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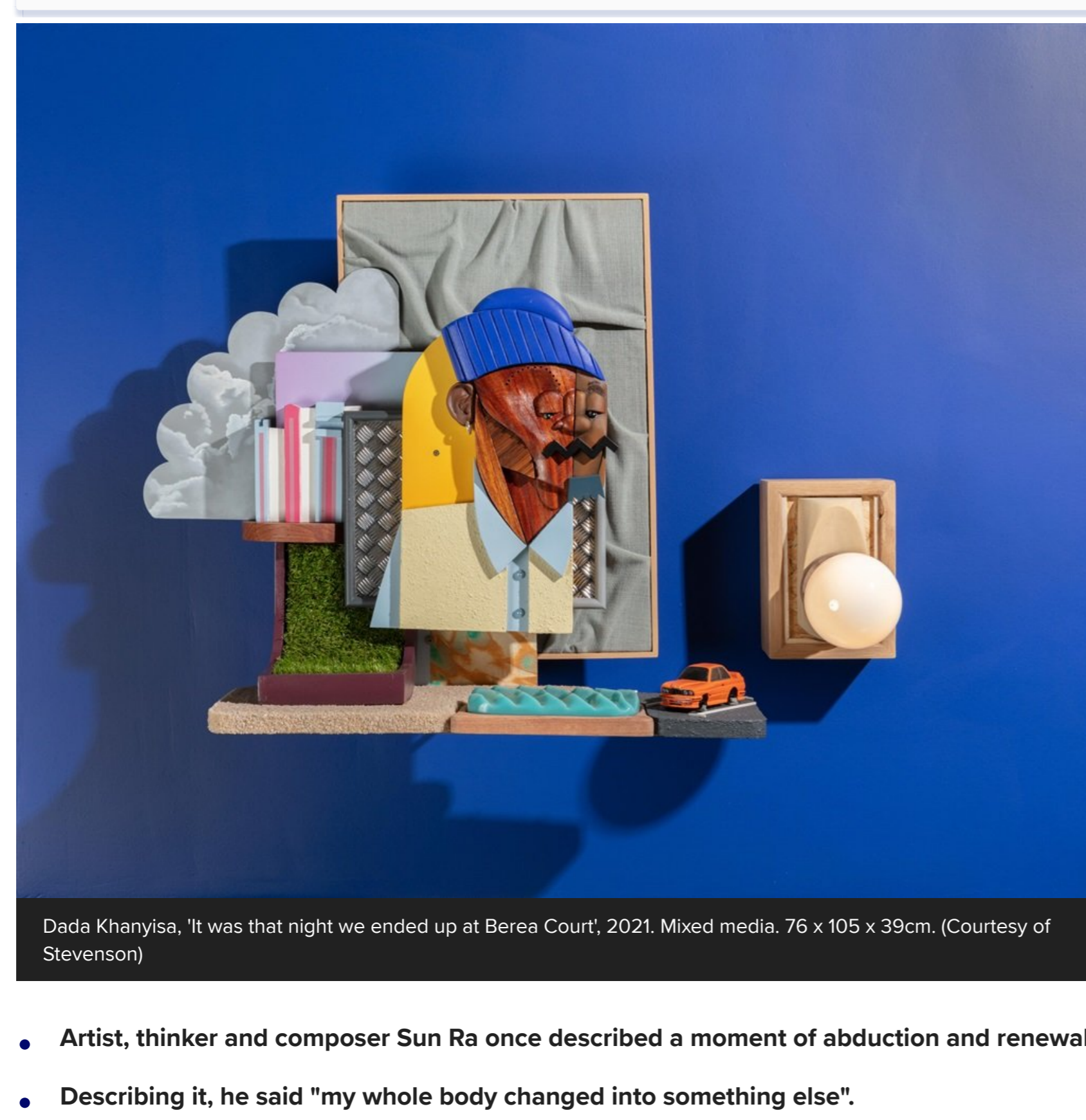
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'my whole body changed into something else' is more an inquiry than an exhibition

arts24 Kim M Reynolds

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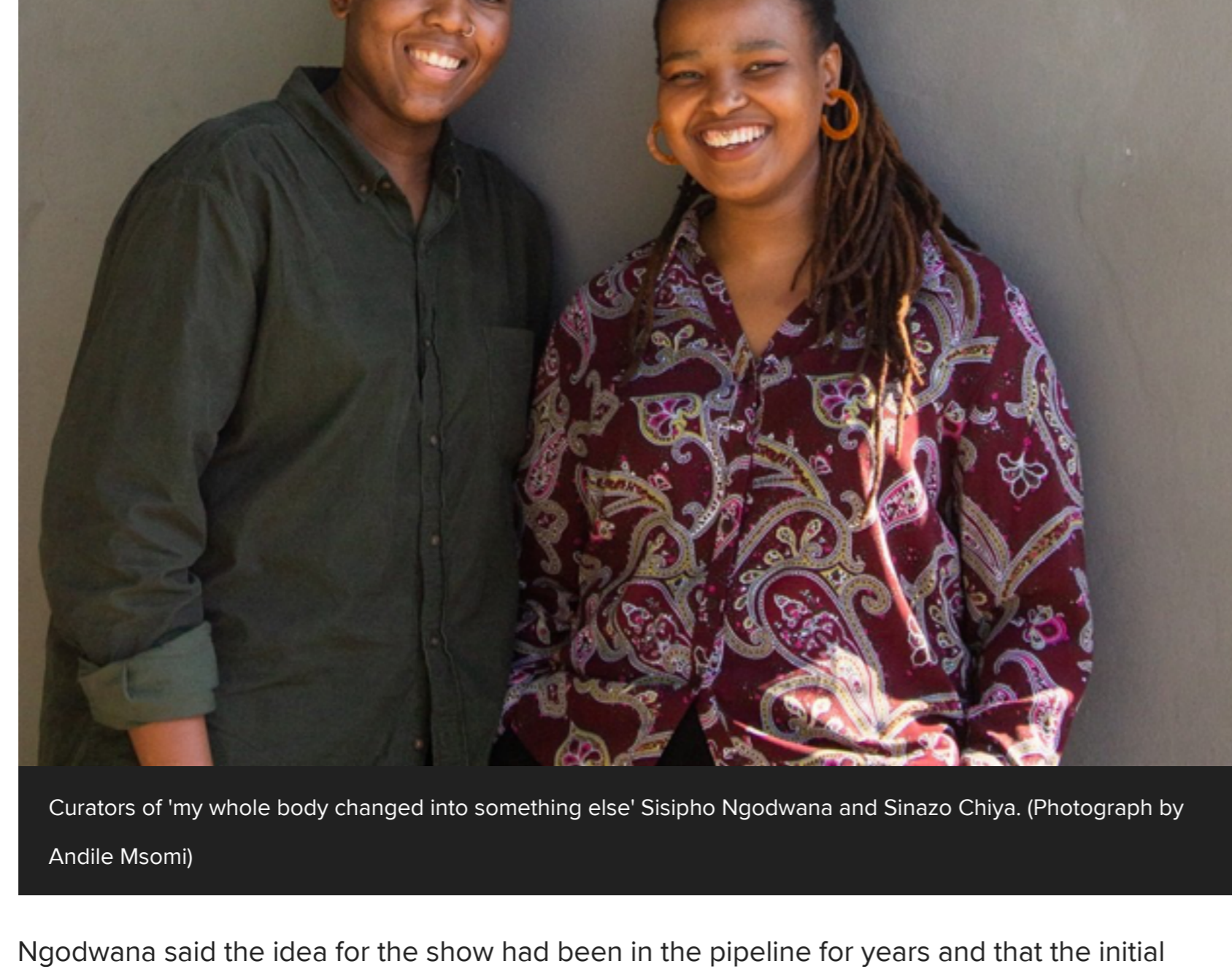
Dada Khanyisa, 'It was that night we ended up at Berea Court', 2021. Mixed media, 76 x 105 x 39cm. (Courtesy of Stevenson)

- Artist, thinker and composer Sun Ra once described a moment of abduction and renewal. Describing it, he said "my whole body changed into something else". Comprising 34 works, the exhibition is an inquiry into individual and collective notions on existence and transcendence.

Stevenson Gallery's latest exhibition that takes imaginative direction from Sun Ra is more an inquiry than an exhibition. 'my whole body changed into something else' is curated by Sisipho Ngodwana and Sinazo Chiya, whose aim is to stage a place where questions about being, belonging and embodiment can be proposed, interrogated, watched and reflected back.

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The two curators emphasised that the show functions more as an inquiry than an exhibition because the conversation these artists are having with one another does not attempt to get to the bottom of any one great question, because sometimes there is no bottom.



Curators of 'my whole body changed into something else' Sisipho Ngodwana and Sinazo Chiya. (Photograph by Andile Msomi)

Ngodwana said the idea for the show had been in the pipeline for years and that the initial concept for a group show of this nature was centred on interrogating the role money and capitalism played in our lives regarding meaning-making. However, during 2020 and South Africa's lockdown, Sisipho landed upon Sun Ra's music. His practice of building worlds and creations (primarily for black people) that were more tenable than the current iteration Earth, which is marred by the atrocities of slavery and colonialism, was able to add additional layers of meaning that were lyrical and spiritual. Chiya's onboarding to co-curate the show and bring it to fruition this year also added a layer of interpretation and familiarity.

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With this in mind, 'my whole body turned into something else' is a broad meditation on translation, where each artist's work is fashioning a human experience into something else.



Going Home, 2021. Art by Frida Orupabo. (Photograph by Andile Msomi)

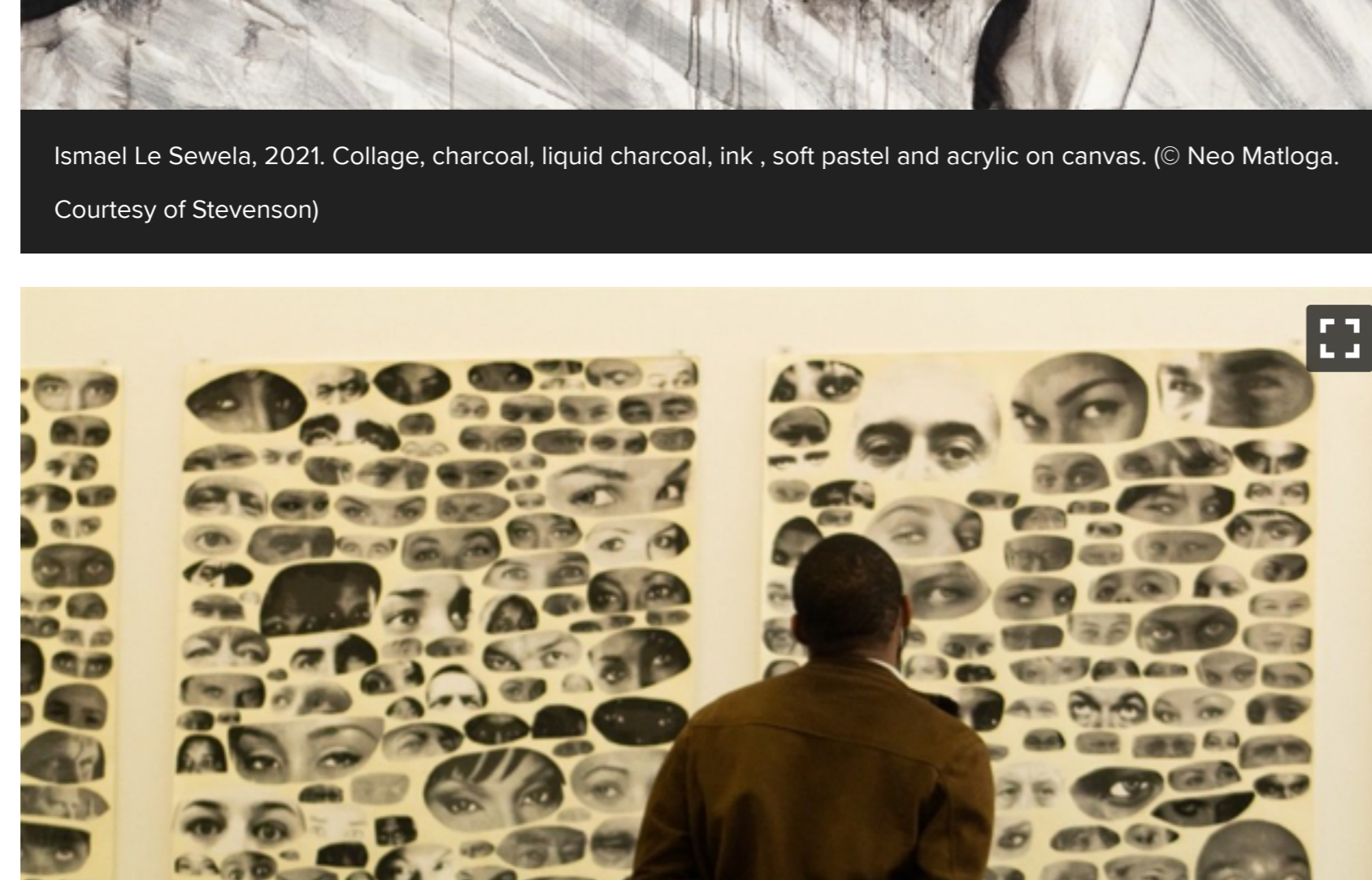
The show comprises 34 artists from several corners of the world, including South Africa, Brazil, Iran, United Arab Emirates, Nigeria and the United States, to name a few. It is on view at the Stevenson galleries in Johannesburg and Cape Town as well as virtually via Stevenson's online gallery room.

The mediums range from installations (Paulo Nazareth's large-scale work MAZE), to paintings (Ben Enwonwu, Dancing Girls Yoruba), to collage (Neo Matloga, Bare Goo Ntswaneli; Ismael Le Sewela or Frida Orupabo, Going Home), to video and film (Rahima Gamba, Instruments of Air, or Aziz Hazara, Eyes in the Sky) to text and tracing (Wura-Natasha Ogunji, Foster, and Simnikwe Buhlungu, There Are No Complete Knowledges; There Are No; The Cose of the Agricultural Hyperpolyglot) to portraiture (Ajamu X and Pieter Hugo)

The time frame of creation ranges from 1950 to 2021. Some of the works were newly completed and installed for the show, while others were existing works the curators have had a longer-term relationship with.



Ismael Le Sewela, 2021. Collage, charcoal, liquid charcoal, ink, soft pastel and acrylic on canvas. (© Neo Matloga. Courtesy of Stevenson)



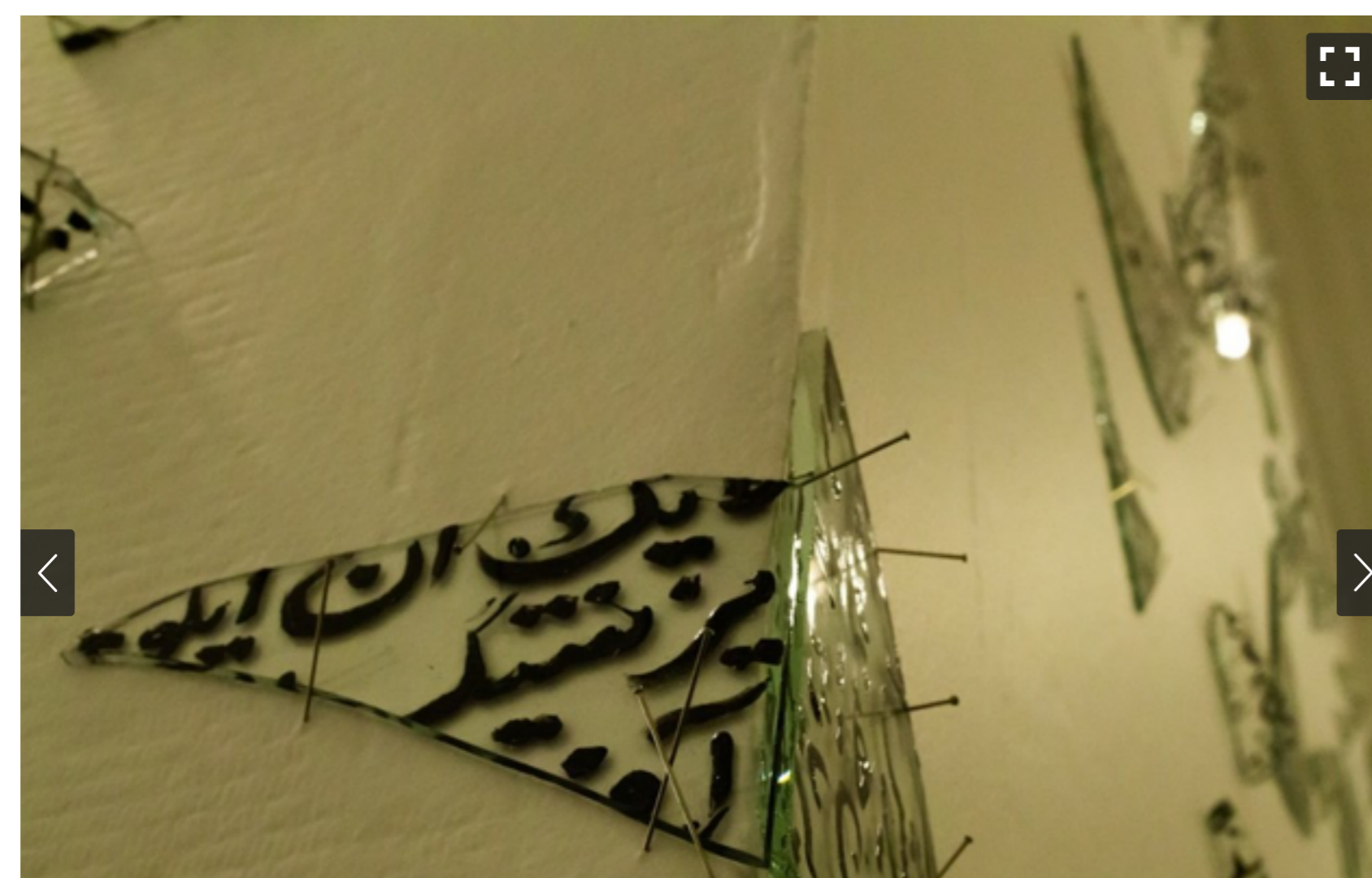
Onlooker contemplating Moshekwa Langa's work, Untitled (1-3), 2004. Mixed media on paper 140 x 100cm. (Photography by Andile Msomi)

Generosity and intimacy seem to be key curatorial guiding elements that allow the different works to speak to one another, to have conversations. At the Cape Town gallery, for example, the first room you enter is full of eyes. In the centre of the first room and against the back wall is the work of Moshkwa Langa, a South African artist, originally from Limpopo, based in Amsterdam. The floor installation, titled Mogalakwena (2013), is a collection of stacks of books, toys, rugby and footballs, underneath a base of vinyl records all tied together loosely by string and lights, while the adjacent wall is adorned by Untitled (2004), which is four columns of collages of eyes. Langa's work speaks to the notion of memory and how intimacy can shape-shift. This work then complements the surrounding walls and the work on them, which are select photographs from Léonard Pongo's series The Uncanny. The Uncanny series captures ordinary moments in the DRC, where some are treacherous, some are joyful, none are in perfect focus, and all are incredibly familiar.



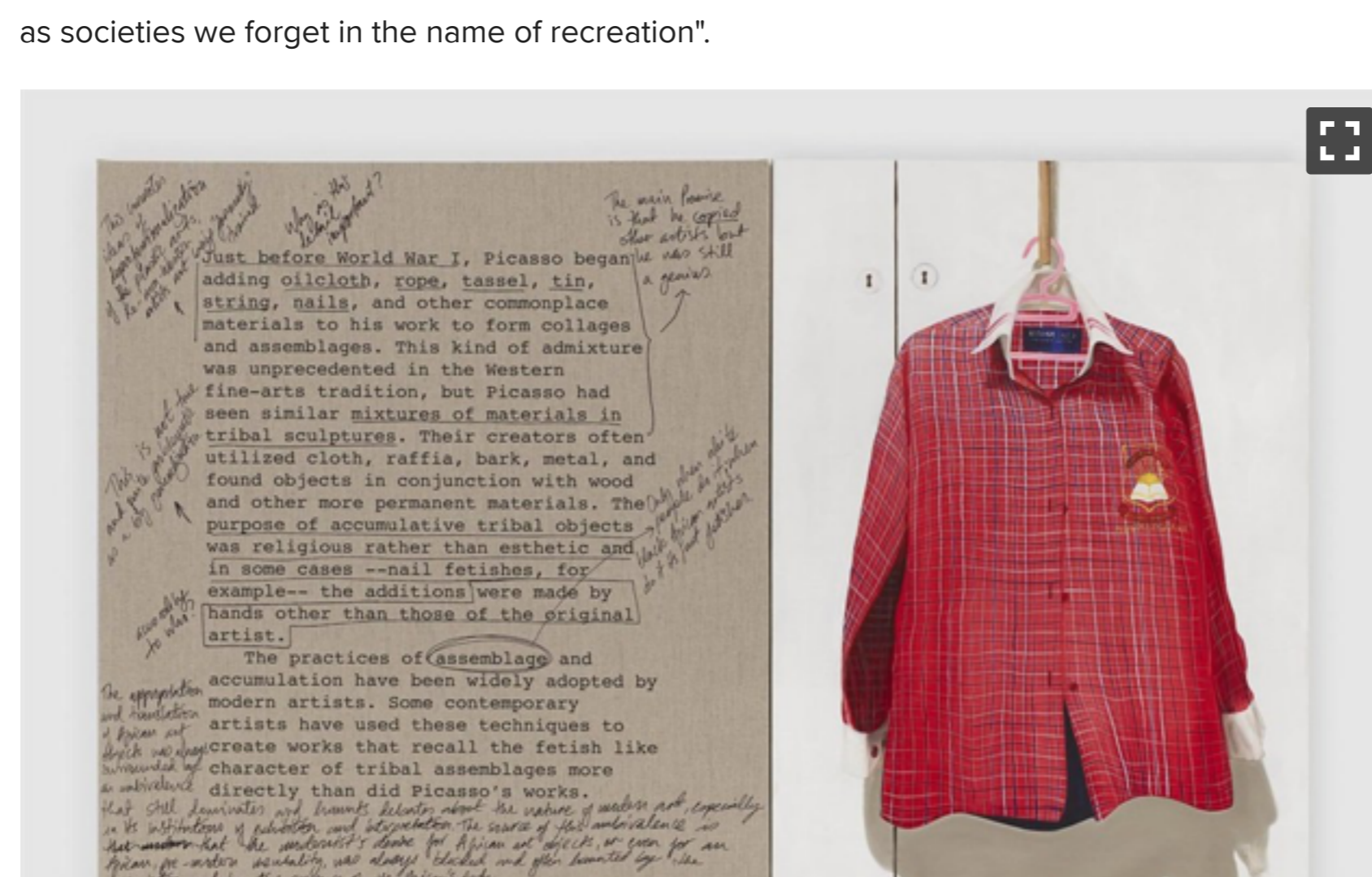
Untitled, 2019. Archival ink on Baryta paper 40 x 60cm, Edition 3 of 7. (© Léonard Pongo. Courtesy of Stevenson)

The collection of works in the show is underpinned by a notion that the personal is political, and that there are overlaps across borders, nations and language. Ngodwana said one of her favourite overlaps among the works is that of Kamyar Bineshtarigh and Moshkwa Langa, wherefrom her office view Bineshtarigh's shards of glass are foregrounded by Moshkwa's eyes. And this emphasises the "the tension between something so potentially dangerous and then these fragile body parts, so I'm constantly aware of the fact that you're surrounded by so much fragility and so much potential for violence".



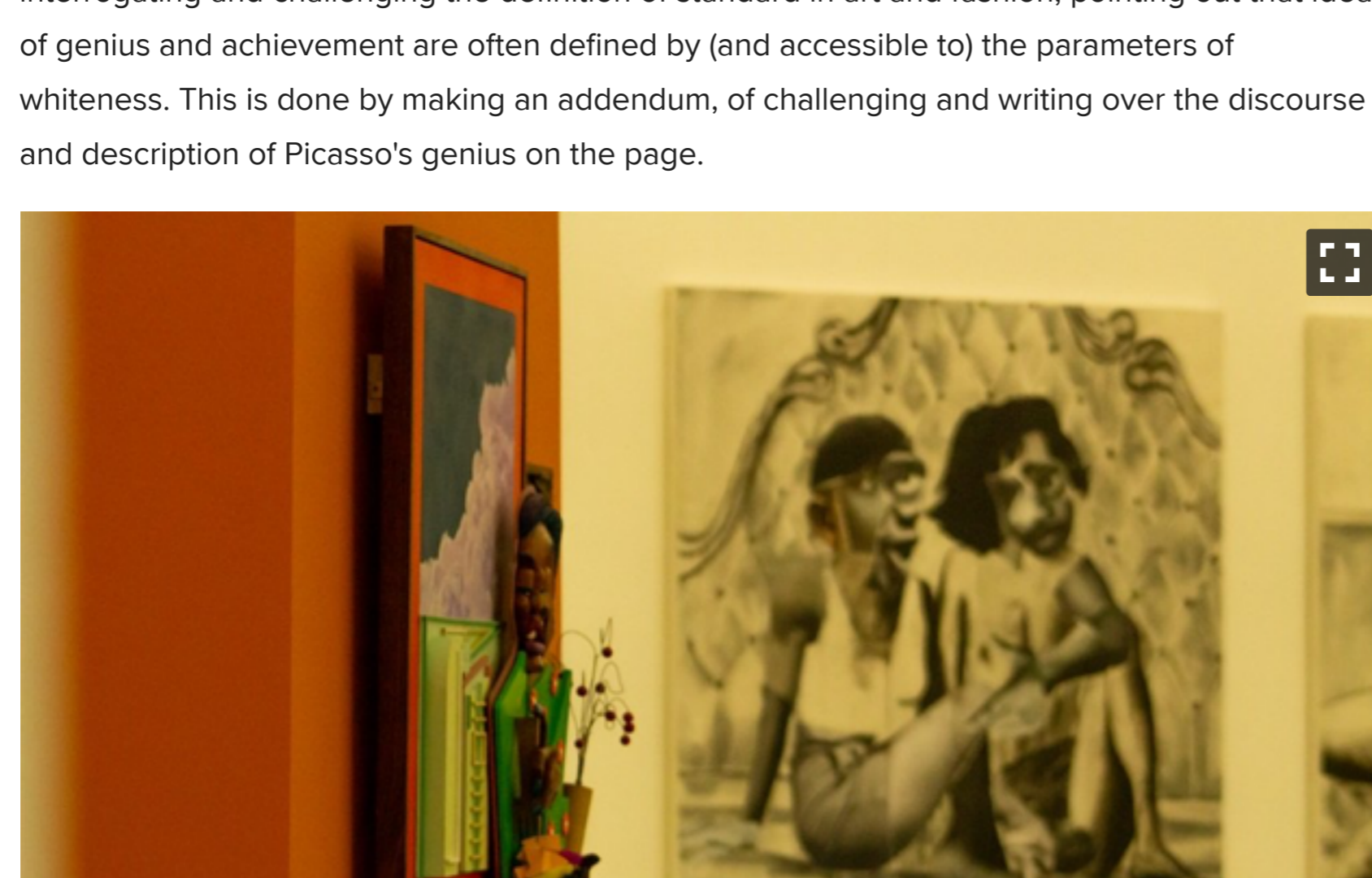
Close up of An Exhaustive Catalogue of Texts Dealing with the Orient. Work by Kamyar Bineshtarigh. (Photograph by Andile Msomi)

Chiya said Erkan Özgen's two films that play in the same room were a political statement for her. Wonderland (2016) is a single-channel video that films a 13-year-old Mohammed, who is deaf and mute, as he uses gestures and his body to tell his story about his family during war in Syria. Juxtaposed to this film is The Memory of Time (2018), which, from multiple angles, displays a cannon on the Finnish island of Suomenlinna and captures how tourists memorialise engagement with it. The two films demonstrate the pitfalls of memorialisation, where the playfulness of atrocity, specifically those that are related to anti-black violence, often de-antagonise the history as well as attempts to bookend its effects. Chiya poignantly noted that these films "show history as societies we forget in the name of recreation".



Objects of Desire, Addendum 9, 2019. Inkjet and permanent marker on linen, oil and photo transfer on canvas. (© Meleko Mokgosi. Courtesy of Stevenson)

Similarly, Meleko Mokgosi's work Objects of Desire, Addendum 9 critiques revisionist history by interrogating and challenging the definition of standard in art and fashion, pointing out that ideas of genius and achievement are often defined by (and accessible to) the parameters of whiteness. This is done by making an addendum, of challenging and writing over the discourse and description of Picasso's genius on the page.



Gallery view of Dada Khanyisa's 'Not Particularly Looking For Someone, I Just Go On Dates For New Conversations' and Neo Matloga's 'Bare Goo Ntswaneli'. (Photograph by Andile Msomi)

Other major thematic elements of the show are playfulness and colouring in the every day with wit, pleasure and collage. The large-scale size of Dada Khanyisa, Neo Matloga and Frida Orupabo's work all 2021 collage and texture to bring in a brilliance to the ordinary, and decorate the interiority of life with wonder, levity and fun. Ajamu X's four-piece photo selection centres the importance of queer eroticism and tending to the facets of life often deeply feared and overpoliced.



Seyon Amosu, 2020. Silver gelatin, 35.5 x 30cm, edition 3 of 10. (© Ajamu X. Courtesy of Stevenson)

Lastly, while the show isn't seemingly or overtly responding to Covid-19, both curators have emphasised that nothing about the show is untouched by Covid-19 – from the ability and inability to ship certain works to the country to the interactive meanings of the work.

"So, it is about Covid in some way, but it's also about the rest of the world during this time, because as all of these other things (violence, insecurity, death) haven't really stopped, they're still continuing, and they will continue after," Ngodwana said. Chiya emphasised that "Covid is a symptom of so many other things... it's all interconnected."

my whole body changed into something else is on view at Stevenson galleries until 3 September 2021.

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