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Sculpture of Johannes and Collen Maswanganyi

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# Communality of Identity in Post-Apartheid South Africa: The Reception and Consumption of the Sculpture of Johannes and Collen Maswanganyi

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*Abstract: The sculpture of South African Venda artists Johannes Maswanganyi and his son, Collen Maswanganyi, challenges traditional arthistorical boundaries on three levels: art versus craft; art versus design; and art versus decoration. Such contestations on formal, conceptual and political levels became evident when their work was exhibited at Fried Contemporary Art Gallery in Pretoria in October 2005 – the artists' first ever solo exhibition at a 'high-art' gallery. This exhibition entitled The Maswanganyi Family will be investigated in the paper in order to find evidence regarding the character of South African art reception and the possibility of a communal South African identity more than a decade after the initial processes of political and cultural transformations started in South Africa in 1994. Through this case study it will be shown that the reception of the artists' work revealed leftovers of cultural separatist ideologies from before 1994 when South Africa was still under Nationalist regime and thus that arthistorical categorisation and definitions are conditional to the local socio-political context, that is, where, when and how artworks are produced and exhibited. In the attempt to demonstrate that audience often determines the status and meaning of artworks, aspects such as the character and content of the Maswanganyi sculptures; the concept of the exhibition; attendance; recorded comments; and sales will be critically scrutinised. The argumentation will revolve around notions of cultural association with sculptural form; cultural abject in terms of classification; voice; authenticity; and authorship.*

**Keywords:** Communality, Identity, Post-Apartheid, Authenticity, Audience, Reception, Meaning, Transformation

**I**N OCTOBER 2005 members of the Maswanganyi family, the artists Johannes, Collen, Pastor and Ester, exhibited in Pretoria, South Africa, at Fried Contemporary Art Gallery & Studio, a gallery that offers challenging and cutting-edge exhibitions of contemporary art. This exhibition entitled *The Maswanganyi Family*, of which I was the curator, was a double first: it marked the occasion of the artists' first solo exhibition in a gallery and their first-ever exhibition together as a family.

The Maswanganyis are a Shangaan family who originally hail from Giyani in Venda, Limpopo Province, although Collen now lives and works in a RDP<sup>1</sup> town, Kaalfontein, in Midrand between Pretor-

ia and Johannesburg (Figure 1). Since Johannes and Collen have exhibited and sold work locally and internationally and have work in several private and public collections, it seemed long overdue to introduce the artists to the Pretoria public in a more organised and prominent manner. Firmly believing in the merit of the exhibition, the curatorial strategy was firstly aimed at profiling the members of the Maswanganyi family, especially Johannes and Collen, as artistic personalities, and secondly to articulate individual black artists' wood sculpture as legitimate contemporary art since wood carving's legacy in Africa is grounded in craft and tourist work.

<sup>1</sup> "RDP" refers to a town that forms part of the South African Rural Development Programme.





Figure 1: Collen Maswanganyi at Home in Kaalfontein, Midrand, South Africa. Photograph: Elfriede Dreyer

Johannes Maswanganyi and his sons, Collen and Pastor, are engaged in wood carving, whereas Esther, their mother, embroiders nceka cloths and produce ceramic pots. Johannes's *Mozambiquan Mother* (2004) (Figure 2) portrays the floods of 2000 in Mozambique and narrates an incident that caught the attention of the local and international newspa-

pers of a trapped woman who gave birth in a tree and had to be airlifted to safety. Johannes replaced the helicopter with an airplane and included his signature image of the fish. *Paradise* (2005) (Figure 3) similarly entails narrative in the Christian rendering of God in Eden talking to the birds.



Figure 2: Johannes Maswanganyi, *Mozambiquan Mother* (2004). Photograph: Elfriede Dreyer.



Figure 3: Johannes Maswanganyi, *Paradise* (2005). Photograph: Elfriede Dreyer.

Whilst Johannes's work is entrenched in the socio-political histories of Southern Africa, Collen corroborates global impulses and the impact of new technologies on disenfranchised communities. Sculptures of Collen such as *The Modern Mind* (2005) (Figure 4) and *Technology at its Best* (2005) (Figure 5) reveal

the artist's awareness of the postmodern African as a global citizen and the transforming influence of technology on people's lives. In the latter work a black mermaid is engaged in conversation on a cell phone, very subtly suggesting that patterns of thinking in many South African cultural communities

display leftovers of African hegemonies of belief and superstition intermingling with postindustrial strategies of systems thinking and media communication. In a work such as *Board of directors* (2007) (Figure 6), Collen humorously deals with social as-

piration and notorious climbing of the corporate ladder, and relentlessly interprets technology as empowering and as having a positive impact on rural communities.



Figure 4: Collen Maswanganyi, *The Modern Mind* (2005). Photograph: Elfriede Dreyer



Figure 5: Collen Maswanganyi, *Technology at its Best* (2005). Photograph: Elfriede Dreyer



Figure 6: Collen Maswanganyi, *Board of Directors* (2007). Photograph: Elfriede Dreyer

Although the afore-mentioned works are quite naïve in style and content, the members of the family are educated, have travelled and exhibited internationally, are users of new technologies and are informed citizens with regard to art-related institutions, corporations and collections. Yet although sculpturally the above-mentioned works show similarities with other conceptually inclined work such as those by other celebrated Venda artists like Jackson Hlungwani<sup>2</sup>, Noria Mabasa<sup>3</sup> and Phillip Rikhotso<sup>4</sup>, they are formally comparable to wood carvings produced for tourist purposes and advertised namelessly. Wood carving, Africa's oldest technique for producing functional and ritualistic objects, today is still part of a carving cooperative in Venda and many other regions where apprentices learn from and are permanently indebted to master carvers. At these cooperatives where work is produced in relation to consumer demand, there are superior carvers but also role specialisation which results in repetition of certain forms in terms of the materials used, the carving method (mostly a primitive handmade chopper) and the stylised rendering. Yet, although these works mostly remain representative of a region and not of individuals, contentious claims of 'authenticity' for this kind of work are often made by dealers in African art based on its long tradition<sup>5</sup>.

When dealing with wood carving in the contemporary African context, the notion of *namelessness* has become a cardinal point of consideration in determining artistic and human value, although the emotional and psychological role of ethnocultural kinship can never be underestimated. Frank Ledimo, a South African curator and artist who opened *The Maswanganyi Family* exhibition, noted that the work in general and especially Ester's *nceka* cloths, beadwork and pots defied such notion of namelessness and posited the artists individually without devoicing their collective identity.

As artist Collen seems to embrace both the positions of the loyal kindred and the individual artist, an ambivalent position that rejects the modernist notion of a unified, coherent self. This idea is echoed in the writing of Amina Mama (Doy 2000:141) who argues that through the analysis of subjectivity as "positions in discourse", allowance is made for the person to be conceptualised historically as changing over time and in different contexts. It cannot be ar-

gued that a difference between anonymous tourist art and work such as Collen's authored artworks is monetary gain, since the latter artists also market their work vigorously and cleverly. Thus *formally* and *economically* there are similarities between the two kinds of wood carving, but *conceptually* there are major differences.

Sidney Kasfir (1992:49) calls this bifurcation a split between "a precolonial self-contained symmetry and a postcolonial expressionism". According to Gen Doy (2000:85) the so-called 'new internationalism' in African art evident in the progression from ethnic arts to multiculturalism to an engagement with the international is far more about a conceptual avant-garde than a political one. This view is commensurate with the transcultural nature of the practice and scholarship of diasporas of artists who are moving across the globe; it is not a case of the celebration of the ethnic 'Other' who has become empowered, but about the non-static migratory state of being as a human being whose history is continuously unfolding. Considering the transcultural mix of influences and cultural references in the work at *Africa Remix*, currently on show in Johannesburg and curated by Simon Njami, such internationalism is evident. What is interesting about this exhibition is that wood carving as medium is non-existent except for the work of Jackson Hlungwani.

To demonstrate that postmodern African identity has become hybridised and socio-politically informed, and that Western notions of so-called 'authentic' African art as entrenched in traditionalism have become obsolete was a particular curatorial aim of *The Maswanganyi Family* exhibition. In 1996 already, curator Okwui Enwezor argued that:

It might be worth it to recognise, especially for contemporary African artists working across many borders, that culture and history are neither continuous nor uninterrupted. Today we speak not of history or culture, but of histories and cultures, and any artistic initiative needs to recognise the inherent plurality of cultural experience. Thinking of my own background and experiences ... I have come to realise, with perhaps a hint of unintended irony, how much history, culture and identity are often hybrid, incomplete, suffused with 'impurities', rebel-

<sup>2</sup> Jackson Hlungwani is one of South Africa's best known and critically acclaimed artists and his works are housed in the following collections: Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town; S.A. National Gallery, Cape Town; University of Cape Town (Dept. of African Studies); University of South Africa, Pretoria; University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg; Tatham Art Gallery, Pietermaritzburg; Sandton Convention Centre; USA, Japan and Europe.

<sup>3</sup> Noria Mabasa lives and works in Vuwani, Venda, and deals with issues of identity pertaining to women. She is the only Venda woman who sculpts in wood. Her work is in the following collections: Johannesburg Art Gallery; S.A. National Gallery; Standard Bank Gallery; University of Fort Hare, Ciskei; Pretoria Art Museum; University of Western Cape; University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg; Sandton Convention Centre; Netherlands, Belgium, USA.

<sup>4</sup> A previous award winner at the prestigious Brett Kebble Art awards.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, an Internet website such as <http://www.authenticafrika.com/index.html>. Accessed on 12 May 2007.

lions, impermanences and contingencies (Williamson and Jamal 1996:6).

In the South African context though, it not easy to rationalise African art production imbued with cultural and artistic leftovers of traditional techniques and styles into neat packages without taking cognisance of *political* leftovers. Mostly, in the case of works such as these, the socio-cultural and political connotations with the sculptural form seem to influence the reception thereof. An investigation of the public's reception of the Maswanganyi exhibition demonstrated this contention and posed challenges to New South Africa ideologies that came into being during 1994. This was the watershed year when, envisioned with a newly conceptualised constitution, the African National Council took over from the National Party, infamous for their policy of forced segregation, known as "Apartheid", and advocated a radical new democracy in terms of equality human dignity, the right to privacy and freedom of connotation, movement, residence, trade, occupation and profession.<sup>6</sup>

Pretoria is the administrative capital of South Africa and as such politically speaking the most stigmatised city of South Africa. Since the change of government in 1994, perceptions were created in the media and the vernacular that Pretoria was a non-fashionable place to be or be associated with. It became discredited in an unaccepting world that preferred to take important cultural and artistic events to Cape Town and Johannesburg as politically fashionable environments that included the Old Prison at Constitution Hill in Johannesburg; Newtown where the informal street market sector operates; Robben Island where many Apartheid prisoners including Nelson Mandela were incarcerated; and the Castle in Cape Town that was host to histories of slavery and colonialism.

Over the past thirteen years since 1994, Pretoria's stigmatised identity has become something that Pretorians (including the young upcoming generation) had to deal with and manage, especially on the level of business and education. Many excellent contem-

porary South African artists such as Wim Botha, Minnette Vári and Kudzanai Chiurai were educated and trained in Pretoria, but soon after left for more fashionable artistic quarters such as Johannesburg, Cape Town and the international market. Within such a context of stigma, it seemed like a 'test' to present the work of the Maswanganyi's in a contemporary Pretoria gallery.

Although besides the normal gallery list of invitees of more than seven-thousand, government officials, embassies and collectors were personally invited to the exhibition, only a handful of people attended *The Maswanganyi Family* exhibition. A situation of non-attendance prevailed throughout the duration of the Maswanganyi exhibition and the very few visitors entered addresses and contact numbers in the gallery visitor's book but no comments. As curator I approached individuals in an attempt to understand the phenomenon and received verbal comments such as "I meant to come", "I'm not really interested in their work", "Who wants to see craft", as well as "Why is the work so expensive – I can go and buy it at the zoo or at Hartbeespoort Dam for next to nothing", which made me suspect that maybe this kind of work was stigmatised in some way.

Another politically motivated set of exhibitions, *Reconciliation* (Figures 7 - 10), that I curated for the University of Pretoria as part of the Arts and Reconciliation Festival in 2005 was equally badly attended although receiving rave reports in the newspapers. The work ranged in terms of cultural, gender and age contexts and the curatorial aim was to demonstrate that South African artworks display a process of the aestheticisation of politics and histories and even an exploitation of forms of representation for its own discourses of power rather than offering solutions regarding political issues. The exhibitions further demonstrated the co-existence of the collectivity and the dissimilarity of experience within the South African multicultural context and corroborated the curatorial intention to demonstrate that the cultural and political transformations in the country were not all pain, introspection and trauma.

<sup>6</sup> In Chapter 2 of the Bill of Rights of the South African Constitution.



Figure 7: Kudzi Chiurai, *Mzansi* (2005). Mixed Media on Canvas. From *Reconciliations* Exhibition, University of Pretoria, 2005. Photograph: Elfriede Dreyer



Figure 8: Diane Victor, *Smoke Head* (2004). Carbon on Paper. From *Reconciliations* Exhibition, University of Pretoria, 2005. Photograph: Elfriede Dreyer



Figure 9: Jan van der Merwe, *Baggage Arrival* (2001). Found Objects, Rusted Metal, TV Monitor, Security Camera and Electric Motor. From *Reconciliations* Exhibition, University of Pretoria, 2005. Photograph: Elfriede Dreyer





Figure 10: Frikkie Eksteen, Detail from *Hanging Garden* (2004). From *Reconciliations* Exhibition, University of Pretoria, 2005. Photograph: Elfriede Dreyer

Most other subsequent exhibitions at Fried Contemporary have been well attended, such as Celia de Villiers's highly conceptual non-political exhibition, *LiveWire* (Figures 11 - 12), that dealt with the manner in which artists challenge conformity and emancipate themselves in their attempts at maintaining a cohesive self by employing cross media interactions. The exhibition received comments from the Pretoria public (recorded in the gallery visitor's book) such as "Best exhibition I've ever seen"; "Opwindend"; "Fantastic & stunning"; "Ongelooflik"; "Exception-

al"; and "Deliciously wicked". In the strongly academic exhibition, De Villiers aimed to demonstrate her hypothesis that, at present, distinct Gothic and Baroque sensibilities are manifesting as during previous periods of cultural stress that were characterised by anxieties about social transformations and crises. A local newspaper review described the work as "[p]oetic, more than academic, from the fireballs to the faux fur, it's all about having a sensuous experience" (Staden-Garbett 2006:[s.p.]).



Figure 11: Celia de Villiers, *Red Obsession* (2006). From *LiveWire* Exhibition, Fried Contemporary Art Gallery, Pretoria, South Africa, 2006. Photograph: Elfriede Dreyer



Figure 12: Celia de Villiers, *Interstice* (2005). From *LiveWire* Exhibition, Fried Contemporary Art Gallery, Pretoria, South Africa, 2006. Photograph: Elfriede Dreyer

Therefore as curator my experience of the Pretoria public as a whole was that it displayed a hunger for avant-garde and challenging art, but that as Walker Connor (1994:75) argues, “it is not *what is*, but *what people believe is* that has behavioral consequences”. The lingering connotation with the Maswanganyi sculptures with wood carving as craft that does not belong in a contemporary art gallery seemed to have created cultural abject, although on paper South Africa has a new constitution and the Maswanganyi work displays postcolonial sensibility. My contention is that the negative perceptions regarding wood carving in the South African context are induced by an insistence on the importance of voice, authorship and authenticity and, what Kasfir (1992:49) calls, the Jamesonian modernistic “resistance to commodity form”.

Although the Maswanganyi work (Figures 13 - 14) challenges Western arthistorical boundaries on several levels (for instance in terms of art versus craft, art versus design, and art versus decoration), the Pretoria art public received the work as tainted by notions of ‘non-inauthenticity’. To me such perceptions seem to be motivated by formal and traditional connotation with the semiotic content of tourist wood carvings, although metaphor, allegory and metonymy in such works are layered but often remain unvoiced since it is not the primary function of the work. Yet, as Kasfir (1992:43) argues, the case for authenticity in African art is one that can only be made in terms of fakes, forgeries and imitations, and not in a context where there is continued artistic production, which can never be excluded from so-called cultural ‘contamination’.



Figure 13: Collen Maswanganyi in his Studio (2005). Photograph: Elfriede Dreyer

Although subliminal to a large extent, the stigma attached to the Maswanganyi work seemed to have inhibited the articulation of the full meaning of the work. Lerita M Coleman (in Ainlay et al 1986:219) argues that “Stigma appears to be a special and insidious kind of social categorization . . . , a process of people [being] . . . treated categorically rather than individually”. Gaylene Becker and Regina Arnold (in Ainlay et al 1986:47) argue that although stigmatisation is usually based on ascribed attributes created through the institutionalisation of stigma, in most countries to be poor and unemployed is considered deviant. As these authors maintain, the “plight of illiterate people epitomizes the institutionalization of stigma . . . . Although illiteracy is specifically related to class inequalities, individuals (usually from poorer socio-economic classes and from certain ethnic groups) bear the blame for what are essentially systemic and institutional problems” (Becker and Arnold in Ainlay et al 1986:47).

It is not surprising then to observe this process in the South African context where illiteracy, poverty and unemployment are rife and associated with the ‘lower classes’ where societies have been brain-

washed for several centuries, not only decades, into patterns of categorical and stereotypical thinking. This is further convoluted by the fact that due to and policies of racial discrimination, many blacks in South Africa were left poor and uneducated. However, discrimination according to race predates current postmodern history and was insistent already in the seventeenth century during times of slavery and elsewhere where Europeans sought to justify their domination. In reference to racism in the United States, Jeff Spinner (1994:139) argues that:

Despite the increasing murkiness of the boundaries between some aspects of Black and mainstream culture, the distinction between Black and white identity is not about to disappear. Many Blacks will not forget their oppression. Although whites can share in the cultural practices of Blacks, not all whites will do so. Some Black cultural practices will be handed down from one generation to the next and will remain distinctively Black. Some parts of Black culture, shaped by racism and segregation, will disappear if racism declines. Yet, not all aspects of Black culture will necessarily end if racism

evaporates. ... While Black identity has become diverse recently, Blacks may no longer be tied together as strongly by culture, but racism will ensure that most Blacks see themselves as part of a group. Only when white citizens live up to the liberal premise of judging people on their individual talents and abilities will this begin to change.

Equally, considering the nature of the reception of the Maswanganyi work, the possibility of communal identity in the new South Africa still seems like a pipe dream. It will be interesting to see how such

notions of group cohesion and cultural difference will feature in the future in the light of current reverse racism and exaggerated redress practices in the country, evident in university bursaries and art prizes reserved for previously disadvantaged artists and exhibitions for black artists only, despite nationwide calls by minority groups for an end date to post-Apartheid remedy actions. As Anthony Marx (1998:1) maintains: "Far from displacing race as an issue, industrialization, class conflict, rising nationalism, and state consolidation have actually spurred racially defined contention".



Figure 14: Collen Maswanganyi, *Tycoon Couple* (2005). Photograph: Elfriede Dreyer

In a country such as South Africa that has been fraught with socio-cultural segregation and ethnic fragmentation, the notions of the extended family and belonging, traditionally characteristic of the ethnocultural context, have become essential components of the psychological makeup of many other

cultural groupings. As such, irrespective of the articulated utopian visions of racial democracy, it is highly unlikely that South Africa will experience any racial, cultural or artistic solidarity in the near future and it is most likely that informal discrimination will continue.

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### **About the Author**

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The topics of posthumanity, technoculture, Romanticism and utopia/dystopia are ongoing interests in Elfriede Dreyer's practical and theoretical research. Besides the curating of several exhibitions she exhibited her own work widely, both locally and internationally. As an interdisciplinary arts specialist she teaches and publishes in the fields of Fine Arts and Visual Communication at the University of Pretoria since March 2003 and before that at UNISA from 1990 to 2003. She was the recipient of several research grants and obtained qualifications in the fields of Fine Arts, Art History, Philosophy, French, Education, Music and Multimedia. She has set up international liaison in the field of Multimedia and is well known as an adjudicator for art competitions and as an external examiner in the disciplines of Fine Arts and Art History. She presented papers at several national and international conferences and chaired a few sessions.

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