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OPINION / COLUMNISTS

# CHRIS THURMAN: A look at the vulnerability of the human body

The second half of Stevenson gallery's split-site exhibition 'my whole body changed into something else' focuses on the bodily experience

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Neo Matloga, ismael Le Sewela, 2021.

In last week's column I wrote about visiting Stevenson's Johannesburg gallery to see one half of the split-site exhibition *my whole body changed into something else*. Such is my commitment to you, dear reader, that the very next day I climbed into my car and drove 1,400km to Cape Town so that I could bring you this second instalment.

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To be fair, I did have other commitments down south – though one hardly needs multiple reasons to visit the Cape. This time of year especially, it is a welcome escape. Leaving the bone-dry highveld behind, soldiering along the uninspiring stretch of road to Bloemfontein, then completing the rite of passage that is the long and lonely N1 cutting through the stark beauty of the Karoo, like all Joburgers I breathed a sigh of relief as the Hex River valley signalled a shift into a lush and fertile landscape.

There were other signs too: of the exploitative labour system on which our country's agricultural system is built, of the severe wealth-poverty gap that characterises every facet of our economy, of unemployment and desperation. *Et in Arcadia ego ...* even in idyllic landscapes, material suffering looms large if you only look for it. Perhaps I was more keenly attuned to this after encountering works at Stevenson Johannesburg that emphasised the connection between the global food industry and histories of violence and dispossession.



Helen Sebidi, Manhood, 2015 / 2016.

But that is only part of the story of this exhibition, or "inquiry", as co-curators Sisipho Ngodwana and Sinazo Chiya prefer to call it – an appropriate moniker for a collaborative project that balances intellectual rigour with an invitation to imagine oneself into the lives and, indeed, the bodies of others elsewhere.

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While the Johannesburg leg packs ideas and aesthetic possibilities into three relatively small rooms, Stevenson's Cape Town premises are far more capacious. For *my whole body changed into something else*, the gallery's space in Woodstock is filled with works by 23 artists, double the number included in Johannesburg. Set aside plenty of time to see this rich and varied collection.

The title of the show is borrowed from American jazz composer and poet Sun Ra's description of a mystical epiphany, one that entailed temporary freedom from inhabiting his human body. Each of the works displayed could be interpreted in terms of bodily experience: the body abjected, the body exalted; the body broken down into its constituent parts, the body reassembled; the body metamorphosing from human into animal form.

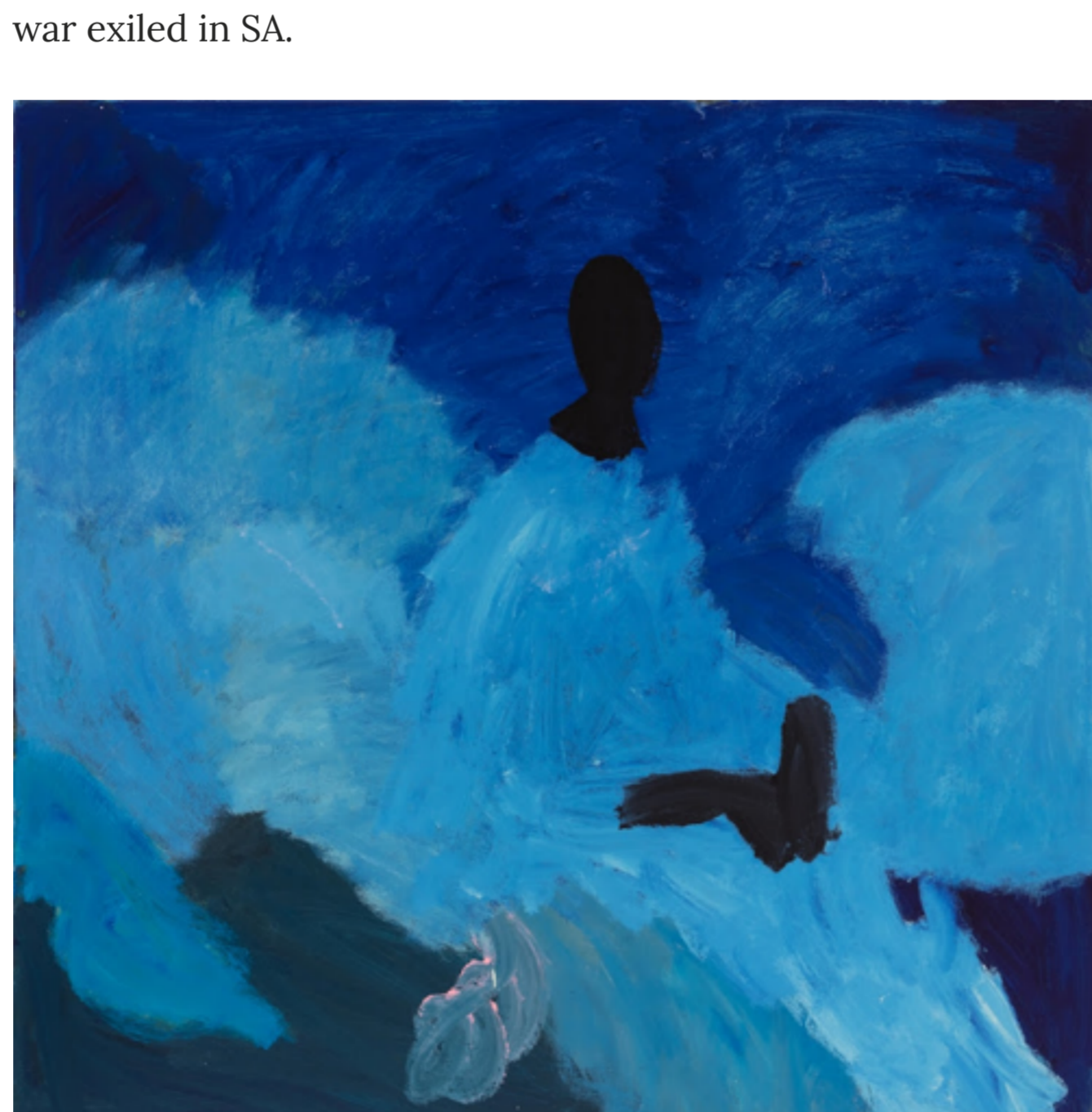
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One intriguing exception is Kamyar Bineshtarigh's exploration of Arabic calligraphy, which deals in the abstraction of language, writing and semiotics. Even here, however, the fading and fragmentation of text gesture towards the embodiment and situatedness of particular people in particular places and times – from Persian poets to Turkish prisoners of war exiled in SA.



Ruth Ige, Sitting Woman, unknown year.

Many of the artists included trouble the human-kiti's binary: in Mmakgabo Helen Sebidi's paintings and Thami Kiti's carved staffs, creatures appear as spirit guides, messengers and guardians. Jane Alexander's troubling installation *Infirmity* includes a variety of hybrid beings that are by turns comical and menacing. A room dedicated to the riotous colour of Penny Siopis's remarkable glue-and-ink canvases also probes the relationship between the human and the non-human.

In Ajamu X's portraits of "black queer lives", respice comes through the body and its capacity for intimacy, love and passion. Neo Matloga's collage of a couple in flagrante delicto, by contrast, draws our attention in cubist fashion to the human animal as an assemblage of body parts. Heads and arms must suffice to suggest the human shape of Ruth Ige's subjects, afloat in hues of blue.

Other subjects are very much bound not only in their human form, but also within the constraints of geography and politics. Short films by Aziz Hazara and Erkan Özgen present children playing make-believe war in battle-scarred Afghanistan or trying to tell a story of forced migration from Syria to Turkey. Özgen places poignant footage of a deaf and mute 13-year-old refugee miming his trauma opposite a video reel of tourists aping around a historical site, posing for photos in front of a cannon.

We've been in these hominid bodies for a few million years, but our species seems incapable of understanding their vulnerability.

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