In the steps of Jia Baoyu

# Marc Barben joins Hylton Nel on a trip to China

Artist-potter Hylton Nel began reading The Story of the Stone, the 18th-century novel by Cao Xueqin, when he was an antique dealer living in Kent in the early 1970s and the first volume had just been translated by David Hawkes. Every five years or so another volume was published, and it took him 20-odd years to read the full story. For his recent trip to China he took it along to start again from the beginning.

Described to me one evening in Beijing, the narrative begins when the edifices of heaven become dilapidated. Such heavenly things, of course, can only be mended with jade. A surplus block falls to earth and a Taoist monk comes upon it; realising its divine origin, he engravés the novel’s story on its surface. Its protagonist, Jia Baoyu, is born with this jade in his mouth, his tale inscribed on the stone.

Shortly after leaving his home in Calitzdorp for this trip, Nel mentioned that he was taking along his ‘bearded old man’, a jade pendant he believes is from the Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD). It’s abraded on the side; people would prescribe medicine from powdered jade, and so an ancient object is more potent than a new thing. The fish pendant around his neck he’s worn for many years; he believes it is 10th century and bestows abundance. He also carried an amulet in his pocket, remarking that ‘it feels quite nice in the hand’.

 Asked for a reason for this visit when applying for his visa, Nel’s answer was simply ‘TO ENJOY CHINESE CULTURE’. As experienced, his journey was a multidimensional spiritual pilgrimage, not least to imbue his stones with some of their homeland’s energy. It was to retrace the steps of Jia Baoyu, to better understand his character, comparing notes with fellow readers along the way. To see Mr Zhang, his antique dealer in Beijing, and collect some treasures to take home. To hear the chorus of cicadas surging across Shanghai, and behold the sight of lotus upon lotus in full bloom.

Most of all, Nel was there to exercise his life-long passion for Chinese ceramics, high and low, imperial and peasant. For Nel the shapes and glazes, images and brush marks, act like points in a network of breadth of personal experience and depth of knowledge. In China, a place described by one new friend as an ‘Empire of Things’, Nel was happiest in the antique markets, among a mass of visual and tactile things, which – unlike at the museums – he was able to feel in the hand. Occasionally he’d pull out his ‘old man’ pendant and watch the trader’s expression transform from confusion to veneration.

His favourite purchase? A modern replica of the old man, bought for next to nothing, loosely carved in an opaque white. Now he’s back in the hinterland, and we wait impatiently for the kiln to fire!
Pride in New York

# Muholi and artist-friends of Stevenson queer the Guggenheim

We take joy in seeing the artist list for the second part of Implicit Tensions: Mapplethorpe Now at the Guggenheim in New York.

This installment of the institution’s reflection on Robert Mapplethorpe’s legacy features Zanele Muholi, Catherine Opie, Paul Mpagi Sepuya, Glenn Ligon, Rotimi Fani-Kayode and Lyle Ashton Harris, putting the late photographer’s opus in conversation with contemporary practitioners. All but one of these artists have featured in our exhibitions, projects and publications over the years.

While Muholi has been part of the gallery for over a decade – most recently presenting Faces and Phases at our new space in Parktown North – the works of Sepuya, Ligon, Fani-Kayode and Harris have consistently woven through the constellation of our programming.

Sepuya, Ligon and Fani-Kayode recently featured in our 15-year retrospective, Both, and (2018). The previous year Harris exhibited a video installation titled Black Power, and contributed an acrylic-on-Kente-cloth work to A Painting Today. Sepuya’s intimate studio photographs showed as a solo project in 2015 and formed part of Kings County, a focus on artists working in Brooklyn, in 2014. Ligon’s neon installation Untitled (Braise/Blues) showed in Johannesburg and on The Quiet Violence of Dreams in Cape Town in 2016, and his Negro Sanshine paintings featured on What we talk about when we talk about love in 2011.

Fani-Kayode’s work was part of Staged Realities: The studio in African photography in 2004; a solo presentation of black and white photographs showed concurrently with Muholi’s first exhibition at the gallery in 2006, and colour works were shown in 2007.

Though polemical – The New York Times’ Arthur Lubow concludes that Mapplethorpe’s moment has passed – the motivating curatorial impulse and the subsequent conversations reflect a cultural deepening around the politics of desire, identity, embodiment and rage.

The exhibition continues until 5 January 2016.

Activism on the coast

Zanele Muholi’s particular activism can be seen at A4 Arts Foundation as their Ikhono LaseNatali exhibition travels to Cape Town. The show features interpretations of Muholi’s Somnyama Ngonyama series of self-portraits, commissioned from 25 Durban-based artists in order to showcase the city’s creativity. Curated by Bajabulile La Dlamini Sidumzo and Thobeka Bhengu, the exhibition debuted at the KwaZulu-Natal Society of the Arts earlier this year.

In addition to the exhibition, the project entails a wide-reaching exchange with schools in the Western Cape and aims to challenge youths to consider the tenets of inclusivity, creativity and collectivism.

Meanwhile, in Port Louis, Mauritius, the Institute of Contemporary Art Indian Ocean presents Zanele Muholi, a solo exhibition of the photographer’s work, spanning series including the early Only Half the Picture, Beaulahs, Mourning, Faces and Phases and recent Somnyama Ngonyama prints and wallpapers.

As part of the project Muholi delivered a public lecture on LGBTQI+ rights at the Institut Français de Maurice, a gesture towards broadening perspectives in a country where homosexuality is criminalised by law.

New space, new explorations

# Lerato Bereng visits Nandipha Mntambo’s newly built studio in Joburg

LB My first question is: why do you do what you do, right now?
NM Right now I think I do what I do to not go insane. The time I took off to do other things in life was good and necessary but it also helped me understand that I couldn’t live without my work. The fact of being able to feel things and make things has, I think, been highlighted for me.

LB What are you feeling?
NM On a tactile level, the cow hide. I didn’t understand how important, how interesting, how integral to my life it is. There was a period when I thought, ‘okay Nandipha, how many more cow hide sculptures can you make?’ A lot of that was about how I thought people were perceiving the work, and not about the fact that I hadn’t finished my exploration of the material yet.

LB At some point you were quite certain about the boundary of meaning in relation to the reading of your work. How is your new life phase shifting this definition?
NM I think the shift is about accepting the baggage that comes with everything. The baggage that other people, or society, or our lived experience brings to everything.

LB Are there things you are more aware of now that impact your understanding of your work?
NM I’ve always had this utopian view that we’re all the same – and yes, on some level we are but on others we’re not. Having my child Isiuwa – having made a clear decision to have a child who is very, very black – has helped me understand that although I’ve had a particular upbringing that has shaped who I believe I am, some things need to shift. Isiuwa comes from a particular lineage – her father is from a bronze-making nation – and that’s made me think differently about how I got to my material, how I explained away a lot of events that helped me get to the point of working in this material, how I skirted around certain issues, whether blackness or being female. When I was younger I was interested in understanding how to manoeuvre away or around these things and now I’m like, ‘actually there’s no way around or beyond or sideways’, you know?

LB So what’s going to be happening here in your new studio?
NM The first thing is that I need to find a new mould-maker.

LB What’s so funny, and this is a metaphor, is that for the past five years or so, you’ve been talking about ‘breaking the mould’.
NM I’ve been doing it slowly.
Calendrier Sept-Nov

7 Septembre
Join us for the opening of Meleko Mokgosi’s first Joburg solo exhibition, Objects of Desire, Addendum, at Stevenson Johannesburg 10AM – 1PM
TO 25 OCT

11 Septembre
The Way She Looks: A History of Female Gazes in African Portraiture – photographs from the Walther Collection, including Zanele Muholi’s Beaulahs and Miss D’vine – opens at Ryerson Image Centre, Toronto TO 6 DEC

13–15 Septembre
Art Joburg takes place at the Sandton Convention Centre, Johannesburg.
FIND US AT BOOTH #1

13 Septembre
A solo show by Wim Botha opens at Feldbusch Wieser Rudolph, Berlin from 6PM; TO 19 OCT

14 Septembre
Walkabout of Meleko Mokgosi’s Objects of Desire, Addendum at Stevenson Johannesburg with Sinazo Chiya and Dineo Diphofa in conversation INAM

16 Septembre
Last week to see Ernest Mancoba: I Shall Dance in a Different Society at the Centre Pompidou, Paris. Artists including Kemang Wa Lehulere provide contemporary echoes. ENDS 23 SEP

18 Septembre
Stevenson’s Amsterdam office hosts a selection of works from Viviane Sassen’s Hot Mirror, previously seen at the Hepworth Wakefield in Yorkshire 5–8PM; TO 16 OCT

19–21 Septembre
As part of the Festival d’Automne, Steven Cohen performs put your heart under your feet … and walk! at the Centre Pompidou, Paris NIGHTLY at 8.30PM

21 Septembre
Hyton Nel is included in Graphic Pots at Oxford Ceramics Gallery TO 26 OCT

22 Septembre
Last week to see Pieter Hugo’s work in Here We Are Today: A View of the World in Photography 6–Video at the Bucerius Kunst Forum, Hamburg ENDS 29 SEP

23 Septembre
Last week to see Odili Donald Odita’s Negative Space, commissioned for outdoor sculpture exhibition Color Field at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art ENDS 30 SEP

24 Septembre
Heritage Day, South Africa

28 Septembre
Robin Rhode’s survey exhibition Memory is the Weapon – spanning digital animations, photographic series, drawings, sculptural elements and performances – opens at Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg TO 9 FEB

30 Septembre
Last week to see Pieter Hugo’s La Cucaracha at Stevenson Cape Town ENDS 5 OCT

30 Septembre
Last week to see IncarNations: African Art as Philosophy at Bozar, Brussels. Zanele Muholi, Nandipha Mntambo, Edson Chagas, Steven Cohen, Berni Searle, Nicholas Hlobo and Barthélemy Toguo are among the featured artists ENDS 8 OCT

1 Octobre
Last week to see Paulo Nazareth’s first US museum solo, Mele at the ICA Miami ENDS 6 OCT

2–6 Octobre
Stevenson (booth G02) presents work by Paulo Nazareth, Simphiwe Ndzube and Zanele Muholi at Frieze London, Regent’s Park

10 Octobre
Last week to see Odili Donald Odita’s Negative Space, commissioned for outdoor sculpture exhibition Color Field at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art ENDS 30 SEP

10 Octobre
Solo shows by Paulo Nazareth and Simon Gush open at Stevenson Cape Town 6–8PM; TO 23 NOV

14 Octobre
Last week to see Viviane Sassen’s commission for Visible/Invisible at the Palace of Versailles ENDS 20 OCT

19 Octobre
Melek Mokgosi: Bread, Butter, and Power travels to the Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago TO 29 DEC

20 Octobre
Dialogue: Portia Zvahahera with drawings by Gustav Kluit opens at Artspace De 11 Lijnen in Oudenburg, Belgium

22 Octobre
Zanele Muholi accepts the Luce Award for Outstanding Achievement in Humanitarian Photography at Carnegie Hall, New York

24 Octobre
The Lubumbashi Biennale, curated by Sandrine Colard, opens. Portia Zvahahera shows work produced during a residency TO 24 NOV

25 Octobre
Mame-Diara Niang, Zanele Muholi and Viviane Sassen have work on the Montevideo Biennale in a show curated by Alfonso Hug TO 28 FEB

28 Octobre
Last chance to see The Cape Town Triennials: Then and Now at the Rupert Museum, Stellenbosch. Early and recent work by Penny Siopis features ENDS 2 NOV

30 Octobre
A solo show by Kemang Wa Lehulere opens at Stevenson Johannesburg 10AM – 1PM

6–10 Novembre
Stevenson presents a focus on Pieter Hugo, Viviane Sassen and Zanele Muholi at Paris Photo

22 Novembre
Stevenson’s Amsterdam office hosts Jericho, a new photographic series by Robin Rhode, opening during Amsterdam Art Weekend

28–29 Novembre
Steven Cohen performs put your heart under your feet … and walk! at MC93 – Maison de la Culture de Seine-Saint-Denis (Bobigny) as part of the Festival d’Automne, Paris

28 Novembre
A solo show by Moshekwa Langa opens at Stevenson Cape Town 6–8PM; TO 18 JAN

Don’t miss these ongoing shows

→ Until 3 Novembre
Zanele Muholi’s Somnyama Ngonyama/Hail the Dark Lioness is on view at Seattle Art Museum

→ Until 7 Novembre
Ikhono LaseNatali, commissioned by Muholi, shows at A4, Cape Town

→ Until 24 Novembre
Kemang Wa Lehulere and Zanele Muholi are among the artists participating in the 58th Venice Biennale’s main exhibition, May You Live in Interesting Times. Work by Mawande Ka Zenzile is at the South African Pavilion.

→ Until 1 Décembre
Penny Siopis’ Obscure White Messenger shows as part of Media Networks at Tate Modern, London

→ Until 5 Janvier
Zanele Muholi is one of six contemporary photographers in conversation with the work of Robert Mapplethorpe in Implicit Tensions at the Guggenheim, New York

→ Until 15 Mars
Penny Siopis and Zanele Muholi have works on I Am ... Contemporary Women Artists of Africa at the National Museum of African Art – Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC

→ Until Fall 2021
Pan-African Pulp, a commission by Meleko Mokgosi, is on view at the University of Michigan Museum of Art
Ndzube's Raft sets sail

Simphiwe Ndzube takes part in the 15th edition of the Lyon Contemporary Art Biennale, opening on 18 September. Echoing the French city’s specific geography, at the confluence of the rivers Rhône and Saône, the title of the biennale is Là où les eaux se mêlent (‘Where water comes together with other water’), taken from a poem by Raymond Carver. Ndzube contributes a new site-responsive installation titled Uhambho.

Further south, Ndzube's graduate work Raft — in the collection of the South African National Gallery — forms part of the 14th Curitiba International Biennial of Contemporary Art. Of this work Ashraf Jamal has written: 'His raft is not Géricault's Raft of the Medusa bearing the bodies of the dead and the living, though the memory of that devastating Romantic work nevertheless accompanies it. Rather, after Biko, it is the work of a black body that has come back to itself, the work of a life that moves both inward and outward, listing and jostling on its sea-legs, pumping life always into its empty shell.'

Curated by Tereza de Arruda and Adolfo Montejo Navas, with guidance from Ernestine White and Adolfo Montejo Navas, this iteration of the Curitiba biennial is themed Open Borders and runs from 21 September to 1 March.

# Steven Cohen on performing at the Israel Festival in Jerusalem

i can't communicate at all well how contaminating and detoxifying Israel was. it was sort of like being immersed in holy poison and forced to become instantly immune, or die. it really is life and death at every turn. it's joburg, jews and jacarandas, an infinity of hard-core fur-hats in catholic garb drag, guns, police, soldiers, 14-year-old girls armed and quarrellsome ... everything is constructed of the same white stone (buildings, people) poor and disenfranchised sectioned-off invisible palestinians ... from the ruling class I elicited only scowls and glares, some curses ... killer sun.

i saw myself in every form ... fat, thin, young, old, rich, poor, mad, oblivious, sick, manic, zealous ... i swear i saw myself a thousand times, cloned versions of the nose and ears and physiognomy ... what i could have become and might yet well. it was like a 60s french art film noir, that aspect, all psycho and twisted and poignant, and everyone who wasn't me was a jew i knew – there were aunty Brendas, aunty Eppas, aunty Rontzas, Uncle Reubens, Brodies, Essers, Liebmans, Goodmans, versions of the lot of us ... a million ghosts alive and well and i very nearly got shot for ignoring repeated shouted commands to stop and identify myself (in Hebrew) but they saw my naked jewness and they fell silent whenever I joined them. they saw my naked jewness and i never afraid, always and never lost. i did research for an intervention in the future. nothing is possible but i will try it nonetheless. and then a life of limping.

Jerusalem is now a mental place i can never leave, like the abattoir and i am still burning at the future. nothing is possible but i will try it nonetheless. and then a life of limping.

Cohen performs put your heart under your feet ... and walk! at the Centre Pompidou on 19-21 September, and at M39 – Maison de la Culture de Saint-Saint-Denis on 28-29 November, as part of the Festival d'Automne, Paris.
Reading matter
# New additions to our shelves

Pieter Hugo La Cucaracha. Published by Editorial RM, 2019. Book launch at Paris Photo in November

Gabrielle Guy Part 1, 2 and 3. First instalments in an ongoing photo book project, self-published by our designer

From the press

→ Nicole Martinez on Paulo Nazareth’s Melee at the ICA Miami:
‘The Brazilian-born artist’s work is grounded in activism and renowned for its durational, performative nature. In Melee, his first US retrospective, the extent of his Odyssean investigations are on full display. Whether traversing the Underground Railroad in Louisiana; raiding the tombs of disappeared rebels in Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay; or tracing African influence across Kenya, Nigeria, and Mozambique, Nazareth’s is a starkly personal journey to understand the oppressive, exploitative nature of colonial history.’


→ Melvyn Minnaar on Berni Searle’s exhibition as Featured Artist at the National Arts Festival, Makhanda:
‘This year the Monument’s Gallery in the Round hosted a new video work, A Place in the Sun, commissioned by the festival. And in front of the monument the established flag poles fluttered brightly in another of her projects as addendum to her well-known Spirit of ’76 video. To say she had an eye-catching presence is an understatement. As in much of her previous work, the new art is an engagement with the unexplored obvious, land, memory, history and the rituals of the ordinary, anchored in lingering ethical questions. Hers is a finely crafted sense of the theatrical of place and personality.

‘A Place in the Sun is a four-channel video installation, taking as point of departure an abandoned public swimming pool in Maitland near her Cape Town studio in which the scars of its disuse triggers contemplation of what it was and is, and how the future of run-down urbanscapes can be meaningfully imagined. [...] The way in which memory is held in the commonplace, the ordinary, and where and how identity is embedded, have from the start powered her sense of the aesthetic.’