



Beyond the self in a quest for re-representation

Africa. What Africa? occurs at an auspicious moment as the continent establishes permanent territory within the global dialogue of contemporary art. Es Baluard's commitment to present a platform for artists from Africa and its diaspora is launched in the wake of the opening of the first major contemporary art museum in Africa, Zeitz MOCCA, Sotheby's first standalone sale of modern and contemporary African art in London and international acclaim for the South African Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale following enduring praise for 'All the World's Futures' curated by Nigeria's Okwui Enwezor. Most crucially, young to mid-career artists from the continent such as Peju Alatise, Kiluanji Kia Henda, Dineo Bopape, Zanele Muholi, Nicholas Hlobo, Candice Breitz and Meshac Gaba are claiming international prominence at the heels of heavyweights like El Anatsui, Ibrahim El Salahi, Yinka Shonibare, Wangechi Mutu, Julie Mehretu and William Kentridge.

Yet in spite of this international visibility, artists from Africa remain relative minority voices in the museums and galleries of the "art world" at large. This is owed not only to widespread lack of support and infrastructure for cultural institutions across the continent, but also to the perpetuated notion of African art as a kind of genre of contemporary art, where the geographical origins or the identity of African artists continues to form the curatorial framework of many exhibitions on the global stage. In order to challenge this marginalising tendency, projects such as *Africa. What Africa?* require authentic engagement and new approaches that involve long-term exchanges with artists and curators on the ground to fully explore works of art and the intersectionality of geography, race, gender, sexuality and class within particular artistic practices.

Occupations with historical structures in South African practice, for instance, almost three decades since the end of apartheid, have been replaced with a strong set of micro-narratives. Although not separate from history and the implications thereof, these narratives concern themselves with themes relating to individual and collective identities and the many nuances that arise when these identities are explored.

Artists like Nicholas Hlobo, Haroon Gunn-Salie and Mohau Modisakeng are exploring these themes through a multi-medium approach. From large-scale installations such as *limpundulu Zonke Ziyandilandela* (2011), a monumental hanging sculpture that lines the entrance of the Zeitz MOCCA to his multiple canvas works and performances, Nicholas Hlobo's ability to work across mediums provides him with many opportunities for visually communicating with his audience. Through an exploration of his own Xhosa heritage, Hlobo's use of Xhosa as a language for his titles not only pays tribute to his individual identity but also identifies his work as forming part of a greater collective. Hlobo refers to Xhosa rituals in his exploration of homosexual identity, masculinity and ethnicity, often inserting his own body into his artworks through various performances.

Cross-culturalism is not a unique theme in contemporary South African art. Haroon Gunn-Salie's work also represents the collective through the visual reimaging of community oral histories. Gunn-Salie's work often takes shape outside the confines of gallery walls and rather in site-specific locations that enhance his works realistic "believability". Gunn-Salie's work which often appears to be quite confrontational, presents itself more as an intervention than that of a simple visual representation of identity. Through his marriage between past trauma's and present realities, Gunn-Salie is able to capture the complexities pertaining to South Africa's contemporary existence. Shadowed by colonial structures and apartheid regimes, the audience can come to terms with the lack of transformation



that governs current realities. Identity, in this instance, is the collision of past and present. A narrative that cannot be experienced without considering how the one affects the other.

This assertive approach to creating takes shape through many forms. Zanele Muholi's portrait photography is almost synonymous with her role as an activist. A representative for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Intersexual and Queer (LGBTIQ) communities, Muholi's work aims to create a visual archive of bodies that have been neglected in past narratives. Although Muholi's photographs focus on the individual identities of her participants, the contribution of this visual archive extends past this, especially when her exhibitions travel around the world. Her ability to re-represent identity in a contemporary setting promotes ideals of transformation in a way that is accessible and tangible.

Mohau Modisakeng is another contemporary artist that uses photographic qualities to explore themes of post-colonial identities and the re-representation of self. Although also experienced in performance, installation, sculpture and video, Modisakeng's work subtly engages with notions of violence and the ideology of shared memory. Recently exhibited at the 57th Venice Biennale, Modisakeng's video installation *Passage*, uses the creation of characters to examine the consequences that colonisation has had on black bodies. Using symbolisation and historical references, this work provides viewers with a visual pastiche of identity tensions.

Identity narratives in these instances go far beyond what we see on the surface of each creation. South African art aims to fill in the missing gaps that have warped identity narratives of the past. It is essential that projects showcasing the work of artists from Africa in order to diversify their programmes and collections critically consider the collective, multi-layered approach that artists from this continent have so uniquely embraced to go beyond the self in a quest for re-representation.

- Lucy MacGarry

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Lucy MacGarry Biography

Lucy MacGarry directs a curatorial consultancy and corporate art advisory firm based in Johannesburg. In 2017, she held the position of Curator of The South African Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale. Presenting the work of Candice Breitz + Mohau Modisakeng, the Pavilion (pictured above) has been met with critical acclaim and listed as one of the "must see" pavilions by numerous media amongst others Artsy, The New Yorker, The Guardian, Le Monde, The Art Newspaper, The Telegraph, Architectural Digest and Spiegel. 2017 also saw MacGarry fulfill the position of Deputy Editor to Editor, Ekow Eshun on a publication focused on South Africa's cultural scene. The book is



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From 2014-16 she was Curator of the FNB Joburg Art Fair. Based between Cape Town and Johannesburg from 2009-2014, MacGarry held the position of Curator at Yellowwoods Art where she managed the corporate collections of Spier Wine Estate, Hollard Insurance and Nando's Global. In 2012 she founded her own company L'MAD Collection, which creates limited edition collections to promote local artists and designers. Prior to this, from 2005 - 2009, MacGarry lead long-term creative projects as Gallery Director of David Krut Projects (Johannesburg, Cape Town and New York).

MacGarry holds a Master of Fine Art from the University of Witwatersrand, a Bachelor of Commerce Honours in Business Management from the University of Cape Town (UCT), and a Bachelor of Arts in Cultural, Literary and Visual Studies from UCT.