

## Ruzy Rusike Curatorial Essay

### Return to the Source

There is a sense of tranquillity and catharsis that we derive from crying. It resonates within and without, as the warmth of a tear falls onto our faces, touching our cheeks and then our lips. It is in these tears that we can understand the depth of our being and a realization of the answers to our lives' deepest questions, along with a sense of belonging. Animals are embodiments of tranquillity as they live in harmony within it by constantly observing, assimilating, and being in stillness within themselves and without disturbance. As much as animals take from their environment, they give back to it constantly through their life cycle. Our cycle of giving back is at the end when our whole life form is placed into the earth and only our bones remain. Therefore, it is not by chance that *Azibuyele Emasisweni (Return to the Source)* comprises of works solely sculpted from animal bones. These bones are imbued with pure and natural energy in line with their attunement to the natural flow of the world. This contrasts humans, who remain within the energetic rhythms made by the intentions, will, and reactions of the communities we belong to. The bones that are on display in this exhibition represent both mortality and immortality: the transitory spirit of the animal. *Azibuyele Emasisweni (Return to the Source)* aligns the spirit to the bondless form of time.

### Source

Bones are the structure of what was once a life form. In semantics, the 'bone' is classified first as a noun and defined as '*any of the pieces of hard whitish tissue making up the skeleton in humans and other vertebrates.*' In biology, it is defined as '*the rigid organ comprised of bone tissues, and forms the skeleton of most vertebrates.*' While these English understandings are relevant, I will instead align this essay to its Nguni words, *amathambo okubhula* (divination bones). These are a set of bones used as a medium of communication between a traditional healer and ancestral spirits. That knowledge, whether it is indigenous or modern, is the outcome of model-making above the functioning of the natural world. All societies strive to make sense of how the natural world behaves. We strive to apply this knowledge that will guide practices which align with one's social, religious, and cultural beliefs. Furthermore, the practice of exhibitions gives one a sense of range, reach, possibility, and what can be imagined when we platform an idea. As the word 'platform' comes from 'plot' and 'form', from stage and theatre, it suggests that there is a structure that can host other behaviours. Its exterior allows possible behaviours, while its interior stays relatively fixed – like different plays being performed in a single venue. Although the exhibition echoes existing ideas, there is a

larger unfolding of messages that sets forth a new agenda when it comes to understanding the established knowledge systems of content, sculpture, spirituality, exhibition, and audience.

## **The Spirit**

Pitika Ntuli identifies as an artist, academic polymath, political activist, struggle stalwart, poet, and spiritual healer – someone who embraces both the physical and spiritual aspects of humanity. In this body of 45 works, he has engaged in numerous collaborations with other thought-leaders in the arts, music, theatre, literature, politics, media, and performance. One gains a new-found understanding of oneself in a community of things, ideas, people, rituals, and languages. We can see this today, especially in this paradigm of COVID-19, Black Lives Matter, the internet, communication, and knowledge. We see his sculptural acts of divination to bind the spirit animal to the animal bone. We can see an act that aligns itself to the particular moment of a community that gathers around the interpretations of being. We consider what it is that they see or do not see: a community that grows around a concept. Thus, his works reverberate moments that have existed, currently exist, and shall come to exist. In other words, he collapses time through the act of activating the spirit of the bones by decorating them with symbols, beads, shells, objects, and hair which are relevant to the spirit of the bone that he wishes to call upon. Ntuli reconciles the chasm between the two - bone and spirit - by creating a space for the spirit of the animal to come into being. When communicated or brought to us, this spirit ceases to adhere to time but ties itself to the earthly plane that facilitates communication and allows us to draw from their qualities.

Historically, beads were traded for slaves as well as ivory, gold, and other goods distributed in Europe and around the world. Therefore, spiritual healers/*izangoma* treat and read beads as one of many connections to the ancestors. This symbiotic relationship can be read as the shackles that bound the ancestors to that of trade, conflict, slavery, life, death, and birth. The colours of the beads reflect the earth, air, wind, and fire – basic elements which align to meaningful symbolism.

Recently, Reverend Al Sharpton delivered a eulogy at the funeral of George Floyd that reflected the living part of a human in the afterlife of slavery of *partus sequitur ventrem* (that which is brought forth follows the womb):

Genesis II said that God formed man. And Jamie, they say he breathed breath, the breath of life to make him a live human being, which means that breath comes from God. Breath is how God gives you life. Breath is not some coincidental kind of thing

that happens. Breath is a divine decision that God made. Some babies are born stillborn. God decides to blow breath in them. Breath is sanctified, breath is sacred. You don't have the right to take God's breath out of anybody; you can't put breath in their body. But you don't look at it that way because of your wickedness, principalities, darkness.

The word 'spirit' is derived from the Latin word '*spiritus*', meaning breath, and healing implies a process of making something whole. Spiritual healing is concerned, literally and originally, with holistic breathing transformations. It connects itself to the beginning and the end: breath is that which bonds the earth-bound physicality to the fluid movement of the spirit. If breathing stops, one is declared dead. Because Sharpton connects "breath to God" and "God to sacred", he reiterates the impure energies of humans who are not sacred but connected to it. Breath is the umbilical cord to many forms of experiences, intentions, and cultivations we witness through different flows of breaths. Ntuli, through the divination act of sculpting into the animal bones, is in alignment with the frequency of the soul of the breath of the earth. This breath occupies time, space, and construction. When, like George Floyd, breath inhabits that Fanonian "zone of non-Being": wickedness, principalities, and darkness deform the sacredness of breath. That is why space and platforms are important: they give us insight into other narratives. More importantly, spiritual healing and spiritual healers have become even more important as they guide the process of making things whole again: rupturing the continued marked effects of apartheid, slavery, imperialism, colonialism, and more.

### **The Complexity**

The direction of time has changed: we no longer see ourselves as living in a linear sense of time, in the sense of the past being followed by the present and then the future. Rather, the future happens before the present and time arrives from the future. This must be addressed because terms such as 'primitive' and 'contemporary' art were defined according to a linear understanding of time. Linear time is a concept which many Africans reject, hence the phrase "You have African timing". The interpretation of these works, therefore, is that of an unfinished project. More precisely, it is in the conditioning of what temporality or contingency does with these works within our traditional interpretations of 'primitive' and 'contemporary' art. The future is trading algorithmically, seven-year plans, development proposals, military simulations, securitised promotions, economic forecasts. All these predictions seek to extract, mine, and trade on the future. What emerges from this is that the 54 countries that assemble the continent of Africa have never been the object of what we call the 'futures industry'. This is an industry whose network apparatus, and whose devices aim, to develop or stage its laboratory of prefatory

futures in Africa. Therefore, this exhibition ignites a new consciousness through human, nature, and animal coming together as one.

It is important to note that the term Afrofuturism in the last decade, has been criticised by many artists and critics. The fact the prefix of Afrofuturism remains focused on the cultural practices of the African diaspora has come under particular fire. Being in the UK, USA, and Europe, the term effectively ends up excluding the history and the future theories and practices produced by artists and theorists working in East, West, North and South African, the Caribbean, and South America. This means the 'Afro' in Afrofuturism is still American and Anglo-centric. It is the non-African attempt to monopolise theories around blackness.

There is, therefore, a lot of difficulty in defining or terming a moment in African art or how art is produced in Africa. As most of the works being sculptures, paintings, ceramics, and land art, they evolve and react to time. Furthermore, terms such as 'Primitive', 'Contemporary', or 'Afrofuturism' find problems to narrate this ongoing transformation. This art communicates consumption, industry, technology, taxation, labour, warfare, finance, insurance, government, bureaucracy, science, religion, and philosophy – all of this together was made possible by the ubiquity of slavery. Thus, we bond these works to concepts that are not our own. Because of this complexity, one will never be able to say with certainty when blackness started: before or during the sugar revolution? Or whether slavery followed from racism or whether racism follows from slavery? These works help us realise that we need to examine what they evoke in us as humans and the level of consciousness they activate.

## **Return**

Through our tears, we can begin to plumb the depths of our inner being, helping us to understand the deepest questions of our lives, the journeys we are on, and our sense of belonging. The combination of air, fire, earth, and water is what gives us this breath of life. The act of Breathing is sacred and pure. It is our gift to ourselves. Bones carry the very essence to our life form after transcendence into spiritual beings. Bones are what remains of us on this physical plane. Through this transitory life form, bones transform to become the source. Tribute must be given to Pitika Ntuli as he has allowed us to go into his innermost source through *Azibuyele Emasisweni (Return to the Source)*.