‘What you see is life’

Neo Matloga in conversation with Sisipho Ngodwana and Dineo Diphofa

Could you tell us about the title of your exhibition, *Back of the Moon*?

I’m reminiscing about an imagined place and time, a past that becomes present behind the moon. I come from a place where a lot happens at night. There are rumours of voodoo and witchcraft – stories of people who wake up and plant evil spirits in other people’s homes. O swanetše go ba le phatla ya gona, meaning certain things are meant to be seen by certain people.

You’ve mentioned that the works were made in the light of the moon. Do you always work at night?

It just so happened that, during this period, my levels of concentration were better in the evening. Once I realised this, it was clear that night would be the most useful time for me to engage with my work. I do work during the day, but in other forms. When I’m outside the studio I know that I don’t have to go far to experience something that may be surreal or absurd. There’s always something

happening within my surroundings, so I'll always have a camera with me and I'll always have my ears open to listen to new stories from people passing by.

This is your first solo exhibition in South Africa. With your work being partially inspired by the country's socio-political history, is having an exhibition here of particular significance?

When I land in South Africa, it is always enlightening to see home with a new perspective, although there are so many challenges and social circumstances that one has to psychologically adjust to. Whenever I'm here in Ga-Mamaila I start missing Amsterdam, and whenever I'm in Amsterdam I start missing Ga-Mamaila. I know I'm privileged to experience worlds that are totally different when it comes to politics, religion and cultural viewpoints, but showing my work on home soil and being integrated into the local scene has been a great longing of mine. I'm hoping people will see their emotions, their experiences and their spirits living on my canvases.

Could you tell us more about Ga-Mamaila?

Most of the time when you hear about rural areas, villages or townships, they are reduced to disadvantaged areas for previously disadvantaged individuals. Without taking away from that reality, what has struck me about Ga-Mamaila is that living here is like living in a world of the senses. People listen, people talk and people touch in a way that makes you more conscious of your surroundings. There is a distinct sense of community – you see it clearly during social gatherings like aritsibaneng [a gathering between family members to get to know one another], funerals and weddings. Life here is also a bit slow. At times I feel like I'm living decades ago; the days feel longer. Topics such as race are also spoken about in a very different way here because we don't experience the same things that people in the cities experience. Certain things happen quite far away from us and the village is predominantly lived in by Black people, most of whom own their compounds or their land, which I admire. At the same time, Ga-Mamaila is a village that is growing. There is so much to appreciate about it – the vast landscape, the air, the people and their relationship with the landscape.

I'm interested in how you came to work in Amsterdam. How did the residency at De Ateliers come about? What was your experience like there, and how did it compare to your time at the Bag Factory in Johannesburg?

Being at De Ateliers was challenging at times because nothing was for marks; it's not school. You just have a studio where you practice your art or do whatever you want. Every Tuesday we had lectures of sorts. Artists, writers and critics from all parts of the world would speak to us or do studio visits. Those meetings were some of the most complex times for me as a human being. But as an artist, I must say, to this day I still keep what I learnt during those visits. Of course, some things that critics say you flush away, absorbing what you need for your practice to move forward. There was so much freedom to explore whatever I wanted without any pressure of failing or doing something wrong or living up to the standards of grading. It was great in that sense.

After De Ateliers I was in-between residencies, trying to find a way to stay in the Netherlands. It was challenging and fun at same time. Eventually I moved from Amsterdam to a residency in Rotterdam. I realised then that I absolutely wanted to stay in the Netherlands because I had the

freedom and isolation to do my work.

The Bag Factory was also a very important moment for me as it was just after I had left art school. It was an interesting time. I was confronted by the fact that I just came from university but somehow I didn't have the survival tools to be an artist. It was at the Bag Factory that Ntate Pat Mautloa and the late Ntate David Koloane as well as other artists from different generations shared everything about being an artist – how to practice and how to navigate a career in Johannesburg. I became a permanent artist-in-residence, but then came time to do De Ateliers. The transition was interesting. Literally, my contract at the Bag Factory ended on 31 August and on 1 September my residency at De Ateliers started. It was almost as if it was meant to be. It's a really nice feeling when all these things fall into place. Both the residencies were important for structuring me as an artist and as a human being as well.

Could you talk about nostalgia and collective trauma in your work? There's collectivity in both happiness and struggle, especially in relation to apartheid and the post-apartheid condition. In his exhibition *Objects of Desire, Addendum* Meleko Mokgosi poked holes into nostalgia to unravel the complexity of the violence of history. Your work appears to engage with or rework a similar notion of nostalgia, with an element of healing.

My work certainly has an element of healing present. I think drawing, painting and collage are cathartic processes which are concerned with both reflective and restorative forms of nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia acknowledges the past by revisiting it. It goes on a quest to build on the past by closing any gaps that are visible within that history via discourse or conversation. The reflective type of nostalgia highlights a sense of loss and longing. Here, you acknowledge that the past shouldn't be taken for granted, and at the same time one can see it as a humorous or ironic thing because it reveals that reminiscing and critical thinking are not really opposed.

Regarding your choice of medium, specifically charcoal, and paper cut-outs, these are both materials that have distinct traces of people, previous processes or a past life. Your work seems to have clear intentions of reworking the past or bringing things back to the present, even in an altered state.

It's not by chance that I use ink and charcoal in my canvases. I've always enjoyed line drawing. I understood at a very young age charcoal's relationship to time and ageing. It leaves a residue. I use ink and charcoal in a painterly manner and treat these with the same sense of care as collage. With residue there is evidence of life, and what you see on the surface of the canvas is life. That's important to me.

You've used colour before but more recently you seem to be focusing solely on working with black and white paint. Do you ever have the urge to paint in colour?

Maybe the urge to use colour will come at another time. For now, I don't yet feel I have an understanding of the scientific relationships between colours. When I do use it, it feels like there is something missing. I think as an artist your gut always tells you this.

What about the consideration of light when working in black and white?

I work with chiaroscuro which is a process that considers light and shadows in painting and drawing. Admittedly, I still don't follow the rules of this process because that would reveal too much and detract from the mystery.

There was an emphasis on printmaking in your early work. What motivated the shift to painting?

I started painting because I needed more room to attack or execute what I needed to express. Printmaking has limitations in terms of scale, but painting gives you the freedom to go from left to right, over two metres, with a single brush stroke.

Is there a relationship between fashion and memory in your paintings? The attire of your figures looks somehow 'retro'. Do you find historical references for the choice of clothes the figures wear?

As part of my research, I go to vintage stores to document and sometimes purchase clothes, but I'm not looking for any specific moment in history. I seek out materials or props for my characters in the same way that characters on a set in the theatre are dressed.

I look at some of the paintings and I hear Jonas Gwangwa and Papa Penny playing in my mind; each fragment, each fixture, each brush stroke harmonising – all elements of an orchestra coming together. We've heard you play music in your studio – does it inform your thinking?

I like that you mention Jonas Gwangwa and Papa Penny. Growing up we had no choice but to listen to what our parents listened to on the radio. We were exposed to musicians like Patricia Majalisa, Peta Teanet, Foster Teanet, Shaka Bundu Girls. This music still lives in my studio and I use it as a tool that transports me to another realm. In order to work or be creative, some form of distraction is needed and the music does that for me.

Apart from music, are there any other studio traditions that you cannot do without?

I consume a lot of tea when I'm creating, I can't live without it. It just goes with what my grandmother says, 'tee e tla o lapološa' [tea will make you less tired].

There is no doubt that education can be one of the greatest gifts of the human experience; however, it can also introduce a new set of complications. Certain kinds of education can lead to a generalised way of engaging with visual art, such as looking at a work's formal elements, or looking through the artist's biography. As someone who has studied in a variety of contexts, how important do you consider art education for an artist's practice or development?

To me it's like reading a coin: it has two sides. On the one side, art schools can take away from an artist's experience through the systemic issues around grading. How do you even grade an artist? There was a tendency for artists of colour to have to over-explain themselves in any project they presented. At that time, not so long ago, I felt that conversation was brewing on how the art school does not know what to do with artists of colour. On the other side of the coin, one accrues knowledge about art history and other artists through being in art school.

When it comes to institutions (including galleries, museums,

art fairs), as an artist do you assume any responsibility or voice when it comes to how these spaces function towards the public or the people directly in its ecosystem? Or is this something outside of the concerns of individual artists?

As artists we are who we are because of these institutions, and they are who they are because of the people directly involved in their ecosystem. I wouldn't say that this topic is outside of our concerns. I believe that institutions have a responsibility to be transparent in the way they navigate and put out information to the world. It is important that they are conscious and also acknowledge the times through their programmes.

Are there artists whose work you admire or respect?

A few years ago I participated in a group show, *Tell Freedom*, which took place at the Kunsthal KAdE in Amersfoort. It was a group show of about 15 South African artists. Here I was exposed to artists who worked with different kinds of materials; the ones whose approaches and philosophies I admired most were Bronwyn Katz and Buhlebezwe Siwani. Talking about another generation, I enjoy and respect Lynette Yiadom-Boake's work, as well as that of Lubaina Himid – I respect what she has done for artists of colour and female artists in the UK and in the world at large.

Are you aware of the work of Nathaniel Mary Quinn?

I learned about his work almost two years ago when a guest artist from Chicago, David Schutter, visited my studio at De Ateliers. He asked me if I knew Quinn's work and we looked at it together online. It was an amazing moment in the sense that I've always seen musicians as getting influence from previous generations without knowing the links, but now I could see it visually too. I came to the conclusion that as artists, there are energies and spirits that existed before us that have made their way into our practices. I also think that it may be partially attributed to historians' tendency to group artists according to themes or similarities.

Who or what have been the guides in your practice?

I am blessed to have had the guidance of several individuals, outside the context of art. These are people that I exchange conversations with, a doctor, a teacher, a lawyer, an accountant, and through those conversations they shape who I am as a human being. On the other hand I communicate with the artists with whom I participated in my residency at De Ateliers and we continue to check on one another. I think it's important to be well mentally, and I appreciate having their support.

You mentioned that you learned artist survival skills during your time at the Bag Factory and that they mostly applied to surviving in and navigating Johannesburg. Could these skills apply to your time in Amsterdam and Rotterdam?

There's a difference but not a big difference. You could say that some of those tools are kind of universal. You can apply them anywhere in the world just to stand and live as an artist. Some of the things I learnt at the Bag Factory I'm still applying today. Just sharing, for example, was an important thing I learnt while there. Sharing information is an important way to build one another as artists. But some things are different because of the system. One needs to adjust and also learn to absorb.

Are there theories or particular texts that have lent themselves to your work?

Yes, there are texts by the likes of Achille Mbembe, Toni Morrison, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Right now I'm reading a book edited by Xolelwa Mangcu, titled *The Colour of Our Future: Does Race Matter in Post-Apartheid South Africa?* I've also enjoyed texts by Louise Gordon on existentialism and Emmanuel Levinas' concept of the face, or rather the face-to-face-relation, and his other ideas on how humans interact socially.

How do you think this is reflected in your work?

There appears to be a dialogue between them. I often search for the other once I've rendered my collage paintings; maybe I am the other? Looking at my work it occurs to me that it is more about me and the viewer as we have to interrogate what we see. At each glance the work changes because of the dismantled and sometimes rearranged physiognomy.

The majority of your paintings have multiple figures, with only a few single portraits. Given that the current pandemic has forced us to live in somewhat isolated environments, have the 'social gatherings' in your paintings been a conscious counter to what we are experiencing?

My exhibition came at a time when I was making work that alludes to events and situations that we wish or long for. I didn't know what we would be experiencing today so my work is not a counter to this but I've always wanted to show people my universe, and it is a universe that expresses the fact that life continues in the midst of all the socio-political arrangements of the world.

Between Selobedu and Sepedi, how does language lend itself to your work, particularly in terms of your titles?

It all stems from how I read and write. I read books that are written in Sepedi and I write in Sepedi but the complexity of the language begins when I travel. For example, when I travel to Botlokwa or Moletši, people hear me and ask 'Neo, kgane o apa Selobedu na?' (Neo, do you speak Selobedu?) In Makhakhapatše or Tzaneen or Ga-Koranta, the people ask 'Neo, kgane o bolela Setlokwa na?' (Neo, do you speak Setlokwa?) I would say, 'No, nna ke apa Sepedi' (No, I speak Sepedi). So I find myself in the middle of Sepedi dialects since my language has an emphasis on the pronunciation of certain letters in the words. You could say that I speak Selobedu – even in the school syllabus, the children or the people in the community may speak a Sepedi dialect that could be heard as Selobedu – but actually we write in Sepedi.

The titles of the works are taken from Sepedi or Selobedu utterances or poems that I feel don't really make sense. I take words from days of the week, from poems, from what someone might say. In a way, the titles have both nothing and everything to do with the paintings. Even with the title of this show, the direct Selobedu or Sepedi translation, 'ka morago ga kgwedi', would mean something else, 'after a month'. There is a poetic nuance that is complex to translate. South African languages are notoriously difficult to translate into English.

The titles offer clues to what's happening in the paintings but on the other hand they shouldn't always be used to interpret the work.

The influences of Cubism and Dadaist collages appear to be birthing a new generation of Black figuration. What do you make of this?

Maybe this is a protest; we've seen and read about different movements, and the most recent and relevant is Black Lives Matter; in philosophy, this is a multi-layered topic. In relation to my work and its materiality, I think the different layers could be a metaphor. Gone are the days where we see things from one single viewpoint, and this is what the aesthetics of the work encourages, for one to experience different perspectives.

On Black existentialism, are you familiar with Aimé Césaire's writing? He speaks of Negritude as an affirmation of the Black body. Would you consider your approach to reflective and restorative nostalgia as affirmation of Black existence?

I'm not very familiar with Césaire's writing but from what I know, perhaps my way of tapping into reflective and restorative nostalgia is a way of acknowledging Black life and existence.

I saw on Instagram that you posted a snapshot of text from *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You*. The book came out early this year, and touches on the tension between WEB Dubois and writers that were part of the Harlem Renaissance – the tension in beliefs in terms of how Black bodies are portrayed. You have one side that says that it's OK to show Black bodies in strife and struggle because that's fundamentally part of the human condition. You know, you have moments of perfection and moments of imperfection as well. Then you have Dubois, who's on the other side of spectrum. He argued, mostly, for uplifting and dignified portrayals, of course from the viewpoint of his time. As someone who works within the growing tradition of Black portraiture and Black figuration, what is your take on that?

To be honest, I'm just painting or drawing my life – Black life. I'm highlighting and emphasising certain forms of humanity. This is my normal but I do know that whatever I read or watch has a way of coming into my studio. I feel that in every painting or collage of mine, all forms of humanity should be present. In these characters, for example, where the person looks angry, sad or happy, it's just part of being a human. I do understand that we want to portray ourselves as positive, or as heroes. I know that I don't like it when I see the media portray Black people as inferior, Black people in poverty … no, I don't like that. But when it comes to my work, it's important to expose or highlight this because it is part of who we are. It would be very weird if, 20 years down the line, people ask, 'what was happening in 2020?', and then they go back and only see pictures of happy Black people. That's not true. It doesn't make sense. That's why it's important that I paint life as it is.

At one stage in our correspondence, you mentioned that some of the questions we asked were maybe too ambitious or didactic in their terminology or references. I wonder what your impression was about the words being used. The thing about making paintings is that their impression is very fluid, right? Because art or image-making is not as direct as text, do you think that what you say through text or in this interview might be too direct for what you would like to say verbally and through your practice?

Even though I went to university, I was very opposed to the type of language that was used because it was really

foreign to me. When I read some of your questions I felt that my mother, for example, would not understand what I'm talking about because of the language. It doesn't feel OK for it to be this way. Some of the questions I was very happy to answer and I was just writing away because I understood them. We are all in geographically different locations and we are asking questions that stem from our own opinions.

And to some extent, most of who and what we are can be attributed to cultural DNA that we have inherited from generations before us. At the same time, this culture is not always something that one chooses to adopt, and more often than not, we are bred into politicised cultural pockets. As an image-maker or someone who documents life forms, how do you navigate the moral expectations or suppositions from your audience?

It is very difficult to have a conversation about my work without politics and race surfacing. My practice is politicised against my will because everything is politics. As I put my work out there I know I have signed up for subjective opinion and racial criticism. What is important is to navigate the factors gently and with integrity.

Everybody has an opinion. I know that a lot of us, including me, are scared to voice our opinions in case someone says, 'you're wrong!' Sometimes I have so many opinions but I don't know how to articulate them.

Because English is a very specific language.

Yeah, and even though there are those expectations of what should come out of an artist of colour, I don't feel obliged to respond to that. I'm just making. I happen to be an artist of colour but I'm just painting experiences of which I know no other. I was once asked by a journalist why I only paint people of colour but that's what's within my reality. You don't go back to the 18th century and ask Rembrandt, 'Why did you only paint white people?' I'm just painting my reality. There's no other way for me. When I dream I mostly dream of Black people, I dream in my own language. It's my reality. I can't over-explain that.

Do you ever find yourself at a crossroads between truth and political correctness?'

Art is a process, right? I don't think I'm the kind of artist that's like,'there's coronavirus!' and the next thing is that all my collages have masks. [Laughs] Just because something is happening doesn't mean that I should immediately respond to it with my art. I have a practice that exists on its own. Yes, I can respond to what's happening in the world by engaging in conversations with people, but just because it's a part of our reality doesn't mean that I should bring it into the studio.

I know that I'll be spending the rest of my life learning and improving my mental capacities. As my latitude grows, I'll continue to be at the crossroads between truth and political correctness. I'm glad that I don't feel the pressure to sound 'woke' because that's now an ongoing, complex conversation.

It's great that you don't feel you have to succumb to the pressure of having to make work about every moment that's going on, especially because you situate yourself in more than one place in the world. It's a lot to keep up with. But it's also good that you recognise that there are other, if not additional, ways of engaging with what's going on around us.

It's exhausting actually – waiting for information from the world to make art.

Does success exist in the art world, and if so, what does that mean for you?

For me, success is being able to embrace the uncertainty, the failures and the mistakes that one encounters during the journey that is one's practice. It takes a lot to be able to reach that point. Another thing that is very important to me, as an artist, is gaining the respect of institutions and individuals who appreciate what you do.

If you were not a visual artist, what do you think you would be doing?

I would probably be a doctor as I love mathematics and sciences. Painting and drawing in the studio is like performing surgery in the operating theatre. Both processes entail solving a problem, which is what I love doing most of the time – solving problems in the studio.

Sisipho Ngodwana is an associate director and Dineo Diphofa a gallery assistant at Stevenson, based in Cape Town and Johannesburg respectively.

Everything Genetic

Ashraf Jamal

'Painting', for lack of a better word. None will suffice, but it is this word which recurs in an interview with Neo Matloga for *Neo to Love* (2019), his solo show at the Fries Museum in Leeuwarden, the Netherlands.[1] Painting? It is not the medium uppermost in my mind. I see drawings in liquid charcoal and ink. I see collage, photography. Perhaps it is painting which links these media, contains their overlay and interpenetration. There is something profligate and hybrid in their making. No single descriptor can absorb what Matloga is doing, what we see. His subject matter is peopled, domestic. His is a world of interiors – *living* rooms. If photography seems dominant – the photographs sourced, torn apart, their fragments recomposed – it is because this overlaid medium is structurally prominent, occupying the extremities of his figures (their fluid heads, hands, calves, feet). The photographic fragments are black and white, the entirety of the works monochromatic. To describe them as paintings suggests that, as yet, no word exists to explain what we euphemistically dub mixed-media.

Then why painting? Is it because of pedigree, because it carries a more enduring weight? Or is it because of what happens when one paints – the time it takes for layers to dry? Is it because photography implies something momentary – a snapshot? Then why not collage? Because it implies a tearing apart and a suturing, an arresting, re-stitching, a putting back together of discrete moments – not time's duration but its computation? For the artist, it seems that neither photography nor collage suffice. They have their part to play, but they are not the main event. Matloga reserves that pride of place for painting. It is painting that keeps the ship afloat; that allows for the time it takes to make a work; that allows one to see what is captured as a sustainable story. Painting lingers. It breathes. It spans a time before and after the event

which Matloga presents. Painting is 'a relationship'. It tells him 'what to do'.[2] Unlike photography, painting is not an abduction. It is not a stolen moment. Neither, as in the case of collage, is it an accretion of moments.

If painting for Matloga is more durable, is it also because it carries the mystique of being out of time, untimely? This fantasy has been argued to be anything but the case. Nonetheless, let us pursue the matter. Can one say that painting is code for an art that refuses time? That painting is neither static nor narrowly dynamic (in other words, neither photography nor collage)? If this is the case, then perhaps painting matters most to Matloga because it is all about duration – the time it takes to make a work of art, the time that painting, better than any other medium, contains.

One drinks time. Time is what it takes to drink. One lives in it, because of it. In a world that has succumbed to instantaneity, Matloga has chosen time's uncontainable and suggestive fullness. His paintings are scenes, not stills taken from scenes. The situations he paints – 'people dancing … eating … kissing … having a conversation' – are redolent with suggestion.[3] In the making and in the moment it is completed (or simply concluded), Matloga asks himself: 'What actually happened before the scene? What's going to happen afterwards?'[4] These questions – about time past, time future – are Proustian. They suppose a journey 'that no one else can take for us, an effort which no one can spare us'. It is a journey 'we must discover … for ourselves'.[5] Matloga invites us into his world and asks us to take our place within it. What we see is not what he sees. The painter too is a wanderer. He asks what happened and what will happen. And we, in turn, ask ourselves the same questions.

What Matloga sees in his paintings are 'characters … immersed in themselves. They are in the painting, but they are in their own worlds.'[6] This distinction is vital. Matloga's dramatic personae are actors, but they are also not. They are characters performing a role, yet they are also more than the roles they perform. They are not typecast. They are living beings with all the foibles, secrets, plots and hopes that no narrative can control. Matloga is not the puppet master. He 'leaves room for imagination'.[7] We roam amongst his figures as they roam amongst our lives. Matloga's paintings intersect worlds – those of his 'characters' (in relation to each other), the painter and his audience. The event – whether making a painting or experiencing it – is not the result of a transaction or exchange. It is a living, breathing, organic fretwork of feelings, intuitions and suppositions. It is breath that matters most; painting's respiratory ability to capture lived conditions, irrespective of the overlay and interface of applied techniques. Notwithstanding their makeshift contemporary feel, is Matloga an Impressionist? The evocative quality of his paintings suggests so. The relationships between people linger. They are 'intimate'.

Matloga speaks of 'trying to document, trying to write notes'.[8] His emphasis is telling. A painting is a record of an attempt, not the resolved result thereof. 'In painting I'm grasping the concept of life,' he resumes.[9] The artist's inflection – trying, grasping – reveals the tenuousness of the attempt. Matloga makes no claim, presumes no judgment. The events he creates come with no final disclosure. The 'concept' is always provisional. The lives he conjures are as varied as humanity itself. 'No matter the political landscape,' he reminds us, 'people do not stop living their lives.'[10] Everything Matloga states must be understood as such. This is because the worlds he inhabits, which pass through him, are not designed

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to explain life, but to allow for its full yet inchoate tenderness. It is warmth one encounters – 'intimacy', 'temptation', the subtle quavering of lives poised between reflection and anticipation.

Matloga's decision to construct his worlds in such an open-ended manner speaks volumes about his refusal to complete a story. It is unsurprising that none of his paintings possess a beginning, middle or end. Time will not allow for such an easy narrative, and neither does life. What we witness are occasions filled to the brim with suggestion.

I have spoken of warmth, but what of conviviality? Mutual comfort? Pleasure? I find no melancholy in these paintings, no existential doubt. If his characters are 'immersed in themselves', it is an immersion wholly engaged with life's promise. One's 'own' world need not be a damnation, and neither need hell be others. This bleakly existential view of reality, which Matloga refuses, denies both the rights of the self and the rights of community. In Matloga's world, we are richly enjoined to ourselves and to others. The delight, ease and pleasurable warmth his paintings generate stem from this fulsome vision.

How did Matloga arrive at the work he is now making? When I first wrote about him in 2016, he was painting in brilliant colour. Then, his faces were devoid of feature, his bodies defined by their apparel. It was clothing as a human sleeve which preoccupied the eye. The works, in hindsight, were tentative, unsure of themselves. On visiting the Cape Town Art Fair in 2020 I was struck by the fact that Matloga had made a profound shift, that he had 'come into his own', honed his message. There is no doubt that Matloga's latest body of work, produced between 2018 and 2020, is a stunning contribution to South Africa's image repertoire. While it holds fast to monochromatism, collage, and photography (a defining 'look' and idiom in South African art), its expression does not serve the ongoing belief in documentary truth, a binary optic and culture, or poor 'make-do' art. Something quite different is afoot. His 'take' on Black life refuses a reactive or grievous turn. He does not seek, through art, to address pre-existent and persistent political, economic or social injustice and inequality. Instead, he describes his recent work as 'an archive of Black love'.[11]

Matloga's emphasis on the archival suggests the importance of an historical record. However, this view is scuppered by the artist's interest in provisional and open-ended situations and experiences. It is not a history of Black South Africa's hurt that compels him, but Black pleasures – then as now. Matloga is correct in noting that the South African art-historical, cultural and political record rarely embraced the quotidian and everyday, the fact that 'people do not stop living their lives'. Njabulo Ndebele's insight in this regard remains enduring. His critique of the 'spectacularisation' of Black life, his celebration of the 'ordinary', remains a defining and hugely enabling insight.[12] In this regard,

Matloga belongs to an important revisionist tradition. But to frame his works thus is to limit, if not diminish, their force. If Matloga is a highly significant artist for our times, it is because he has minted anew the way we see Black experience, how we engage with Black lives. His emphasis on the personal and subjective is of inestimable value. It is a fluid normalcy which he brings to the fore – Black life immune to the psychic and material disfigurement wreaked by history, a disfigurement that remains ever-present.

Looking at Matloga's latest paintings, I was struck by their canny nous, their nowness. They were playful, light, embracing. Rereading the essay I'd written in 2016, I stopped and held my breath as I came upon the following words from *Divisadero* (2007) by the Dutch-Tamil Canadian novelist and poet, Michael Ondaatje: 'Everything is collage, even genetics. There is the hidden presence of others in us, even those we have known briefly. We contain them for the rest of our lives, at every border that we cross.'[13] Then, as now, it is human intimacy which I find strikingly in evidence in Matloga's paintings. For Ondaatje, and justly so, collage is not a pasted overlay of interactive but discordant elements, a mishmash of this and that. It is 'genetic'. Collage is not the sum of remaindered traces. It is the breeding and breathing ground where life converges, parts and regroups. Everything connects, reflects upon the other. History only ever exists in the present. It is the 'hidden presence of others' that informs our being – our intimacies and our temptations.

Matloga's interest in 'intimacy' and 'temptation' reveals the nature of the engagements and scenes he constructs. As I have noted, they are rich with portent and suggestion. Matloga does not produce a scene as frieze or tableau, but generates lived and living conditions. His art is a condition for life. While he claims 'painting' as his metier, it is how he uses photographic fragments – torn, sutured, placed together in ill-aligned consorts – which is most striking. The technique is not uniquely his own, but its application surely is. Despite appearances, Matloga's faces are not aggregations of discrete and relatively autonomous elements, bits and pieces from here and there – an eye, a mouth, the slope of a chin or ear – but a testimony to life as a congregation of differences which allow us to reconceive a person's univocity.

Matloga's world vision is not fragmented; it is the sum of fragments. It is not the join that matters (everything is broken, everything must be joined) but the union that splicing affords. What makes us whole are the many parts that make us up. We are also one because of others. We are not defined because of the distance that separates one from another, we are defined because we embrace. All gestures, whether inclusive or distanced, suppose connection. We are never removed, one from another. The stitching of fragments may seem violent, rough, deliberately unconcerned with any smooth mesh, but in Matloga's case, its affect refuses incongruity. If his faces and bodies are paramount it is not because he refuses Black life as a pathological aggregate, or

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because he wills its enabling unity, but, in spite of negation and affirmation, because he chooses to show us its enduring self-love and the importance of community in maintaining and engendering this love.

'Men must endure their going hence, even as their coming hither; Ripeness is all.'[14] Shakespeare's famous line finds its echo in Ondaatje's assertion that all life exists at a border crossing. Life may come and go, our lives lived in passing, but nothing survives or is sustained without connection. In 2017, Matloga remarked that he is accused of being 'nostalgic' – of holding fast to a utopian vision of Black life that was blind to persistent, often brutal inequity. 'This affection for the past has increased over the years,' he said. 'My age group are constantly accused of not knowing where we come from, but on a real note, the spirits and the ghosts of the past still live in us. In a way, the historical and political context has become an everyday psychological experience for me.'[15] Genetic, psychological, socio-political and cultural, Matloga's 'everyday' is also a world of spirits and ghosts. Everything occurs in the present. There is no past tense.

In 2016, I noted the immense influence of Sophiatown on Matloga's youthful imagination. At the time, it was clear that he was deeply inspired by the cultural force of that township in the 1950s and 60s – the time of writers such as Lewis Nkosi, Can Themba, Bloke Modisane, Nat Nakasa, Todd Matshikiza, Henry Nxumalo and Es'kia Mphahlele, and photographers such as Peter Magubane and Bob Gosani. At the hub of this cultural force was *Drum* magazine, the apogee of sartorial style and urban cool. But what matters is not only Matloga's nostalgic love for what remains one of South Africa's most potent creative periods – our Harlem Renaissance – but also the struggle which underpinned it. For Matloga, the two are indistinguishable. Together they are our root, because struggle – centred on 'identity, relationships, cultural dislocation, racial conflict' – 'still resonates today in the quest for a post-apartheid South Africa'.[16]

As Matloga bracingly reminded us, ours is a 'not-always-so-after-aftermath'.[17] The sting is forked. Historical ills persist, but he also reminds us of parallel worlds of pleasure, warmth, dignity. 'People do not stop living their lives.' Then as now, what distinguishes his approach is the desire to override paradox – the parasitic interface of illness and health. He may recognise the persistence of freedom and entrapment, bigotry and compassion (who cannot?) but as I observed then and maintain today, Matloga's remains the pursuit of a greater and more inclusive life. If Sophiatown – as a culture, a way of living – remains an enduring trope, it must be understood as part and parcel of a greater metropolitan, continental and diasporic vision.

Achille Mbembe's concept of 'Afropolitanism' articulates this vision for us. It refers to 'an aesthetic and a particular poetic of the world, refusing on principle any form of victim identity – which does not mean that it is not aware of the injustice and violence inflicted on the continent and its people by the law of the world'.[18] It is as a 'principle' or credo that Afropolitanism distinguishes Matloga's art. Its presence was nascent in the pan-African vision enshrined by the creatives of Sophiatown, which assumed centre-stage in the figure of Sam Nhlengethwa (collagist, jazz fundi, historian of cool) who has doubtless inspired Matloga. If Mbembe and Nhlengethwa are vital, it is because both choose to foreground that which is engendering. As Mbembe notes:

> Our way of belonging to the world, of being in the world and inhabiting it, has always been marked by, if not cultural mixing, then at least the interweaving of worlds, in a slow and sometimes incoherent dance with forms and signs which we have not been able to choose freely, but which we have succeeded, as best we can, in domesticating and putting at our disposal.[19]

It is this greater sense of belonging which Matloga's vision communicates. For him, however, there is no longer any hesitance. His multi-media works display an effortless 'cultural mixing'. Today, Matloga seems unconcerned with maintaining paradox. One senses no lack of freedom, no compromise. His new paintings display none of the equivocation evident in the jarring phrase, 'not-always-so-after-aftermath'. They are not the fallout of a difficulty or a syncretic attempt at reconciliation, but expressions that are disarmingly and seductively effortless. Matloga has claimed his world. His paintings may emerge in fragments, in bits and pieces pulled together, but their allure lies in their join. The pleasure derived from knitting together fragments is ancient. Beauty lies not in the broken pieces (say, of a broken clay pot) but in the soldering of the cracks, the re-composition of the broken pieces that make up a life.

As Ondaatje reminds us, we all carry 'the hidden presence of others'. In what are surely Matloga's greatest paintings to date, it is this joining of lives, this connection between people, that is conveyed with a blithely astonishing ease. I cannot think of a more compelling response to human difficulty at this moment in time. His scenes and stories – a couple on a bed, a gathering in a lounge, on a porch, his visions of 'people dancing, eating, kissing, having a conversation' – are masterful reconstructions of the small and utterly profound pleasures that a homespun life affords. They carry our past, intuit our future, but most of all they encapsulate our bounteous present. It is not 'Black love' that is their sole purview, though this is emphatically the case. It is not the normalcy of Black love which he feels compelled, against the odds, to impress upon us. Nothing counterintuitive spurs their making. Neither regret nor hope impels them. 'I'm grasping the concept of life,' Matloga says. 'I'm trying to represent these people, these characters … in all forms of humanity.'[20] As the artist utters these words his arms lift upward, his face glows, and one shares the sincerity of his enthusiasm. We are all contained and embraced in that moment. Everything is genetic.

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