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Serge Alain Nitegeka



Form without formula

Serge Alain Nitegeka's sculptures, paintings and installations manifest from internal meditations on shadow and light, material, texture and line. The installations reveal themselves to the artist as he wanders through a space changing his perspective and positioning. There is no predetermined plan or formula. There are materials and ideas and spaces, and a will to follow lines of possibility with an embrace of improvisation. Over time, one gesture makes another possible; a gap in the structure makes a new line visible.

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Nitegeka plays with the aesthetic language of architecture and, in dialogue with questions of function and form, his sculptures speak to the elements of design that make internal spaces inhabitable. Wood is utilised to numerous ends – as structure, cladding or bent into arcs and curves; it provides solid sculptural form, and may be laid bare or covered by layers of paint. Nitegeka often employs the wood of industry and transportation such as shipping crates or ply. Despite being industrially mass-produced the crates are chosen as objects with a history linked to the movement of cargo and, as such, invoke the artist's personal story of forced migration and perhaps also the forced transportation of African people during the slave trade.

In an early series of nude self-portraits Nitegeka expressed his personal narrative, drawing his own image in great detail with charcoal on the surface of crates. His facial expressions are clearly discernible – staring downward at the viewer with pride or contempt. Charcoal lines were soon replaced by silhouettes in his paintings and later his moving image work. The silhouette affords an anonymity to Nitegeka's subjects, and its ability to conceal the individual while representing the human body allows him the space to consider the formal qualities of the body in relation to its surroundings. It also allows the artist greater nuance in reflecting his own personal story and speaking to a broader experience.

Balanced within Nitegeka's practice is the relationship between internal and external worlds, where the artist's own experiences of movement, as a migrant but also as a maker of objects, are made visible through his exploration of form. In turn, the outside worlds of nature and the built environment provide new ways for the artist to encounter, see and imagine his work into being.

Hansi Momodu-Gordon:

To start, could you describe the work that you're making here?

Serge Alain Nitegeka:

It's always hard to answer that question. Let's see ... first of all it's a site-specific work that has a fluid formal agenda in terms of the kind of lines and planes I want to make or shape. This is what I brought to this space. And for me in particular, site-specific work not only involves working with the physical space but also with the people I encounter in the space, the temperature outside on the street and how I feel in the moment. Pretty much the general vibe.

Do you tend to visualise in advance? Do you have a set image of what you could create or is it about the emotions that you want to bring to the fore?

It starts as an abstract emotion, if there is such an expression, mainly felt and hard to explain. I think to myself, I want to work with this material and I want to have my lines interact with the space in particular ways.

It's a vague feeling that wills itself ever more steadily towards materialisation.

It's how you want people to feel when they enter the space?

Yes ... for them to wonder how it all came together, work out and appreciate my logic of geometry that was once fuzzy visuals in my head. So it's about clearing it up, getting it out of the mind and putting the puzzle together, as it were.

So in a way you work with things that are known and things that are unknown.

Mostly unknown, mostly unknown.

But you set yourself rules around materials or time or ...

Let's put it this way: it's about an idea, this untouchable thing, becoming an object that you can physically touch and walk around; that's how I see it. You visualise space and once you see it for the first time and you see the materials, you start with: what if I start with one of those? What if I stand over here to have a different gaze? And then before you know it compositions are almost self-generating before you. It began with a screw into a block of wood on the wall, then expanded outwards.

Yesterday when you walked through the space, you said to me, ‘This is where it first started,’ and you pointed ... Can you talk a little bit about how you worked from there, now that we’re on day three of the installation?

You know, the title of the show is *Black Passage*, and that passage started from the area outside the gallery staff office, gallery one and the main entrance into the gallery ... That’s where most viewers enter the space and that’s where I had to start, where I would start to block movement. That was the most problematic part: where to start. But when I solved the problem and began to tame this area, then the show was done. It’s about identifying that starting point, the usual movement of people and objects in the space and changing or disrupting that a little bit.

So you changed the flow of that space?

Yes, I had to change that flow first, even before putting up the rest of the show, even for myself. How would I walk here? Oh, I’m not going to walk there, don’t want to ... let me find another way to access this space.

You’ve used plywood to change the routes through the space. But you’ve left that kind of cheeky gap in between the two boards and so you’ve still got that vision, that viewpoint through.

Yes, I keep my approach fluid. What if I do it this way as opposed to how I have always done it? It might be more interesting that way, you know, let me experiment, let’s play and let’s see what happens.

Do you approach your paintings with a similar level of spontaneity or is that a different process?

It’s slowly changing now. Before the paintings were a way to document the installations that I did. So it would be taking a picture and working from that almost as a one-to-one translation, whereas the current paintings – for example *Field Configuration* – make no reference to any of my installations. They are composed purely from interactions of space, form and colour on an already charged wooden surface. How am I going to create the illusion of space? How am I going to work with form and light? How is that going to come through? These are the ideas I am exploring now. Whereas before it was working from a translation of three-dimensional space into a two-dimensional composition. But that in itself is not as straightforward as I’m saying because of the varying elements of surfaces I have to engage with.

The idea of surface is really interesting in your work because there are so many different layers: you have different kinds of blacks, you have the matte black and the reflective surface, and then you have the raw material coming through ...

I see that not only as a way of creating the illusion of three-dimensional space in the works, a flat surface having three-dimensionality, but also as a way of reflecting light. For example, this shelf is white, but the way the light falls on the different planes gives it depth and variation of colour and form.

The idea of the positive and the negative space, the darkness and lightness is very much part of the installation as well.

As much as any art is dealing with colour, you're dealing with light, you know; light is one of the key elements I am working with, right next to colour and form.

I wanted to ask you about your journey through colour, because I think at the beginning it was a very limited palette, and black was very much there, black with white and then red, which became a very powerful motif, and then this exhibition is the first one where you've used yellow and blue. Can you talk about your journey through the chromatics of your work?

I've had those two colours, the yellow and the blue, sitting in my studio for the last three years. I just didn't feel comfortable making that leap yet.

What was the process that you went through to even choose those colours before they got to your studio?

There was a residency at Nirox where I had the space to create a three-dimensional work outside in nature. My installations had always been interior works, and these exterior works posed the black paint against the blue sky. Once I saw this I realised there was a nice complementary relationship in a pale blue sky next to my black objects. It wasn't something I researched.

That's actually very beautiful because it came from the built environment in the outside world, in nature.

Yes it is, I like to put some of these things in my work; it's not some grand thing ... it's the simple things staring at you that radiate charm later on.

For me the yellow is very much like a sun shining yellow and so warm.

The way the yellow came is that with most of my paintings there's some exposed wood; the plywood sheets that I use vary depending on the trees that are used to make them, and some of them come out quite yellow from a distance or when you photograph paintings with exposed plywood and print them in books or in digital format. So I started thinking about yellow as interpreting light, as you say, sunshine for example. It's also to do with sculpture being outside and people being able to see how the light falls on it and how it reacts to natural light. I make sculptures that usually stand in the studio or in the

gallery space against a backdrop of white walls; venturing outside they have to deal with the yellow and the blue.

And what about the idea of blackness in your work? Because it's there obviously in the form of chromatics, the colour that you're using, but it's also there in the political sense.

There is a political notion that is implied; it's what I don't talk about but it's obviously there. The colour black formally came up when I began to do the nude black drawings. It started with charcoal. I didn't pick up charcoal and start to use it in a very political way that was about blackness. I'm not saying it's not political, it's evidently there, but the genesis of using it and its meaning to me comes from a different place.

I think that's interesting as well because starting from those personal self-portraits where you've got the figure and the individual, you then move to a kind of abstracted representation of blackness and so it's a way of talking about a more global idea or consciousness, a group consciousness.

Yes, when I speak about forced migration and use the colour black and black figures in my work, I'm making it an African issue. It's out there, it's straightforward to think about it but then again I'm not using it in a straightforward way. I'm leaning more towards abstraction but those are the anecdotes.

Can you tell us about the film work that you made, *BLACK SUBJECTS*? I thought that was so beautiful. I've just watched it a number of times and there's something about the silhouette ... It takes away the individual; it gives a sense of the group. You've got performers who're dressed from head to toe in these black suits, moving through this architectural space ...

That was an interesting experiment. I wanted it to be a performance piece from point A to B, alongside the road, with the performers carrying a variety of abstract objects that they would assemble into a cohesive shelter object, rest and perform in it, then dismantle it and move on up the road, reassemble and repeat a couple of times till they reached B. Sometimes you want to explore an idea using a particular medium but down the road you find a better medium. I started with a performance and ended up with a film. I decided to experiment with the film to articulate a particular experience I've witnessed where people had to come together to transform a space into temporary dwellings. When displaced persons are given or find a space of refuge, transformation of the space often involves chucking things out that are unnecessary and making use of what they find there by making everything in the space function according to the most basic of human needs.

Actually that leads on to something I've read in previous interviews where you talked about the

need for refugees to improvise and to use what's in their surroundings and how that informed the way you approach your sculpture. What I've been interested in is the kind of creativity in that process, the forced creativity of those people to improvise and make that space through what they have.

Well, necessity is the mother of all inventions.

Exactly!

So it comes down to that: I have a pen and I have a chair and I want to make a tractor – and you kind of MacGyver your way through, using what you have to fulfil a particular need. And the part of the unknown that I talk about in relation to the site-specific installation, where you're moving into a space, using just the materials you have and find on site to transform a space, informs how I work. You apply yourself, you don't go there with preconceived notions of what you want because that will hinder your progress or even deprive you of something beautiful that you could make ... deprive you of surprising yourself.

I've noticed that you've gone through a lot of physical endurance ... you've been here physically making the work, forcing screws into the wall and deciding where things are going to go and marking things up, and I wondered if that physical process is for you an important part of making.

Yes, it is. I think this is one of the first times I've let someone else cut a particular piece of wood and screw it in place under my direction – I've always insisted on doing everything myself.

Is that because you need to feel the process internally or is it because you need to control it?

Yes, control, but I think internalising the process is very important to me because I feel that I could lose something that I stand to gain if I do it myself. I pay particular attention to everything – how things are placed or how they could be placed – as it could be an inspiration or a solution to something else that I am working on. The arrangement of things, their configurations, how I am cutting a piece of wood, the off-cuts ... I could see something in these that could resolve another issue elsewhere. If I let someone else do that I feel I might lose some of that chance.

Because things often re-emerge in other works or other moments.

Exactly! In the last couple of weeks I have been working intensely on some 20 works and I walked a lot tending to each and every piece – if I had to put all the steps together it would probably be the same distance from here to Johannesburg! That's how many kilometres I have done in the studio! There's a ritual of doing things myself, a sort of meditation if you like.

Another thing that struck me is that there are two sides to the coin: you have this spontaneity on one side but you also have this sense of choreography, both in terms of the film and in terms of how the visitors have to move through the space. I wondered if you could talk a bit about that element of the work.

In this particular installation there's a path as opposed to the labyrinth kind of installations that I've done before where there are multiple ways to go through depending on your ability and willingness to contort your body and to do whatever you need to do. Here it is more like a disruption of the normal way of walking about. If you've been here before, for example, you would have been able to go up and down from one gallery space to the next quite easily, but that's changed. I'm prescribing a way to go around and move from space to space; there are limited options that allow you access to the whole show.

This is jumping back a bit but I was wondering if you could tell me about your *100 Stools* project, which you recently remade for the Göteborg Biennial.

The idea of the stools was a gesture of dignity. I thought the migrants, the refugees and asylum seekers waiting at the Refugee Reception Office needed to have a symbol of dignity. I don't know the situation now, but when I was there with them in the queues, we stood or sat on the ground the whole day with nowhere to sit properly and with nothing to do. It is demoralising. And so I thought

of the idea of the African stool which stands for, among other meanings, hospitality and dignity. It used to be that when you visited someone in their home you would be offered a seat, and on this seat you would be given refreshment, exchange conversations and feel welcomed. Hence, I thought my stools would symbolically reciprocate this gesture of dignity and hospitality. I made a few – I mean, 100 is a few compared to the thousands of people there but it's the gesture that counts ... I went there anonymously and I didn't want to make a huge thing of it. I didn't tell anyone what I was doing so that people wouldn't come and spectate. Put them there, people use them, good, I was gone. The Göteborg version of it – I haven't made up my mind as to how it functions in space but from the outset I felt this project would have to work somewhere else and I always want my work to face new experiences. As a person I grow and as I grow my work grows; you try different things, you experiment.

In Göteborg was it an installation that you look at or was it something that you interact with again?

The House of Words pavilion was a constructed space in the biennale where there were going to be scheduled conversations around issues that the curator Elvira Dyangani Ose had set up, and members of the public and other invitees were going to have these conversations while sitting on these stools. Getting back to the African image of a stool, in a given village people would gather and sit under a tree on stools where they would have the

chief, also on a stool, address their grievances or make announcements. Whenever there were grievances or even community ceremonies, they would be held on level ground with everybody sitting on stools, the idea being: let's all sit together, let's talk about this. My stool design was simple, light and easy to carry. That's one of the things that informed how I was going to design and make them because I wanted to instigate a situation whereby people could copy and make them themselves, carry them easily in a taxi so that they could bring them along the next time they came to the Refugee Reception Office. In Göteborg I wanted the stools to create the idea of a levelled ground facilitating important dialogues.

It's interesting to see how your work does seem to adapt and evolve in different contexts, so you've got the internal space at the gallery and you interact with the architecture, but you're also fed by the outside world, placing your sculptures outside and seeing the sky and how they interact, and then placing them out in the world. In the future do you see your work taking more of a presence outside in the public domain?

It's something I'm open to. I don't want to be set in thinking that my work only exists here and in this particular way. I don't want to be set in anything; anything pretty much goes.

This conversation took place at Stevenson, Cape Town, during the installation of Nitegeka's solo exhibition *Black Passage*, on 8 October 2015

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Mawande Ka Zenzile