

then you will be lucky to get to your better future without your having had some deliberation. I believe that you create your future and you live it now, so that when you get to it, it's something you know already. That's how I see my practice: it has to move into the future, the future I can perhaps imagine but I don't know if it will be like that when I get there. I might have my own vision of the future but it does not mean it will be like that and when it gets to be the way I've seen it or envisioned it then I count my blessings and see myself to be very lucky. But the future will reveal itself the way it's supposed to be and the way it wants me to be in the future – I am not entirely in control of how it's going to be.

This conversation took place at the artist's studio, Johannesburg, on 18 November 2015

7.

Nandipha Mntambo



Shapeshifting, between life and death

I've always been interested in that space of how one understands male versus female. In my personal life ... being seen to be androgynous ... it's something that's always been there. And in art, men are the ones that generally become successful sculptors. I think there's a very gendered understanding of who can take what role within the artistic space ...

Nandipha Mntambo's works in sculpture, photography, video and painting are subtly linked by threads of inquiry that lead from dreams of cowhides to female matadors and the hybrid nature of the Minotaur. Mntambo regularly chooses to take on the male-dominated space of sculptural practice and work with materials such as bronze and stone, in addition to her signature material of cowhide, to shape figures that defy such restrictive binaries, suggesting her own revisions of traditionally gendered narratives.

With her bronze sculpture *Minotaurus* (2015), Mntambo recalls the tale of the half-bull half-man Minotaur of Greek mythology. In Mntambo's retelling, these porous boundaries and categorisations are further ungrounded by a switch of gender. The artist casts her own body and imagines it into the role of *Minotaurus*, subverting the positioning of a male identity entwined in this existence between human and animal form. The myth of the Minotaur is stitched with scenes of death – the story reaches its violent climax as the beast is slain by Theseus of Athens, and ends in the tragic suicide of Theseus' father, King Aegeus.

Mntambo's *Ophelia* (2015) is also cast in bronze, modelled on the artist's frame at one and a half times her scale. On first encounter this sculpture of a naked female form surrounded by water appears serene, recalling the optimism and promise of a wishing well. However, this is a comfort soon dispelled by a deeper comprehension of the scene: Ophelia floats, motionless; facing death. Both *Ophelia* and *Minotaurus* were exhibited in *Metamorphoses*, a solo exhibition named after an epic collection of poems by Ovid. *Metamorphoses* begins with the creation of the world and ends with the death of Julius Caesar, and this framing of Mntambo's work between life and death is fitting.

Death is implicit in Mntambo's core material and must be accepted if not contemplated throughout the process of making sculptures with cowhide. Working with animal skin forces Mntambo closer to the physical realities of death than many of us allow ourselves to venture. Yet also underlying the artist's first experimentations with the material was an exploration of her source of life. Mntambo made one of her first sculptural series by moulding the material to her mother's form. When questioned what led her to work with her mother's body, Mntambo replied: 'she was my primary life source, and my understanding of life, my introduction to how things happen as a human being, is centred on her in many ways'.

Hansi Momodu-Gordon:

I read that you had an early interest in forensic pathology and its chemical processes, and I'd like to hear more about what drew you to a practice which is really about looking at and trying to understand death. I was wondering if that also informed your decision to move towards cowhide, because death is implied or implicit in that material.

Nandipha Mntambo:

I suppose I've always been interested in science, in chemicals, in the way that organic things can be manipulated or understood. Initially though, when I shifted from forensics to fine art, it was a decision that wasn't critically thought through. It was more that I felt there was too much death, too much explicit death, you know; seeing dead bodies every day isn't something that allows you to have distance from the whole concept in

any way. And in making the decision to pursue art I didn't have any particular goal or outcome in mind ...

As I was continuing along that journey there was this struggle around what material to use because at the time I was one of very few black students on the campus [at Michaelis School of Fine Art] and I guess because of the history of South Africa and the way that people understood blackness or even art history in the context of where we live, there was a push to try and make me interested in certain materials. Materials such as wood or clay, which were typically materials that black people would use, I guess because they were easily accessible. I found myself not really interested in those things, and I struggled for a long time to figure out which material to use. For some reason I figured maybe cowhide. I actually had a dream about it ... and I decided to find a taxidermist who could help me understand the process.

At the time I was not thinking about death but the dream had been about death, very literally ... Only now, over time, understanding the material and being able to go to the source, being in contact with the animals and understanding how the people who handle the animals think, it's become more obvious how much my work really is about death. At the time I thought of it more in terms of organic process and impermanence; funny enough, it's all the same thing. [Laughs]

I'm wondering about cowhide's specific qualities as a material and how it's revealed itself to you in

the time that you've been working with it – what attracts you to it and what have you learned about it as material?

When I first started working, I didn't have a handle on the chemical process and how to control it so there was a lot of decay and rot and flies and maggots. Beside the weird self-punishment of deciding to deal with these things, they just reminded me about what being a human is and what being on earth is about, this process of living and dying. Now, because I've become more aware of how to avoid certain parts of the process, it happens less that I am confronted with the very horrible parts. Not that I've separated myself from the process, but I have a little bit of distance around how I react to grinding cow fat, for instance, and so the feelings around it have changed quite a bit.

Do you think that your route into art through forensic pathology in some way prepared you for that, in a way that other people wouldn't be prepared?

I don't know if it really prepared me. Actually I think the only thing that can prepare you is time, and that's the human experience. You know, you speak to people who have children and they say, 'You know, I've been thinking about it forever but until the child came I had no idea all the things I would have to deal with.' Just like going to school, you could be prepared on some level for

what you might experience but until it happens there's no way of really knowing.

When I started to think about the material in relation to death, I thought of Damien Hirst and some of his earlier works which deal with death and rotting animal bodies. One of them is *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, and in some ways it feels like there's a connection there with what you're talking about, in terms of the material of dead animals and not being able to comprehend death.

Yeah, it's just a really interesting thing that we're all confronted with all the time on some level. If you're a person who eats meat, for instance, and choose not to understand how it gets onto your plate, you distance yourself completely. I'm interested in that complex space of actually confronting it and dealing with it and not being distant from how it works.

Going back to some of your earlier sculptures that you made by moulding with the cowhide, you made the decision to make a mould of your mother's body and I wondered if you could talk a little bit about that.

I guess the decision to work with her was centred on the fact that she was my primary life source, and my understanding of life, my introduction to how things

happen as a human being, is centred on her in many ways. I was interested in understanding that relationship and how we influence each other; how, although I was developed inside her, I was also a very separate person from her. And then as you grow up there are certain things that you inherit or that are learnt behaviours you don't even realise are happening – and so this connection but also disconnection to her was what interested me. Trying to imagine what I would be like at her age, looking back at her and what she looked like and how she described herself when she was my age ... and also having this complex space with her where she somehow believes that she knows everything about me and that I share everything with her, which is obviously a falsehood, it's just not a possibility. And so that relationship of withholding but also sharing at the same time is what I was interested in.

You've worked with choreographers on a number of occasions and I wondered what that experience has taught you about the body and its capabilities, its restrictions?

It's really interesting because choreographers are people who understand the body in a way that's different to how I understand it, and understand the spectacle of the body in a way that I don't necessarily understand or even connect with. Because, although I use my body for the mould, I am never really present in the same way as a dancer would be. I think the decision

to have a recording of a performance rather than a live performance is also an interesting one. Working with the choreographers was scary but also quite comforting in a way. It took me a long time to decide who to work with and how we would work, how to relay ideas in a way that somebody else would understand – and to ensure that their way of working, even though it helps in the process, does not completely take over the outcome.

Because in a way your body becomes their material.

Yes, and having to separate myself from that idea of ego was a very humbling experience, because you have to completely trust that you have relayed your idea in a way that is understandable to somebody else, and also trust that, although they hold on to how they work, that person's ego is also left at the door.

In the video work *Paso Doble*, you've got this very traditional dance which is normally performed by male and female dancers; you play with those gendered roles by having two women enact this dance, and the women themselves are kind of androgynous looking. I also like the idea that the dance steps are the *paso doble* but the music is different. In a way it's like playing with society's structures and dancing to a different rhythm. Could you talk a bit about how you explore gendered identities and androgyny in your work?

I've always been interested in that space of how one understands male versus female. In my personal life at different stages, being tomboyish or being seen to be androgynous just because of the ways I've looked, it's always been something that's been there. And in art, men are the ones that generally become successful sculptors. I think there's a very gendered understanding of who can take what role within the artistic space and so this whole question of male/female has always been on my mind in different ways. A couple of years before I made the *Paso Doble* work, I had been to Portugal trying to job shadow a bullfighter. He was a young man, similar in age to me, and his father was training him. The father didn't speak any English, and while this guy spoke English and Portuguese he never really spoke to me, so I relied on his sister to be my translator, my main point of contact. Eventually when the father asked me, 'Ok, you've been here for a month, what is it that you really want?' I told him that I wanted him to train me as a bullfighter and his immediate response was 'No! I'm not going to do it, you're a female. I'm sorry, no!' And so I suppose that conversation and experience had been on my mind as well.

In a weird way I've never really fitted in to any kind of social box or construct. Growing up I wasn't straightforwardly black, you know; I don't have a straightforward experience or understanding of blackness or growing up in South Africa or all those kinds of things. It also comes back to my mom who also grew up in Swaziland and so her experience of being of a particular age, of a particular race living in South Africa

is not the same as someone who's spent their whole life here. So there's this disconnection from other people's expectation that there be a collective experience of how we understand our social standing.

It's interesting because there's a gendered hierarchy which is so strongly ingrained even to this day – while we might feel that the world has progressed, for the bullfighter it was a flat out 'no'. So even though there's a real subtlety to that piece, it's actually quite a powerful statement that you're making in changing those gendered roles.

Yeah, sometimes people seem to think the only way the message is heard is if it's really loud, whereas I think that it's the things that you don't necessarily hear or understand immediately that have more impact. I suppose I've always been interested in that underlying unclear, complicated space that you can't really articulate.

Another work which I find really intriguing, that touches on similar concerns, is the photographic series ...everyone carries a shadow. To me the work feels like a kind of exploration of self and the balance of the gendered identities that are within us. I wondered if you could talk a little about that work – maybe it's an extension of the previous question ...

[Laughs] I feel like all of my work is connected somehow although I don't necessarily see the connection while I'm

making something – it becomes apparent a month or even years later. ...*everyone carries a shadow* was made with a choreographer who I first worked with when I was making the bullfighting series, and reconnecting with him was the main preoccupation. And trying to in a way step out of myself ... You know, when I first started working on the piece, I tried to find somebody who could be my body double, so either somebody who looked similar to me or somebody I could change my body shape to seem similar to. I'd found somebody I thought that I could work with and for some reason that didn't work out. Then I reconnected with this choreographer that I had worked with and in a funny way, without understanding that it wasn't just a visual thing, it was also a spiritual connection.

Right, so how did it feel to be seeking out your male double? What was the process of even thinking it through?

It was very odd actually and a very quiet process, it wasn't like I was holding casting sessions. Because you can very easily find someone who has the same body shape as you but their energy is not necessarily something that can work, you know? So I had to step back and be quiet about it, quiet in my mind about how it would work itself out. And it just happened that we reconnected ... and so I think what was really interesting about that process was that it wasn't about a physical space at all; the physical space worked in the way it did

because of things that were beyond the physical that were already in place.

I was listening to a talk you gave in which you mentioned a video work that you made with the French bullfighter Marie Sara. One of the things that struck me is you said you were trying to understand the things that she doesn't remember and the things that she chooses not to tell you. It links to what you were saying about what you reveal and what you don't reveal, and I was wondering how you feel memory but also its retelling is explored through your work.

Again the idea of memory is quite a complex thing. Initially I was thinking about material memory and the fact that cowhide, as much as I try to control it through chemical processes or stretching it over a mould, if I were to re-wet it, it would continue to remember a particular shape. So the control that I think I have isn't a reality because the material functions in a way that it remembers and even chooses to remember. Beyond material memory there's this understanding of cultural memory, there's the social memory that we all have, and history and how it's told or not told.

I think my interest specifically in Marie Sara was that she's this very glamorous, amazing woman, wonderfully dressed, and nothing that I read about her or experienced of her indicated any kind of struggle around being a bullfighter. There are hardly any stories of her being

maimed by a bull, and she doesn't talk much about the gender roles that have obviously influenced her life and her path. In a funny way she reminded me of my mother and myself – my mom is a very particular type of woman who never walks out of the house without makeup – which I've obviously learnt from her! – and never gives you any indication of a struggle. [Laughs]

Obviously I don't understand Marie Sara's personal experience or how she's gotten to where she is, but it was interesting to me that she had quite a difficult and complex job but really showed no indication of that at all. When I work there are so many things that are private in the creating of the artworks that then become the spectacle of 'oh wow, it really looks great', but no one really understands the process. I think that kind of double existence is what I was interested in initially.

I was thinking about the relationship to memory but also wondering if that's what interests you about mythology. Mythology as a form of storytelling – it's a form of memory recall but it allows for fiction and also fantasy and so it's also this style of narration that I guess relates in some ways to this.

Yes, definitely. I think that how we understand history, how we understand our connection to the universe, the earth, is based on a lot of fiction. What you choose to believe becomes a reality for you; that complex weird thing that we have in common is this whole fiction that we make a reality.

Marie feels, from what you've described, like the type of person who does become someone of legend or mythology, at the kind of colloquial level of the urban legend, she could have that status.

In making that video I had a discussion with her around the fact that I felt it would be interesting for the viewer never to see her face but to have an indication of what she could be like by seeing snippets of her, whether the shoes she was wearing that day or jewellery ... I was also trying to understand how I might have imposed my own feelings around my history, how I was understanding her in relationship to myself, in relationship to my mother ... She was the canvas for a whole lot of possibilities.

Can tell me about the works that you are currently focused on? Are there any new research interests? I know that you research deeply as you make work and I wondered what direction that has taken you.

Well, right now I am in the space of wanting to explore and play. I started painting because I was getting bored with sculpture, or maybe not with sculpture but with myself. I've been trying to find a different language and I've increasingly become interested in this humped shape; I've always imaged the body very clearly in my work but never really tried to simplify the shape. I feel that the body consists of these humps and bumps, you know, your shoulder, your ear – this really simple shape that implies safety, housing, a shield of some sort. And

I decided to start playing with the colour black and understanding the different variations of black. Playing around with oil paint and then printmaking and still this preoccupation with this shape ...

You retained the hair from the cowhide as well?

Yeah, so just trying to expand the language of how I can work, and also now working with bronze on a large scale. I just had a show at Stevenson in Cape Town, still around mythology but on a more personal level ... I've always used myself as a subject but there was a bit of distance to how I was doing it. So I'm making the decision to be more physically attached to the outcome of the art piece. Yeah, so it feels like I am revisiting certain aspects of the process that I never really delved deeply enough into, so not really new ideas or new preoccupations but maybe new ways of dealing with the same things.

This conversation took place at Stevenson, Johannesburg, on 19 November 2015

8.

Dineo Seshee Bopape