

**THE ART OF LO-FI, HI-DEF  
ROBIN RHODE INTERVIEWED BY JAMES SEY**

**JS: It's more than a decade since you've exhibited in South Africa. How would you contextualise your own work now, after this long break?**

RR: For me, South Africa is fascinating in its openness to things, its attitude towards materials and spaces especially. I'm especially interested now, and think this has a lot to do with a particular South African aesthetic, in the lessons of African-American artist David Hammons, whose own work is street-smart, and blurs the lines between private and public spaces. I've always, like Hammons, used everyday materials and spaces, encoding them into an aesthetic experience, and not been too concerned with institutionalising art, whether in galleries or through identity politics. I'm also very taken with the ideas of the Arte Povera movement in Italy in the late 1960s, for the way they valued the everyday also, and returned to simple, powerful visual messages. South Africa has a great attitude to materials in this way, it's not so institutionalised.

**Your combination of performance, lens-based media, street art and attitude has brought you exposure in major European and US galleries, including the Hayward Gallery in London, and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Tell us a bit about how you're received in the world.**

It varies quite a bit. My work is well-received in the UK, partly because of a larger, more prevalent black community of

art lovers. It's also good in Italy, but perhaps more because of a conceptual understanding in the market there. In France, there's more of an affinity with the performative and comedic elements in my work. There's a lot of street art, buskers and live elements to art there, so that goes well in France. In fact, the Centre Georges Pompidou has just acquired what I call a 'lo-fi, hi-def' piece documenting me drawing a charcoal mic on a wall and interacting with it. It's called *Microphone*. So there's a diverse relation to my work, and different kinds of appeal, with markets in Europe, but in the US it's much more about the black experience. I'm involved with the Studio Museum in Harlem in New York, where I've started a record label out of the bookshop. We distribute through the museum, all limited edition vinyl, and I design the covers. So that's great to get involved in other artistic avenues, like design and music.

***Paries Pictus* is your first show in South Africa in 12 years. Why now?**

A lot of it has to do with wall drawings! I've been much more involved with them lately, partly after seeing an amazing show of wall drawings by Sol Le Witt at the Walker Art Center. And I've felt that there was a huge potential in South Africa for wall drawing. The lineage here, the ancient history of Khoisan cave paintings, has always been important to me. There's something about the drawing of their belief systems and rituals, their experiences and aspirations, which resonates with me. And bringing that feeling up to

date, there's our political past of protest murals, rather than graffiti, the mural art in the townships that was more about social upliftment than tagging - I was always drawn to that. Messages like 'Stay away from drugs', 'AIDS kills', 'Down with Apartheid'. Once I took a US curator through Westbury township, and we came across a crudely painted NYC skyline, which had in the foreground a view of the Venice Lagoon - why? Is it an aspiration to escape? A fantasy? It was so poignant.

***Paries Pictus* - Latin for, roughly, wall drawing - includes a site-specific intervention of drawings in collaboration with Cape Town children from disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Could you say some more about the wall drawing concept in this show?**

I'm attempting to develop the idea of wall painting under the *Paries Pictus* banner, so that the potential of wall paintings can be used by ordinary people, can be better understood. I've taken this into a fine art context though - there are Bauhaus graphics in the template for colouring in, and there are other considered design principles, such as graphics on the evolution of urbanism, from mud huts to the megalopolis, on one side of the wall in the gallery. On the other side are simple shapes forming a boat or yacht, a set of dumbbells, a flower, etc, where the emphasis is on geometry, shape recognition and change. Other parts of the *Paries Pictus* space are devoted to drawing activity, for example, where a stencil of five 'colonial-era' ships

goes across the wall, and the kids draw waves under them. Bringing wall art into the gallery is about planting a seed in these young people, which is unusual in South African art, especially for young, disenfranchised kids. It's about turning the gallery into a large colouring book.

**The wall painting approach raises the issue of the relationship of your work to street art generally, which has been experiencing a bit of a vogue, what with Banksy, Shepard Fairey and others going global. How do you perceive the relationship, if there is one?**

There's a much greater focus now on street art, and on its commercial value. When I showed at White Cube in London in 2011 there were street art blogs covering the show. So it's big now. I think it's a healthy thing that my work really just touches on but runs parallel to street art. Many street works and techniques have now evolved into abstraction, but this doesn't necessarily imply that they're moving into a gallery or fine art context. My work in turn is more about an aesthetic evolution, about redefining the real. I have a creative need to push an idea of painting or a conceptual idea out of the gallery and into the street. The legitimacy of street art is about bravery in making a statement and risking injury and arrest, as much as about the image itself. I don't want to be embroiled in the tired notion that being an artist in a gallery context, but who works with concepts and materials close to street art, means that I somehow appropriate that work or that idea. I therefore don't see

myself as a street artist, but as a contemporary artist who has roots in the street, and as one who adopts the mentality of the street. I always saw myself as being in the white cube of the gallery, and always saw myself as a conceptual artist that incorporates street materials. My work is in fact not on the street, but on a metaphorical roll of film, the one I use to document the drawing, performance, whatever it is.

**You're also showing a range of photo-based series - can you tell us a bit more about these?**

The choice of works for this show is all about their relevance to South Africa. One of my spiritual mentors is poet and activist Don Mattera, and a few of the works are inspired by him. *Blackness Blooms*, for example, with the giant comb and the drawing which blooms into a huge afro that is also about the blooming of black identity and consciousness, is inspired by lines from his work. It's also of course a reference to the 'comb test' of blackness during the apartheid era, those strange markers of racial identity that we obsessed about at that time.

*Twilight* and *Vultures* are companion pieces, also partly inspired by Mattera. *Twilight* references his metaphor of coloured people existing in a twilight zone, between black and white, night and day, indeterminate in terms of racial classification and apartheid politics both physically and psychologically. The feather in the piece acts as a kind of barometer or timepiece, moving from dawn to daylight to evening. The purple hoodie the character in the piece wears

is referencing thug life, but also has spiritual undertones – a kind of priestliness or monasticism. *Vultures* was the name of Mattera's gang in Sophiatown. The metaphor is of the bird that feeds on scraps, but is only there when death is around. The actual bird is replaced by an Okapi knife, used by the gangs as a weapon of choice. In the piece, the knife appears closed, perching on the tree branch. As the character approaches, the knife opens, and confronts the character as his shadow.

The series called *Bird on Wires* is inspired by the serial 'chronophotography' of the 19th-century scientist EJ Marey. He made very influential studies of animals and humans in motion, including many of birds in flight, which influenced the development of early cinema. The wires are also meant to recall the strings of a guitar.

*The Point of Vanishing* offers an ironic take on imagining the perspectival view of inhabitants of the land when the colonists first landed in their ships off the Cape of Good Hope. Imagine a bushman cave or rock painting of such a ship ... the piece plays with the idea of such a representation, and the character is dressed as a sailor, of course.

*A Spanner in the Works of Infinity* links the wall drawing of the car at the entrance to the gallery with the tool that fixes it. Also the wheel spanner denotes an 'X', such as the one marking treasure or put down when casting a vote. When the character in the series throws the spanner into sky, it spirals, into the wall, creating the illusion of another dimension. Structurally, this piece has quite a formal compositional style, based on the Fibonacci mathematical grid.

In the piece called *Bones* I'm relating the history of the game of dominoes to the human body. All 28 domino pieces are used, and the title puns on both the skeleton and the slang name for domino pieces. The character in the series has a relation to each piece as part of the choreography. It's a very large work, 9.5 x 2.45m, and both numerically and visually very interesting, for example with the double blank and double six. The game also unfolds as part of the viewer's experience.

The last two works, *A Day in May* and *Carry-on*, are perhaps the most personal in terms of my feelings for South Africa. *A Day in May* is inspired by Worker's Day. The digital animation shows the figure carrying a black flag, the symbol of anarchism and opposition. But as he protests, he is held back by clothes pegs, so it's domesticity that puts a stop to his revolutionary fervour, and hangs him out to dry. It's about coming back to a sense of self, and a sense of home. *Carry-on* is a pun on carry-on luggage, which in this case is a graphic outline of South Africa, tethered by ropes to the character, his sense of home that he carries with him, but struggles to deal with. It begins to repeat itself, and to fragment, so that although he is pulled by the South Africa symbol, by the end of the work it's undefined.

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