticisms.' His words echo those of Albert Camus in his treatise 'Absurd Creation: Philosophy and Fiction': 'In this universe the work of art is then the sole chance of keeping [the artist's] consciousness and of fixing its adventures. Creating is living doubly...If the world were clear, art would not exist.'

In a preceding chapter, Kemang Wa Lehulere argues for the generative possibilities of unknowing; Ndzube's emphasis on the limitations of the visible does the same. The artist has moved away from attempts at direct representation in pursuit of metaphysical accuracy. He asserts that his work is now founded on a sensitivity to unmapped epistemologies rather than the comfort of certainty, saying: 'From well-known philosophers to our completely sidelined grandmothers and grandfathers *ekasi*, there is all of this vast knowledge. For me as a young person to say I already know the answers would be a disservice to myself – I would not be allowing myself to learn and experience.'

Sinazo Chiya:

Are you interested in art criticism?

Simphiwe Ndzube:

To me and other artists working today, it doesn't seem like there is a particular authoritative figure who dictates styles and movements, or what matters and deserves to be taken seriously. It's testimony to Arthur Danto's 'The End of Art' where he mentions the importance of the viewer bringing their own interpretations and openness, as well as the push for institutions to test, modify and continue to challenge various interpretive methods. I get rather confused thinking of the role of art criticism when contemporary art taste is largely influenced by the market, or perhaps by the taste of the mega-curator or museum inclusion.

**Are you invested in how your work is written about?
Would you write someone a letter saying 'that's a
bad interpretation'?**

For now at least, no. I really admire people who can write about art with integrity and insight, and shine light on an artist's practice.

**Would you say that after you left Michaelis you needed to
wipe the slate a little bit – clear your mind of all that *stuff*?**

Totally, and I'm glad I've had some opportunity to travel outside South Africa to expand my knowledge about how other people approach art-making. There are different kinds of dialogues I've been exposed to ... Working in Los Angeles I've noticed artists' openness to experiment, collaborate and support each other. In art school I honestly struggled with understanding academic

theoretical materials, but I did and continue to take note of what other artists are consuming intellectually.

Even though you've taken your hiatus from theory, are there writers you still find valuable, who've stuck with you somehow?

More so than before. Now I'm in total control of my content I'm opening up more to literary influences: Zakes Mda, Ben Okri ... I looked at them when I was in school but they seemed tangential, things recommended by friends; it's only now that I realise those were actually the books that mattered the most. So now I'm getting back to that kind of material. I just finished *Kafka on the Shore* by Haruki Murakami.

That's a beautiful book. You have to read *Norwegian Wood* as well.

I will.

And besides Murakami?

Magical realism ... Credo Mutwa's short stories in *Indaba, My Children*, and Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which I need to revisit. A friend just introduced me to the wonderful and fascinating world of Luigi Serafini's *Codex Seraphinianus* and CG Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*.

What draws you to magical realism?

My work has naturally opened that avenue in ways that I'm willing to understand and use to my creative advantage.

I seem to be obsessed with things transitioning and inhabiting multiple dimensions of being and becoming. Magical realism affords me a way to tap into those spiritual connections – between life and death, the obscurity of time, the grotesque and uncanny, but always with a foundation in the physical and socio-political world of those existing in the margins.

What sparked that interest?

Essentially rejecting that I – we – have all the answers. A rejection of the scientific way of knowing everything, a resistance to the massive imperial centre and its totalising systems.

Mawande Ka Zenzile, who was at Michaelis doing his MFA when I was in undergrad, was a big influence on me, both in terms of pushing myself in the studio and because he always emphasised intuition and the impulse to create. To allow the subconscious to bring images to the front and maybe then interrogate their significance. There is such a deep connection between the spirit world and art-making. Just making art about what's in the headlines feels inauthentic to me. Reading Paulo Coelho's classic book, *The Alchemist* when I was in first year may have been an initial influence. But going even further back, growing up in Black communities that are steeped in spiritual connections, that honour and constantly recall the dead through rituals and dreams, is what comes subconsciously when I make art. At times I feel I connect with very ancient experiences of those who lived before ... and memory filtering through things like Gcina Mhlophe's children's stories which I grew up listening to on the radio.

You are exchanging socio-political commentary for a more personal, interior understanding of things?

It's a very important practice for me, perhaps necessary to not be swayed by the dominant discourses of the time, to create my own unique content and aesthetic that's personal but universal, fantastic yet macabre and unsettling all at the same time.

Has the distance that you've gained since moving to Los Angeles helped you come to grips with everything, or helped you understand things better than if you had still been here, on the ground?

I think maybe it helped me to escape it entirely. I see it with my new work. I have created Bhabharosi, a male-ish figure that is voluptuous, beautiful, ugly, and crippled with legs that have tentacles or rather roots growing within them. His character has influenced many of the recent works. I imagine him belonging to the race of the first people, from the Cradle of Humankind, yet he has worked and lived in the mines. Part of him shares the experiences of the sartorial Swenkas. So he embodies those elements of defiance, of dressing up, yet there is always a tension with something deeper, darker, a sense of being damned in the face of the world.

He dresses up to prove himself or assert himself?

To allow himself a space to self-create, to explore a whole cosmology of what it means to be alive, confused, in search for myths in a world that maybe needs new and very old poetry.

You are creating a mythology?

I'm slowly building a cosmology of content to explore myths, theosophy, memory and other related mysticisms. But it has to

be not too far removed from people's experience – I need to keep that in mind as I go.

It sounds as if you don't want the object to be simple and pretty – you need some grit in there, some drama, some mysticism?

Everything, and maybe ultimately arrive at nothing.

So as much as you are conscious of aesthetics, you are following your imagination.

That's what gets me excited to work every day. It's about looking, seeing; it's about how things connect, how they're placed next to each other, how scale affects your relation to the work, how certain colours make you feel, and how thick layers create ...

... their own richness?

They're almost edible. This is something that paint does. But then there's also wondering what I'm trying to say, and for the most part I'm really not trying to say anything. I'm just trying to project my imagination onto a canvas. Does it work? Does it not work? Is it finished? Is it not? How does that respond to this?

Conclusions don't matter?

No. I'm really not interested in meaning. Meaning prejudices objects. From well-known philosophers to our completely sidelined grandmothers and grandfathers *ekasi*, there is all of this vast knowledge. For me as a young person to say I already know the answers would be a disservice to myself – I would not be allowing myself to learn and experience.

Just as you cut and stitch and splice all these elements together in your work, you're doing that in your imagination as well?

Exactly.

Are there other mediums that have engaged your curiosity? I recall seeing an old photographic series of yours.

Yes, photography, video and performance are the mediums I started working with in art school and at some point I will revisit them, when I have a suitable project. Films like *The Elephant Man* by David Lynch and *Dance of Reality*, *Endless Poetry* and *The Holy Mountain* by Alejandro Jodorowsky engage a deep side of my curiosity.

Ashraf Jamal has written about you, quoting your words, that 'the artist's acts of stitching together seemingly incommensurate worlds, imaginations and things are not only meditative re-enactments of bodily and psychic violence, but "also a form of restoration and recuperation to make the body whole again"'.

The bodies that present themselves in my work are totally in contradiction, incomplete and complete, celebratory but also acknowledging body memory.

What has made the figure such an urgent place of inquiry for you? Your work is very visceral – I'm tempted to use the word somatic. The question arises in part because I read an article that said you saw an accident that altered your view of things. It's also

because of your attentiveness towards issues around disability – I don't know of many other artists working with this.

The body has agency; it produces meaning. I've adopted the body as my central focus because I want to create images that are empathetic, troubled but also joyous, sharing a universal experience. My first self-motivated project at art school was based on the limitations and prejudices we place on the body, a critique of the ways certain bodies are permitted and denied access in both public and private spaces with a deeper focus on physical limitations. That conversation has evolved much further and perhaps shifted away since then.

It sounds like you don't want your practice to be pigeonholed into a narrative of Black subjugation, or a branch of decolonial thinking tied to the spotlighting of pain. It sounds like in your work, what's urgent is how you insert imagination and life. You make the figures live and breathe; things float in midair.

It's all the stuff that we already have, without being so specific. The materials that I'm drawing from are a decolonial curriculum. Credo Mutwa, Amos Tutuola – they all work within the epistemologies of the south and speak from within the marginal spaces they are from. But I'm against single answers.

Absolutely. Based on what you are telling me, your work sounds very personal. Do you feel like you make the work for an audience?

There is this idea that artists have a particular responsibility ...

Especially from Black artists, people expect certain things. It functions almost as an extension of Black tax.

You have to deal with it some way or the other. You are doing well, so what are you doing for everyone else? Mark Bradford, whose works are selling for millions, has all these amazing projects way beyond the studio, including the space Art + Practice which brings curated contemporary art, dialogues, education and employment opportunity to a predominantly Black community in Leimert Park, Los Angeles. And the late Noah Davis and Karon Davis with the Underground Museum, also in LA, again with an amazing vision that has seen musicians such as Solange and Beyoncé and activists like Maya Angelou giving sessions. Both of these have become important cultural institutions for the Black and Latino communities in LA. I could go on to mention a lot more that artists do as social outreach and public engagement besides making sellable objects.

But at the same time, I think sometimes an artist painting in the studio and allowing people to see their stuff is enough. Sometimes the role of the artist is just to make beautiful pictures and share them if the world desires to see them. No one asks, 'What is the role of bankers in society?' I think because artists are already so public, so generous, and seen as 'playing' instead of getting 'real' jobs, we are always expected to do more.

You've lived in Los Angeles for a while – do you feel like you are an artist of the diaspora?

I'm still trying to understand what the word really means. We are all ultimately in a state of transition, here and there. We don't belong here.

How did you get to LA?

I spoke to the ancestors and they showed me the way. Truthful jokes aside, I followed a very beautiful girl and really, I had no idea that LA is one of the best places to live and work – if you can take the heat, distance, isolation and traffic, of course.

So, you haven't lost your sense of home?

I really hope not. But one also needs to leave home and be hit by the world. Maybe one also needs to be in complete isolation to allow imagination and introspection to run their course and get a better idea of one's self and interests. Life goals.