

Artist Proof Studio, Johannesburg, South Africa

# Artist Proof in South Africa: When Does Optimism Silence Memory?



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## Our Hearts Were Touched by Fire

A skittering scooter bumping over the brick path breaks my early morning reverie, my all too brief mental retreat from the metropolitan sensory onslaught. Downtown Johannesburg is teeming with minivan “taxis,” each transporting double their allowable number of passengers, crammed 10-deep with workers making their hour-long commute to work from the township to the city. Alongside the taxis are shiny double-decker grey and blue buses. Their whooshing brakes muffle the chaotic rumbling of vans rushing by with doors unsuccessfully held closed with pieces of string. This particular square is itself a bit of an oasis, perhaps the only spot en route to work where daydreaming is possible. A tranquil plot of grass set amid the brick trail leads to the entrance of the imposing tan stone structure of the Johannesburg public library. The cloudy midwinter sky brings the buildings into sharp relief, their rigid structures posing a stiff contrast to the vibrancy and instability of the street traffic.

Several of those buildings display murals or photos of art projects, such as performance artist Robin Rhode posing on the ground with motion lines drawn to make it appear as if he is flying through the air to make a slam dunk, or jumping over a ledge on a skateboard. These images bear the trademark of “Johannesburg: ArtCity,” one of several urban renewal projects in this area, designed to highlight and celebrate the creativity and artistic activity flowing in Johannesburg at the moment, ideally for commercial growth (as opposed to purely aesthetic enhancement). Past the library, the sidewalks become increasingly more crowded. Vendors sell everything from underwear in cardboard boxes, to plates with individual bunches of bruised apples or bananas (all of which the flies are exploring with no protest), or gaudily beaded jewelry spread on a worn quilt. The walkways are cracked, buckling and undulating under my feet. These sidewalk entrepreneurs are laid-back in their sales approach, often merely sitting by their wares without so much as a nod to prospective customers. In a particular spot behind a

concrete divider I often see a sleeping man covered in newspaper, so still he could be mistaken for comatose. Today there is a pile of human excrement, apparently of recent disposal, in that spot.

After I cross the street, the next block is bordered on one side by the gleaming glass-and-steel Johannesburg Stock Exchange, rising triumphantly on its own concrete island. The other side is chockablock with storefronts housed in crumbling colonial buildings, their wood pillars painted to look like iron scrollwork, their balconies sagging. Many of them have huge colorful velour blankets-cum-rugs-cum-all-purpose coverings and decorations piled to the ceiling in the box-like quarters. These stores are managed by mostly Muslim proprietors of Indian descent, who more than make up for their black African counterparts’ lack of persistence. “Five rand, five rand!” “Come in, see our stock! Lowest prices!” “Ten rand, ten rand!” Upon entering the Newtown district, the artistic and cultural hub of Jo’burg, the commitment to regeneration and regrowth becomes even more explicit. The fence of a construction site advertises the forthcoming science museum with paintings of bright blue fish and orange phrases extolling its virtues. A wrecking ball suspended from a crane carves out larger holes in an old apartment building, replaced by façades of brand-new condominiums, painted with bright red backgrounds and blue and beige trim. The color scheme invokes the same design on the colonial buildings across the street, now in disrepair. Ironic, perhaps, that the architects are trying to idealize such a bitter and corrupt past that took place under such a beautiful, wealthy façade. On the other hand, the purpose is clearly to attract higher-income homeowners to downtown, a goal not uncommon for American cities as well. In that sense, I find this an optimistic real estate development, given that it is in the heart of downtown Johannesburg, so consciously avoided that some 40-year residents, all white, of the suburban areas have yet to visit.

The Newtown district where Artist Proof Studio (APS) is located contains many institutions that played a historical role

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in using artistic expression to protest political oppression. The Market Theatre, for instance, which is across the street from APS, was founded in Johannesburg in 1976 by the late Barney Simon and Mannie Manim and went on to become internationally renowned as the “Theatre of the Struggle.” It is the theater where the world-famous play *Sarafina* was first performed, telling a powerful story about children fighting against the oppression of their everyday lives. In the 1980’s it was one of the few places where whites and blacks could mix and share on equal terms. The Theatre’s mission statement says that it seeks to “provide a voice to the voiceless” and maintain a high level of artistic excellence and integrity.

Across the street is the deceptively named Bus Factory, the home of APS, along with several other initiatives of the Ministry of Arts and Culture. The Bus Factory’s name recognizes its history and progress as a building, the fact that it too has been refashioned and rebuilt after years as a storage facility for broken-down buses. Certainly its gray corrugated metal walls and high ceilings give it the unmistakable coldness of an industrial building. Yet the craft displays are quite the opposite: meticulous square patches of stone, glass, or sand in flat wood enclosures containing everything from smooth, painstakingly realistic wooden figurines carved with rudimentary tools to wicker baskets and obelisks twice my height. Bamboo racks are draped with colorful embroidered tapestries showing tableaux of animals and nature, squat round white and red candles form a pattern of an AIDS ribbon, and two-foot high wire animals tend to their six-inch tall “children.” The café to the side is stocked with coffee, snacks, and “bunny chow,” a popular delicacy consisting of French fries, hot dogs, cheese and a spicy condiment, sandwiched between two slices of white bread. The entire space is scrubbed clean and guarded by security guards from the Arts and Culture Ministry in neon yellow and green uniforms.

Towards the back of the factory is a false wall that is simply the divider between the various art studios and offices and the craft display area. Past this wall is the entrance to the APS. This is a new space for APS, after a tragic fire last year destroyed the studio, taking the life of one of the founders as well. Across the street, not even 50 feet from the Bus Factory, the old APS still exists as a pile of smoke-darkened rubble, enclosed by a chain-link fence. From the moment you enter the new studio, there is a clear emphasis on remembering the past and rebuilding from that traumatic experience. The front lobby is the Nhlanhla Xaba Gallery, in memory of the “father” of Artist Proof. This space is far larger than

the old studio, thanks to grants and donations. On the first floor of the studio are the computer room, several offices, a boardroom/kitchen, and a workroom for the women’s embroidery group, full of cheerful felt hand-stitched stuffed animals and books. Leading to the second floor are the stair railings hung with pieces of the old studio structure, much like those scraps of metal and cardboard hung on the guardrail on the top of the second-floor balcony. The rusty metal scraps and twisted wire mesh are a stark, though not uncomplimentary, contrast to the furnishings in the administrative offices, including blond wood and steel desks and ergonomic chairs that one would expect to find in a flourishing American NGO.

APS was founded in 1990, when Kim Berman, a young, idealistic printmaker, returned from Boston, where she trained and worked for nine years, to her home in South Africa. Her dream was to contribute to a new democratic South Africa by founding a community printmaking studio that could train talented, disadvantaged youth who otherwise would have no opportunity for training or employment as artists. To realize her vision, Kim sold all of her possessions to purchase a French Tool Press, known to printmakers as the Rolls Royce of presses. In Johannesburg, she found a partner in Nhlanhla Xaba, an artist from Soweto.

Nhlanhla Xaba first studied art at the influential Rorke’s Drift Centre in KwaZulu Natal. The center closed down in 1981, soon after he had joined. In 1986, he attended the African Institute of Art at the Funda Centre in Soweto, where he trained as an art teacher and taught both children and adults. Nhlanhla came to the APS in 1991 as a teacher. He was the winner of the 1998 Standard Bank Young Artists award, and was highly regarded as a valuable mentor to many of the young students of the Studio. He had two young children at the time of his death.

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Berman, a native South African, participated in the anti-apartheid movement both in South Africa and in the United States, particularly with her provocative prints. One of her works features pictures of people who participated in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) together with quotes that demonstrate the brutality and lack of remorse that many white South Africans maintained even while confessing morally reprehensible acts. The piece is titled “Playing Cards of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: An Incomplete Deck” (1999). Berman is an example of how art and activism are inextricably fused for many South African artists. Her print series is largely a criticism of the TRC, a crucial part of the new South African identity. Her pieces reveal the callousness of the perpetrators and the cost for the national psyche to hear in detail about horrific crimes committed for 50 years that went unpunished.

The TRC process, which began in 1995, was the most ambitious and public truth commission in history. The commission invited victims to share their stories and to state for public record the atrocities that they suffered, while white officers who perpetuated apartheid could come forward as well and give a full and honest disclosure of their acts in exchange for amnesty. The particularly public style of the TRC—whose hearings were broadcast daily on television and radio and reported on the front page of every newspaper—has been criticized for reducing black suffering to a form of spectacle. Antjie Krog, an award winning South African journalist who covered the TRC for SABC, the most popular South African news radio station, is the most notable example of such social commentators. She speaks to the simultaneous pain and relief of hearing the tragic voices of survivors of attacks and the emotionless repetition of the perpetrators of bombs planted, beatings committed and murders calculated. In her memoir *Country of My Skull*, Krog writes of the psychological stress that she suffered as a journalist while hearing litanies of horrific reports day after day, and asking herself how people from her country, from her ethnic group in particular (she is Afrikaner, i.e. a descendant of Dutch settlers, the most influential group in apartheid government) could possess such cruelty. “The [families of the] victims ask the hardest of ... questions: How is it possible that the person I loved so much lit no spark of humanity in you?”

The TRC is a useful reference point for demonstrating the catharsis of a society bearing witness and reclaiming memory for victims of oppression. Their empowerment emerges when they reclaim their identities, citizenship, and agency by breaking the code of silence, both enforced by the government and imposed by the culture. At the same time, it brings the corresponding questions about whether the display of reconciliation through amnesty, and the optimistic statement such a decision makes about the ideological foundations of the new national character, are in fact just and ethical to the victims of oppression. Did the TRC sacrifice justice for goodwill among South Africans? Does South Africa have to ignore the past’s harsh moral failures by emphasizing forgiveness and reconciliation to give the image of a Rainbow Nation any credibility and viability? Art and creativity can play

several different roles in affirming or dismantling the way South African businesses, government, and people construct a South African identity, by emphasizing one dimension or the other on the continuum between raw trauma and blithe confidence.

South Africa still suffers severe inequality, particularly with regard to access to education and job skills that would allow more blacks to be upwardly mobile. Yet the level of social criticism veers from one extreme to the other, depending on the issues being discussed, the medium used and the artists’ individual perspective. In one advertisement for Woolworths, several multiracial South Africans, including an artist, a choreographer and a deejay, pose with exuberant, optimistic expressions alongside personal quotes that express their enthusiasm for using creative work to reflect South African society. A fashion designer says, “Africa has always been my muse. She is sexy, alluring, sensuous, regal, and exotic. All those qualities combine to make a great fashion statement.” A deejay says “It’s great to be South African right now... There’s a great sense of possibility... Everywhere you turn someone is creating something new. It’s invigorating.” The significance of this text is two-fold: one, the artists featured can express optimism and pride in their identity as South Africans, something that most people would not have said before 1994. Secondly, a major commercial company can advertise that optimism using faces of different races as a legitimate reflection of South African society and attitudes.

The very existence of APS is proof of the success of Kim and Nhlalaha’s efforts. Since 1992, when the APS opened, it has trained hundreds of artists in all aspects of printmaking. By its tenth anniversary, over 50 artists were actively involved with the studio as students, teachers, and outreach program coordinators. Its artists have exhibited and led workshops nationally and internationally. Kim’s faith that art could serve to empower the disadvantaged and contribute to social transformation was validated. As she said, “APS was built by joint energy, love and passion.” Such progress does not mean, however, that these artists will abdicate their role as activists and social critics. The social reality that South Africans face every day is complex mixture of hopeful progress and painful reality, but artists in South Africa, certainly at APS, try to uncover the complex and sometimes disheartening reality beneath the relentlessly optimistic catch-phrases.

Even as much of the public art in South Africa demonstrates a flourishing of creativity for commercial purposes, or in some cases, personal expression absent of explicit social commentary, artists at APS are continuing the South African tradition of applying artistic creativity to the purpose of social criticism. These artists are not targeted by adverts for expensive clothes placed in magazines that cater primarily to whites. These artists have different stories to tell, informed by their ongoing struggles in the townships, seeing how the reality of apartheid continues to manifest itself in harmful ways on blacks in South Africa.

One print featured in the downstairs gallery shows two pigs wearing human masks watching a human-like form raping a young child. The inclusion of text in the print (the child is five

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months old) articulates a shocking truth about the deterioration of human standards, saying that we should not insult swine by comparing ourselves to animals when we rape children. The piece is by Paul Molete, a teacher at the Studio and last year's winner of the prestigious Brett Kibble award for outstanding South African artists. He has also done two other works that portray positively young children who appear to have survived abuse, but these are not displayed in the gallery. The decision to display only the raw brutality of the prevalence of child rape (including infant rape) demonstrates a desire to balance out the relentlessly sunny optimism on display in so many other areas of South African society.

The tension between optimism and burial of trauma is apparent in the students' portrayals of a painful event unique to APS: the fire that destroyed the old studio. Along the walls of the staircase are huge multimedia collages of human figures, created in art therapy workshops after the fire. The collages represent humans rising from the ashes, each in a different pose. Behind Plexiglas coverings, these life-size figures are all of a similar, genderless, rounded human form, like a character on a children's television show, or a traced body outline. One reaches up and out, its arms embracing the imaginary sunlight. Another collage has two figures reaching towards each other in an embrace, viewed from the side. On the bottom of each piece is a layer of dark shading, representing the fire and ashes from which these universal characters emerge with strength, openness, and support for each other.

Upstairs is the studio area. The stone walls and lack of indoor heating make APS cold in the winter, and the architecture does not allow for a lot of natural light. But the students, almost all of them male and black, between 20 and 25 years old, are spirited in their work, mixing inks with great precision and singing songs like "hip-bone connected to the thigh-bone/ thigh-bone connected to the leg-bone" Today they are creating monotypes, a particular type of print using colored ink, which will be used as CD covers for Gito Baloi, a beloved South African musician who was killed during a carjacking. His wife, Erica, was a drawing instructor at the Studio before moving to Botswana after Gito's death. The warmth and emotion in these prints speaks to their now well-practiced ability to create beauty out of suffering.

The structure of APS is based on a large first year class that focuses on technical skills in drawing and basic printmaking, a somewhat culled group of second year students that have regular class but participate in mentorships and learn advanced techniques in etching, monotype and computer skills, and a select group of third year students that focus exclusively on independent projects and internship work at the Studio. One of the most pressing issues is the question of white versus black leadership in the studio. Kim and Cara, the director and manager, both white and female, are eager to develop black managers to serve as role models and authority figures for the students. But often blacks do not have adequate preparation to compete for management jobs, or even apply themselves to entry-level jobs in a way that prepares them for a promotion. This is especially important because the Studio

constantly struggles with students who do not show up to classes on time, do not turn in their work on time, and to an educated white person's eyes lack a crucial work ethic. However, the fact is that for so long blacks have not been given adequate education or access to opportunity where they would feel an incentive to be professional, or even have an understanding of what that would mean.

The success of the second-year class is crucial for both the individual students and for the teachers and administrators, who have to decide which students have proven themselves worthy to continue being supported by APS. This second-year class in particular has been subject to a lot of scrutiny by the teachers and directors. They are the class who had a connection to the old studio and were the most vulnerable when it burned down. The destruction of the old studio destabilized the class, many of whom did not show up to classes that were held in interim spaces, and even vandalized the area around the old studio.

Stompie Selibe is a graduate of the Studio who, in addition to producing his own award-winning artwork, performing as a drummer, and training as an art therapist, also teaches at the Studio. When Stompie saw some of the difficulties that the second year class was going through after the fire, he decided to try to use the loss of the Studio as an opportunity to create a curriculum that would bring the class together as a supportive unit. In fact, the class was very individualistic and competitive in the old studio, but now had a clean slate to bring the class together through group art projects and individual research based on a common theme: ubuntu, or humanity-through-others.

Stompie explained his approach to me in an interview:

*A lot of what we do with ubuntu is about creating a community. There was a lot of tension and struggling after the fire. A lot of anger, students were participating in vandalism, they had lost respect for their class and their work. We needed to find a way to reform APS in how we handle ourselves, and the most important thing is exploring the humanity of the Studio, how we can live that. They had to have a channel for facing the issues they confront as young people, and at the same time form a new vision of APS to fight the racism, the anger, the vandalism.*

*We performed at the opening ceremony. We had a music performance, because music can bring people together, it is both fun and [requires] consciousness of meaning that speaks to the individual within. Three weeks before, I brought in a bag of instruments and asked each person to pick one that they thought related to their identity. Then we just played together, like a jam session, just asked the guys to express themselves.*

*After they were done playing I asked them how we could sound better. We discussed how we have to listen to each other to make more sense musically. Do not try to compete to make yourself the loudest or most interesting or control the flow of the music. We have to complement one another. I explained that music is an example of ubuntu, how we are the best when we listen to each other. It is the same in our class group, everyone has to listen to each other. We had only two weeks*

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*rehearsal, but we gave a great performance. Everybody was very impressed and the guys didn't want to stop playing. We talked afterward more about how we can listen to each other the same way that we listened in that performance. As part of the class we started having a check-in time at the beginning of classes because then tension is always discussed and resolved.*

The first day that I met the class, they were working on the monotypes for the CD covers. I would have been content to silently observe, perhaps introduce myself to individuals, but leave them to complete their work. They had other plans for me. Bekz, a budding rapper and graffiti artist, asked me if I knew what they were doing, and if I knew how to make a monotype. I replied no, but I was fine with simply watching. “No no, it's very easy, here can I show you? You just take a piece of plastic and take a roller, get some paint, and make a smooth background. Then you can make a design with a toothpick or a paintbrush, whatever you want, just make sure to draw it backwards from how you want the print to come out.” I made my first monotype that very morning, an abstract, pseudo-Japanese design of what in my head I imagined to be a daffodil. Many of the more outgoing guys, including Seth in his yellow mesh cap, Elton in his paint-splattered smock, and Nelson with his infectious grin, introduced themselves to me and asked me about my musical tastes, rap and hip-hop being an international language. The most impressive interaction on that first day, though, was when Seth set up the printing press for me and prepared to roll my monotype through. Bekz asked breathlessly what Seth was doing, and when he explained that he was trying to help me, Bekz replied “No, man, I wanted her to learn how to do it for *herself*.” This was clearly a concept that they had been exposed to by their teachers, the benefits of learning a skill and becoming an independent, empowered creator, rather than one dependent on others' help. It was also a great compliment that they felt I could be one of their community, by giving me access to their supplies as well as the skills to use them.

Most of the guys had no problem, however, asking their classmates to help them set up a press or borrow a certain color of ink, or even critique their work. They sang together, besides the “hip-bone connected to the thigh-bone” but also “Tell me when was Jesus born? It was the lasssst month of the yeeeeeer” The covers which they produce have several common images, including a guitar to represent Gito Balo's music, a butterfly to symbolize freedom, and outlines of children resting against their parents. The delicacy of their designs shows a great deal of care and sensitivity to the memory of the artist. As I continued to get to know the class, through their art, the class writings that I typed for them, and my interviews and personal conversations, I found that their research about ubuntu has been rather transformational for them individually and as a class. Several students write about trauma and healing, and the concept of life as a journey (one of Stompie's favorite terms), demonstrating a psychological vocabulary that I would not expect of many

young black South Africans (or many young Americans, for that matter). When I asked Bekz how the class research on ubuntu changed him as a person, he replied, “Now I almost get psyched to be a good person. It changes me a lot. Sometimes I can be very short tempered, but since the project I can control myself.” Elton responded “The project [creating a personal visual diary based around the theme of ubuntu, along with research and writing assignments] gave me more enthusiasm to express myself, understand ubuntu before check in opens everyone's mind to speak out loudly, before it was tense, afraid to speak out.” Frans, one of the quieter students who had a troubled past said “I was very angry, out of control, a thug, but now after performing at the opening, and seeing how we combined in such a short time, I realize anything is possible.”

As encouraging as such statements were for the power of the holistic ubuntu curriculum, the effect of the class's initiatives to bring them together as a community was tested soon after I conducted those interviews. June 13, 2004 brought an enormous blow to the Artist Proof community. Floyd Thungu, one of the students in the second-year class, had committed suicide the day before, and the students learned of his death that Monday. The second years were all called from their upstairs meeting area to the workroom downstairs to hear the news. They sat completely stunned, unable to say anything. Everyone in the Studio that day, student, teacher, or visitor, agreed that Floyd's death felt like a betrayal—of his friends at Artist Proof, his family, his young daughter, and his own talent and gifts as a human being. The teachers at the Studio worried that the students would turn to alcohol or drugs to deal with the pain, perhaps from feeling like they had no other option. But most students returned the next day, a Tuesday no less, the day when they have class with Stompie. Their “check-in” time, designed to help them articulate their emotions and share their emotional struggles with each other, today seemed simultaneously futile and necessary, after losing one person who, it seemed, could not take comfort from their community.

Thankfully, Stompie did not bear the full burden of trying to comfort the entire class in the midst of his own pain. Another visitor came to the class, an art therapist named Haley. In some ways, Stompie's suffering at this moment has been magnified by his questioning of his teaching, his effort over the past year to help these young men face the darkness in their lives with a community of support and a stronger sense of their own power to fight against despair. The class sat around their usual long table on tall stools, their torsos hunched, their arms crossed against the chilled air. He decided to start the session with a prayer. “Can we take hands?” he asked, and then started praying out loud in Sesotho. My coworker Darnisa and I did not understand the literal translation, but we could certainly feel the sentiment and emotion of the prayer, spoken in the impassioned, rising cadences of entreaties from any faith, in any language. I was relieved that he did not pray in English or repeat the prayer in translation—the students needed strength and encouragement more than us, who were visitors of barely two weeks.

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Stompie concluded and introduced Haley, a graceful brunette with a calm presence, so calm, in fact, that she sat at the table unnoticed, at least by me, until then. She proceeded to gently explain that she was just there to talk, and to give them space to discuss how they were affected by the news. She asks if anyone wanted to talk about his thoughts or feelings on the suicide. Her query was met with silence. Silence that lasts nearly five minutes. Everyone sat quietly, trying to be available to whoever tried to talk first, not pressuring or inquiring further. Around the table, heads rested on chests, and everyone sat slumped over, avoiding eye contact. The only sound was that of cars in the street below. I looked to Stompie and to Haley, who were trying to focus on the guys and not give any nonverbal signs of impatience.

This was possibly one of the most uncomfortable situations I had ever been in, not because of the subject matter, but because in my upbringing, I have always been encouraged, successfully, to narrate my feelings. This part of my family legacy comes from having a father, uncle and grandfather who are therapists, though admittedly my father's approach relies on empathy, rather than analysis. Anywhere—in the car, around the table, in a one-on-one conversation over a cup of tea late at night—my family was, and remains, a constant emotional support system. Not to talk about my reactions to a distressing event is anathema. Additionally, as a teacher, my instinct in a dead classroom is to ask more questions, tell a joke, to try anything to provoke discussion and participation.

I wonder if some of the awkwardness came from Haley and I both being white and female and therefore completely different from the guys in terms of race, education, culture, and gender. In addition to my personal background, there was perhaps an expectation on the part of the students that they were either supposed to say something to appease the white person or that they must keep their emotions that much more tightly locked because revealing one's feelings to an outsider could be even more dangerous. Perhaps more relevant than that, even, is the presence of almost all authority figures at the Studio as white females: Kim, the director; Cara, the studio manager; and Ilse and Shannin, two of the main teachers. Especially as black men, it must have felt intimidating to be asked to share emotions by yet another white woman, as well as counterintuitive to open up to an outsider.

Finally, one of the students, Seth, broke the silence, saying how Floyd was a role model for him. "Floyd was such a talented artist, and worked so hard"—he remembered the time when the class visited the zoo to draw animals: "By the end of the day Floyd had drawn four or five beautiful animals where everyone else only had one or two." Seth continued talking about how people often confused him with Floyd, because they had the same light skin and slight build. But then he transitioned into talking more about his emotions, and how difficult it was to talk about his emotions as a man. He said "It's like you stuff clothes into a suitcase and you just keep stuffing and stuffing them in until it bursts- that is what happens with emotion a lot of the time."

At this point several students abruptly left the table, running outside, possibly so no one could see them cry or because they

did not want to talk about this issue further. One of the students was able to express his feelings and feel like he was in a safe community, but others still resisted participating in the group process, constrained by strong social taboos against men crying or showing emotion. This phenomenon became the topic of discussion amongst the group. All of the students noted that crying is not allowed for men in South Africa, though these guys in particular face tragedy almost daily. These combined pressures are enough to break anyone, which is why, one of them noted, "we need to feel like we can open up and it will be okay."

I was torn between my desire to express, to share my thoughts, perhaps offer some advice about how the guys could talk to me, how they could support each other in the group, and my understanding that for that moment, it was more important that I just listen. The most effective use for my voice, ironically, was keeping quiet so as to not intimidate or interfere with the very gradual, countercultural learning process that these men were going through. I was also conscious of the fact that I was perhaps too much like Haley—white, female, educated—to offer an opinion without seeming like another authority figure.

The morning session drifted towards some semblance of a conclusion, necessitated by the fact that Haley needed to leave and it was time for the students' lunch break. She asked the students if they would like her to come back next week. Even this request is an example of the strains caused by cultural and racial differences. For the guys to accept her offer would be admitting that they need more help, making themselves more vulnerable by talking about emotions. Some of the guys said nothing, but it was enough to have a majority of the group agree to take the next step together.

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June, the second-years held a memorial service for Floyd, inviting family members, friends of the Studio and even a church choir to perform. One group rehearsed several songs, including "Farewell Brother": Farewell Brother, Farewell Brother/G-d be with you/Till we meet again/ We meet to part/We part to meet/G-d be with you/Till we meet again. Others composed speeches highlighting Floyd's accomplishments and validating his presence as an inspirational leader for the class. Stompie played a piece on his finger harp and Floyd's grandmother spoke towards the end, shuddering with suppressed tears. Most class members were present, and

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the event was as much a testament to the class's solidarity and support for their community as it was a tribute to Floyd. None of the teachers or administrators organized any piece of the service. The purpose of having the class do all of the organizing was to reinforce their leadership, to show that as students, and as black men, they were trusted to produce something important for their community based on their own talents, instead of their teacher's instructions. It was yet another example of how this class has the tools to create a community of which they can be proud, yet there was an underlying sense of fragility. How strong could their class be if one of their apparently strong members could commit suicide? How much were they sharing with each other and how much was superficial parroting of the jargon they felt obligated to learn?

The appeal of a strong, unified nation, or studio, or class, is so powerful that black South Africans may choose to sublimate or ignore the painful inequality they experience every day. The choices that artists, particularly black artists, make in creating their visual messages are quite telling about the precarious balance between self-expression, social criticism, and a desire to affirm national pride that one sees almost everywhere in South Africa. South Africans are extremely proud of their democratically-elected government, the multiracial casts of soap operas and news broadcasts, and the 2010 World Cup. The TRC hearings were supposed to be a great national healing process, making public the exact horrific details of apartheid, and laying the groundwork for a peaceful transition to civil society. And certainly optimism abounds, whether in the collages of poor art students recovering from their private trauma or in the boardrooms of elite advertising agencies. The sincerity of this optimism is reflected in the statements of ordinary Africans who say, "it is so wonderful to be in this democracy" or "I feel glad to live in South Africa." Yet such blind optimism may lead to deliberate avoidance of some more difficult problems that plague South Africa, even among artists who have a special platform for social criticism.

One example of subjects that artists have for the most part resisted is AIDS, arguably the most destructive element in their society today. The pandemic has affected nearly 25 percent of the population. Billboards abound in Johannesburg exhorting people to use condoms, to "love life," to break the silence. Yet the artists I encountered did not incorporate AIDS at all into their work. Such an absence prevails among almost all prominent South African artists, according to Pamela Allara, a scholar and teacher of South African art. "Male artists in particular," she says "have seemed reluctant to confront this subject in their individual output." One reason for this silence is the fact that to come out as HIV positive is a frightening prospect in South Africa, one that could result in banishment from family, church, and work.

Grace (not her real name) is one such person at the Studio who is HIV positive and refuses to tell her co-workers in the women's embroidery group. "There was another woman a few years ago who had HIV and everyone knew about it, even if she said nothing, so people did not try to be her friend, they were uncomfortable around her. I do not want to go through

the same thing." Declaring one's status as HIV positive is still dangerous even in this supposedly welcoming, empowering community. HIV in particular may have special significance because the illness implies a moral weakness or failing in some South African perspectives—the failure to use protection, to be safe, to be abstinent. Everyone knows someone who has died of AIDS, and the resulting shame comes from this sense of moral failure. Even in a society that has had to admit so many moral failures and resurrect so many painful memories, there is now perhaps an even stronger need to bury personal tragedy if it will reflect poorly on one's moral character, and subsequently, admit something that reflects poorly on South African society, having recently and vocally reclaimed a sense of pride and national unity that to some may seem tenuous.

William Kentridge, an internationally acclaimed South African artist, expresses the ambiguity of living an outwardly peaceful life, in his case as a privileged white person, while the mines, literal and figurative, hold so many buried secrets. He is one of the few artists to confront the issue of AIDS in his charcoal-animation film *Tide Table*. He shows two overlapping stories, one of the wealthy white vacationer at the Cape Town seashore, oblivious to the suffering of the black community, who form the second story. Crowded into small cabanas on the beach, black AIDS patients die while survivors perform religious ceremonies of mourning. Seven cows emerge from the sea, as fat as those in Joseph's dream in Genesis, fat with the promise of new economic and political success. They are subsequently replaced by seven emaciated cows, representing a country now ravaged by illness and persistent inequality. Not only does Kentridge discuss the topical and taboo issue of AIDS, but he does so in a way that illuminates the disjointed nature of South African life for privileged whites versus blacks, as well as the rhetoric of promise versus the reality of perpetual suffering. Most of all, he is a seeker of truth, of resurrecting the truth for South Africa from underneath the layers of secrecy that both apartheid and post-apartheid societies have perpetuated.

His first animated charcoal drawing, *Mine* (1991) shows a white industrialist's coffee plunger transform into a drill that bores into the mine where hundreds of black men extract gold and diamonds, and more metaphorically, where collective and individual memory are buried. This very duality defines the experience of the second-year class at APS, who have grown to an admirable extent in their ability to share emotions with one another and support each other in the spirit of ubuntu. Yet there are untold depths containing a powerful undertow of denial, burial, and shame. Each tragedy is bittersweet for the young men in the second year class at APS, because it provides a new opportunity to accomplish something amazing like a memorial service or huge collective lionel cuts. At the same time, such tragedies serve as a fresh reminder of just how far they, and South Africans in general, have to go before the rhetoric of optimism and those uplifting public murals match the reality of the people walking beneath them every day.

