

DINEO DIPHOFA

**Exhibiting [Black] Modernisms: Language,
Diction and Sites of Intervention in Institutions**

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Introduction

Clouded by insurmountable controversy, the *Black Modernisms* exhibition attempted to provide a platform for engaging concepts of modernist expression evident in black artists practicing between 1940 and 1990. Held at Wits Art Museum in 2016, the exhibition garnered critical attention concerning race, rehabilitation of whiteness through white patronage, institutional power historical oversights and ultimately the curation of the show. From this controversy developed a line of questioning the formation of the black modernist canon. The point of interest here is in the language used in this exhibition's z-fold and demonstrating how this can be problematic in can reproducing misinterpretations and misrepresentations of black artists in the South African art narratives. I argue that the politics of writing about the black subject (the artists) speak to notions of power, the notable omissions and oversights of additional black south African artists speak to a power of selection and thus operate to reinforce a system of power, namely the curator and the institution.

The subject of the black artist and their representation has notably been a site of debate in many art narratives concerning the framing of black artists in South Africa¹. The representations inform a basis of understanding of power: those that subject and those that are subjected to representation. In his essay *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Stuart Hall asserts that "...the regime of representation is a regime of power" (Hall 1990: 225). Although Hall refers to this in the light of representation around blackness, one may begin to understand that there are power relations that inform what is being represented and what is doing the representing. Furthermore, that which is doing the representing holds the power to exclude other forms of representation that do not subscribe to the dominant regime. The ways in which I approach this is through a textual analysis and intervention informed by how the *Black Modernisms* exhibition demonstrates inclusions of subscribing to – and thus

enabling – the regime of representation. The exhibition was organised together in supposed collaboration with Andrew R. Mellon Foundation Research Associates. In addition to this, the exhibition was planned to coincide with the *Multiple Modernities* colloquium held in June 2016. The exhibition was curated by Anitra Nettleton. Much of the critique of the exhibition surrounded the positionality of Anitra Nettleton as curator as well as the exclusions of artists such as Alfred Thoba, Valerie Desmore, Eliza Xaba and Gladys Mgudlandlu – just to name a few.

Black Modernisms is an exhibition I first encountered as a student pursuing a History of Art course² in 2016. Following this encounter I wrote a paper concerning one of the exhibition's inclusions, Bongiwe Dhlomo. The paper focused on the selective historicisation that followed Dhlomo's exhibition history. In the z-fold, the exhibition frames itself as a research project examining Modernisms in relation to Black South African artists, the question as to why it had to be racialised as a black modernist canon is significant. Why could not these artists simply be identified as modernist artists as opposed to black modernist artists?

The paper's question ultimately lies in the role that exhibition's z-fold plays in the narrative of Black South African artists and their representation, namely using *Black Modernisms* has a microcosm for unpacking this. My interests here lie less in the

¹ Narratives around black artists in south Africa have been problematic in their framing. An example of this is the label "Township Artists "

² The course is called Context and Display.

historical oversights and omitted narratives, but more so the diction and the phrasing/framing used in the z-fold to describe black artists' mode of working. There were very few considerations made for the selection of artists in the show. Some

notable omissions included Ernest Mancoba, Valerie Desmore and Alfred Thoba, just to name a few. Interestingly enough although Alfred was excluded from the show, there is a retrospective of his work on at Wits Art Museum as I am writing this paper. Another line of enquiry may be posed regarding the exclusion of Thoba from Nettleton's exhibition and ultimately the black modernist narrative as well as an inclusion of his retrospective in their public programming two years later.

What are the ways in which the Black Modernisms exhibition has enabled the selective and inconsistent nature of art history regarding Black South African Artists and their narratives? The paper's proposed answer is through the language. The paper analyse the exhibition's z-fold as a site of interrogation and intervention. Both these aspects take place in a number of ways. In Black Mark Collectives panel discussion 'Black Artists, White Labels', Khwezi Gule comments that there are four recurring ideas in the z-fold. Namely:

The writer's reliance on the art historical model as a way of explaining artist production within binaries i.e abstractions and figurations, the artists foregrounding of apartheid and colonial contexts as a precondition of production, the mentioning of white tutelage and patronage as inspiration for artists and the absence of any other endeavours of the artists featured in the exhibition - for instance Selby Mvusi. In addition to being an artist he was also a scholar of African art. Gerard sekoto was a musician and many of the artists mentioned were teachers who produced significant other pedagogies of art. (Gule 2016)

In identifying these four recurrent themes, Gule inadvertently points to numerous ways in which the z-fold can be a site of intervention – especially an artistic intervention.

Methodology

In this research I am using a qualitative research design as my methodology. A qualitative methodology is traditionally used to further research and thus gain insight into certain aspects of the respective research. Jennifer Mason⁶ writes that this research design has a number of approaches⁷, however the approaches I adopt for this research will be carried out in two ways: textual analysis of the z-fold in the form of an artistic intervention and an interview with Same Mdluli.

The first approach is an examination of the z-fold. This will carry itself out as visual and textual examination in the form of a video which will be included in the archive. In addition to this, I have had a brief interview with Same Mdluli to augment what the press material acquired online.

Positionality and Gatekeeping

In a letter of response to City Press' Black Modernisms, White Saviours article, Nettleton claims to have over thirty years of experience in African Art. (Nettleton 2016). Nettleton further attempts to justify that this very thing gives her a leg to stand on concerning curating an exhibition like Black Modernisms. However, the likelihood of this as validation may require enquiry.

⁶ See Jennifer Mason. 2002. *Qualitative Researching*. London: Sage Publications

⁷ Jennifer Mason is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Manchester.

Noting the kinds of writings that Nettleton has contributed to the pool of African art scholarship, Nettleton occupies a precarious if not perilous position in determining what a black modernist narrative may look like. Does this 'thirty years of experience

in African Art' qualify Nettleton to not only speak about [black] modernist art, but in turn disregard the opinions and qualifications of her alleged co-curators?

In response to *Black Modernisms, White Saviours* by Lwandile Fikeni; Nettleton acknowledges for the omission of pivotal artists however does not account for some of these omissions. Instead, Nettleton lists all of the contributions that she has made to Wits' Art History curriculum. Nettleton claims that the museum did not have the financial resources to subsequently borrow art works of notable omitted artists from other institutions (namely Johannesburg Art Gallery and Fort Hare University) however there are a number of artists that remain omitted however can still be found in the museum's very collection – namely Alfred Thoba (whom I have reiterated has the attention of a retrospective at Wits Art Museum as of 13 March 2018), Valerie Desmore and Gladys Mgudlandlu. Alexander Beresford, a lecturer from the University of Leeds, argues in his paper *Power, Patronage, and Gatekeeper politics in South Africa* (2015) that “the spread of patronage-based relationships in the ANC has augmented the growth of a volatile form of gatekeeper politics that threatens both the party's internal integrity and its capacity to deliver upon its electoral mandate. ” (Beresford 2015: 228). Beresford drew on an analysis of ANC discussion documents, key informant interviews with senior party officials, and interviews and observations with delegates from all levels of the movement at the ANC's centenary policy conference in 2012. He writes

“Gatekeeping is a term commonly used within ANC circles and the term gatekeeper politics is employed here to refer to how political leaders in positions of authority within the ruling party or in public office control access to resources and opportunities in order to forward their own political and economic ends” (Beresford 2015: 229).

He argues that there are two interrelated dimensions to gatekeeper politics and what he terms as "spoils consumption" (the use of control over public resources for private ends) and crony capitalism (the use of connections to public authority to facilitate private capital accumulation). With this reading in particular, the dynamics of South African gatekeeper politics can be applied in the sense of Nettleton's role as a gatekeeper of the black modernist framework in the way that she has positioned herself as a ruling authority because of her 'thirty years experience in African Art'. This ruling authority as a gatekeeper affords her the opportunity to take claim of the black modernist framework as her establishment. The black modernist framework exists as a canon too and Nettleton's gatekeeper politics are present here too. It may be effective at this point to unpack what the notions of a canon are. Anna Brzyski writes that "...canons are the ultimate arbiter of cultural value" (Brzyski 2007: 2). A measure of judgement is what a canon holds to decide what precisely is of value to be included within it. This implies a very selective value judgement. Reading the introduction to *Partisan Canons*, one can understand canons and the formation of canons to be a "mechanism of oppression, a guardian of privilege, a vehicle of exclusion and a structure for class, gender and racial interests" (Brzyski: 2007: 7). Here one can see that even the formation of canons is similar to that of the framing of histories in exhibition making.

In 2006 visual artist Sharlene Khan wrote a short essay titled *Doing it for Daddy*, which argued that that since 1994, 'transformation' in the visual arts field in South Africa seemed to have ceased at the point of white women replacing white men in positions of power. It questioned this new position of selective power in institutions that remained colonially and racially unreformed. Here, one has an understanding of the "block" that has happened in regarding qualified black scholars – such as Same Mdluli – from entering a curatorial position and having curatorial agency in

the Black Modernisms exhibition. Regarding the surge of white women into positions of power, Khan writes "As it stands, the ascendancy of white women into positions of power has seen little in the way of the implementation of new techniques, concepts or strategies in cultural policies" (Khan 2011: 1). Here, one can note there has very little contribution – if none – to the transformation towards an inclusion of qualified people of colour. The same can be applied for having qualified black scholars having a curatorial role in the Black Modernisms exhibition.

I also refer to Okwui Enwezor's notion engaging representation of the black subject in South Africa. In *Reframing The Black Subject (1997)*, Enwezor writes that white South African artists possess an overly determined fantasy of identification with the black subject (Enwezor 1997: 23). Included is Enwezor's use of South African artists Candice Breitz and Pippa Skotnes as examples that demonstrate his claims concerning how the black subject is exposed through the use of racist Western principles that reinforce colonial discourses. Enwezor criticises the above mentioned South African artists' works of art and how they operationalise ethnographic photographic conventions in representing the black subject. Visual devices are photographic methods used in the construction of the black male subject as a 'primitive' being. The argument that Enwezor tries to communicate in his criticism of Breitz and Skotnes is the manner in which photographs of black subjects by white artists appear to be lacking in a "truthful" nature about the circumstances of the reality of the subjects. This Enwezor says is evident through the use of formulaic photographic practices. Enwezor's criticism lies in the issue of the using methods – such as photography - as a tool of colonialism in order to strengthen the hierarchical ideology of domination of black subjects. The mode of photography is a colonial lens through which the black subject is engaged. Although this criticism is related to photography, this relates to how the Black Modernisms exhibition is the colonial lens

through which Anitra Nettleton utilised as a tool to strengthen the Western ideologies of domination of black [artist] subjects and their work. Here, the colonial lens of the exhibition frames black artist subjects' work that subscribes to western modernist (regime of western modernist representation) modes of working.

Exhibition Catalogue: Language and Interventionist Curating

Considering this paper's title, one cannot speak about the power of language without making reference to Michel Foucault. In *Subject and Power* (1982) he argues that power relations are not unidirectional in nature, but are a mesh of antagonisms instead (1982: 786). Foucault further writes that power is exerted by institutions as well by both actors in the power relationship (1982:786). Foucault encourages that power is analysed solely from the perspective of the institution exercising power on a subject rather than an action of exchange (1982: 739). Understanding language is critical in considering power relations and the complexities within it. The writers within the institution have the power to frame the black artists as well as the subject of their work within in particular framework to frame the black artists in a such a way that subscribes to the writer's (and thus institution's) regime of representation. In the z-fold (Figures 1-5 respectively), the artists' have been described as "The African: Abstract and Essential". The artists included in the exhibition subscribe to what the writer and curator aimed for the respective z-fold and exhibition, while the ones excluded do not *subscribe* to being the 'essential African' that practice in abstracted forms and western ways of art-making.

In *Subject/Object: New Studies in Sculpture* (2012), Carroll Ashgate writes a chapter titled 'Sculpture and The Museum' that examines the role of artistic intervention in critiquing art objects held in museums. Although the below text refers to interventionist engagements with sculptural objects from museum collections, it

offers a brief introduction into the nature of interventions and the intentions behind them as artistic practices.

Intervention in the context of artistic practices implies an artist aiming to disrupt in the museum where pre-existing objects are often presented as authoritative representation (Ashgate 2012: 217)

Here, one understands the role of an artistic intervention is to disrupt. The site of the intervention is disrupted and thus offers new readings for the interpretation of the z-fold in this case.

The typical catalogue will carry a number of essays or at least a point of introduction for the curator of the exhibition. This, however, was not the case for the *Black Modernisms* exhibition. A zine-like catalogue, regarded as a z-fold, was produced for the exhibition instead. Evident in the z-fold is a landscape format displaying a number of artworks from the museum's collections. Namely works by Bonnie Ntshalintshali, Julian Motau, Nesta Nala and Sydney Khumalo amongst others. Included in this, are texts referring to aspects of the exhibition's research under the guises of "'The African: Abstract and Essential' " and "Modernity in traditional contexts" just to name a few. On the other side of the z-fold shows the exhibition's introduction and historical background. An inclusion of certain sub-heading's are problematic in their diction and this the primary site of intervention for my final submission – a means of editing, addition and subtraction of certain aspects of the content. Phrases such as "traditional", the "African as essential" may pose a question of "What is the exhibition actually legitimising, what is it trying to do and how is it speaking to notions of power?" It is attempting to selectively legitimise what a "black modernism" may look like, suggesting that there are racially equivalent modernisms that are being produced.

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WITS ART MUSEUM, *Black Modernisms*. 2016. Z-Fold. Courtesy of Julia Charlton

Black Mark Collective Critical Thought.2016 .*Black Artists, White Labels*. Panel

Discussion recording. Online URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jL2kN43tcwo>

Date Accessed: 16/05/2018

Figure 1-5 (in descending order)

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Detailed realism, however, dominated in the figure studies produced by artists such as Simoni Mnguni and Gerard Bhengu, with watercolours and drawings of individuals that were intended to document particular ethnic types and occupations. The finely modelled and ethnically identified clay busts of Hezekiel Ntuli are sculptural equivalents based on European portraits. Both this realism



David Phaswane Mogano, *Untitled (Rural Scene)* 1972
Watercolour on paper, 50.5 x 71 cm
Standard Bank African Art Collection (Wits Art Museum) Acquired in 1999



Bhekisane Manyoni, *The Dancer*
Linocut in black ink on paper, 20 x 36 cm
Standard Bank African Art Collection (Wits Art Museum) Acquired in 1989

and the softer naturalism of many of the painters were styles that were linked to modernity. They were not often used in historical African arts, and definitely not in use in southern African traditions. The more the drawings looked like photographs, the more modern they appeared because of their approximation of mechanical modes of reproduction.



Lucky Sibiya, *Untitled (Decorated Gourd)*, 1980s
Gourd and ink, 20.1 x 17.2 cm
Standard Bank African Art Collection (Wits Art Museum) Acquired in 1997



Simoni Mnguni, *AmaTonga Medicine Man*
Watercolour on paper, 28 x 22.6 cm
Standard Bank African Art Collection (Wits Art Museum) Acquired in 1995



Cyprian Shilakoe, *Untitled*
Etching, aquatint, 30.6 x 21.20 cm
Presented in 1999 by Goodman Gallery to Wits Art Museum

BLACK MODERNISMS IN SOUTH AFRICA (1940–1990)

Introduction

This exhibition is constructed from artworks in Wits Art Museum's collections by black artists working in modernist modes. Modernism is an art historical term that has been used to refer to European art made between 1860 and 1950. In the South African context it has usually been applied to the work of white artists influenced by the European avant garde. However, the narrow definitions of traditional art history are exclusionary and are being challenged by new understandings of modernity and its artistic expression in modernisms. In this view there are multiple different manifestations and developments of modernist styles and modes of making.

Historical Background

All the artists represented here worked under the exclusionary discrimination that ruled South African life and which denied black artists access to art institutions. The artworks on show were made between the 1940s and 1990 by black artists who had no formal art-school training, but established themselves as artists nonetheless. Some obtained formal training through workshops set up and run by white artist-philanthropists and others by working with trained white and black artists. In the latter years of apartheid (1970s and 1980s) a number of artists qualified through university art departments; at UNISA (by correspondence) and at historically black institutions such as Fort Hare, Durban Westville and Bophutatswana. Differences in artists' access to training, materials, resources and markets might be expected to correlate with differences between the works of formally trained artists and those of artists with less or no formal training in western ideas of 'art'. The divide evident between the main forms of modernism outlined here is based on stylistic and aesthetic criteria, but it does not coincide with these differences of access.

Strands of Modernism

It is possible to discern a division into two streams in works by black artists of this era. One can separate works in which abstracted figurative images that evoke emotion through metaphor, from those using expressive and/or naturalistic representation, which often depicts a narrative. This divide embodies a distinction between the impetus towards universal or essential forms and the evocation of a particular reality. Most of these black modernists did not embrace complete abstraction and their abstracted images of figure subjects sometimes intersected with the story-telling impulse associated with naturalism. The divide between abstraction and naturalism, was not the product of different forms of training, however, but was driven rather by the artists' choosing to follow specific paths. One of the main factors influencing their choice was undoubtedly the art market, situated physically, economically and culturally in white South Africa. Before the 1960s, black patrons and artists were largely absent from the 'art world' of galleries and it was white elites who bought and collected paintings and sculpture and possibly thus influenced the direction taken by artists. But from the 1960s onwards, in spite of apartheid's severe restrictions and repression of black aspirations, black artists found their personal voices and created avenues of access to the art world through some commercial galleries. As individual, modern subjects, each embraced modern, universalising definitions of 'art'. Many also pulled historical materials and techniques that had formerly been considered 'craft' into the high art arena.

Modernism in Naturalism and Realism

For many of the first generation of black modernist artists in South Africa, modernity lay in the depiction through expressive naturalism, of the realities of urban township dwelling. Working in a mode that correlated to the soft forms of European Impressionism, Post Impressionism and Expressionism that had reached South Africa in the 1920s, artists such as Ernst Mancoba, Gerard Sekoto, George Pemba and John Koenakeefe Mohl, mostly produced works that concentrated on urban life, but also images of rural landscapes. Some, like Gerard Bhengu, used the landscape genre to record traditions of African life. Many artists saw their process as one of creating an archive that documented the waves of suffering and destruction caused by apartheid, but also stood as records of resistance and resilience in the face of ever hardening discrimination. Artists of a second generation like Durant Shilali, Ephraim Ngatane, and David Mogano, who all had the advantage of attending classes at the Polly Street Recreation Centre in Johannesburg in the late 1950s and early 1960s, continued this landscape tradition, lifting their renditions of townships beyond the mundane into poetic visuality.

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Exhibition dates
6 April – 19 June 2016

Curated by Professor Emeritus Anitra Nettleton, in collaboration with Dr Same Mdluli and Bongani Mahlangu, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Research Associates at WAM.

Wits Art Museum
University Corner, Corner Bertha (extension of Jan Smuts Avenue) and Jorissen Streets, Braamfontein, Johannesburg.

Opening hours
Wednesdays to Sundays
10h00–16h00
Tel (Monday – Friday):
011 717 1365
Tel (Saturday – Sunday):
011 717 1358
Free entry, all welcome



Ezrom Legae, *Germination* 1985
Bronze, 22.4 x 10.7 x 70.8 cm
Wits Art Museum collection. Acquired in 1990

The end of the exhibition will coincide with a colloquium at Wits, organised by the Multiple Modernisms research group. More information will be available on the Multiple Modernisms facebook page in the course of May 2016.

The African: abstract and essential

The second stream of modernism on show here is the abstracted form. Abstraction is evident in the works of many artists who trained in centres such as the Polly Street Recreation Centre and the Evangelical Lutheran Church Arts and Crafts Centre at Rorke's Drift in Natal. Both of these centres offered artists guidance in drawing and painting, with a special emphasis on print-making at Rorke's Drift. The art-school trained teachers at both centres, Cecil Skotnes (Polly Street) and Peder Gowenius (Rorke's Drift) encouraged their students to find styles of production that referenced African traditional forms. As these forms were seldom realistic, the artists developed abstracted figurative styles familiar to us in works by artists who studied at or were connected to Polly Street such as Sydney Kumalo, Ezrom Legae, Ben Arnold, Lucky Sibiyi, Louis Maqhubela, Leonard Matsoso and Lucas Sithole. Artists from Rorke's Drift, such as Azaria Mbatha, Dan Rakgoathe and Cyprian Shilakoe, developed abstraction which also referred to Mediaeval sources, in prints and sculptural forms. There are poetic, metaphorical and indirect references to the world beyond the images in all these works, but often their poetic appearance masks a strongly political message. The formalist aesthetic underlying these works, with emphasis on composition, balance, contrast and harmony, is evident in Alina Ndebele's tapestries as much as it is in the prints from Rorke's Drift, or the figure sculptures and drawings by artists trained at Polly Street.

Another group of artists harnessed the formal abstraction promoted by the teachers at these two centres to develop styles of expressive representation that were more explicit in their critique of apartheid than either those who painted landscapes and township scenes, or those who used subtle abstraction to evoke a sense of loss. Artist such as Dumile Feni and Julian Motau used expressive distortion of figures to draw attention to black people's suffering and deprivation, working almost exclusively with pen, pencil and charcoal. Many of these images carry a power to evoke strong emotional responses from their viewers. This was the case also with some of the earlier graphic work of Selbourne Mvusi, who obtained a BA at Fort Hare before it had an art department.

In the 1980s many black artists who had initially embraced an abstract mode of representation turned to more realistic forms, as their need to make political statements became more intense. Ezrom Legae's drawings from that decade and the work of younger artists like Fikile Magadlala are examples.

Modernity in 'traditional' contexts

Many artists living in the rural areas and working in traditional media for local clientele also produced modernist forms. An almost completely abstract modernism is evident in the refined clay forms made by ceramic artists Nesta Nala and Rebecca Matibe. These works are differentiated from traditional wares by their precision and deliberate development of geometrical or representational elements. They share these characteristics Bonie Ntshahintshali. Jackson Hlungwani used wood to assemble works, with minimally carved elements, in contrast to the historical traditions of sculpting as carving. This represents a modernist, individual response to particular circumstances. The topical subject matter and basic naturalism of the wooden sculptures by artists such as Johannes Maswanganyi and Noria Mabasa situate their works within a framework of the modern.

From this brief survey, it is clear that black modernism in South Africa took a number of forms and delivered a richness of artistic endeavours. This exhibition offers a small glimpse of this complex part of South African art history, drawing on published and ongoing research into and hopefully encouraging new research on the artists of this period.



Beauty N (ceramic) Bonie Ntshahintshali (painting), *'Reptile'* bowl 1994
Overglaze enamel earthenware, 19.5 x 38 x 35 cm
Standard Bank African Art Collection (Wits Art Museum) Acquired in 1995

Julian Charcc Present

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Julian Motau, *Walking Mother and Child*
Charcoal and pastel on paper, 64.5 x 45.7 cm
Presented in 1997 by W.O. Heilmann to Wits Art Museum

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BLACK MODERNISMS
IN SOUTH AFRICA
(1940–1990)



Julian Motau, *Walking Mother and Child*
Charcoal and pastel on paper, 64,5 x 45,7 cm
Presented in 1991 by W.G. Helmhorn to Wits Art Museum



Nesta Nala, *Uphisa (Water cooling pot)* 1993
Clay, polish, engravings, 21 x 18 cm
Standard Bank African Art Collection (Wits Art Museum) Acquired in 1999

Front: Sydney Kumalo, *Seated Woman* 1962
Bronze, 58,3 x 19 x 17,9 cm
Acquired in 1971 with Norman Herber Fund (Wits Art Museum)



Biographical Profile

Dineo Diphofa (born 1995, South Africa) is curator, arts writer and researcher currently based in Johannesburg, South Africa. Additionally, she is the co-founder and member of the art collective *Title: In Transgression*. Diphofa has recently completed a Master's degree in History of Art at University of the Witwatersrand, where she also obtained a degree in Fine Arts. Diphofa's research and writing interests are located in 20th century and contemporary South African art, neglected narratives, and contested histories. She has previously worked for commercial art galleries as well as the cataloguing and research department of an arts auction house in Johannesburg. Diphofa is currently working at the Visual Identities in Art & Design Research Centre (VIAD) at the University of Johannesburg and is also a member of the South African Visual Art Historians organisation (SAVAH).

