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Untitled (Skins), 1995, multimedia installation, photographed in the backyard
of Langa's Bakenberg home by the artist

TRAVERSING WORLDS

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In 2002, as part of his *Fresh* residency exhibition at the South African National Gallery, Moshekwa Langa featured his seminal video *Where do I begin?* (2001) for the first time. It had been five years since he last showed in South Africa, after moving to Amsterdam to study and then work there. His previous South African showing, in 1997, had also been at the SANG as part of the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale exhibition, *Graft*, curated by Colin Richards. Langa had arrived in Cape Town at that time with a European film crew in tow, recording his every move including the installation of another of his seminal pieces, *Temporal Distance (With Criminal Intent.) You Will Find Us in the Best Places* (1997) - an elaborate multimedia cityscape of thread, wool, bottles, toy cars - which he later reproduced, notably as part of the 2009 Venice Biennale.

The question that *Where do I begin?* poses feels as poignant an entry point into Langa's work now as it did in 2002. Fifteen years ago the inquiry appeared to be directed around how to explain and acknowledge the multiple aspects of himself - culturally, educationally, artistically, spatially, relationally - to his varying audiences, locally and abroad, who wanted to know who he was and what his art was doing. Today the question seems to have found more self-reflexive depth as he looks back and considers roughly twenty years of artmaking. In both instances, that 'beginning' is invoked by reflecting on his childhood home of Bakenberg - then still a small village in Limpopo (previously part of the then semi-independent 'homeland' of KwaNdebele), now a larger platinum mining town - as his earliest place of personal and cultural rootedness.

The title of this exhibition, *Fugitive*, is closely tied to this self-reflection. It bears an acknowledgement of the refuge that his art and studio have provided

for him over these years of creative and personal maturation, away from others' questions about his existence. It also acknowledges his ongoing experience as a young boy, and as a young artist living away from home, in South Africa and abroad, as one of displacement at all levels of self-presentation, having him feel not unlike a type of fugitive – always disconnected, somehow outside of the framework he found himself in; needing to explain details of his history and present experience that would locate him in context.

From his earliest works, produced in the mid-1990s when he was not yet twenty, Bakenberg became for Langa a deeply personal marker of relative distance from wherever else he found himself or felt himself or had to explain himself; a strongly formative location of belonging and un-belonging. The place where he lived for his first eleven-and-a-half years has become, for Langa, a space – and an idea of a space – of continual longing; a signifier of home, of stable existence – of his rooted self and life; a place of refuge in his mind where he isn't required to explain himself to anyone: where he came from, what that meant to him. And thus the relative distance that Bakenberg represents as a point of evaluation for all of Langa's experiences has become not only spatial and experiential, but also temporal – an imagined, longed for time of containment and relative simplicity and uncomplicatedness.

To some degree there is a conflation of the nature of place and self, key elements that Langa returns to repeatedly in his work. This deeply entangled evaluation and registration of himself in relation to space and time is a fundamental motif of the *Fugitive* exhibition, twenty years on from experiencing his

earliest radiance under the international spotlight. In *Fugitive* Langa questions, engages, connects with and tries to make sense of his process and his journey over these twenty years.

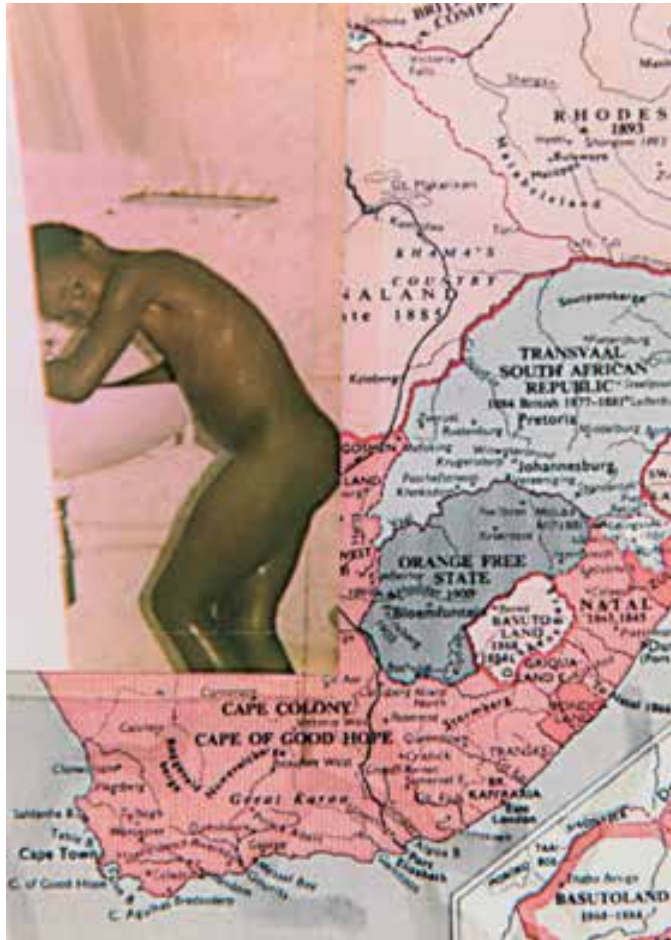
At a material level, the resonances and connections that he makes between early and current works are keenly considered and cited, as is their curatorial placement in the exhibition. At the level of engaging his process, *Fugitive* presents a richly matured and self-reflexive expression by the artist of this journey.

Viewers are introduced to the exhibition by two works – a video piece, *Martha*, from 2011 and a diptych, *Overseas I/Overseas II* (2017) – that immediately set up a subtle dialectic for the show: of place and time, home and away. Of dry, dusty roads and deep, iridescent wateriness. Of worlds apart. And Langa's continual traversal of both.

Martha, which was shot in Bakenberg, stands as Langa's self-referential starting point in the exhibition – his context to "begin" his telling of himself and his journey. Langa has been documenting Bakenberg for many years, from the beginning of his artmaking, tracking its residents, its landscape and more recently its sudden infrastructural changes since platinum mining began in the area. Filmed by the artist, running with a hand-held video camera after his long-time neighbour, Martha, along the untarred main road in Bakenberg, the video piece evocatively captures a sense of the place – its colours, sounds, textures. It documents for Langa the ephemeral state of the village on the cusp of change, holds it for him as a moment in memory of the place as he's known it, registering the landscape as a tangible referent. This place, which in his earliest



Where do I begin?, 2001, single-channel digital video, sound, duration 4 min 20 sec



Via Afrika Large Print Atlas for Southern Africa, 1994, detail from notebook

work he mapped almost obsessively, insisting on giving name and presence to the small area where he was born, but which failed to appear on official apartheid-era government maps of the region, seemingly disregarding and nullifying its – and by extension, his – existence, is in some ways Langa's symbolic key to self.

Overseas I/Overseas II, on the other hand – cool and watery and unpredictably in flux; all shimmery surfaces and unknown depths of layered line and pigment – becomes that relative distance from the warm, knowing intimacy and familiarity of *Martha*. Rather than embodying the rootedness of a particular place, the paintings map a space of transition and anticipation, which are also important referents in Langa's narration of his journey.

One of Langa's very early works, *Halcyon Days* (1994), installed just as one enters the next part of the exhibition, marks another careful inclusion in reading the show's trajectory by providing a contextual backdrop of his earliest concerns and interrogations as a very young artist. This complex collage ironically reveals and maps a colonial plot to take over Africa. The work includes many of the ongoing material devices that Langa employs going forward, using multimedia including tape, printed material, drawing, text and thread to layer image and meaning. This early piece already poignantly reflects Langa's pursuit to position himself, personally and politically, within the landscape of South Africa and the continent, and to explore what that means. In terms of his practical process, this work and others from that early phase prefigure his ongoing experimentations with materials and colour, both two-dimensionally and in his elaborate installations,

including floor pieces such as *Temporal Distance (With Criminal Intent.)*.

While every work in this exhibition invites careful reading and proposes associations with previous and other current works, there are several pieces that particularly warrant drawing out some of their historical-contemporary connections. These include the powerful presence of the suspended series of *Drag Paintings* (2016) that hang centrally in the middle room, diagonally opposite *Halcyon Days* and in relation to *Declarations of love* (2013/17), *Metseng ya batho* (2016), *Spirals* (2016), *Rikisha (Ramokone)* (2016) and *The sweet simple life ...* (2016).

Langa speaks of the *Drag Paintings* as almost physical remnants of the Bakenberg of his childhood – stretches of canvas that he dragged along the ground behind a car on Bakenberg roads to collect and literally become embedded with the earth of that place, and then lacquered to preserve them as what he's referred to as 'locked documents', representing part of a physical and memory archive echoing the landscape of Bakenberg as he remembers it having existed. Or the fantasy of that memory. Other works on the exhibition, such as *Bakenberg Imagined I* (2016/17) present similarly as part of this archive, although through different material means.

In the third exhibition space are two further 'drag paintings' installed as framed canvases – *Wydhoeck* (2016), which is heavily imbued with additional pigment and thread, and *Bokwidi* (2017). Both have been intensively worked, reworked and – Langa's word – 'deworked', using the natural materials and earth of the particular places they reference, and embodying the resonance of those materials' affect.

But the drag paintings have a further echoed significance in Langa's oeuvre, in that as much as they infer place, landscape, map, complexly saturated relic, rich palimpsest parchment, they also reference Langa's earlier *Untitled (Skins)* (1995) that prominently featured on the exhibition *Faultlines: Inquiries about Truth and Reconciliation* at the Castle of Good Hope, Cape Town, in 1996, and which, in that context, took on a far more sinister character, as of flayed human remnants.

Langa has noted in discussion about his work that elements of self-portraiture may be read into all of his pieces, as he writes himself into the histories he infers, as well as through his referencing of what he experiences. His use of photocopies, for example, which recurs in various artworks over the years, builds a referential lexicon, as does his inclusion of text, drawing and titles that locate works specifically for him, even if obscurely, or opaquely, for his viewers. He describes himself 'try[ing] to perform being [him]self every day' or finding himself reflecting on things he finds relevant and of interest around him. David Brodie, in introducing this exhibition, commented about Langa's process that it intuits a sense of longing - something ephemeral that remains on the periphery, just on the edge of conscious understanding. Langa describes this phenomenon as a constant engagement and struggle with himself, both as a person and as an artist on his journey, trying to find concrete, containable formulations to express that desire that feels constantly remote or just out of reach.

While this feels true of the entire *Fugitive* exhibition, there are several works - some part of this exhibition, others related to it but not ultimately

included - that seem to supersede the discomfort and ineluctability of expressing that desire. The drag paintings are among these works that appear to come close to accepting the constantly unreachable, and embracing their expression, simply, as intimate statements of emotion and declaration of where the artist is at that moment. If the drag paintings are bold and powerful objects, though, some of these other works are more softly stated, quiet and perhaps lightly unassuming - sparser than the other works on the exhibition, with a different colour palette and embracing a different energy. These are the *Love Letters* and the perhaps more elaborate piece, which does appear on *Fugitive*, titled *Declarations of love*. Even as the texts that they infer are not legible to the viewer - they appear as gestures rather than actual statements - their intention is made evident and the simple intimacy of their declarations rings true. The minimalism of line, colour and layering in these works is different to the intense layering of mark, material and text of so many of his works both on the show and produced over time - the complex registers of experiential cues - names, titles, places, adjectives - that have so regularly occupied his canvases previously, and whose titles have maintained their relative opacity. The *Love Letters*, instead, Langa openly titles as such. Clear, but not literal in their presentation; delicate, but by no means insipid, these works with their intimately coded texts seem to communicate an embrace - of themselves, and their maker - in answer to that perpetual longing.

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Halcyon Days, 1994, mixed media on paper. Courtesy of a private collector