



# The Peculiar Language of Material

Nandipha Mntambo's work signals a complex relationship between metaphor and material, writes **Nomusa Makhubu**

It's not quite the silence, but the semantic traffic that confounds Nandipha Mntambo's work. In an essay for the Standard Bank Young Artist Award 2011 catalogue, "The Silence that No One Talks About", David Elliott points out the significance and amplification of silence in works such as *Silent Embrace* (2007) as well as *Silence and Dreams* (2008).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Mntambo herself asserts that there is "a silence in the work that exists between us."<sup>2</sup> But what if we don't take the artist's word for it? In speaking with Mntambo I realise that oftentimes a variety of narratives wrap themselves around her work just as the cowhide cloaks the bodies that we do not see. Far from being simply "the cowhide girl", Mntambo is a versatile artist, working in sculpture, photography, painting, printmaking, performance and video. This versatility draws attention to the medium and, more specifically, the anecdotes it attracts. While an interest in Mntambo's development of new work is important, it is necessary to rethink her existing oeuvre and, in the process, to reveal the cultural currency wrapped around material – a few sacred cows must be killed and a few myths done away with.

### **When Material Remembers – A Subjectivity of Objects?**

In a recent conversation with Mntambo, two heuristic devices arose for re-envisioning this oeuvre: the focus on the material and the logic constructed around it. Mntambo links what she views as the "memory of material" to memory in general, explaining that the hide recollects the shape of the previous object around which it was moulded. When made wet, the material loses the shape of the mould but maintains some aspects of the object on which it was first placed. Apart from what it simulates and implicates – the body – the material itself in Mntambo's work is granted a subjectivity or "agency", as Mntambo calls it, which makes the hide more than just a threshold between the invisible body and the viewer. In this sense, the idea that material remembers suggests that material "thinks". This alludes to the mediation of human agency in the valuation of objects within a matrix of socio-political structures. It is thus no accident that, in considering the constellation of meanings (sometimes unintended) generated by the work, analyses of Mntambo's art point to all forms of traditions related to cattle and the female or male body. These include the *tauromaqia* (bullfighting) of the South Americas, Portugal and Spain, as well as the Nguni attribution of material value to the cattle and their use of the cattle hide as battle-shields and clothing (with particular colours as forms of identification). Further, cattle also serve as metaphor in many idioms and proverbs. Engagement with Mntambo's work thus requires a disentanglement of the multiplicity of languages that envelop the work.

All kinds of captivating narratives drifting in my own mind regarding the symbolism of cattle had to be suspended. Mntambo's work always made me think of Nongqawuse, the young Xhosa girl whose prophecy that the dead will be resurrected caused about 100 000 Xhosa to kill their cattle. The Xhosa nation was divided into

"believers" (*amathamba* or "soft ones") and "unbelievers" (*amagogotya* or "hard ones").<sup>3</sup>

The famine that resulted led to the decimation of Xhosa populations, loss of land (which "cleared the way for white settlement"<sup>4</sup>), taxation and forced labour. This part of history has semantic links to Mntambo's work. The death of cattle in Xhosa culture symbolises the end of the agrarian and collectivist way of living. The cattle, in this sense, are inextricably linked to material value. The often-floating hide in Mntambo's work appears to have an incredible lightness even though the material is weighty, which makes it seem an allegory of resurrection. Furthermore, the hide, though soft while it is being processed, soon becomes hard, even though the undulating folds of the sculptures appear soft. This to me seemed an oblique reference to *amathamba* and *amagogotya*. It is the process of transformation from soft to hard, light to heavy, alive to dead and vice versa that remains the key.

Like a magic trick, the secret is concealed in the performance. In the video recorded in Maputo, Mozambique, entitled *Praça de Touros II* (2008), the killing of the bull in the tradition bull fighting (*tauromaqia*) is more performative than the killing that makes the hide available for Mntambo's sculptural works. In *tauromaqia* there is magic in the performance of waving the red cape that conceals parts of the process of killing. The *torero* (bullfighter) possesses both magical and performative power. In *Praça de Touros II*, the artist stands in the place of the *torero* and also, through her wearing of a cowhide coat, in the place of the bull. There is, one can argue, a permutation at work that resembles what John Pemberton calls "material symbolization".<sup>5</sup>

Though a multitude of references resonate in Mntambo's work, they also need to be set aside if one is to understand what Mntambo means by the "agency of the material". Not only does the "material remember" but it is also powerful enough to evoke memory and awaken history in extraordinary ways.

### **Material and the Corporeal**

Mntambo draws one's attention to the artisanal side of her work: "I am interested in understanding material ... the textures ... pleats and folds." This interest is not only in discovering the potential of hide but also of other kinds of materials. Mntambo's four-week residency at the Nirox Foundation included her experimentation with printmaking (drypoint etching and linocut). One is also reminded of the bronze busts that form part of the body of her work. The primary object of her art is the process of crafting material. Even in her performance, when she occupies the place of the *torero*, she does so with the understanding of bullfighting as an art. Mntambo's work illuminates process and labour – the art of making.

Her National Arts Festival Standard Bank Young Artist of the Year exhibition, which took place in July 2011 and is currently travelling South African cities, includes ink drawings. This title of this series, "Actos de fé que estão entre mãe e" (2011), is roughly translated as "acts of faith between you and me". The drawings are not easy to comprehend – one can't simply connect a myriad narratives and one must contend with the material: paper, ink, charcoal and cow hair. Are these aspects of the body? How does one make sense of these? When asked, Mntambo amusingly calls them "humps and bumps". These drawings are related to the relationship between the artist and her mother. They intimate, in a general sense, bodily protrusions (pregnancies, for example). More prominently, they profess the *act*: the act of labour, the act of creating, inter-action, the act of consumption, the act of killing or the act of bringing to life. The hair that "grows" out of the paper emphasises the corporeality of the transposition of the magical power of resurrection to performative power.

It is difficult not to become conscious of the visible and invisible body. Bodiliness is implied in much of Mntambo's work. The ink drawings, for instance, do not only imply the body because of the hair but also because of the performative *action* involved in making large strokes on the paper surface (the paper is around 151 x 145 cm). The video performances and photographic composites explicitly involve the body as medium or as material. The photographic composites involve performed re-interpretations of Greek mythology. For example, the narrative of the hunter, Narcissus and that of the seduction of the Phoenician, Europa, by Zeus in the form of a bull are re-enacted by Mntambo. The cowhide figures that are the hallmark of Mntambo's work refer to the (absent) body, which is integrally "performed" in the floating figures. The performative power suggested by her work indicates social organisation within the context of material reproduction.

Arguably, the "bodiliness" in Mntambo's work ascribes relations between people (recast sometimes as animals) and objects. Here, I am reminded of the

herding economy of the Namibian Himba-Herero for whom notions of selfhood imply "the bodies of the animals in one's herd".<sup>7</sup> It "concerns de-centered subjectivity ... and extends in material culture, in animals, and in the bodies of others."<sup>8</sup> For instance, in works where these figures are arranged in a circle (*Silence and Dreams*) or as if

they are a regiment of soldiers (*Emabutfo*, 2009) we are made more conscious of the relation between bodies and the herd or the collective. We are also made more conscious of the invisible boundaries that differentiate the community of, for example, *emabutfo* (meaning "soldiers" or "warriors"). The metaphor of the boundary surfaces in terms of the skin (hide) as well as in the buildings of the arena(s) in which the performances *Ukungenisa* (2009) and *Praça de Touros II* took place. The skin signifies the boundary of the body in relation to other bodies.

Mntambo's current search for one of the few remaining female *toreras* for her upcoming project is revealing. The search for the specific body that participated in *tauromaqia* in a certain period divulges the significance of space and time as "closely related aspects of bodiliness" in the production of meaning.<sup>10</sup> "Experience" places the body-in-collective as arch actor as well as creator and carrier of anecdotes. According to Steven von Wolputte, The body represents, a "meeting ground of hegemony and counterhegemonic practices, power and defiance, authority and subversion."<sup>11</sup> It heralds meanings and values but can also be seen as a site of the representation of external and internal conditions.

### **Consciously Constructing Narratives**

*The experience of having a body, with the burden of its passions and gross*



Nandipha Mntambo, *Emabutfo*, 2009, cowhide, resin, polyester mesh, waxed cord, 24 figures, each c. 120 x 60 x 20cm, installation dimensions c. 120 x 230 x 440cm. © Nandipha Mntambo and courtesy Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg



**ABOVE** Nandipha Mntambo, *Actos de fé que estão entre mãe e 4*, 2011, cow hair, charcoal and ink on cotton paper, 121 x 151cm. © Nandipha Mntambo and courtesy Jochen Zeitz Collection **FACING PAGE TOP** Nandipha Mntambo, *Study I*, 2012, etching, 39 x 43cm © Nandipha Mntambo and courtesy Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg **FACING PAGE BOTTOM** Nandipha Mntambo, *Red Hump*, 2012, etching, 35 x 42cm © Nandipha Mntambo and courtesy Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg

materiality, is the most inescapable bondage of all that constrains the soul's unfettered liberty.<sup>12</sup>

Now that the material is stripped naked, without the cultural dressing of myth and connotation, I am left with the basic elements: the body and object/time and space. The urge is to return to the place of imagination and myth. The second time I look at Mntambo's work, I become more conscious of this process of attributing narrative. I become afraid to be wrong. I am aware of my agency in the economy of meaning. I am embarrassed to undress my belief in myth – but I indulge.

Looking back at work such as *Beginning of an Empire* (2007), *Balandzeli* (2004) and *Lelive Lami* (2007) I begin to construct a narrative about an empire consisting of rulers and followers. One could imagine a familial power structure, a rite of passage and a journey (*Uhambo*, 2006; *Silence and Dreams; Emabufo; Ukungenisa; Praça de Touros*). There's also violence (*The Fighters*, 2006), escape and seeking refuge, loneliness, estrangement and fear (*Uhambo; My Departure*, 2009; *Refuge*, 2009; *Meditations on Solitude*, 2009). With these, one could construct narratives that are similar to many familiar histories of war, migration, cultural and economic differentiation, estrangement and community – but this possibility presents itself as a flight of fancy. The material remains rational. It is the constant in the equation.

Playing with narrative is seductive. In Mntambo's work, however, meaning is to be found, in part, in her reference to a multiplicity of language and

symbol. The frustration one feels at trying to approach meaning in the work is summarised by the artist in her 2009 installation entitled *Babel*. Its conglomeration of cow tails is an allegory of the telling of tales.

1. David Elliot, "The Silence That No One Talks About" in Sophie Perryer (ed) *Nandipha Mntambo*. Cape Town, Johannesburg: Stevenson, 2011, 28.
2. Ibid.
3. JB Peires, *The Dead Will Arise*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1989.
4. Ibid.
5. John Pemberton III, "Egungun Masquerades of the Igbonima Yoruba" in *African Arts* 11. 3, 47. Pemberton discusses "material symbolization" in relation to Yoruba *egungun* performances as "a process of ritual condensation" that transforms one value to another.
6. Ibid.
7. Steven van Wolputte, "Hang on to Your Self: Of Bodies, Embodiment, and Selves" in *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33, 260.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Committee of Public Safety, "My Place in the Sun: Reflections on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas" in *Diacritics* 26.1, 3–10.

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