

## URBAN CHEMISTRY CREATIVE PLACEMAKING IN JOHANNESBURG

### THEMATICS / IMAGE PARTICULARS

As with many cities around the world, whose neighbourhoods and communities have been segregated along class and economic lines Johannesburg (South Africa's) apartheid spatial planning, displaced people of colour into designated township settlements often far removed from access to social services, economic opportunity and jobs. Hence for all major metro's in the country, redressing the transport system through an interconnected system of transport modes; buses, taxis, and trains has been a major imperative for micro-economic regeneration at the various intersections of such transport exchange. Thus, Johannesburg's Rea Vaya, Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system serves to connect communities over longer distances from city to township and so on.

Urban Chemistry, Creative Place Making In Johannesburg, is an artistic response to the City of Johannesburg's BRT implementation programme for 12 new BRT Stations along the Louis Botha Corridor, complimenting the existing network of inner city and Soweto BRT routes and providing vital connectivity to the suburbs of the North which include Sandton City described as the richest square mile in Africa, with Alexandra one of Johannesburg's poorest townships directly opposite.

To date a collective of emerging creatives has been instrumental in documenting the programme of placemaking through art, commissioned by the City of Johannesburg and running in conjunction with the BRT Implementation programme. This city commission awarded to The Trinity Session in 2017 (ending 2019), is particular in that it employs a trans-disciplinary creative approach to engaging and collaborating with the myriad communities along the corridor, engaging place-making and design thinking through a process of co-production. To this extent the various community facilities being implemented along the corridor, such as the Noordgesig Public Library and Plaza, the Paterson Park Upgrade and Sports and Recreation Facility, Brixton Sports and Recreation Facility and the Linear Park in Turfontein, all fall within an extended programme of works attendant to the new BRT System along the Louis Botha Corridor.

Conceptualised in parallel to the curation and co-ordination of small, medium and large scale artworks implemented in and around the Louis Botha Transit Oriented Development Corridor, the young artists that comprise the #ArtMyJozi Creative Crew, were commissioned by The Trinity Session to explore the urban fabric of the corridor in terms of narrative's close to their own personal interests, namely; performance, fashion, portraiture, built environment and distinct social, spatial situations.

Hence the creative crew have been directly involved in documenting and translating all aspects of the creative process which culminates in site specific, community-centric artworks, drawn from storytelling and workshop sessions held with users and local residents impacted by these developments. *(And for new audiences the portfolio of works is accessible in this exhibition by way of printed material and video excerpts, relating to the project spaces mentioned here as well as on our social media platforms when one uses the #ArtMyJozi handle.)*

In the spirit of contextual and site specific work (the transit oriented corridors, Louis Botha Avenue in particular) the Creative Crew was encouraged to re-interpret and animate an otherwise hard piece of urban infrastructure which cross cuts through some 30 odd neighbourhoods as it heads northwards to Pretoria. A linear route holding memories as early as pre-mining town Johannesburg.

Given the enormous stretch and reach of this corridor, the #ArtMyJozi place-making through art programme, is limited in some ways by only recording the artworks programme in each of the above mentioned sites.

Hence this exhibition is about the role that artists can play in helping us to see and re-see what otherwise might be lost in the general daily commute to and from work. In 2017 the first briefs to the team centered on reframing conventional modes of documentary work by employing a poetic and performative approach to translating findings along the corridor. Equally the crew employed a forensic eye looking at traces of time and history. It is also

important to note that the various series generated for this exhibition demonstrate collaborations between the team where photography, videography and performance overlaps due to the logics of the team sharing the responsibility of supporting one another's work, in particular where the subject requires more than one eye so to speak and in particular where places and contexts pose personal threat to the team.

In city a such as Johannesburg, where the legacy of gold mining, colonialism and Apartheid have inscribed into the landscape conditions of extreme inequality, the 'new generation' of post-apartheid creatives, see the present and the future in different ways, finding their voices through social media and re-invention in a complex post-apartheid reality. The practice of working, day in and day out with different communities, different social-cultural paradigms over an extended period of time, is something of a privilege, in that The Trinity Session gets to work the city every day, travelling from one end of the project geography to the other. Such processes combined with the artistic translation of collective memory, people and places makes the street alive with an unpredictable mixing of personalities, histories, and skills; in this mix new meanings and forms emerge. Urban Chemistry therefor asserts that a city in the remaking has its own social and creative forces and 'we' should remain present in our efforts to receive and interpret them.

## PHOTO SERIES' THEMATICS AND DESCRIPTIONS

### **My body is a museum**

While both having a passion for yoga, Mantala Nkoatse and Zivanai Matangi, embarked on a project that explored the tensions between public and private space in complex social situations and circumstances. Being a performer and a poet, Mantala is very mindful of her body's capacity to occupy space and evoke meaning, through movement, spoken word or song and Zivanai Matangi's instinctive photographic eye is in constant pursuit of impactful visual situations, people and personalities on the street. In this series however, the range of locations and perspectives strengthened by Mantala's self-insertion was not only awkward for both performer and audience, but evoked strong verbal reaction in some instances where male onlookers assumed the right to objectify and intimidate. For Mantala, and this best expressed in her own words in the exhibition podcast, she reflects on feelings of anger and rage towards these comments while having to remain centered and focused within the photographic moment, but she also speaks about the shift that occurs over-night, where anger shifts towards strength and empowerment as she takes to the streets the following day.

In contrast: Ke Lorile ke robetse: **In my sleep I dreamt I was sleeping** by Mantala Nkoatse and photographed by Zivanai Matangi, Mantala finds situations along the Louis Botha Corridor that allow her to provoke new readings of Spaces and places. Working in collaboration with colleagues and friends from her home Alexandra Township, she was able to respond to global issues affecting her sense of womanhood and young woman in West Africa today, where she takes advantage of found signage, as can be seen in the image Ke Lorile ke robetse: In my sleep I dreamt I was sleeping (Bring Back our Girls), Mantala and her colleagues perform symbolic gestures in front of a Nigerian Church on Louis Botha Avenue.

### **Ezweni Lam – In My World (Wind-up Lamp) Senzo Bongwana / Zivanai Matangi**

For several years now the Louis Botha Corridor has been a construction site, seeing road widening as the first phase to make way for the new Rea Vaya Bus Rapid Transit Stations. And for many Joburger's this has caused a lot of frustration. To the extent that there is little positivity circling at present, and certainly if you weren't paying attention Thabo Mokwena's occupation of a piece of the side walk opposite the construction of Clarendon Place's new BRT Station, would go unnoticed. However during Senzo and Zivanai's frequent walks along this stretch of the corridor they encountered Thabo's place of residence, which to most would present as a state of homelessness. Thabo's complex history as a member of the infamous gang the 26's, criminal activity and years of imprisonment, finding him on the street recreating his own sense of place and spirituality. Typically such use of the sidewalk would be met by Metro Police, forcing him to relocate. However in the 2 years that he has lived here, he is tolerated and largely accepted. Senzo Bongwana's longer term plan is to work closely with Thabo, developing his story into a short film. And the for the purposes of this exhibition settled on a series of images that speak to personal creativity, taking found objects and recycling them into a distinct urban landscape, replete with side view mirrors for surveillance.

## **Eskhaleni: In the Space**

As with Senzo's enquiry, Thusi Vukani and Sparks Napoli worked together to create a series of street portraits where either Sparks or other models usurp existing street signage and advertising to present their own commentary on urban style, movement and consumption. To this extent the act of modelling is used to mark space in a deliberate way, reflecting on the urban form of Louis Botha Corridor while equally mindful of personal aesthetics and street style fashion. And while Johannesburg has always been a place of extreme imbalance and inequality forged from the conditions of apartheid planning and gold mining, their occupation of the street observes the combined resilience of a city and its people.

## **Stephen Hobbs: Callus**

For Stephen, the Louis Botha Corridor holds numerous childhood memories, the strongest of which being as an early teenager attending Hebrew lessons, close to the now derelict Doll's House on Louis Botha Ave, made famous by a popular film of the 80's, Saturday Night at the Palace. Hobbs' early childhood days in Johannesburg were the stuff of a seemingly ideal time when white people benefitted then as they continue to today to a life of separate development and privilege.

And over time, like many Joburgers his interaction with this main arterial through suburban Johannesburg, has been informed by decades of change and waves of migration of families, whose young lives started typically in Johannesburg's booming CBD of the 50, 60's and 70's, with an eventual move to the suburbs to settle and start families.

The imagery depicted in Hobbs series Callus, is a reflection on his own lived experience of the pervasive nature of fear in our society, fear of house break and assault. In many respects the leafy suburbs of present day Joburg are representative of the inherent contradiction in our society an un-neighbourliness in parts - an unwillingness to drop the walls and see one another.

In the context of this exhibition Urban Chemistry, the ArtMyJozi Creative Crew are too young to have any significant memories predating South Africa's democracy. However the ArtMyJozi Creative Crew are the very interlocutors between the former white middle class suburbs, transformed sidewalks of Louis Botha Avenue and the black township settlements formed under Apartheid (Alexandra Township being one of them).

And yet along some stretches of Louis Botha Avenue, it would appear that middle class reality sits best behind highwalls, and all manner of boundary securitization (no longer to the exclusion of black families) nestled beneath the greatest man made forest in the Southern Hemisphere. And while many of these suburban neighborhoods, have shifted in terms their economic and racial demographics, their seeming sense of self isolation stands in stark contrast to the texture and energy of Louis Botha Avenue.



MANTALA NKOATSE\_ZIVANAI MATANGI\_My body is a museum\_\_ALEX CORRIDOR\_A3

Alexandra Township, purportedly the oldest township in Johannesburg, is split into the west bank and east bank by the Jukskei river. The east bank is typically suburban, working / middle class. Whereas the west bank closest to the Louis Botha Corridor, is a mixture of social housing and informal shack settlements. The living conditions are extremely poor and people almost live on top of one another. This side of Alex is well known for its violence, xenophobic attacks and mob justice. Mantala's pose in one of the typical narrow corridors between shacks and brick homes reminds one of the cramped conditions, but she lends an uncanny poetic to these impoverished sites.



MANTALA NKOATSE\_ZIVANAI MATANGI\_My body is a museum\_TABLE STRETCH\_A2\_

As above, Mantala performs a stretch on an available table at a local tavern in Alex. These spaces are typical male dominated and it is very rare to see men drinking in the company of woman in such taverns



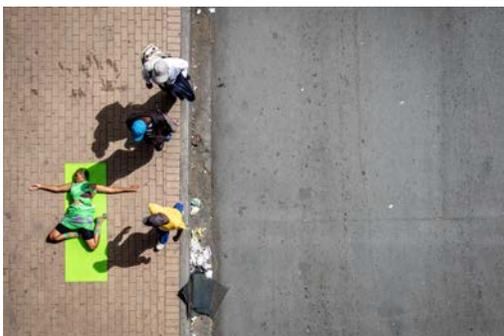
MANTALA NKOATSE\_ZIVANAI MATANGI\_My body is a Museum\_STREET POSE\_A3

Mantala occupies a main road through Alex, usually an impossible act to perform, the colours of her dress hair and yoga matt are a deliberate assertion of her femininity within the township.



MANTALA NKOATSE\_ZIVANAI MATANGI\_My Body is a Museum\_GREEN MATT\_A3

The possibility of occupying a main road median (traffic island) is unusual anywhere in the world, but the suggestion here of her either starting or ending her use of the space, speaks as with the corridor scene on the westbank above, to liminal space and ways in which the female body in a male dominated city looks to alternatives for surviving and navigating such spaces.



MANTALA NKOATSE\_ZIVANAI MATANGI\_My body is a museum\_\_SIDE WALK\_A3

In Side Walk, Mantala more directly seeks to provoke curiosity at a near taxi rank in Alex.

The four images below are demonstrative of Mantala's personal sense of irony and defiance, she is notably more androgynous in these images, an object in space a, a transient marker of township life and equally an animator of space, the last image – Touch Toes, is important as she engages the viewer directly, whilst in a potentially vulnerable position



MANTALA NKOATSE\_ZIVANAI MATANGI\_My body is a museum\_\_FISH AND CHIPS\_A3



MANTALA NKOATSE\_ZIVANAI MATANGI\_My body is a museum\_\_HAIR SALON\_A3



MANTALA NKOATSE\_ZIVANAI MATANGI\_My body is a museum\_\_CHURCH\_A3



MANTALA NKOATSE\_ZIVANAI MATANGI\_My body is a museum\_WALL GAP\_A3

To the point about liminal space, there is an excellent architecture of precarity in this shot, Mantala is bridge on the edge, her body a framing device for Alex's streets.

STEPHEN HOBBS CALLUS SERIES

Drawing from the biological meaning of Callus, Hobbs' photo essay of domestic life in the suburbs as seen from the street, draws attention in some instance to an accumulative securitization of one's residential edge, where any sense of neighborliness is navigated through overlapping grids, cross bars and wires. In *50s FENCE* the precast boundary fence, likely to be of the 50's era, has been added to by way of the ubiquitous sharpened palisade fence, and in contrast the advert for *CLEAR VU The Invisible Wall*, speaks to the notion of an expanded view of the landscape a visually more palatable version of the black palisade fence. For Hobbs there is a potent irony, and everybody knows it, if criminals want to steal from you or invade you home, they will always find a way in. In this sense the Callus series speaks to an all-pervasive fear of attack. A condition that many Joburgers suffer from, as the statistics suggest we could be at war. And yet ones daily lived experience is to the contrary. One wanders whether the residents of *MESH CLOUDS* recognize the irony of caged clouds.



STEPHEN HOBBS\_Callus\_50sFENCE\_A4



STEPHEN HOBBS\_Callus\_BOOMS\_A4



STEPHEN HOBBS\_Callus\_CLEAR VU\_A4



STEPHEN HOBBS\_Callus\_FENCING GRAFT\_A4



STEPHEN HOBBS\_Callus\_MESH CLOUDS\_A4



STEPHEN HOBBS\_Callus\_BLACK GATES\_A4



THUSI VUKANI\_SPARKS NAPOLI\_Eskhaleni\_In the Space \_RECLINING FIGURE\_A2

There were several shots with this model reclining on the traffic median, we settled on choosing this image for the layering of the cars in relation to the backdrop and the extent which the driver in the black car appears oblivious to the model.



THUSI VUKANI\_SPARKS NAPOLI\_Eskhaleni\_In the Space \_GOLD\_A2\_CROPPED\_421 x480mm

Part fashion shoot, part performance, this work makes use of available signage on the corridor, where the gold exchange of years gone by still persists.



THUSI VUKANI\_SPARKS NAPOLI\_Eskhaleni\_In the Space\_BLACK JACKET\_A3



SENZO BONGWANA\_ZIVANAI MATANGI\_Ezweni Lam\_In My World\_WINDUP LAMP\_A2



SENZO BONGWANA\_ZIVANAI MATANGI\_Ezweni Lam\_In My World\_SIDE MIRROR\_A3



SENZO BONGWANA\_ZIVANAI MATANGI\_Ezweni Lam\_In My World\_LIFE STORY\_A3



SENZO BONGWANA\_ZIVANAI MATANGI\_Ezweni Lam\_In My World\_ORANGE FLOWER\_A3



SENZO BONGWANA\_ZIVANAI MATANGI\_Ezweni Lam\_In My World\_ARMCHAIR\_A3