

NANDIPHA MNTAMBO

Standard Bank Young Artist Award 2011

Texts by Ruth Simbao & David Elliott

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A SENSE OF PAUSE

Ruth Simbao interviews Nandipha Mntambo

A sense of pause was not what I expected from Nandipha Mntambo. Yet, despite the forceful drive of both her personality and the external interest in her work, what struck me about my conversation with her in Johannesburg in April 2011 was her reflection on quiet, private moments – moments of personal and professional perplexity; moments of acknowledging discomforts that many of us feel but seldom declare. When I asked her how it felt to perform as a bull and a bullfighter, merging animal and human qualities in the video *Ukungenisa* (2009), her response was, “It was nerve-wracking ... psyching myself up before doing it was really difficult.” Reflecting further, she disclosed: “Performing as an animal has been an eye-opener. There are elements of myself that I don’t really understand, don’t necessarily like, don’t know how to handle at the moment, so being able to draw from that experience was interesting.”

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Such honest self-reflection has enabled Mntambo to reveal the underbelly of various spectacles: the spectacle of bullfighting, the spectacle of ‘Africanicity’, and the spectacle of the art world. In his book *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle*, John MacAloon writes the following about spectacle: “In its every aspect – from the etymology of the word, to the metamessage of the frame, to the sensory and symbolic codes it activates, to the behaviours it prescribes – the spectacle is about seeing, sight and oversight.”¹ While we easily acknowledge the visual element of spectacle, which derives from the Latin *specere*, ‘to look’, how often do we consider *oversight* – the omission of subtleties or realities (whether deliberate or not) that would rob spectacle of its grandeur or hype? In order for the seeing of spectacle to exist, certain things need to remain unseen.

Performance theorist Peggy Phelan asserts that the visible is, in fact, defined by the invisible, for “sight ... is both imagistic and discursive”, and “the gaze guarantees the failure of seeing”² What, then, are our oversights in relation to the typical characteristics of spectacle, which are an emphasis on seeing, an emphasis on large size, a clear-cut distinction between actors and audience, and a dynamic where actors act and audiences get excited?³ What is it that we fail to see? What are the silences?

A careful reading of the breathers in Mntambo’s work reveals insight into the quiet,

1 John J MacAloon, ‘Olympic Games and the Theory of Spectacle in Modern Societies’, in *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle: Rehearsals Toward a Theory of Cultural Performance*, edited by MacAloon (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1984), 270.

2 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 14-15

3 MacAloon, ‘Olympic Games and the Theory of Spectacle in Modern Societies’, 243

forgotten moments of spectacle – the things overlooked. In her works that explore the art of bullfighting, particularly *Ukungenisa* and *Praça de Touros I-IV* (2008), loneliness is exposed despite the flashy exhibitionism of this flamboyant sport, and rather than keeping a distance between actor and audience, Mntambo merges actor, acted-upon and observer in an extraordinary way. It is the private moment of fear, experienced by both the bull and the bullfighter, that Mntambo draws from.

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THE UNDERBELLY OF SPECTACLE I: BULLFIGHTING

In watching a lot of bullfighting movies and reading a lot about bullfighting, and how fighters prepare for a fight, I have realised it's very private ... and then they have to be prepared for the spectacle. That was interesting to me – this very private act that then becomes an overtly public spectacle.

Nandipha Mntambo (2011)

Ukungenisa and *Praça de Touros I-IV* were shot in a deserted bullfighting arena in Mozambique, which was a Portuguese colony. The once-impressive concrete structure is now dilapidated, and grandstands are devoid of noise and excitement. In these works, the bullfighter, or matador, meditatively enters what Mntambo calls a solemn ritual of dressing before the fight. The matador's uniform – *traje de luces*, or suit of lights – is usually worn by men, for very few female bullfighters exist worldwide. Mntambo, however, merges male and female qualities in these and other works.

In the dance performed in Mntambo's video *Paso Doble* (2011), which is linked to the bullfighting spectacle, traditionally the male dancer represents the matador, while his female partner represents, through her dance, either the matador's shadow, his cape, or the bull itself. The term '*paso doble*' also refers to music – the music that usually accompanies the matador into the stadium and the performance of his final passes (*faena*). Through Mntambo's concentrated focus on the shadows of the dancers in the *Paso Doble*

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video, the artist converges the two dancers (who are both female), recalling her earlier fusion of the characteristics of the matador, the bull and the audience in *Ukungenisa*. In *Ukungenisa*, the figure paws the ground, like an agitated bull raising dust, and stares sternly ahead, concentrating on both killing, which is the role of the matador, and trying not to be killed, reflecting the instinct of the bull. In the photographs *Praça de Touros II* and *III*, the lonely figure in the middle of the hollow stadium waves a red cape, casting solid shadows on the ground. While both the cape and the shadow are performed by a single dancer in *Paso Doble*, which literally means 'double step', Mntambo plays with multiple forms of doubling where male folds into female, and bull, matador and observers dance together.

RUTH SIMBAO *When I look at the video Ukungenisa and the photographs Praça de Touros I-IV, what strikes me as very powerful is the concept of space. Particularly in the triptych Praça de Touros IV, the emptiness of the architectural space is very distinct. A lonely figure stands out starkly against the vacant architecture – epitomised by the crowdless arena grandstands – in a very powerful way. Can you say something about your experience of working in that space, especially considering the fact that this space, a bullfighting ring, was a space of spectacle for a large crowd? Now you stand all alone in this deserted space.*

NANDIPHA MNTAMBO What I found amazing about that building is that it is such a loud yet quiet space. It's very public but, in my experience of it, very private as well. It's become

something that's not really used by anyone anymore. It's abandoned. It's this building that was part of so much of Mozambican life at one stage, and now it just isn't anymore. In some ways it is a kind of by-product. When I make my work, people don't get to see the process, so this space was sort of the after-effect as well. It's something I didn't experience in its heyday. I am only experiencing the remnants or the crumbs of [the space].

When you were in Portugal, what sort of research did you do specifically in relation to the bullfighting costume? Did you make any changes considering the fact that you are a woman wearing a costume designed for men?

Everything that I do is an adaptation; it's something that I mould to fit what I want. So the bullfighter's costume is based on the typical male costume, and I try to work with cowhide so it becomes more like a fabric ... building in folds, making layers, trying to reflect the sequins and adornment and everything that is on a bullfighter's outfit ... I use cowhide to reference those elements that aren't there. In watching a lot of bullfighting movies and reading a lot about bullfighting, and how fighters prepare for a fight, it's very private ... and then they have to be prepared for the spectacle. That was interesting to me – this very private act that then becomes an overtly public spectacle.

There is an interesting contrast that one sees in these works. In the way you perform you create a sense of a crowd – the excitement and the energy – but in the still photographs especially, the figure looks very lonely. It's very private and quiet. This contrasts sharply to the concept of spectacle.

I was in Portugal last June during the World Cup, and in Lisbon they screened the soccer inside a bullfighting stadium. It is interesting to compare the spectacle of bullfighting to the spectacle of the World Cup, to compare the bullfighting arena to the soccer stadium. When the soccer was screened in the bullfighting ring, there was one crowd watching the spectacle of another crowd. Televised spectacle, of course, is mediated for the watching of television often takes place in a private space, but in this case it occurred in an architectural space of spectacle.

When you perform in this video, you appear as the bullfighter, the bull and the audience. Can you talk more about this collapse and particularly about being the audience?

When I was in the space, and trying to understand how to occupy different characters in the work, I started imagining watching myself. So it was about being in more than one place at the same time. It's a lot about being alone and trying to negotiate a very private but public situation.

There also seems to be the notion of confronting yourself, or even fighting yourself, which is a very private moment.

Yes, it's private and at times it becomes public too. We all experience moments when we are at war with ourselves - I think we show it in different ways.

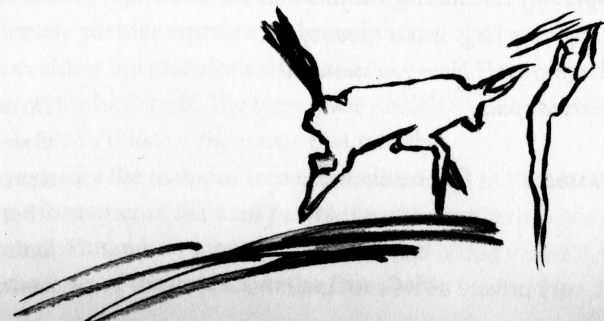
What was it like working with the choreographer Mpho Masila for Ukungenisa and how does that experience take your work into the realm of dance - a dance with yourself and a dance with

the bull? How did your choreographer get you into the role of being a bull, an animal?

I made him watch the bullfights I recorded when I was in Portugal and we watched the Spanish movie *Talk to Her* a lot. It's a movie about a female bullfighter. I was really interested in how this woman became almost androgynous in her demeanour and in her way of dealing with the bull. That was the starting point for me. It was interesting working with Mpho as I had not previously put my artistic process in anyone else's hands, and to find people who are on the same page as you and understand what you do is very difficult. So I spent a lot of time with him. It was difficult for me to have this moving image of me in someone else's hands. It was hard, but fun.

Did people get injured in the bullfighting you watched? Did the bulls get hurt?

Yes, they did. I really thought that I would feel sorry for the animal and for the fighter, but watching bullfighting is the most strangely addictive thing that I have ever experienced. The bull is sedated and it stays alone the night before the fight ... I was lucky to visit a lot of bull breeders as well, and bulls that are destined for



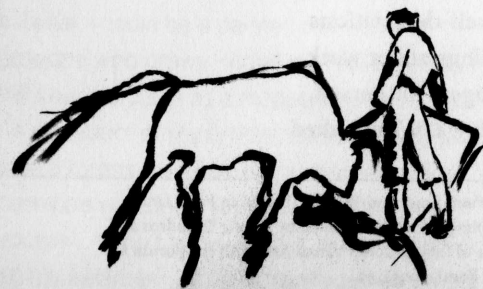
fighting are treated like the best thing on earth from birth. A particular mother and father are chosen for them - the bull-breeding business is amazingly regulated; it's a serious business. They are fed the best food. They have huge pastures to run around in, and the day before the fight, their lives change. They experience a strange, quiet, solitude ...

So this private quietness of the bull parallels the private ritual of the bullfighter dressing up for the fight.

Yes. The bull is sedated just before the fight, then just before it goes into the arena it is given this jolt. It's out there in this aggression, but it's a survival situation; it's scared, I'm sure. So it's this combination, and I'm sure the bullfighters get scared too. I think what I find interesting is the fighter, the bull and the audience share feelings of being afraid, of needing to perform, of an expectation of some kind - of a spectacle.

There seems to be a mutual fear and anxiety, as well as a mutual thrill and excitement.

You conducted research in both Portugal and Mozambique, so in terms of these two places there is a dialogue between the coloniser's space



and the colonised space. However, it is much more complex and subtle than that because there is a disjuncture between what Portugal was centuries ago in relation to Africa (very powerful and domineering) and what it is now - an economically weak country. When I was in Portugal giving a talk about art in Africa I was told that people there are quite embarrassed about their colonial history and their relationship to Africa. I think in a lot of your work you reflect such complexities. You deal with dichotomies, but you deal with the ambiguities of dichotomies that go beyond the obvious such as coloniser/colonised, or dominating/dominated. Can you talk a bit about how you work with merging and blending dichotomies, opposites and contradictions?

I guess because of how I grew up my life was always filled with those opposites that I had to figure out somehow. My defence mechanism was trying to find the in-between space and trying to understand the complexities that we don't have the words to articulate. I think I have always been interested in things that are under the surface. I also don't think that life is a straight line. I don't think that things are always what they seem. And so because I think about those complicated, in-between things all the time, it's what interests me.

While in-between spaces are hard, do you think they have the potential of also being productive spaces ... at least some of the time?

Yes, I enjoy in-between spaces, and I think I would be very boring otherwise! The in-between spaces are what have helped me create my work.

**THE UNDERBELLY OF SPECTACLE II:
'AFRICANICITY' AND THE ART WORLD**

I was thinking about the court jester and how it was a person who was employed to provide some kind of entertainment or spectacle. So the work [*The Jester*] reveals the fact that I was also playing at the time in the sense of trying to figure out what was going on with the material, and how I wanted to function within the art world, and how I wanted to be represented.

Nandipha Mntambo (2011)

Just as the spectacle of bullfighting hides the private, vulnerable moment of the matador strapping his suit to his body in the belly of the arena beneath the grandstand, the art world is built on deliberate oversights. Becoming an arena of spectacle, there's an element of artifice: sequined trappings, staged personas and cheering crowds.

Then there's the showdown.

While it is not always clear who is the bull, who is the matador, or who is the cape being used for the lure, often the annunciations of who's who come from the outside – outside of the self. Underlying much of Mntambo's work is a desire to slip between and beyond; to evade the grasp of categorisation; to create the space to self-identify and to speak on her own behalf.

In 'Maps of Emergency: Fault Lines and Tectonic Plates', Stuart Hall argues that artists from the African continent are in the process of freeing themselves from the "burden of representation", for they are often expected to announce some kind of 'Africanicity'.⁴

However, as he argues, "There is no one 'Africa' here to be positively affirmed", and he suggests that 'Africa' can too easily become a lazy signifier. While the increase of international exposure of artists from Africa in recent years is largely valued, the perpetuation of group shows framed simply around the loose signifier 'Africa', rather than being meaningfully themed shows, continues to be problematic. In the sculpture titled *The Jester* (2008), Mntambo explores the resulting dis-ease she experiences as an artist who is too often pushed into the dark corners of 'Africanicity', and of whom it is often expected that her reference to cows will tell a tale of rural Africa, deep tradition and monolithic culture.

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Mntambo's space-making is not simply about making room for definitive self-declarations that would limit understandings of her work, but it is about allowing passage – for herself, for nuance and for new readings. When asked

⁴ Stuart Hall, 'Maps of Emergency: Fault Lines and Tectonic Plates', in *Fault Lines: Contemporary African Art and Shifting Landscapes*, edited by Gilane Tawadros and Sarah Campbell (London: Institute of International Visual Arts with the Forum for African Arts and the Prince Claus Fund, 2003), 32.

to explain the title *Ukungenisa* she said, "This means to allow passage, to allow something to happen, to allow space. Not in the way that you just let the thing happen on its own; you are guiding it, you are allowing the passage for it to happen." While *Ukungenisa* is the title for one specific piece, the concept has broader relevance to her body of work. Much of Mntambo's pause, her grappling with her work – its meaning and its reception – is about allowing passage; allowing space for something to happen.

In conversation she's very open about this process:

While some writers attempt to interpret your reference to cows as a direct illustration of certain African traditions and rituals, in your work and in conversations about your work you seem to distance yourself from that. Can you say something about your work in terms of this ambivalence, particularly as someone who grew up in Johannesburg, as someone who is a different generation from your mother who might see the symbol of the cow in a much more cultural context? How does your work speak to you as an urban, cosmopolitan person of a young generation?

In my opinion, the issue is that cowhide is a material. I could be a painter, or I could be someone who draws – cowhide is the material that I have chosen as a means of expression. It is a product of my artistic thinking. I wanted to be a forensic pathologist and I really love chemicals and understanding the chemical process ... I don't know if that's the only reason, but my beginning of using cowhide was a very

private, strangely spiritual experience of having a dream that I can't really remember. But I do remember there were cows in the dream. This is why I chose the material. I enjoy exploring how a chemical process can give me a certain amount of control over this organic material.

How long ago was that dream?

That was seven years ago now. Then I connected the content of this dream to a very superficial liking of chemicals and a desire to understand the material and how it works; how to manipulate it. And so I think for me it's never going to be about a particular culture. I just happen to be black. I could be Chinese or Indian. I think that some writers find it the easiest option to speak about black women and *lobola* and whatever, but it's never going to be about that; it never was about that. It's about an interest in dead material and chemicals, and the connection that every civilisation in the world has to the cow. We all have an experience of the animal – it's one of the many things that connect us.

I have not seen much written on the work The Jester. Tell me about it.

It was made for a show curated by David Brodie, a group show called *Trickster*. At the time I was thinking that I am a bit of a trickster in a way ... taking something that isn't traditionally an art material and making it into that. And I was thinking about the court jester and how it was a person who was employed to provide some kind of entertainment or spectacle. So the work reveals the fact that I was also playing at the time in the sense of trying to figure out

what was going on with the material, and how I wanted to function within the art world, and how I wanted to be represented. I think that was the time I decided I was going to limit the 'African' group shows that my work was going to be on. I was playing at the time - trying to figure it out.

Yes, I guess one has to be a kind of trickster in order to self-identify as an artist, because in the art world one can too easily be told that you are this or that; your art means this or that. You have to trick people in the art world in a sense, to let it be what you want it to be, and to be yourself.

I think one has to find a combination of strategies. Yes, one has to perform a bit of trickery but one also has to have the language to articulate what one wants viewers to experience within an artwork. A viewer needs to be bewildered by and guided through the understanding of an artwork.

While many of your suspended hide figures, like The Jester, are vertical, Sondzela (2008) is very different in its distinct horizontality. Can you say something about this work, particularly its horizontal form and the glass beads that cascade down from the figure? The glass is almost invisible, so there is a lovely sense of floating in the work.

Sondzela means 'come closer', so I was literally asking the viewer to come closer and take a look. I think that the horizontal stance, in a way, seems less aggressive and less confrontational, and so it's about wanting a person to be drawn in to take a closer look. In terms of the glass beads, at the time I was really interested in

culture. I don't know ... I was possibly a bit confused. Because of how my work began [with a dream], a lot of people were thinking about very spiritual connotations of my work, and because I'm black and I dreamt about cows, the interpretations were often that it must mean there is some *sangoma* situation happening. [Laughs].

Yeah, that dream is a dangerous thing to bring up as it can be interpreted in such a simplistic way!

I think I was just trying to find connections, so I started reading up on dreaming and how it works, and then something led me to the Maasai. I was dealing with the female body, and was interested in culture and adornment and how people view the body, and I started to get very interested in jewellery. I then realised that Maasai women create their own necklaces and these necklaces show your status as a woman; it indicates whether you are married or single, your age and status within the community. So on the one hand this thing, the necklace, tells so much about you culturally ... but at the same time it doesn't really say anything.

Although there might be a tendency to interpret your work in relation to the concept of 'African culture' - whatever that is - it is interesting to think about the various ways your art resonates with the works of artists from elsewhere in the world. I was recently working on a proposal that considers your work in relation to the art of the contemporary Chinese artist Zhang Huan who also uses cowhide in works such as Cowskin Buddha Face No 1 (2007), Cowskin Buddha Face No 2 (2008), or the cowhide giants he produced in 2008.

Oh, I love him so much!

Have you met him?

No, I wanted to meet him. I went to China last year and I emailed his studio in Shanghai, but I did not get to meet him.

It is interesting to think that his use of cowhide, ash and incense might be interpreted as relating to tradition and spirituality. Apparently in the Giant series the skins come from Henan Province where he grew up and for him animal motifs are often linked to rural life.⁵ However, his earlier performance work in China and the USA was anything but traditional, leading him to “reject the notion of a homogenous cultural identity in favour of a subject that changes over time and is constantly redefining itself”.⁶ This freedom to self-identify is so important. What interests you about his work?

For me it's the scale of his work, as well as the attractive and yet repulsive element. His work is very overpowering, but in a way also draws you in, which I absolutely love. He makes you look again. He makes you look closer.

And some of his later work is also very quiet.

Yes, I really enjoy that about his work. I actually saw one of the giant cowhide people, a figure with a baby, in New York. It was quietly overpowering but drew one in at the same time. Like something out of a fantasy, maybe even a nightmare - it's difficult to tell. It was huge, like four stories high. I was blown away!

When I saw your work at the Sydney Biennale

last year I was struck by the proximity of your work to that of Louise Bourgeois and by the way bodies and clothing completely merged in your works and hers. How do you feel about meanings that can open up when your work is displayed with that of other artists in group shows?

Yeah, I was quite excited about being close to Louise Bourgeois' work! I really enjoy being put in relationship to artists that I respect, and whose work I understand. Having work out there means that you should allow for connections or parallels or conversations with other people's work. I really enjoy it, as long as I am on the same page.

Do people ever try to connect your work with Nicholas Hlobo's? Visually there are connections with your work and his, especially with the ideas of clothing and materials, and the folds ...

I love Nicholas' work, in terms of how he thinks, his use of material. But people curating shows or writing about our work haven't really picked up on the connections between us. As I mentioned before, I think it's been the easiest option for critics and writers to 'group' my work with that of other black women artists - it seems that it would be too complex to have a more dynamic conversation about materiality... and that is the connection I think Nicholas and I share within our art-making process. I guess it's never really crossed anyone's mind before.

5 Dziejwior, Yilmaz, 'Self-Made Man', in *Zhuang Huan*, edited by Dziejwior, Roselee Goldberg and Robert Storr (New York: Phaidon, 2009), 40.

6 Dziejwior, Yilmaz, 'Self-Made Man', 38.

THE FAILURE OF ART'S GAZE

[T]he gaze guarantees the failure of seeing.

Peggy Phelan (1993)⁷

It's about the power of the non-gaze ...

Nandipha Mntambo (2011)

If spectacle is about oversight as much as it is about sight, what could this mean for the gaze? Is the gaze about seeing, or about what we fail to see? Does the non-gaze see more than the gaze? What makes us look a little closer?

In the bronze bust Zeus (2009), what I find to be powerful is the way the body moves forward – including the eyes and horns. Everything seems to move in a particular direction; there's quite a lot of dynamism to it. Can you say something about that portrait in relation to art historical traditions of busts ... how this image debunks certain ideas about portraiture and the bust? And in contrast to Sengifikile (2009), the other bust in which the eyes are lowered and the body is more upright ... can you compare the two busts?

Zeus came first, and I was really wanting something based on me but very masculine, domineering; a confronting image. At the time I was researching bronze and portraiture and how people used their own image in a way where they immortalised themselves in that particular moment. So I was thinking of the idea of immortalising oneself, making oneself seem more important than one might be. I guess I was interested in destabilising

ideas around the human image and how we understand it. So when I started making that work, it was really interesting that as the features developed I saw more of my mother than myself in Zeus. Not that she looks like a man, but it was really interesting to be confronted with an image of her that I was not expecting to come up. And I had used her body in my work before. Then it was a very intentional thing, but here it just came up unexpectedly. So I have been trying to understand whether, in a strange way, Zeus is a reflection of how I see my mother, or if it's just totally about me.

I initially made Sengifikile because my best friend's father wanted an artwork from me and I was working on Zeus and really loving bronze at the time Although it is more me in terms of the features, I really love that work more than Zeus because it's that same thing as in The Rape of Europa (2009) – the recognition of the power that one holds within a particular moment. The eyes are facing down but I think there is a very real and clear recognition and realisation of the gaze. So it's a work that – unlike Zeus which is very confronting – draws

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you in and as such I really enjoy the power that the work has to make you look a little bit closer.

It's interesting that in Zeus you start off making something more masculine and it ends up like your mother, and in the other one you start making it with a man in mind and it ends up being more feminine. It's like a subconscious reversing or merging of gender.

Can you say something about the strong gaze in the photograph Europa (2008), particularly the fact that it was on the front cover of Art South Africa in 2008? It's almost as if it's an easier image compared to the lowered gaze that you say is more powerful in the bust Sengifikile. In some ways the direct gaze in Europa makes it easier for people to latch onto as a powerful image.

When I made *Europa* I was beginning to explore the whole idea of the animal-human and how people really do forget that we are animals as well. And I woke up one day and thought that I want to try and make myself into a bull. I was reading a lot on the Minotaur and I was trying to understand how I would look as that kind of character, and I think that work is very direct, but strangely seductive in a way.

Do you think that comes through in the gaze?

I think it's about the gaze, it's about the smile on the face, it's about how we understand the black body, it's about how we understand the female body, and it's about how we understand what's attractive and repulsive. For me, all those things are strangely problematised in that image and no one ever talks about it in that way, which I find problematic. Everyone says "oh, great

image ... powerful", but no one speaks about the female body, the animal-human; how we understand sexuality, how we understand the border between the male and the female ... and that, for me, is what the work is about.

In terms of seduction, the body is leaning forward, but then you have these horns that would block someone from being close to your body, so there is a pull and push effect.

What about the title of the bronze bust, Sengifikile?

It means 'now I have arrived'. It's about the power of the non-gaze. This work is confrontational in a quieter, more subverted way.

The eyes are not shut, right?

Yes, they are not shut.

That's interesting as it is a kind of subversion of the normal art historical idea that if as a woman you gaze back boldly you are reclaiming power and if you do not – if you lower your gaze – people can look at you in a debasing way.

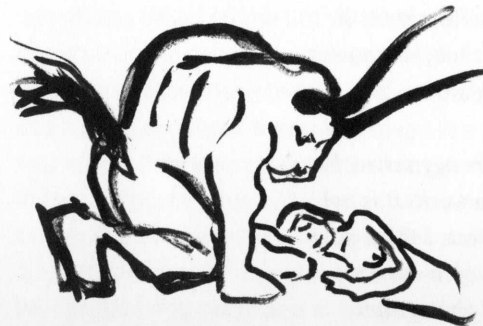
Yeah. I think it is the other way around. There is so much power in not returning the gaze – a viewer is forced to come closer. The viewer is forced to take action in order to fully engage or be part of the experience of the work.

In a sense, the work Zeus is more aggressive, but in the way you discuss these two works it is not necessarily the most powerful piece. I think your work deals with those subtleties of in-between spaces well. For example, in the photograph

The Rape of Europa (2009), one figure appears to be dominating and the other appears to be passive, but it is much more complex than that, as it is the same figure.

Yes, it appears to be passive, but at the same time it's also not, because there is recognition of the other. There is a clear recognition of the potential threat. Looking one's possible aggressor in the eye ... The figure who is allowing the other one to overpower it or her is doing it with a certain kind of power as well. I am not saying that victims don't exist, but there is a certain power that we all have in situations and you may not necessarily recognise it at the time.

And this tension comes out in the fact that in this image you are both of those things – you are both of the figures.



REFUGE FROM SPECTACLE

I was thinking about this idea of being very visible, but also being able to hide...

Nandipha Mntambo (2011)

There are two pieces that I have struggled to understand, partly because most writing focuses on culture and tradition even though I don't think that is necessarily what you are talking about. These are uMcedo (2009) and Refuge (2009). Can you help me understand them?

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With *Refuge* I had started making the army *Emabutfo* (2009) and was thinking around the idea of a fight. Because of how people choose to understand my work I have had to try and become more articulate about how I don't want people to interpret my work. I found myself in a situation where I was having this very private fight with myself and trying to figure out what was going on, what I wanted to say. A lot of the time, as artists we depend on critics and writers to help us find the language of what our artwork is about, and I felt frustrated because the language that was being offered at the time was not at all helpful in describing what I was thinking about or what I wanted my work to be about. So I was having this strange struggle with myself having to figure out how to use language that accurately expressed my thoughts and process. With *Refuge* I was thinking about this idea of being very visible, but also being able to hide. So in the kneeling ... some people would see it as a prayer, some people would see it as a submissive position, some people would see it as a very sexual

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position and some people would see it in other ways. I was playing with this idea of an ambiguous space and the relationship between being there and also being concealed.

In *uMcedo* I was thinking of a similar idea - being able to hide, but being very visible at the same time. I was thinking about a space where one could enter and only exit when you are ready. It was really amazing that although the work smells really bad, lots of people went in there. It was really interesting to have exactly what I wanted to happen.

What does the title uMcedo mean?

The object *uMcedo* was for Zulu men ... the object is made out of reeds; it looks like a little hut, and it is worn as a pendant on a necklace. And *uMcedo* means 'the final thing', or the thing that puts your outfit together, so it would be the last thing that men wear as part of their outfit, and it's meant to be something that helps protect you. I was thinking about completion. It completes your outfit and it protects you.



PAUSE: 'WORKS THAT MAKE ME CRY'

There are actually three works of mine right now that give me that feeling of crying.

Nandipha Mntambo (2011)

Nandikeshvara is a strange work, because it made me cry for a while. How it started: my best friend worked in India for two years and she called me and said, "Nandi, you won't believe it, but there is a cow called Nandi. It's a bull and they worship it here in India", and I just kind of dismissed the conversation. When I was preparing the show *Encounter* (2007), I created the army first, and was drawn to white cowhide. I had no idea why because I had worked in black cowhide mainly before. As I was working, I don't know what it was that happened, but I rethought of this Nandi and started researching about it and realised that it was a white bull. And I was really intrigued by the fact that all of a sudden I had been drawn to this white hide, as I had no idea why I was drawn to it. And then this story comes up again, and we have the same name ... and so it was just really strange to me. I guess I started thinking around the idea of immortalisation again, and creating something that was very powerful, but also very quiet.

As for the gestures, I think it was in relationship particularly to the army and being a leader, but at the same time, Nandi became so full of himself that Shiva had to teach him a lesson in humility, and so he crippled him. Then he became the guardian of his temples. I think that quiet power, and having to learn the lesson of humility, was what I was thinking about.

Yes, being very powerful but quiet could be viewed as an apparent incongruence but it is not necessarily a contradiction at all. In As I Am (2009) there is another seeming contradiction between something almost grotesque and something very elegant, and yet these two elements come together quite naturally. The hooves become like these enormous hands, which are grotesque in terms of scale, but then the way the material hangs down, it is quite elegant.

Actually, that is the other work that makes me cry a lot. I started realising that, because of how I grew up, and because of how my mother is, there is a very specific way that I allow the world to see me. I will go to the studio looking a particular way, change and do my thing, change again and leave looking just like I did when I arrived there in the morning. And that is how my mom exists - she is very particular about how the world is allowed to see her. That is a part of her residue in my life. At the same time I am a lot taller than a lot of girls, I am bigger than a lot of girls, and I have been mistaken for a man at times, and have had to understand the in-between space of it. I have enjoyed being an artist, being able to travel around the world and observing how artists or people from Africa continue to be viewed. I guess people's understanding of me while I have been travelling becomes a little more spicy because I happen to be a black female artist, and I happen to live in Africa, so in the opinion of some people who have not travelled to Africa or have only been to specific parts of the continent, I must live in a shack with no electricity and very little concept of the current world. All these interesting but problematic issues that used to be more prevalent 10 years ago still happen. Realising that, ultimately it makes me sad at

times. So yeah, I guess that work is about feeling immobile. Feeling a bit immobile, but having to have a particular pretence at the same time.

The hands in As I Am are so large. What can one do with such large hands? There is a clumsiness to them; an awkwardness and a distortion. What could one do with such hands that are made from hooves?

I started playing with hooves a little while before and really enjoyed the fact that they are the things at the end of the animal and the things that help it move, but because they are not on the animal anymore they become useless, they are not used for the same purpose anymore. So, for example, with the cloud of hooves in Nandikeshvara (2009) - the sculpture is never going to be able to walk anywhere. So I really enjoyed the reference to becoming crippled and having these things that are meant to help one move around.

And the third one that makes you cry?

[Laughs]. It's kind of funny because it is a work that no one wants to buy! It's the strangest thing. It's Iqaba Lami - an old work where I started working with cow faces and I came across the Herero women in Namibia and I was so fascinated with these bustles and bustles and bustles that they wear, so I created a work that was about that, and using cow faces as these bustles. And I just cried, and cried and cried. And no one wants to buy the work.

Do you know why you cried?

No. Not yet.

RUTH SIMBAO IS AN ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR IN THE FINE ART DEPARTMENT AT RHODES UNIVERSITY, AND THE PROJECT LEADER FOR THE MELLON FOCUS AREA, 'VISUAL AND PERFORMING ARTS OF AFRICA'. HER CURRENT RESEARCH INTERESTS INCLUDE CHINA-AFRICA RELATIONS, THE GLOBAL SOUTH, INTRA-CONTINENTAL AND CONTRA-FLOW DIASPORAS, SITE-SPECIFICITY AND COSMOLOCALISM IN CONTEMPORARY ART.



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Endpapers (hardcover only) *Untitled*, 2010, oil on photo on
 canvas, 4 works, 183 x 183cm each

Page 2 Detail of *Actos de fe que estao entre mae e 5*, 2011,
 cow hair, charcoal and ink on paper, 145 x 151cm

Pages 8, 10, 12, 13, 20, 21, 23, 24, 29 *Untitled drawings*, 2009,
 ink on cotton paper, various dimensions

Page 32 Detail of *Actos de fe que estao entre mae e 4*,
 2011, cow hair, charcoal and ink on paper, 121 x 151cm

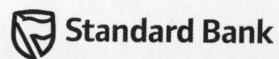
Page 112 Detail of *Actos de fe que estao entre mae e 3*, 2011,
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Page 116 *Vela Sikubhekile* and *Retrato de um lutador* at the
 artist's studio in Johannesburg, May 2011

Page 118 *Entrar* photographed in progress at the artist's
 studio in Johannesburg, May 2011

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info@stevenson.info
 www.stevenson.info

STEVENSON

CAPE TOWN

Buchanan Building
 160 Sir Lowry Road
 Woodstock 7925

PO Box 616
 Green Point 8051

T +27 (0)21 462 1500
 F +27 (0)21 462 1501

JOHANNESBURG

62 Juta Street
 Braamfontein 2001

Postnet Suite 281
 Private Bag x9
 Melville 2109

T +27 (0)11 326 0034/41
 F +27 (0)86 275 1918