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The "Face of the Other"[1]

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This brief response to the artworks in the exhibition, *Representation of Otherness,* considers two issues about representation; firstly, how black people and their culture are depicted, and how these depictions communicate their "otherness." Notions of self/other are deeply rooted in South Africa's political and racialised past (and some might say *present).* This notion of racial "othering" also applies to other countries where race is a central feature of social life. When it comes to this history of the past, black people have always been the "Other" in relation to the mainstream white culture in South African life. Subjected to this racial "othering," black people were not simply "the other," but were "other" in relation to whiteness. For me this idea is crystallised in the following Fanonian quote in his *Black Skin, White Mask*: "for not only must the black man [sic] be black; he must be black in relation to the white man [sic]." Thus, as the very embodiment of difference within a racial politics of exclusion, marginalisation, discrimination, prejudice and all that is negative, "the real Other," according to Fanon, "is and will continue to be the black man [sic]." But the context of Frantz Fanon's reflections was a turbulent violent struggle and transition in his country from the grip of colonialism – that colonial era that produced some of the most demeaning depictions of black people, one small example of which appears in Anton Kannemeyer's *Alphabet of Democracy* collection in this exhibition as depicted in the image "b is for black" (see Fig. 1). Is it possible then, that in the post-apartheid South Africa, artists are engaging a different discourse that offers new perspectives on race relations, one that disrupts the notions of "otherness" that Fanon describes with such urgency and poignant emphasis? This is the question that concerns me in the second part of my inquiry about some of the works in this exhibition.

The second point of inquiry in this discussion considers the question of whether the South African artists presented in this exhibition use their works to seek some form of

[1] Essay response to artworks at Exhibition, Representation of Otherness, at the Stegmann Gallery, University of the Free State, 21 May 2015.

"redress," that is to say, whether their artworks convey a commitment to addressing the (*mis*)representation of blackness in visual art that is associated with stereotyped and demeaning images of black people, and by so doing offer new perspectives in racial discourse.

The backdrop of the reflections I wish to share in this contribution are the following artworks drawn from the *Representation of Otherness* exhibition: Andrew Putter's "African Hospitality," Mary Sibande's "I have not, I have," Paul Albert's "Louw Weppener se Graf," and David Goldblatt's "Child with a Replica of a Zulu Hut …"

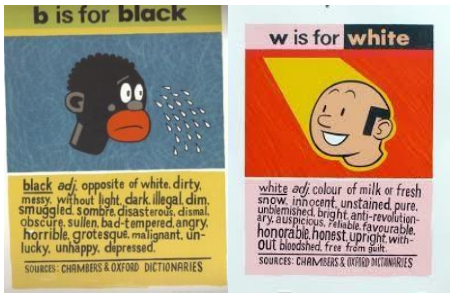


Fig. 1: From *Alphabet of Democracy* by Anton Kannemeyer

Disrupting the Positioning of Blacks as Objects of Anthropological Gaze

Before discussing the relevant artworks in this section, I would like to share a somewhat personal story, my mother's attempt to reclaim my father's right to recognition when she found out that authors of an anthropological study conducted in the 1960s had failed to identify my father by name. Five years ago, browsing through the library at the University of Cape Town, I came across the book by Monica Wilson and Archie Mafeje, *Langa: A Study of Social Groups in an African Township*, which was published in 1963. I was surprised to see my father's picture on the jacket cover of the book. There was a second photograph of him in one of the chapters in the book; yet in neither of these photos was my father identified by name. When I told my mother about the book, and about the authors' failure to identify my father by name, she was incredulous. She recalled hosting Professors Monica Wilson and Dr. Archie Mafeje, and their anthropology students in our home to facilitate their connection with people they wanted to interview for their study. "How can they be silent about his name," she said, "it's like making him invisible!" She asked me to send her the book – "so I can see for myself." When I collected the book during a visit, below the photograph of my father inside the book my mother had written "Mr. W. T.

Gobodo."

I was deeply moved by my mother's act of naming my father in a UCT library book. It seemed to me that by writing my father's name in her own handwriting, even on this one copy of the book, she was restoring my father's dignity. I could not help but wonder what the silence that she said made him invisible evoked for her; what past memories this act of exclusion of his name brought back for her. It struck me that the simple act of writing my father's name was something more – perhaps an inscription, a demand for recognition – inserting her imprint and his name in the space that was silent about my father's identity: *Mr.* W. T. Gobodo.

I think that in his work, Andrew Putter engages with this act of restoration of a dignity that has been denied through (*mis*)representation, the depiction of a proud culture made invisible in unflattering, demeaning images. He seems to be challenging the perspective that black cultural artifacts are backwards, primitive, and in a way makes it not only visible to white eyes, but also appealing to white tastes. Some may say Putter's works gestures towards an appeal to the "exotic," but I think his concern goes much deeper than this analysis may suggest. One finds evidence for this point of view in another collection that is not represented in this exhibition, his *Native Works,* which present black women and men, young and old, in a way that is clearly intended to "make amends" – if one might use this term – as redress of past humiliation of black people and their cultural identity in the arts.

From *African Hospitality* by Andrew Putter

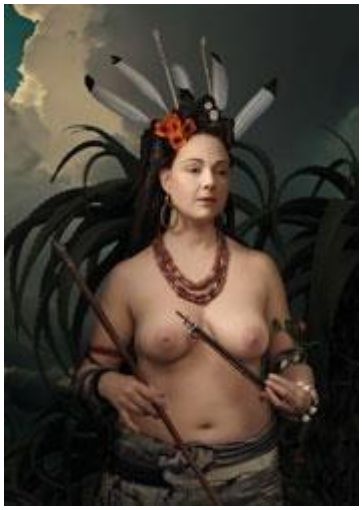
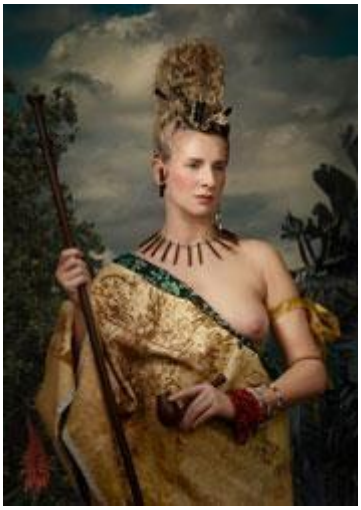
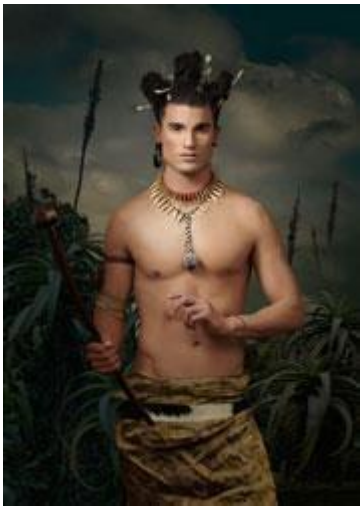


Fig. 2: *Bessie*



Frances Hosea



Joao the Portuguese

Black artists have not been satisfied with white artists' acts of recognition, as the ones to bestow recognition upon black life and black culture. Rather, they have asserted their agency and the dignity of their own experience in a way that confronts whiteness with its own discrimination, subjugation, and marginalisation of black life. Mary Sibande's *I have not, I have*, seems to be a response to the dehumanisation of racial "othering" that appropriates the "master's" (or perhaps "madam's") own language, yet she does this in order to wrest away from the dominant culture the fiat power to dehumanize (see Fig. 3). By appropriating the master/madam's representations of blackness, subverting and transforming the "maid/domestic worker" into an elegant and striking image, as she does so effectively in *I have not, I have* (see Fig. 3), she moves away from the usual objectified powerlessness devoid of any sense of agency, a journey away from the subject position of the dehumanised "Other." Her depiction of the woman as playful, picking petals off a flower, echoing the game "she/he loves me, she/he loves me not," is an act of visual restoration of the pride and dignity of black women. Even the petals on the ground do not seem to have fallen from daisies, the flower associated with the game "she loves me/she loves me not." They can more accurately be seen as rose petals – the woman depicted here is a woman of taste, elegance and refinement. Other black women may share in her defiant pose, one that says "I claim this space as mine too!"

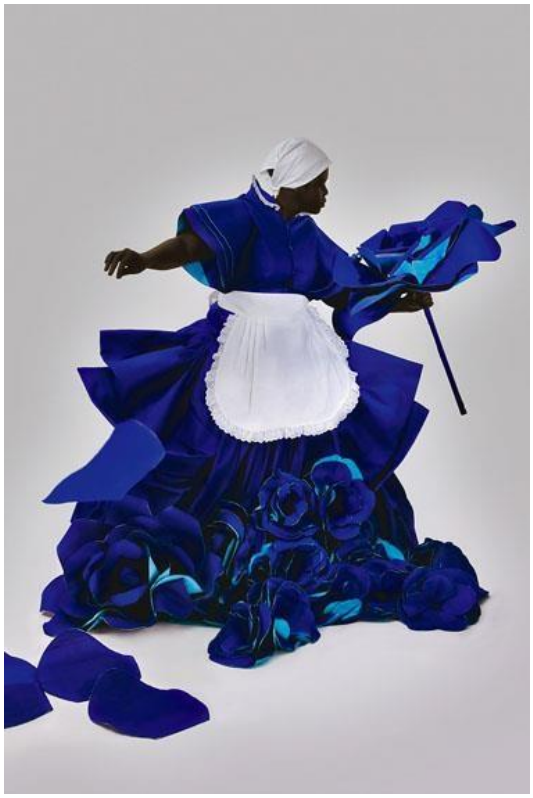
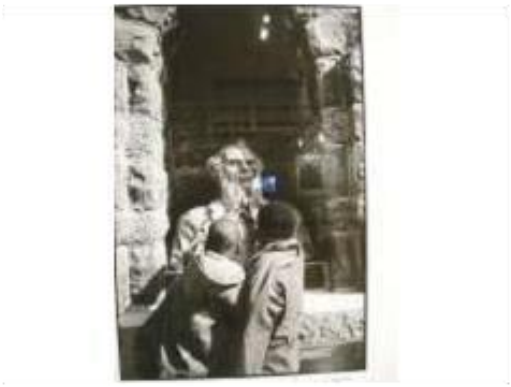


Fig. 3: *I have not, I have* by Mary Sibande

I would like to end with a note about the artworks that invite us to embark on a journey that might lead us to shared community with one another. Andrew Putter's *African Hospitality* (Fig. 2) seems to suggest this movement towards connection and building bridges that might bring us closer to one another. I have been struck by the image of young children and what they are *doing* in two of the works in the exhibition, Paul Albert's *Louw Weppener se Graf* (Fig. 4), and David Goldblatt's Child *with a Replica of a Zulu Hut* (Fig. 5). Could one perhaps interpret these scenes as a kind of "promise," a sign, that it is the next generation that is going to lead us to that hopeful place, to undo the damage of centuries of colonial destruction to the human soul? After all, Bessie, the English girl (evoked by Putter in this exhibition, Fig. 2) and castaway from one of the eighteenth century shipwrecks off the coast of Pondoland, lived among the Xhosas/amaMpondo; the little white girl in Goldblatt's photograph "chooses" to enter into the Zulu hut while the mother maintains her distance. The two boys' apparent fascination with Louw Weppener's beard/face – daring, as it were, to touch this white man's face – symbolise, too, the possibility of crossing the boundaries that divide.

ALBERTS, PAUL 1946 - 2006
Louw Weppener se graf, Bethulie 1993



Medium: Archivally processed print
Measurements: 42,5 x 28,5 cm
Date: 2006
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Fig. 4

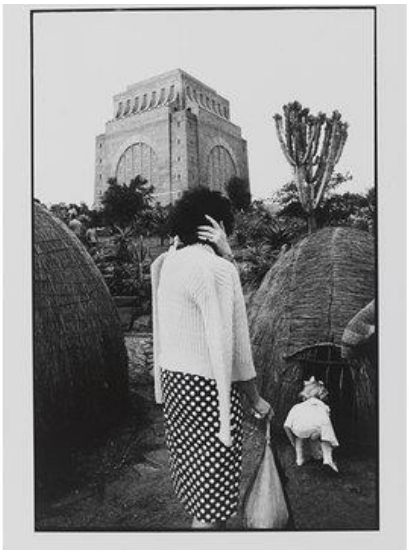

Fig. 5: David Goldblatt's *Child with a Replica Of a Zulu Hut.*

These symbolic acts by the little ones invite us seriously to consider the possibility that we might respond to the Other, and to the suffering of the Other as if the Other were our own flesh and blood. This vision of shared humanity with others calls to mind a morality that is Other-directed, concerned with promoting the ethical vision of compassion and care for others. With this in mind, we could respond to this exhibition as if it is an invitation to a site for ethical engagement, a site for forging human links across time and space with the Other.