

## South African Rubber and Clay: Material Challenges to the Global Nomad

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### **Abstract:**

Artistic nomads described in Nicolas Bourriaud's *Altermodern* are the elite darlings of the contemporary artworld. Yet these transgressors of national boundaries often fail to engage with or slowly abandon local audiences and iconography. Through an analysis of several South African artworks, this article proposes that Okwui Enwezor's alternative concept of the 'aftermodern' is particularly relevant for those working against nomadic superficiality. South Africans Nicholas Hlobo and Clive Sithole are discussed as counterpoints to facile reliance on transnationally recognised sign systems. The both personally idiosyncratic and culturally bound meanings of these artists' materials and significations create subtle oppositions to globalising homogeneity. Utilising material iconographies and histories akin to those of Joseph Beuys, 'aftermodern' artists challenge superficiality by privileging local connections to chart new gender constructions and identities through media specificity and subtle linguistic play.

**Keywords:** Elizabeth Perrill | South Africa | art | ceramics | installation | Nicolas Bourriaud | altermodern | post-apartheid | materiality | comics | Okwui Enwezor | Nicholas Hlobo | Clive Sithole

### **Article:**

Witnesses to the jet-setting success of a generation that hit the international stage during the transition into the post-Apartheid era, young South Africans in their twenties and thirties are finding new positions within the global artworld. Many of these rising stars choose to focus on local meaning, a choice that is a subtle challenge to the preceding generation, artists who have become members of a world that Nicholas Bourriaud has described as *altermodern*. The altermodern artist, a global nomad who embodies life after the postmodern, creates art from networks and shared signs.<sup>1</sup> In Bourriaud's model constellations and networks of meaning are

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<sup>1</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Altermodern: Tate Triennial*, Tate Publishing, London, 2009, p 13

brought together by the nomad, *homo viator*, a pilgrim in search of truth.<sup>2</sup> Artworks are connections brought together through narrative and theory. However, as has been pointed out by Marcus Verhagen, the separation from territory, the celebration of displacement, remains a troubling underlying assumption of this self-proclaimed utopian model.<sup>3</sup>

Using the strengths of what Okwui Enwezor dubbed the *aftermodern*, a younger generation of South African artists is now highly invested in material and intellectual meaning that ‘disinherit[s] the violence of colonial modernity’ in a manner that diverges from altermodern biennale culture.<sup>4</sup> These artists are demonstrating that material and linguistic interplay with territories can, in fact, reveal nuanced constructions of engagement with both international and local audiences. Enwezor described the aftermodern during the first prologue to ‘Altermodern’, the 2009 Tate Triennale, curated by Nicholas Bourriaud. Utilising a parallel to Dante’s *Inferno*, Enwezor hypothesised a model in which extant layers of modernity – such as super, developing, specious, underdeveloped, or aftermodern – coexist simultaneously. Listeners at the public presentation of this theory criticised Enwezor’s use of discrete locations to describe these imbricated states of modernity, such as the ‘supermodern West’ or the ‘developing modernity of China’.<sup>5</sup> Audience members pointed out that these locations reflected a dated style of interpretation, a core–periphery model; however, Enwezor responded by indicating that layers of modernity exist simultaneously in both time and place.<sup>6</sup> The inner-city slums of Johannesburg, spaces of Enwezor’s aftermodern, share a line-of-site with the Ellis Stadium, one of South Africa’s renovated 2010 World Cup locations. In this stadium FIFA-sponsored supermodernity whitewashes over the previously failed or disillusioned architecture of Apartheid’s speciously modern infrastructure.<sup>7</sup>

Two artists who embrace the examination of these modern layers with local precision and flesh out the possibilities of the aftermodern are Nicholas Hlobo and Clive Sithole. These men are members of a South African visual arts cohort who value the materials discovered through the (re)connection and engagement with territories and local meanings. They play with the edges of the new African modernity, purposefully drawing in viewers with a superficial seduction and then challenging the altermodern to realise its own lack when engaging with a new African-centred perspective.

If Bourriaud posits the entire structure of his project as altermodernist, Africa, it may be said, at the least is aftermodern, not only because the narratives of modernity in Africa are predicated on

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<sup>2</sup> It seems that Bourriaud undervalues *agape*, a thoughtful love of mankind, in *homo viator*’s search for hope. The key in this new age is not found merely in the act of nomadism or a celebration of the disembodied network. The root and the motivation for artistic pilgrimage lie in the goal of connection. In a humanist understanding of *homo viator*, the development of self involves responsibility which can remain highly engaged with place and community; one must not ‘confuse hope and ambition, for they are not of the same spiritual dimension’. Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator*, Emma Craufurd, trans, Harper & Row, New York, 1962, pp 16–21

<sup>3</sup> Marcus Verhagen, ‘The Nomad and the Altermodern: The Tate Triennial’, *Third Text* 101, vol 23, no 6, November 2009, pp 803–812

<sup>4</sup> Okwui Enwezor, ‘Modernity and Postcolonial Ambivalence’, in Bourriaud, op cit, p 39

<sup>5</sup> Okwui Enwezor, ‘Specious Modernity: Speculations on the End of Postcolonial Utopia’, Tate Triennial 2009, Prologue 1, Tate Channel, 24 April 2008, available at <http://channel.tate.org.uk/media/31067749001>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> FIFA: Fédération Internationale de Football Association

an encounter of antagonism but also in the invention of a new African character of modernity that emerges after the end of modernity.<sup>8</sup>

After the post-Apartheid transition, both Hlobo and Sithole sought out territories of belonging – townships, rural areas and urban undergrounds – as sites of reinvention. Though vulnerable to demands that they repeat formulas of identity that captivated the artworld during the post-Apartheid heyday and act as simple representatives of the Rainbow Nation – Xhosa, Zulu, or Sotho, male or female, straight or gay – these artists have moved beyond didactic or tokenistic multiculturalism. They still value the visual languages that can be drawn from territories and belonging in lieu of the wandering life of the artist pilgrim, Bourriaud's *homo viator*. Both Hlobo and Sithole dare to reference deeply local materiality as they explore gender, linguistics and identity in a world that seems to be praising the pilgrim while forgetting that each quest has to begin somewhere.

Hlobo and Sithole's material specificity embodies demands by each artist that sets their work apart from the internationally aimed altermodern, the transient artist who uses the network as a disembodied art object. Engaging with the seductive quality of surfaces, of rubber and clay respectively, Hlobo and Sithole demand that the non-local audience members educate themselves if they wish to move more deeply into the work. Hlobo turns the internationally celebrated medium of installation art on its ear and makes it listen to a Xhosa dialect. Sithole, on the other hand, creates ceramic works that challenge contemporary viewers to pay attention to what African art theorist Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbecchie has described as 'indigenous forms of African art whose contemporaneity remains to be theorized'.<sup>9</sup> Sithole moulds not only clay but multivalent layers of gendered signs into contemporary Zulu ceramic vessels. Both artists entice viewers into an appreciation of form and then demand that they pay attention to the cultural specificity of media, to linguistic nuance; they challenge and enrich the assumed transient pre-eminence of the nomadic altermodern.

## **SOUTH AFRICA ALTERMODERN**

To understand the importance of local nuance in the work of Hlobo and Sithole, we must first see how one altermodern South African artist is grappling with similar concepts of race and masculinity. Addressing the Centre for Contemporary Art in Lagos, Nigeria, in July 2009, South African curator Gabi Ngcobo reminded her audience that many South African artists are actively negotiating the fears and prejudices surrounding black masculinity.<sup>10</sup> In a lecture entitled 'Transitions', Ngcobo referenced Anton Kannemeyer's visual commentary in his 'N is for Nightmare' series. In *Black Dicks* (2008) Kannemeyer uses an easily deciphered graphic novel montage completed in the style of Hergé, creator of the Tintin series of comics, to layer political history and contemporary anxieties. As characters wrestle with snake-like black phalluses before a map of African conflicts, the main character shouts, 'Oh My God!! These black dicks are outta

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<sup>8</sup> Okwui Enwezor, 'Modernity and Postcolonial Ambivalence', op cit, pp 38–39

<sup>9</sup> Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbecchie, 'The Curator as Culture Broker: A Critique of the Curatorial Regime of Okwui Enwezor', *The Zeleza Post: Informed News and Commentary on the Pan African World*, Popular Culture section, 16 June 2010, blog, available at <http://www.zeleza.com/blogging/popular-culture/curator-culture-broker-critique-curatorial-regime-okwui-enwezor>

<sup>10</sup> Obidike Okafor, 'Transiting with Gabi Ngcobo', *Next*, 31 July 2009, archived on Muzane's Weblog at <http://muzane.wordpress.com/2009/08/24/transiting-with-gabi-ngcobo/>

control!’<sup>11</sup> Postcolonial anxieties about the instability of Africa, racially spurred stereotypes of black hyper-masculinity, and the internationally recognised devices of comics ensure that transnational viewers comprehend the sociopolitical commentary of the artist.

### FIGURE IS OMITTED FROM THIS FORMATTED DOCUMENT

Anton Kannemeyer, *Black Dicks*, 2008, black ink and acrylic on lithographic print, 66 x 50 cm, © Anton Kannemeyer, courtesy STEVENSON, Cape Town and Johannesburg

Kannemeyer is currently one amongst a cohort working in the archipelago of global art practitioners and exhibitions that Bourriaud describes in his catalogue essay for the ‘Altermodern’ exhibition. Having recently exhibited in the US, France, Réunion and Italy and shown consistently over the past two decades in South Africa, Kannemeyer is recognised as an icon in global politically engaged comic book art.<sup>12</sup> Kannemeyer established his early reputation through *Bitterkomix*, his collaboration with Conrad Botes, which lampooned Afrikaner identity by digging up its deepest anxieties. The explicit satire of *Bitterkomix* has also been loved and promoted as a type of underground religion in South Africa for over two decades. From this work Kannemeyer and his partner both launched solo careers. Kannemeyer continues his satire; however, his most recent imagery translates much more readily to a broad global network of viewers and critics familiar with colonial history.<sup>13</sup> Kannemeyer's work is increasingly appealing to the network of the altermodern, rather than a specifically South African audience. The medium of the Tintin comic spoofs appeals to African, Asian, South Pacific or European audiences impacted by this genre. Moreover, Kannemeyer's recent move towards monumental works ties him to the lineage of Andy Warhol or Roy Lichtenstein, artists who were both highly influenced by Hergé's *ligne claire* style of comic.<sup>14</sup>

Works in both Kannemeyer's solo exhibition ‘A Dreadful Thing is About to Occur’ from April to May 2010 and his inclusions in the June to July 2010 group exhibition ‘This is Our Time’ reflect a critique of the postcolonial that could come from many locations in Africa. In ‘A Dreadful Thing is About to Occur’ Kannemeyer depicts men in an exaggerated black-face style engaged in acts of violence against white comic book characters. Other works depict the same black-face characters in positions as inept authority figures or in domestic settings. For instance, one character sits in a well-decorated middle-class home. In this work, entitled *New Boyfriend*, we see a white girl stand with her hands on the black-face character's shoulders as he addresses what we assume are her parents and says, ‘Mr and Mrs Kannemeyer, I'll come straight to the point. I'm deeply in love with your daughter, and I'd like to move in with you.’ The shock of the generic white parents and the earnest faces of the caricatured youths could belong to any of the nations in which Kannemeyer has recently exhibited. Indeed, this use of transposable situations augments the power of his recent work; he is a contributor to an international dialogue on race.

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<sup>11</sup> Katharine Jacobs, ‘Anton Kannemeyer Fear of a Black Planet at Michael Stevenson’, *arthrob* 136, December 2008, available at <http://www.arthrob.co.za/08dec/reviews/stevenson.html>

<sup>12</sup> Michael Stevenson Gallery, ‘Anton Kannemeyer: A Dreadful Thing Is About to Occur’, 22 April – 29 May 2010, available at <http://www.michaelstevenson.com/contemporary/exhibitions/kannemeyer/index2010.htm>

<sup>13</sup> Bartholomew Ryan, ‘Altermodern: A Conversation with Nicolas Bourriaud’, *Art in America International Review*, 17 March 2009, available at <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-opinion/conversations/2009-03-17/altermodern-a-conversation-with-nicolas-bourriaud/>

<sup>14</sup> Michael Farr, ‘Thundering Typhoons’, *History Today*, vol 54, no 3, March 2004, pp 62–63

‘This is Our Time’, composed of twenty-two international art powerhouses, including Glenn Ligon (USA), Pieter Hugo (South Africa), Shepard Fairey (USA), Jane Alexander (South Africa), Thomas Hirschhorn (Switzerland), Berni Searle (South Africa), and Anton Kannemeyer (South Africa), was created to give the assembled artists' nuanced responses to contemporary politics. Given the international familiarity of the names involved and the increasingly transnationally aimed messages of Kannemeyer's work, he could easily be seen as one of Bourriaud's altermodern nomads. In this group exhibition Kannemeyer showed reproductions of colonial-era images of exoticised African cultures. The images are executed in pencil, ink and acrylics; colonial-era style captions are retained and emphasise observations that would have originally accompanied such images. Although Kannemeyer carefully creates a frame around each reproduction, reminiscent of both a colonial book or newspaper print and of his own comic book medium, the works continue to speak in generalisations and stereotypes that are reiterated through the (post)colonial imagination. The producers and audiences of these artworks are increasingly a select cosmopolitan set, and the sense of satire is ambiguous and transposable across national borders.<sup>15</sup>

**FIGURE IS OMITTED FROM THIS FORMATTED DOCUMENT**

Nicholas Hlobo, *Dream Catcher*, 2006, rubber inner tube, ribbon, 155 × 55 × 25 cm, © Nicholas Hlobo, courtesy STEVENSON, Cape Town and Johannesburg, photo: Kathy Comfort-Skead

The artist, the quintessential nomad of the altermodern, is part of an elite that can be either celebrated or vilified for its appropriation of global sets of signs without an investment in the local. Bourriaud has responded to those who see this as a negative quality by recounting the experience of Pascale Marthine Tayou, a Cameroonian-born artist living in Belgium:

[For Tayou, the] ‘globalised state of culture’ is already a matter of fact: in every spot of the planet, you can see this new cultural stratus, coexisting with the layer of traditional culture and some local specific contemporary elements. Saying that it is the privilege of the artistic jet set is a pure denial of the worldwide violence of the capitalist system, or an extreme naiveness... Let's face it: artists now have access to information, and they all use the same toolbox, from Stockholm to Bangkok.<sup>16</sup>

With this last line, Bourriaud undermines what might stand as a brilliant observation. The naivety in the comment above lies in its assumption that the ‘globalised state of culture’ is merely ‘layered’ with ‘some local specific contemporary elements’. Certainly both Tayou, living in the land where Tintin emerged, and Kannemeyer could expound on the critique that Hergé-inspired black-face characters convey to a savvy in-group, but the specificity of the stereotypes recently fell flat with South African critics used to Kannemeyer's previously biting satire. A former admirer of Kannemeyer's critiques of Afrikaner masculinity and South African race relations reviewed his recent work and stated:

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<sup>15</sup> Ryan, op cit

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

What worries me is there might need to be a depoliticised gaze, someone outside, to laugh at the joke. Otherwise the satire has no audience. It makes for powerful art, important even, but also art that is alienating.<sup>17</sup>

## **SOUTH AFRICA AFTERMODERN**

Another style of voice is emerging and engaging discourses of masculinity in the South African artistic landscape – a subtle tone that has recently resonated with audiences who are by now familiar with homogenising aesthetics and altermodern networks. Existing at the same time and in some of the same spaces, another cohort of South African artists continues to draw on the local, and not as a mere layer, a varnish of particularity within a ‘globalised culture’. Nicholas Hlobo and Clive Sithole's art production challenges the privilege of the nomad and demands that the global citizen learn new symbols or signs in order to engage with the symbolism important to each artist's self-exploration of or challenge to local meanings. These artists draw from another stratum of Enwezor's layered modernity, from the aftermodern existing side-by-side with the altermodern.

In July of 2009 Hlobo (born 1975) was officially honoured at the Grahamstown National Arts Festival as the winner of South Africa's most prestigious national visual arts award: Standard Bank Young Artist.<sup>18</sup> A few months earlier Sithole (born 1971) was awarded the national first prize in ceramics by the South African Department of Arts and Culture.<sup>19</sup> A mixed-media installation artist and a ceramicist respectively, both men share a similar drive. Each draws upon a masculinity that revels in subtle sets of cultural referents, that asks viewers to learn about layers of meanings and to pay particular attention to identity construction tied to culturally loaded media beyond the initial seduction of surfaces. In their award-winning works Hlobo and Sithole reveal worlds of sensual nuance in rubber and clay that refuse to disclose their deeper implications to the passing viewer, to the nomad. These thirty-somethings employ proverbs and metaphors, rooted in Xhosa and Zulu linguistics and visual expression to engage viewers with the psychological and personal depths of the artist.

Hlobo, a consummate wordsmith, states that linguistic and semiotic interests consistently form the starting point for his creations, and he traces formative moments in the social-sexual life of Xhosa youth through his solo exhibitions. Hlobo's first solo show in 2006 was titled ‘Izele’ (Giving Birth). His second show, ‘Kwatsiyw'iziko’ (Crossing the Hearth), dealt with the acts of intimacy prior to birth.<sup>20</sup> With 2009's ‘Umtshotsho’ (Gathering), Hlobo pushes viewers to consider the development of gender relations and sensuality in adolescence and young

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<sup>17</sup> Chad Ressonow, “‘A Dreadful Thing is About to Occur’”: Anton Kannemeyer at Michael Stevenson’, available at <http://www.artthrob.co.za/Reviews/Review-of-Anton-Kannemeyer.-Zanele-Muholi.-Glenn-Ligon- and -Nare-Mokgotho-by-Chad-Rossouw-at-Michael-Stevenson.aspx>

<sup>18</sup> Standard Bank, ‘Standard Bank Celebrates 25 Years of Supporting South Africa's Young Artists’, 5 November 2008, Standard Bank Media Releases, available at [http://www.sboff.com/SBIC/Frontdoor\\_02\\_01/0.2454.10293765\\_30886387\\_0.00.html](http://www.sboff.com/SBIC/Frontdoor_02_01/0.2454.10293765_30886387_0.00.html)

<sup>19</sup> Susan Sellschop, ed, *Crafting New Pathways: Craft Awards 2009*, National Department of Arts and Culture, Johannesburg, 2009, p 50

<sup>20</sup> Mark Gevisser, ‘Under Covers, Out in the Open: Nicholas Hlobo and Umtshotsho’, in Sophie Perryer, ed, *Nicholas Hlobo*, Michael Stevenson, Cape Town, 2009, p 11

adulthood. Each exhibition has taken viewers further into a visual language and metaphor of young Xhosa and South African social development.

The artist's first two solo exhibitions often used relatively obvious physical referents to guide viewers into his iconography. *Dream Catcher* (2006) is perhaps the most striking example of Hlobo's somewhat naive early work. This sculpture is constructed from an inner tube, cut and sewn together with pink ribbon. The centre of the circle is covered with pink woven ribbon and a phallic form projects from the edge of the ring. This phallus, orifice, cliché of an American Indian dream catcher, and/or condom made of rubber and ribbon was an overt reference to S&M, the masculine, the feminine, and psychological struggle with the subconscious and the other. Hlobo's sign system was developed through *Dream Catcher*, but this piece left a relatively narrow metaphorical scope for viewer contemplation that has subsequently been enriched.

The materials in *Dream Catcher*, rubber and ribbon, contain multi-layered meanings for Sithole and his developing audience, yet in 2006 they were only beginning to fulfil their symbolic potential; like Joseph Beuys introducing viewers to the significance of animal fat and felt, Hlobo begins using the materials that would be integral to later production. The predominance of pink and red ribbon, stitching, and embroidery are used here as signs for the flesh and blood binding together rubbery skins. Hlobo creates the primer for his sign system in a way that is, at first, easily approachable to the outsider; however, today the artist takes fewer pains to explain his basic materials. The forms and materiality of Hlobo's recent artistic production seduce the audience with their sensuality, only to reveal more subtle visual references when viewers come halfway and pay attention to the language Hlobo has derived from local South African referents.

In particular, this nuance emerges through materials, the continued language of rubber and ribbon. Instead of retaining the shape of either an inner-tube or the smooth width of a ribbon, as in *Dream Catcher*, Hlobo's Standard Bank Young Artist exhibition 'Umtshotsho' reflects the artist's growing intimacy with and metaphorical handling of materials. The more ornate forms in the exhibition exemplify Hlobo's playful material craftsmanship and cultural references.

All of the eight individual beings in 'Umtshotsho' bear ornate tentacles that hang heavily or reach out to the viewer; they jiggle and sway when brushed or nudged. Rather than confront a phallus or a condom, viewers explore figures that wiggle and beckon. The weaving of ribbon on these forms lacks the formulaic patchwork or symmetry of *Dream Catcher* or *Intente*, another of Hlobo's works from 2006. The rubber that constitutes the figures' flesh is alive with the ripples and movement that Hlobo has acknowledged as a challenge and a joy of his medium. The inner tube rubber and the satin ribbons in 'Umtshotsho' are also combined with found objects and reproduction colonial furniture in an organic Baroque manner that encourages exploration. These eight forms, likened to jellyfish or spirits by Hlobo, float in space, appearing to socialise and commune.<sup>21</sup>

#### **FIGURE IS OMITTED FROM THIS FORMATTED DOCUMENT**

Nicholas Hlobo, *Umtshotsho*, 2009, installation with *Izithunzi* and *Kubomvu*, works in progress photographed in the artist's studio, © Nicholas Hlobo, courtesy STEVENSON, Cape Town and Johannesburg, photo: John Hodgkiss

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<sup>21</sup> Nicholas Hlobo, interview with the artist by the author, Grahamstown, South Africa, 2 July 2009

The word *umtshotsho* refers to a traditional Xhosa youth gathering, a point of departure for the artist to play with adolescence and developing gender identity. At a Xhosa umtshotsho youths were historically encouraged to socialise, dance, spar and practise sexual behaviours such as *ukusoma*, a type of non-penetrative ‘thigh-sex’. Experimental sexual behaviour is an aspect of these gatherings that Hlobo highlights during gallery talks as a moment loaded with homo- and/or hetero-erotic potential. Yet, as at any party, there are outsiders struggling with identity.

Off to the side of the main sculptural group, one figure sits on a couch, separated from its peers; here materiality crosses over into a new metaphor. The materials in his work reflect an exploration of a new form of Xhosa youth, the merging of black flesh and ghostly postcolonial forms in a seamless whole. This individual and couch component is part of the ‘Umtshotsho’ installation that bears the additional title *Izithunzi* (Xhosa for ‘shadows’). The delicate ribbons that stitch together the black, bulging flesh of this ‘shadow’ spill onto its Victorianate couch. The attention to detail in the ribbon seams and appliqué on the couch blend the sitter and seat, the contemporary youth with postcolonial history. The couch is being consumed by and becoming part of the figure, just as Xhosa culture has taken in and transformed colonial memories as a part of itself. Likewise, the individual is changed by this connection. This is a constructed and layered African modernity, the aftermodern, as described by Enwezor.

Enriching his visual metaphors with oral exegesis, Hlobo peels away some of the layered cultural connotations surrounding the material of inner-tube rubber, and of ribbon. Beyond transnationally discernible references to S&M paraphernalia or a cursory understanding of rubber as black flesh, Hlobo refers to rural male nostalgia. This embedded local reference takes time for the outsider to unpack. The patching and reworking of inner tube rubber by rural men symbolises the masculine prowess of auto repair. Unexpectedly, the world of car maintenance is woven into the gallery. Indeed, when one looks closely at Hlobo's sculptures one can see the patches on his purposefully selected recycled rubber, evidence of this history of an improvisation during hard times that no longer takes place in the era of tubeless tires. Hlobo challenges the viewer to delve into ways this material helped construct rural Xhosa masculinity. Speaking of his interest in this material, Hlobo remarked, ‘I attribute that to my being a Xhosa man. I think I have great joy of manhood.’<sup>22</sup>

Attention to all levels of artistic process, to metaphor and materiality, mark Hlobo as an extraordinary artist. With his 2009 award and one-man show at Tate Modern in London in 2008–2009, Hlobo is clearly established as a contemporary, urbane, transnational artist.<sup>23</sup> Yet it is attention to the specificity of meaning and materials that sets Hlobo's work apart from the altermodern. His works are subtle engagements that continue to reveal depth beyond their surfaces. In the world of installation art the accumulation of materials is not unusual, but Hlobo chooses to flesh out his work with collected material from townships and rural areas; not the rubber of colonial extraction, but that of a specifically black South African reconstruction.

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<sup>22</sup> Quote from Gevisser, op cit, p 15

<sup>23</sup> Kerry Greenberg, ‘Nicolas Hlobo: Uhambo’, Tate Modern Level 2 Gallery, 9 December 2008 – 29 March 2009, available at <http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/nicholashlobo/default.shtm>



In another component of the South African artworld, material attention to the local is less surprising. Ceramic artists are renowned for a fetishistic attention to surface and materiality. Zulu ceramic artists have been less well known for pushing conceptual agendas; however, the highly imbricated metaphorical relationships that Hlobo and Sithole have developed with their media bind these artists in a conceptual love of materiality.

Clive Sithole's first solo exhibition in 2001, titled 'Journey of the Herdboy', employed a didactic and straightforward connection to Zulu artistic norms. Sithole's ceramics during this period looked very similar to what are seen as quintessential traditional Zulu beer pots. He drew inspiration from the radial symmetry of these forms; when seen from above, the swelling convex vessels are dissected into three or four equal sections. Likewise, Sithole's works were burnished with the same smooth surface and were proportionally similar to older ceramic forms. One can draw a parallel between Sithole's early work and Hlobo's less conceptually challenging works, such as *Dream Catcher*. The formal elements in Hlobo's 2001 pieces were not unexpected or overly complex, but laid the groundwork for his personal iconography. Both artists' initial solo exhibitions established their respective personal iconological material vocabularies, replete with local connotations.

As Sithole's career has developed, he has gained a mastery of ceramics and acquired a grammar of Zulu motifs related to gender and ancestral respect. While Hlobo carefully crafts izithunzi spirits and gendered materials into his installation art, Sithole works in a medium that takes spiritual and ancestral associations as a priori. Zulu beer pots continue to be valued in contemporary Zulu society as highly traditional signifiers used to present sorghum beer to one's ancestors, *amadlozi*. Both men are drawing on a similar call for the innovative reworking of tradition; in the Zulu language *amadlozi* are also referred to as *izithunzi*, shades or shadows – the title of Hlobo's previously mentioned installation. However, this is not a mere repetition; the reference to spirits or spiritual life is one set of meanings within each artist's work. The challenge for Sithole has been to weave these cultural references into his ceramics without allowing them completely to dictate his aesthetic choices.

Sithole has worked to break new ground in the relatively conservative world of Zulu ceramics; he is a man working in a historically female-gendered medium. Both Zulu-speaking and anglophone audiences question Sithole's gender identity. While Nicholas Hlobo overtly discusses his sexuality as a gay man, Sithole actively obfuscates or elides direct inquires on the topic of his sexuality through avoidance and humour that are completely compatible with Zulu politeness norms. Moreover, he emphasises his active participation in normative masculine gender roles.

As the first son of a first son, Sithole bears considerable responsibility to pay attention to his father's lineage and its well-being. Indeed, he has funded costly spiritual events for his family that required the slaughter of both goats and cattle. This is significant when considering Sithole's artistic persona and practice, because in the historically pastoralist world of Zulu spirituality Sithole's responsible attitude towards his ancestors speaks loudly. It parallels the 'great joy of manhood', mentioned by Hlobo. Sithole explicitly ties his ceramic production to his spiritual support of his family, stating, 'My pots are my cattle. If I sell two pots I can easily buy cattle for slaughter.'<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Clive Sithole, interview with the artist by the author, Durban, South Africa, 5 November 2006

This assertion of masculinity is important because it is one layer of a recurrent set of gendered inferences in Sithole's artistic production. For instance, vessels in Sithole's first exhibition in 2001 featured images of cattle and cow horns. Sithole made this tie to pastoralism explicit by entitling this exhibition 'Journey of the Herdboy'. His combination of gendered imagery was fairly obvious to Zulu audiences and those deeply familiar with Zulu cultural values: the cattle that symbolise wealth and masculine success were emblazoned upon his vessels. Yet deeper analysis reveals that this is simply the first layer of connotations worked into these forms.

Sithole's imagery depicted cattle in a more representational manner than most historical ceramic wares. It separated them from women's decorative motifs in order to mark them as derived from tradition, but not mimetically traditional. Sithole was aware scholars had hypothesised that pots decorated with horn motifs and raised bumps on vessels might simultaneously symbolise scarification on women's bodies and the abundance of cattle in a homestead.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, some scholars hypothesised that female potters had historically fashioned bumps on pots to symbolise the wealth of men. For viewers familiar with the connotations of ceramics in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, Sithole was layering his masculine identity on a women's medium with the understanding that he was echoing and amplifying the messages of masculine wealth that were already present in historical ceramic wares.

Sithole experimented with various decorative motifs between 2001 and 2008. In a more recent work from 2008 he combined the motif of cattle with rectangular lugs, abbreviated handles, on the sides of vessels that reference men's milk pail carving. Fluent in Zulu, Sotho and English, Sithole shares Hlobo's love of language and cultural nuance. Thus, he is aware of the fact that *amasumpa*, the word for the raised bumps usually used to depict horns on Zulu ceramic vessels, is also the word for the lugs on the side of milk pails carved by men.<sup>26</sup> So in the 2008 vessel reproduced here, one of the largest works by the artist to that date, Sithole marks his work with layers of masculine and feminine double entendre through his inclusion of masculine *amasumpa* lug handles. Like a Zulu poet Sithole uses allusion and inference to keep viewers guessing about the gender ambiguity implied by his work.

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<sup>25</sup> Scholars who have supported the hypothesis that *amasumpa* bumps are references to scarification are now less sure of these assertions; for instance this idea is not strongly asserted in Juliet Armstrong, Gavin Whitelaw and Dieter Reusch, 'Pots that talk, *izinkamba ezikhulumayo*', *Southern African Humanities*, December 2008, vol 20, pp 513–548. However, it is important to note that Sithole worked closely with Armstrong and his understandings of these historical decorations have been shaped by this research.

<sup>26</sup> Armstrong, Whitelaw and Reusch, op cit, p 533



Clive Sithole, *Uphiso*, 2007, burnished ceramic, 44.5 x 35 cm, courtesy Indiana University Art Museum, photo: Michael Cavenagh and Kevin Montague

Today Sithole still sells work at galleries in New York and London, such as the Ameridian gallery in SoHo. Primarily these works continue to reference the convex shapes and bumps discussed above; however, Sithole's National Arts Council award-winning vessel of 2009 breaks with an important traditional norm: the feminine convex beer pot shape. Instead, this vessel featured an abruptly concave angle and was a technically demanding exploration of form. The abrupt angles of this vessel expose the work to risks of cracking. In his previous creation of necked vessel forms reminiscent of beer pots, Sithole mastered some of his medium's technical challenges; now he is applying this technical knowledge in a way that breaks with the historical referents.

Sithole is careful to maintain some aspects of his material's strong traditional associations and is playing with these boundaries. The emphatic reference to Zulu culture retained in this work is its burnished surface. The near fetishisation of the act of compacting the surface of a clay vessel with a smooth object prior to firing is a hallmark of Zulu ceramics and is obsessed over by artists and collectors alike. Thus, the award-winning work entitled *Transformation* challenges all but one aesthetic feature expected by connoisseurs of Zulu ceramics, both historical and contemporary, the shine of the compressed, burnished surface. This skin of the vessel continues

to be prepared and to belie the simplicity of its surface with gendered layers of meaning. The interpretation of these layered associations is left open in Sithole's work but encourages a blurring of binaries in the ceramic medium.

## CONCLUSION

Both Nicholas Hlobo and Clive Sithole create from a place of personal and individual self-expression informed by cultural nuance and media specificity. The surfaces of their works reveal the deeper nuances of gender ambiguity to the viewer who cares to listen and learn about local connotations beyond the surface. Both men are implying that the onus is on the viewer to move beyond stereotypes of black masculinity or gender roles, to see the artist's love of Xhosa or Zulu masculine roles blended with nuance and ambiguity. Both of these award-winning, thirty-something artists challenge viewers to see that contemporary masculinity can retain an interest in symbolism that expresses Xhosa or Zulu manhood while appealing to the transnational viewer at Tate Modern, a SoHo Gallery or, most recently for Hlobo, at Art Basel Miami Beach 2010.<sup>27</sup> And finally, both demand that the viewer come at least halfway, with an eye that is knowledgeable and informed, patient and interested in the possibility of a subtle materialisation of South African black masculinity.

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<sup>27</sup> Art Basel Miami Beach 2010, 'Nicholas Hlobo: Phalela mgama and Wanyus' msila, 2010', in *Online Catalog Art Basel Miami Beach*, 4 November 2010, image of work currently available at <http://www.stevenson.info/exhibitionsbs/hlobo/phalela.htm>