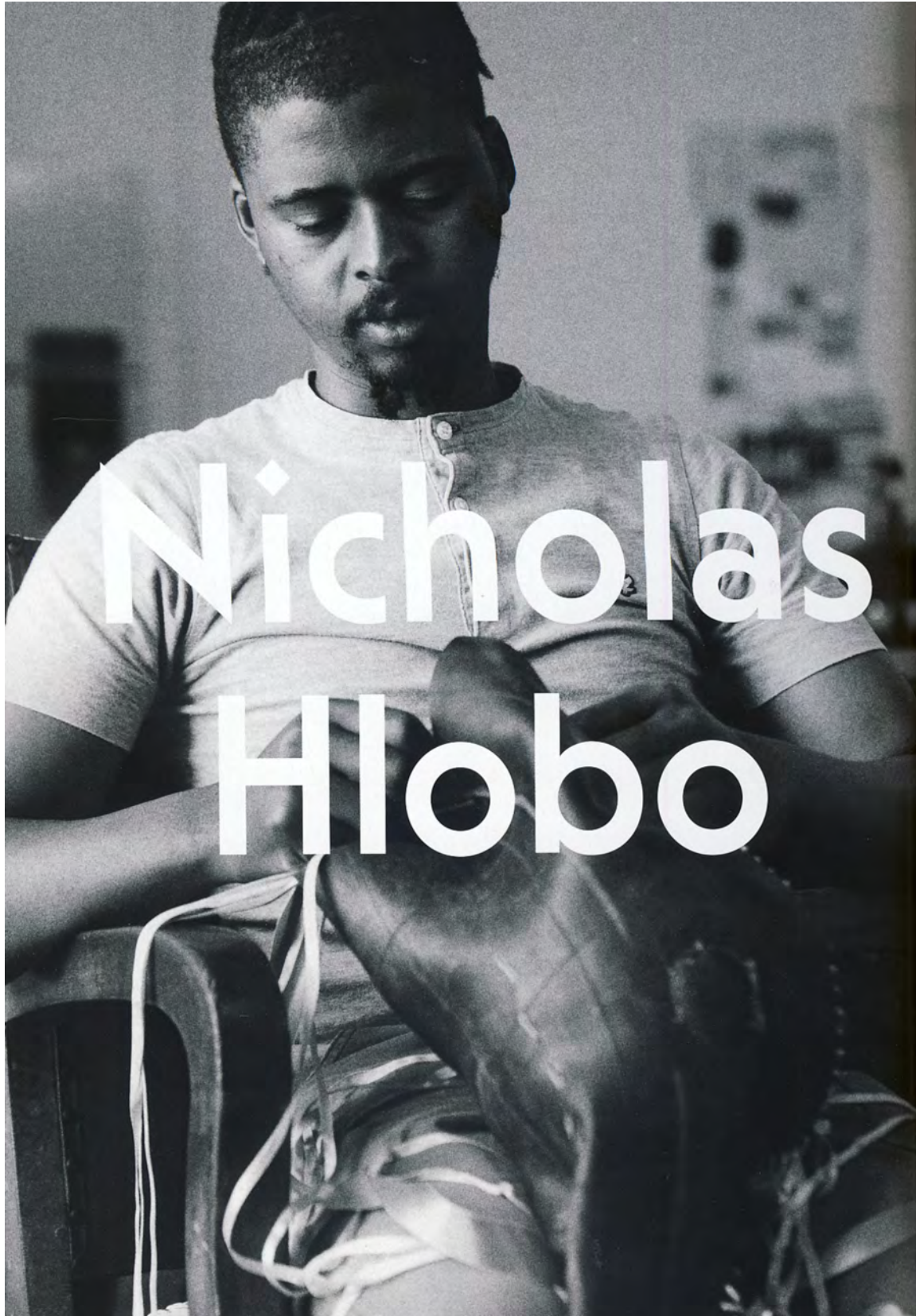


LEHMANN MAUPIN

# KALEIDOSCOPE

Summer 2012



# The Subversive Stitch





Shunning conventional artistic materials and traditional male roles, the works of South African Nicholas Hlobo (handmade sculptures, stitched paper works, visual diaries, installations and performances) are overtly about the process of their making and the journey of the artist's self-growth. By articulating his sexual politics, sociohistorical positioning and ethnicity in the diverse worlds that his work inhabits, Hlobo explores desire, imagination and the very potential for transformation.

Photography by  
Marc Shoul

Interview by  
Sean O'Toole

SEAN O'TOOLE I want to start by establishing links between your biography and your approach to materials and subject matter. You previously told me that as a boy growing up in the Transkei, you learned to make traditional *indimoni* drums using tire inner tubes as an alternative to cowhide. Was it purely economic, the decision to work with rubber?

NICHOLAS HLOBO Economic, but also a change in lifestyle — hide wasn't readily available. Boys used the *indimoni* drums, which can be anything from a five-liter paint tin to something much bigger, during parades and performances; they used them to announce their decision to embark on the process of becoming adults. Playing the drums was a last celebration before the circumcision rituals marking entry into manhood and adulthood. Boys would go around the neighborhood beating drums, singing. People would give them gifts. In Xhosa culture, boys are not given that much respect. You are treated like a dog, basically. I think it was a way to instill an anxiety and desire among boys to want to become a man, to acquire status.

SO You grew up in the village of Newtown with your maternal grandmother while your parents lived and worked in Johannesburg, right? Your grandmother ran a strict Anglican home that shunned many of the old traditions. How is it that you are so familiar with the use and associative qualities of the materials in your works?

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NH My grandmother was an illiterate woman who never went to school. She was separated from her husband and owned a tavern. She had very firm ideas — feminist views, you could say — about how her household should be run. She believed that kids from wealthy families — urbanized families with higher education, people like us — should not play on the streets or attend ceremonies. She didn't like the idea of my cousin Micky and I going to weddings, birthday parties or traditional ceremonies. My grandmother had this thing that it would create the impression that we were not fed at home, that it was disrespectful. She got angry whenever she found out we had been watching traditional ceremonies. Growing up, I really saw her as the devil. She could be tender in private, but once the extended family awoke she changed into this authority figure. Psychologically, I think she was a hermaphrodite. I remember her arguing with men at her tavern. "I wear both the pants and the frocks in this house." She was very vocal. "I have both the balls and boobs in this house. Don't tell me what to do." I still quote my grandmother all the time. I am who I am thanks to my grandmother. She instilled a lot of good in me, although I sometimes feel cheated for not being able to play in the streets. I don't know how to milk a cow, herd goats or ride a horse, things I should be able to do having grown up in the countryside. I was never given that opportunity or taught those things, which I feel I should have known or had experience of. It was almost like living in a convent, in a way. Yet somehow I have come to emulate her worldview. I don't trust people easily, I have very few friends, and I am very solitary.

Author

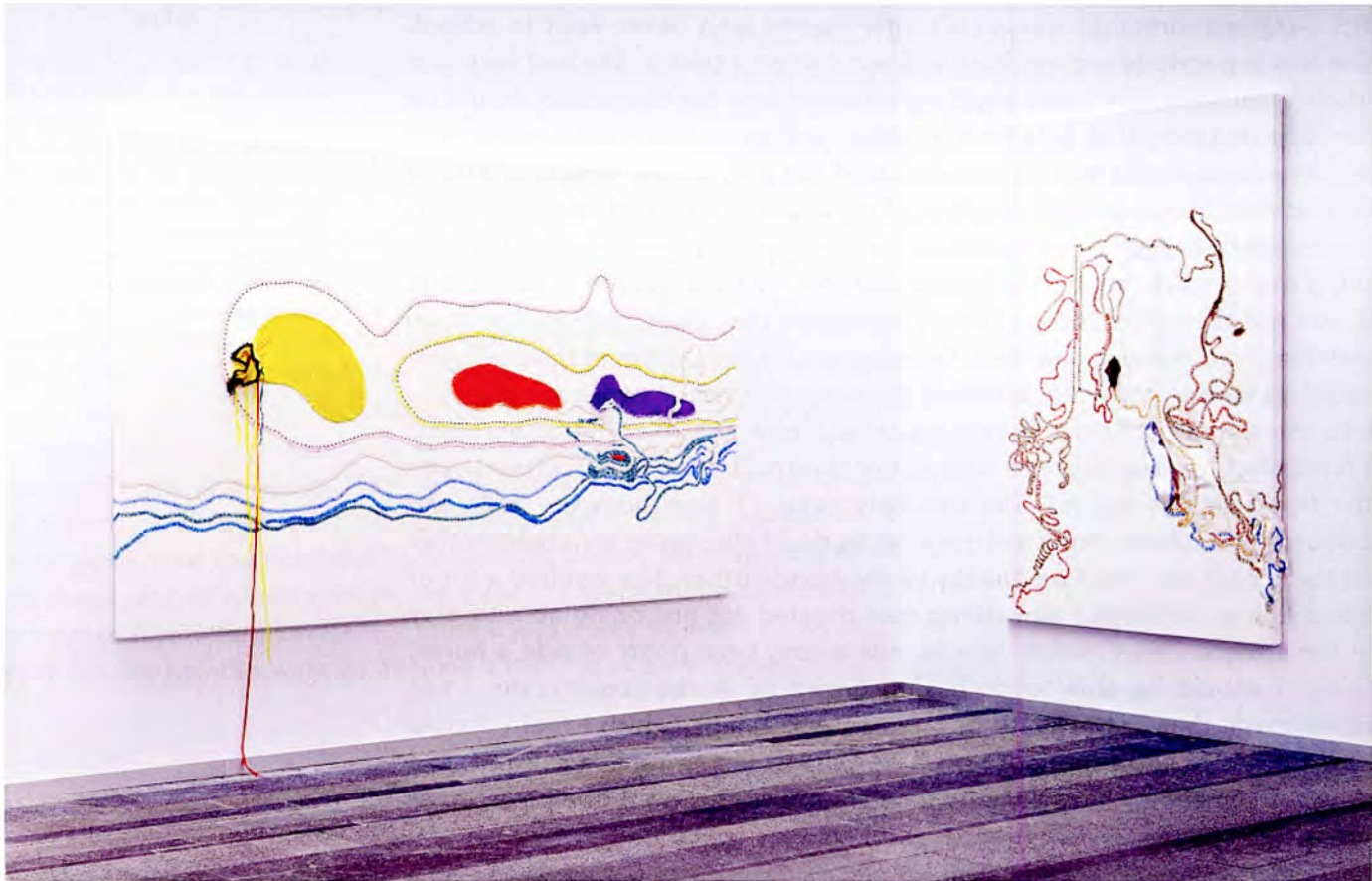
SEAN O'TOOLE is a journalist, art critic and writer based in Cape Town. Joint editor of *Cityscapes*, a journal of urban enquiry, he is a past editor of the magazine *Art South Africa* (2004-10). He writes a bi-monthly art column in *Frieze* and regularly contributes to the *Mail & Guardian* and *Sunday Times* newspapers in South Africa. He is the author of the collection *The Marquis of Mooikloof and Other Stories*.

SO When you make your works, do you consciously set about to engage and interpret your personal biography?

NH I am curious about who I am, my origins, the migratory origins of black South Africans, and the mosaic qualities of Xhosa rituals. I am constantly trying to understand exactly who I am. I always have questions. I find my upbringing and my understanding of my culture to be very confusing. My paternal grandmother, who is still alive, is of mixed descent — her father was colored — which brings a slightly different genealogy into our blood. She uses this identity to her advantage, sometimes saying she is not Xhosa. Her family name is Morrison, and her older sister was named Jessie Morrison. When I was in high school I went to Johannesburg to live with my parents in Tokoza. My paternal grandmother and her sister would always have heated debates. Great Aunt Jessie would ask my grandmother why she had kept the "stupid name" Hlobo. My grandmother won't talk about it; there are still so many truths about myself that I don't know.

SO To what extent is this biographical detail important to an appreciation of your work?

NH I feel I should not rob the viewer of the opportunity to create his or her own understanding of the work. Hence, the titles of my works are not translated, so that whoever is reading the title is made to look at the object. The stories around the work are the least important things, because what attracts a person to a work of art is the object itself. What comes afterwards can either enrich or detract from that experience.



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SO You once repeated to me this Anish Kapoor quote: “Works created around identity are interesting but inferior; works of art have to live beyond that—they should not be restricted to identity.” Is this a conversation you have with yourself since having met and engaged with him?

NH It was something I’d read, which I found a little discomfoting because it questioned my approach to making work—I brought it up in our first meeting. Most people tend to look at my gender and identity and not read beyond that. It is one of the things I battle with. Most people think my work is just about sex, sexuality and being Xhosa. They never look beyond that, at the object, or make connections with the work of other artists. But I feel I have to have my own approach. Looking at my identity grounds me. My work and my personal life are intertwined; I find it difficult at times to separate myself from my work.

SO Could you talk a bit about your 2008 piece *Ingubo Yesizwe*?

NH The work has an interesting history, especially in terms of how the materials arrived in my studio. A friend found the leather on the streets in Doornfontein in central Johannesburg. He thought I might have some use for it. The piece started out as a fabric that I would get assistants to stitch as a way of learning my process. When the Tate Modern proposed an exhibition, the fabric evolved into an artwork. The title translates as “blanket



of the nation," and it relates to ideas of burial and mourning: in traditional Xhosa culture hides are used to cover a corpse before burial to protect the deceased as they enter the afterlife. The leather I used has been treated or tanned. The way it is purposefully cut and stitched together reminds me of seeing a quilted landscape from an airplane.

SO That view you describe presumes edges or borders. The suture or stitch is very prominent in your work. What significance do you attach to the join?

NH On a purely formal level, I use discarded objects that I put together and give new values. Of course, given the history of this country, the process of trying to rebuild a new culture gives the stitch a metaphorical quality. It's almost as if we are stitching bits and pieces of history together to build something new. I choose to employ techniques that many people consider primitive. An Italian curator visiting my studio said the work is very craft-orientated. This is deliberate, I am telling an African story. I enjoy my interference with the material, not using an artificial tool like a camera or having the material laser-cut. It is my way of inserting myself into that object, of putting my soul into it.

SO I want to go back to the late 1990s, when you worked at a cement factory. You once described this period to me as your "blue collar" phase. Black masculine working-class culture,



especially as it is associated with the hostels in Johannesburg, which your studio is very near to, is a mixture of exaggerated ethnic pride and forgetting — forgetting about the rural home and becoming cosmopolitan. To what extent did you, a Xhosa man with some Zulu relations in your family, get caught up in any of this while at the cement factory?

NH It happened earlier. In 1988 I moved to Johannesburg to start high school. I came from a monoculture to a multicultural. I became very conscious of what it means to be Xhosa. "You Xhosa boy, you think you're smart." I learned how other groups despised the Xhosa, and that I was from a culture that is perceived to be smart, rural, devious, not to be trusted. I got to learn all this when I was 12. The township was also interested in politics, whereas in the Transkei we were discouraged from even mentioning Nelson Mandela's name. Coming to Johannesburg definitely played a role in how I view myself now. It made me conscious of myself.

SO You were in your mid-twenties when you enrolled in art school. I want to pause on one student work, *Hermaphrodite* (2002), which formalized your approach to color and found materials, especially the way you ornately orchestrate them into cryptic sculptural forms. How was this work received?

NH My degree exhibition created a lot of conflict. Most of the works went a little mad. I was trying to follow what I had been taught, to resist convention and to be myself, which some of my lecturers couldn't accept. One lecturer said my work was not African. *Hermaphrodite*, however, was considered a resolved piece because it had a well-defined edge, a tube with tassels around it. When I entered it into a local art competition, I overheard a young black artist looking at it say that I'd gone off track. People have often said my work is too white, which I find very interesting.

SO So *Ingubo Yesizwe* comes from that more anarchic or resistant strain of your practice? It is not a neat form.

NH As much as I miss having works that are well rounded, that are easy to view, I find it interesting when an object suggests that it could be developed further. I enjoy a work when it suggests that it is not tight but loose, a work that is flexible, adaptable and can change shape. With *Ingubo Yesizwe*, for example, the tail is now presented differently to how it was first shown at Tate Modern. I enjoy the flexibility of the work, also its impermanence. It might not be there in the next thousand years, unless it is well preserved. It has its own life. Something I would love to do, but is impossible, is to create an infinite piece, a work that just goes and goes, that you never see in full.



## Essay by Tracy Murinik

Over the past, prolific decade, Nicholas Hlobo has engaged in richly enigmatic conversations with his audience that explore themes of sexual and cultural identity via the suggestiveness of materiality that compose his evocative artworks. These conversations are complex engagements in that they assemble — and intricately join together — various aspects of who the artist is and where he comes from through the ideas and concerns that they address, which include both Hlobo's formative cultural environment and his present reality. And that reality is of a gay, Xhosa, South African man living openly in an era of (relative) political and sexual liberation, and the various worlds, at home and abroad, that he consciously enters into and draws from. While not strictly autobiographical in their content, the conversations that Hlobo proposes do intimately relate to the continuing negotiation of his own experiences. By articulating his sexual politics, sociohistorical positioning and ethnicity in the diverse worlds that his artworks inhabit, the artist explores desire, imagination and the very potential for transformation.

## Focus by Liese van der Watt

*Uhambo*, meaning “travelling” or “journey” in Xhosa, was the title of Nicholas Hlobo's 2008–09 show at Tate Modern in London. Though it might obviously refer to the journey of the South African artist's creative practice and his self-growth, the title's notion of the journey also provides perhaps the best conceptual tool with which to approach Hlobo's *oeuvre* as a whole. Increasingly, his work seems to be rather overtly about process, about the journey of the artist's hand and mind moving over the landscape of materials and matter. To that end, what we see in his works is process made visible. The large, soft, handmade sculptures, the stitched paper works, the visual diaries, the installations and even the performances tell the very story of their making. In them we see the painstaking practice, the effort and detail that the journey of creating requires and invariably entails.

I have been struck by this emphasis on process more than ever when viewing Hlobo's recent works, among them the dragon-like figure at the Arsénale at the Venice Biennale in 2011; the vague, shadowlike figures of *Umtshotsbo* (2009); and the amorphous, sac-like womb of *Umphanda ongazaliyo* (2008), installed at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. In these pieces, identity issues regarding masculinity, ethnicity, gender and queer politics, so palpable in Hlobo's early practice,

Born in Cape Town in 1975, Hlobo grew up in the rural Eastern Cape and currently lives in central Johannesburg. These disparate geographical and narrative experiences are deftly echoed in his use of ornately crafted and unlikely combinations of materials. The artist's now-signature eclectic pairings of rubber inner tubes, ribbon, lace, leather, silicon, organza and satin, as well as occasional found props, have come to represent a growing visual vocabulary of the artist's concerns. With such materials and their corresponding forms, Hlobo conjures amorphous but allusive imagery redolent of the particular vernaculars of fetishized sexual clothing and objects, of queer dress codes and of Xhosa cultural references. Each new work, whether a sculptural installation, relief "painting" or performance-animated piece, compounds and deepens this vocabulary to communicate a multifaceted reality, and the multiple threads of influence that inform the artist's identity.

Formally, Hlobo's sculptural works tend to be provocative in their structural allusions. See the often masculine, bulbous, phallic or sperm-shaped forms that his works take, at once organi-

cally suggestive and sexually evocative. Almost without exception, the artist's formal vocabulary bears an external projection: something extraneous that extends or extrudes from the larger, fuller form. These protrusions inhabit space like a type of probe—a thread, a clue, a latent action or perhaps even a bud. Not simply passive augmentations, nor overtly functional parts of the sculptures, these projections nevertheless seem imbued with potential. And it is this very quality that is occasionally realized or enacted during Hlobo's affecting performances that utilize his sculptural works. These adornments or appendages affixed to dense, sultry drifts of rubber and leather invite the spectator to scrutinize and take pleasure in the surfaces of the artist's skin-like sculptures, with their alluringly tactile membranes. As Hlobo has noted, "[w]hat is interesting is how rubber tends to take on a shape of its own, despite being cut into a particular shape. It almost resembles flesh in its tone, finish, elasticity, and even fragility for that matter."

Hlobo consistently posits this potential for "fragility" against the rubber's apparently solid



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constitution in numerous ways. See the juxtaposition of delicate, ethereal materials such as ribbon, lace or organza against the thick finiteness of black rubber. Or take one of his earliest sculptures, *Hermaphrodite* (2002), which features a deflated circular rubber inner tube interwoven at its center with carpet, a bold, rubber fetish tassel attached, and a small, downward-facing wire spring towards its base. The disruption or material contradiction in this work involves the masculine imagery of the sculpture, with its material and formal reference to a “rubber,” or condom, being complicated by the soft, decorative, even feminine tasselled fringe that surrounds it. Altogether, the sculpture is an elegant fulfilment of its title. In subsequent works, however, Hlobo has complicated the rubber’s seeming opacity even more fundamentally by piercing it, either by punching out delicate designs (as in *Imtyibilizi xa yomile*, 2006) or, more often, stitching and embroidering it with ribbon or other binding materials, thus again obscuring and/or challenging gender stereotypes.



and consistently commented upon in reviews and articles, seem to be kept in abeyance. This might be understood as a signal not so much of a change of direction but as a marking of time, a slowing down of pace to examine the journey itself, without rushing to get anywhere. Where references to sexuality and Xhosa culture were often overtly carried and noted by the content in earlier sculptures and installations—I am thinking of the traditional Xhosa animal coop, or *kraal*, of *Umtubhi* (2006), which was constructed out of wood and pink ribbon, and the giant rubber phallus of *Intente* (2007), for instance—these biographical referents are now more often embedded in form and process. The result is that a more oblique reading, which raises questions as it answers others, is required from the spectator.

Take, for instance, *Ingubo Yesizwe* (2008), Xhosa for “blanket of the nation,” which was installed at Tate Modern the year of its making. A large, amorphous, patchwork beast is rendered in black rubber, leather, organza and gauze, all of which is stitched together with ribbon. The work, as Hlobo mentions, references a cow, thereby acknowledging his Xhosa roots in which cattle still stand

Once exposed as not being impenetrable, Hlobo’s ever-employed rubber suddenly takes on other possibilities. For as much as the rubber and leather function to intuit a quality of membrane, the artist skilfully plays with the suppleness and suggestiveness of their folds and weightiness to create a tangible tension between surface and what may lie underneath. His works entice, in other words. But this suggestion is fuelled by another tension incurred by Hlobo’s use of stitching and embroidered ribbon to bind the pieces of rubber and leather together. Not only is this combination of material and technique aesthetically ambivalent, but what it produces, metaphorically and visually, is the seam. At the most obvious level, the seam refers to a point of (allusive) connection. But these seams can also be read as elusive, as they close off access to that which they bind. The sculptures, then, become a complex join of idea and material;

a suture or decoration; a scarification, alteration or embellishment. Rather than skin, the surfaces of Hlobo’s sculptures might instead be

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as a measure of wealth, and whose slaughter continues to punctuate important moments like birth and death. But, Hlobo says, when he thought he had

finished with it, the form had changed, becoming a snake-like figure that he couldn’t immediately identify or trace back to his autobiography. In effect, this is form winning over content. And hence the beast remains incomplete and headless, its amputation rimmed with red ribbon at the neck, a serpent-like tail trailing behind it, its innards spilling onto the floor in a bloody, organza mass.

The leaflet to the Tate Modern exhibition explained the work more literally, relating it to the role of cattle in traditional Xhosa culture. It efficiently, if a little pedantically, explicated that the leather “reflects the economic, social, political, and spiritual importance of cattle in Xhosa culture. Wealth is measured by the size of a man’s herd, and men are only able to marry once they have accumulated sufficient cattle to pay *lobola* (bride wealth).” To this, Hlobo has added more loosely (in the video accompanying the exhibition) that he sometimes thinks of contemporary South Africa as a headless state where there is much uncertainty, and that these kinds of thoughts



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looked at as amorphous coverings, as sheaths concealing other figures, human, ghostly or otherwise. This holds true for his sculptures that employ satin, organza or gauze as well, which infer similar forms.

If the seams in Hlobo's works intimate points of both connection and concealment, they simultaneously offer up the possibility, alternatively, of access. For in their deliberate action of joining and honing in, his sculptures also hold the ability to be undone or pried open—a delicate innuendo. While not specifically transgressive or subversive, his employment of thread or ribbon seems to offer an in, or a passage, to an alternative awareness. In this might be made a visual metaphor for opening access to hidden territory, and the tension between the longed for or imagined and the seemingly inaccessible find their balance here.

The inference of body or inhabited form is most tangibly fulfilled through Hlobo's animation of his sculptures—and his actual insertion into them—via

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trigger this kind of work. Read this way, the blanket supposedly protecting the nation has become a muddled mass of inadequate and incomplete

shelter. But mostly, and most instructively, Hlobo appears to be searching for a distinctive artistic language—as he has himself stated—and through this work he makes us party to that pursuit. As such, we are witness to an ongoing search for meaning and expression, the journey paused and opened up for us to examine more closely.

If Hlobo's artistic practice is the journey, then stitches—those small but most distinctive features of his work—must surely be the steps and stages that mark that travel. At the most obvious level, sewing, in Hlobo's hands, is subversive, going against traditional male roles in Xhosa culture (and most other cultures) in which sewing is considered women's work. But the artist's sewn art works must also be read in terms of their repetitive nature and therefore, as Rozsika Parker has demonstrated in *The Subversive Stitch* (1996), for the meditative, almost protective refuge they provide their maker in the midst of a dominant patriarchal culture. Read this way, the act of needlecraft subverts the culture that it is enacted in, and



performance. If these performances enhance the opacity of the works being animated, they also complicate their potential trajectory. In his earliest performances, *Igqirha lendlela* (2005–06), Hlobo donned a worn-leather biker's jacket modified with a large, rubber hump. With the jacket, Hlobo wore a blue ruffled blouse, a skirt made from old neckties and a pair of hand-stitched rubber boots. Invoking the African dung beetle, Hlobo has written that the title of the work “derived from the Xhosa choral song *Igqirha lendlela nguqongqothwane*. This means that the dung beetle is the doctor of the road ... They are not intimidated by having to move things larger than their bodies.” Wearing this dramatic hump in the performances, then, seems to infer that whatever baggage you're carrying could well be an impediment along your journey to self-realization. Yet, like the dung beetle, there is the positive prospect to still make your way forward.

A final elegant inclusion to this attire is a delicate, bulbous, white-fabric head covering that Hlobo wears, which conjures the chrysalis,

there is something about Hlobo's solitary, painstaking craft that speaks of this denunciation of a dominant heteronormative society. Shunning more

conventional artistic materials and traditional male roles, Hlobo chooses a craft that engages his alterity at every level. In content, but more importantly in process, Hlobo's works question and challenge the mainstream. Sewing is, of course, also about the almost obsessive will to bring things together and to keep them from being separated. In *Ingubo Yesizwe*, as elsewhere, Hlobo's trademark baseball stitch brings contrasting textures and materials together, forming thick seams in a dense, sculptural montage. It is worth pausing to think about the notion of the seam here, a figure of speech that has recently been used in a variety of contexts to indicate sites of entanglement and separation. For South African literary critic Leon de Kock, the seam is a site of convergence and of bringing the incommensurate together, but it is also always, crucially, inscribed with its own difference through the resulting ridge or furrow. “The representational seam,” writes de Kock in his essay “South Africa in the Global Imaginary” (2001), “is the paradox qualifying any attempt to imagine organicism or



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unity.” Hlobo’s repetitive stitching can thus be read as an attempt to bring and hold together things that don’t sit comfortably alongside one another. The seams that mark his work like dense lines on a map remind us of his ongoing search to make sense of and to align not simply leather and ribbon and lace, but also seemingly incompatible aspects of his Xhosa, male, queer and urban identity, and, in the case of the headless *Ingubo Yesizwe*, of the irreconcilable realities of contemporary South Africa.

But, as de Kock reminds us, the seam is ever beset by its own failing. The point of suture also speaks of the underlying rupture: the seam is never seamless. There is always a certain violence implied in the stitch, its puncture and tear, and nowhere is this more visible than in Hlobo’s paper works, which might be read as the inverse of his soft sculptures. Where the latter bring disparate materials together, the paper works deliberately rupture wholeness. For *Phulaphulani* and *Iminxeba* (2008), both also on display at Tate Modern in 2008–09, Hlobo took a large sheet of Fabriano paper and split this intact surface with stitches that run across it in vibrant lines. Hlobo talks of these two works in terms of communication: *Phulaphulani* means “to listen,” but the word derives from the Xhosa root *phula*, or “to break.” Likewise, Hlobo literally breaks up the surface

suggesting that when thrown off, it will have been host to the birth of a newly evolved being.

Another powerful performance suggestive of rebirth or incubation is *Mondle Umkhulise* (2009), which means “caused it to grow.” Here, Hlobo inserted himself into a tasseled, hanging, womb-like rubber pouch. Rather than interact with or remain visible to his audience, the artist maintained a guarded distance, denying access to his body. Yet Hlobo has also produced a series of works that, though performative, offer performance in absentia. *Bhaxa*, *Iqinile* and *Ikhiwane* (all 2006), all comprise a sofa and chairs, the cushions of which are covered with a molten layer of (ubiquitously South African) green Sunlight soap. Instead of the figure being physically present in these works, the existence of a body/bodies is implicitly suggested through the imprint of bare male buttocks that are marked in the soapy veneer.

Ultimately, it is Hlobo’s insertion or imprint of his own body into his sculptures — which may themselves act as his own temporary disguise — that allows the artist to vicariously explore psychic spaces of physical or imagined encounters,

of this work, then re-stitches it together. If the twisted lines invoke telephone lines, with the addition of iPod headphones the work speaks of communication and the breakdown thereof. *Iminxeba*, meanwhile, means “limbs of the vine,” the twisting lines visualizing the very grapevine of storytelling and gossip. These “drawings” are built upon a fragile unity, the stitches holding something together that they have also sundered apart. To that end, they exteriorize the fragile or tentative fusion that often characterizes Hlobo’s work, particularly when he chooses contrasting textures or draws on divergent cultures. Here, however, that ambivalent synthesis is somewhat less overtly depicted, and more embedded in the actual process than in contrasting materials or discomfiting content. Circling back to Hlobo’s notion of the journey, these works look like densely annotated maps, the stitches — that is, the process — visualizing the artistic language he is searching for.

In this context of communication, Hlobo’s unfailing usage of Xhosa titles, not to be translated, seems pertinent. Eschewing the preference for “Untitled,” which many artists choose when they do not want to direct interpretation, Hlobo chooses Xhosa to make these works culturally specific and, more importantly, to reassert a central leitmotif of his *oeuvre*: that of inclusion and exclusion. The sense of

and thus to impart meaning onto them. If he activates his sculptures through performance, still they exist before and beyond his transient embodiment of them. Like the striking contrast of Hlobo's various materials, his presence in these performances shifts between the real and the imagined, between the tangible and the ethereal. As such, his "paintings" on paper and canvas are a further type of slippage of that performative process, of a two-dimensional plane coming into light relief, ready to be explored beneath its surfaces. It is precisely these slippages, or potential peeks — either into darkness, or subtly exposed through the light of language, form or imagination — that are Hlobo's sustaining conversations with his audiences. And like the materials, forms and words that he proffers as alluring clues, these slippages are threads to be followed and unravelled, or standing as the experience of what they might conceal, imagined. His works probe the edges of identities in formation or evolution, as they simultaneously imagine or intuit their dissolution. Though what is sculpturally or performatively presented may at first appear solid and

finite, it is instead along the joins, and into the edges of liminality, that Hlobo's conversations lead us.

#### Author

TRACY MURINIK is an independent writer and curator based in Johannesburg. She has written extensively on contemporary art in South Africa, as a co-author of *10 Years 100 Artists: Art in a Democratic South Africa* (ed. Sophie Perryer), as the author of a monograph on Moshekwa Langa, and in *Personal Affects: Power and Poetics in Contemporary South African Art*. She recently wrote and co-produced a series of 13 films, "A Country Imagined," and is currently editing a publication on participatory photographic practice in Africa, *WIDE ANGLE: Photography as Public Practice*.



not quite understanding the titles even in translation, of not completely getting the innuendos and intimate ambiguities of his native tongue, which, as he points out, is often something that he had to rediscover himself, mirrors a discomfort found in all of Hlobo's works. At the core of his artistic language, then, lies a code of things revealed and hidden, so that the viewer is left asking what exactly she is looking at, and what exactly the artist is trying to communicate.

In many ways, our searching and incomplete understanding of Hlobo's work parallels his position on the thresholds, boundaries and intersections that define tradition, ethnicity, culture, sexuality and race. And it is when we view his work and grapple to find its meaning that we share in the journey that ultimately defines Hlobo's practice: the ongoing process of becoming, *en route* somewhere, and searching, though not necessarily with a destination or objective in sight or mind.

#### Author

LIESE VAN DER WATT is a writer and independent scholar based in London, who focuses on contemporary African and South African visual arts. Current projects include work on South African Zef-rock phenomenon Die Antwoord.

## Biography

NICHOLAS HLOBO (b. 1975, Cape Town) lives and works in Johannesburg. Solo shows of his work have been held at Tate Modern, London; ICA, Boston; Museet for Samtidskunst, Oslo and the South African National Art Gallery, Cape Town. His works were included in the 54th Venice Biennale, 10th Liverpool Biennial and 3rd Guangzhou triennial. In 2010, Hlobo studied with Anish Kapoor under the Rolex Mentor & Protege Initiative.

## Current & Forthcoming

NICHOLAS HLOBO's works are currently on view as part of "Intense Proximity. La Triennale 2012" at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, through August 26. He will also take part in the group exhibitions "The Rainbow Nation" at the Museum Beelden aan Zee, The Hague, through September 30th; and "All Our Relations," the 18th Biennale of Sydney, which will run from June 27 to September 16.

- 1–3 Installation views from "21 Shortlisted Artists of the Future Generation Art Prize Group Exhibition" at PinchukArtCentre, Kiev, 2010  
Photography by Sergel Illin  
Courtesy of PinchukArtCentre, Kiev
- 4 *Dubula*, 2007
- 5 *Ndize*, 2010  
Installation view at Liverpool Biennial, 2010  
Photography by Thierry Bal  
Courtesy of Liverpool Biennial
- 6 *Mondle umkbulise*, 2009
- 7 Installation view from  
"Momentum 11: Vula zibhuqe" at ICA Boston, 2008, Photography by John Kennard
- 8 *Ntywilela ngaphantsi*, 2006
- 9 *Ubomvu*, 2004–07  
Photography by John Hodgkiss
- 10 *Ingubo Yesizwe*, detail, 2008

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