

HYPERALLERGIC

Artists of the African Diaspora Cast Off the Legacy of Displacement



Detail of Aisha Tandiwe Bell, "Artifacts" (2015) (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

A solitary figure standing against the far wall of the gallery, Sable Elyse Smith says: "My father was a drug dealer and loved me." The audience listens in silence as she describes in detail the night when her father beat her mother while black eyed peas rolled across the kitchen floor and the television played on in the other room. The subject of Smith's performance is her father — an inmate and a murderer — but as her voice fills the small space of the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts (MoCADA), it also becomes a testament to the power of speech.

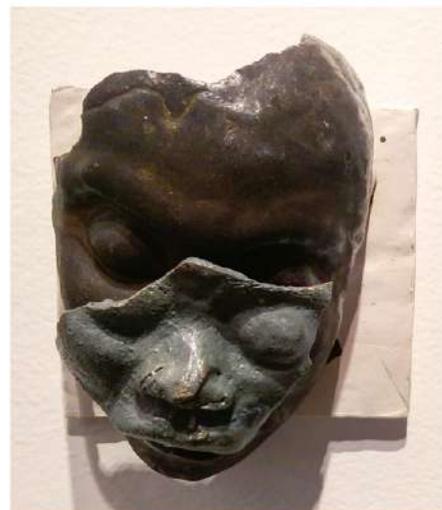
The title of Smith's performance piece, "Sifting," describes her work as a process of searching, failing, and reassembling. The memoir-like nature of her spoken word performance makes it a kind of self-portrait, reflexively forming an image of her identity in the context of those around her — her mother and father. At the end of her reading all the gallery lights go out. Sitting and standing in the darkness, the audience is disoriented and a series of shuffling noises betrays the crowd's uncertainty. Unsettled and with an increased sensitivity to light and sound, the audience pauses as the performance enters its second movement. A video projection of overlaid aerial shots set to a soundtrack of heavy wind gives the viewer a sense of great height and motion. As the video ends and the gallery is thrown back into complete darkness, Smith states, "This is what it feels like to fall."

Smith's performance encapsulates the themes of MoCADA's current exhibition, *Dis place*. When the one-room museum isn't packed for one of the exhibition's performances it is very quiet, but the works fill the space unassumingly and their messages are anything but reserved. Smith's work in particular — and the show in general — examine the residual trauma of displacement, feelings of powerlessness, and the desire to redefine one's place in the world. The title alludes to the legacies of Western colonialism and enslavement that still affect men and women of color today.



Ralph Ziman with Boas Manzvenga, Panganai Phiri, Lenon Tinarwo, Telmore Masangudza, and Kennedy Mwashusha, "Hondo (War)" (2014) (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

The artists assembled by co-curators Allison Davis and Ali Rosa-Salas represent communities as disparate as Brooklyn and Cape Town, yet each struggles against perceived images of blackness and the prescribed labels "African" or "African-American." Ralph Ziman's photograph "Hondo (War)," for instance, shows a man wearing a traditional Zimbabwean mask and holding two AK-47s that are fully beaded in the style of local artists and makers. His image turns the stereotype of "violent Africa" into a statement on culture and misrepresentation, reclaiming an image that is familiar to the Western world — an African man wielding heavy artillery weapons — and recasting it to reflect the artist's own notions of identity as a South African.



Detail of Aisha Tandiwe Bell, "Artifacts" (2015) (photo by the author for Hyperallergic) (click to enlarge)

New York artist Aisha Tandiwe Bell's delicate ceramics reference her multiple identities as a Jamaican-American woman living in the United States. The broken, cracking, and striped forms of her *Artifacts* series are alter-egos the artist makes to embody her feelings of displacement. Her sculptures are intentionally imperfect, riven with

lines and cracks, either made up of broken pieces forced into one or painted in high-contrast stripes, reflecting Bell's fractured identity. The conflict inherent in these fragmented forms is a representation of Bell's relationship with the many roles black women are expected to play both privately and

publicly. The act of making and displaying these alter egos serves as an exercise in personal redemption and commemoration of past lives, a nostalgia that Bell references in her accompanying performance piece, “Segues and Tangents.” When she sings, “Yeah we wept, when we remembered Zion,” a line from the Rastafarian anthem “By the Rivers of Babylon,” she also references psalm 137:1 of the bible, which describes the pain of losing paradise when the Jews were forcibly taken from Jerusalem as captives by their enemies and enslaved in a foreign land.

Bell’s performance piece, like Smith’s, is a retelling of a painful childhood memory. She speaks about the time her mother was arrested and held overnight for trying to protect a young black man from harassment by the police in their Bronx neighborhood. Bell’s mother was falsely charged for assaulting an officer. She describes how that one night without her mother seemed to last for months. Because the police were known to her and her neighbors as bullies who abuse their power, she was fearful that she may never see her mother again. Her anecdote of police abuse is poignant to contemporary audiences as police violence disproportionately plagues communities of color perhaps now more than ever. These feelings of marginalization and a lack of agency are common threads throughout the exhibition as symptoms of the artists’ shared experiences of displacement.



Still from Mohau Modisakeng, “Inzilo” (2013) (courtesy MoCADA)

South African artist Mohau Modisakeng’s video, “Inzilo,” picks up where the other artists in the show leave off, offering an alternate ending to centuries of oppression. Installed alongside Valerie Piraino’s papaya sculptures, which are broken and bruised as a metaphor for violence against African women, the contrast between Modisakeng’s work and the rest is striking. The video opens with the artist seated limply in an empty white room, his hands and feet covered in a thick, flaky second skin. Slowly, he begins peeling this hardened layer of plaster and grime away, revealing the living flesh beneath. In the end, Modisakeng stands and tosses off the remnants of this outer layer, arms open wide as the dust settles. “Inzilo” is the Zulu word for mourning, suggesting that the artist is symbolically casting off layers of grief, a message of hope that the history of abuse these artists are grappling with could be left behind by future generations.

While the other works in *Dis place* are searching for meaning in the past — visualizing Africa’s victimization, attempting self-reform, or confronting stereotypes — Modisakeng is casting it all off in one poignant motion. Each artist here confronts the effects of displacement in their lives differently and attempts to reckon with its insidious effects. Ending with Modisakeng’s message of personal empowerment and self-determination is apt since his work looks forward more than it dwells on the present moment, when black lives are devalued to our collective detriment.



Installation view of ‘Dis place’ (photo courtesy MoCADA)

Dis place is on view at the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts (80 Hanson Place, Fort Greene, Brooklyn) through January 17.