

# What Comes First?

AtWork Johannesburg  
Chapter No. 21

Moleskin  
Foundation



Smithsonian  
National Museum of African Art

CONSTITUTION HILL



AtWork Johannesburg

What Comes First?

Chapter No. 21  
August 26th - August 30th, 2022

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## Exhibition

September 2nd - October 30th, 2022  
Old Fort, Constitution Hill

Exhibition of the notebooks created by the participants during AtWork workshop, conducted by Simon Njami at Constitution Hill

AtWork is an itinerant educational format conceived by Moleskine Foundation and Simon Njami that wants to inspire a new generation of creative thinkers.





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# Editorial Statement

We have discovered that we were deprived of the knowledge of our true selves and that we have been standing upon each other's shoulders and building upon each other's accomplishments. Thus, we are condemned to repeat what others have done before us and we continually reinvent the wheel. The only rules, the only method that we could perceive was to be true and to talk from our inner selves: a colour can exist only through other colours, dimension through other dimensions, positions through other contradictory positions.

We were taken on journey of ups and downs, discoveries and deception. We were forced to question all the things we thought we knew and to look at reality through the lense of fiction. What comes first signifies diving into a forest of unanswered questions, of forgotten emotions and of frightening nakedness.

The five days journey we took was unexpected and awe-inspiring. We moved across time, places, and ideas to seek the answers to these questions. This was a movement of learning-unlearning and listening, transparency, solitude, shame, love, insanity, silence, dance, laughter, rest, transformation, reconciliation and conflict. It showed us the universality in our narratives yet asked us to carve our uniqueness out of what we thought common. We were given the freedom to stitch together alternative truths hinting at fiction as an act to liberate ourselves and our minds. We began to work.

Simon Njami came with the toolbox of possibilities with shifts in perspectives, and through this process we were able to gaze, give and take, then execute with intention. As we looked into the impossible void, he prompted, "What comes first?". Urgency on acting and getting a move on finding new voices that challenge our thinking.

Editorial Team

Lungile Hlatshwayo  
Kwanele Godfrey Ngwenya  
Mthabisi Sithole

# Curatorial Statement

Where does the story begin? With the shoe about to step out the door? On the bench inviting you to rest? In the push and pull of the ocean's tides? Does it start with learning or unlearning? Does it start with building or tearing down?

This exhibition has twenty-four beginnings – the end and the middle are yet to come. These objects represent new trajectories. They are journeys that may have unclear destinations but are certain in their first step.

Inspired by the notion of weaving as conversation -- threads passing over and under each other, back and forth – this is a circular dance, a spiral of rhyme and reference. A form reminiscent of our five-day workshop where stories, secrets and stances were shared (and shot) around a circle.

We learned here that a notebook is not a notebook. A table is not a table. A cell is not a cell. These are objects, tools for us to build and play with, lenses to look at our world. These artworks have been constructed with the materials we had on hand, with individual elements like string, stone, pins, and pages transformed into representations of our outlooks and narratives. These works demanded resourcefulness and urgency, and asked for collaboration. Whether imagining new universes, reflecting on dark experiences, or inviting curious exploration, each object suggests an answer and a question: where do we start?

Curatorial Team

Rory Tsapayi

Kutlwano Monyai

Victoria Kgongoana

Nobuhle Mavundla

Tlhalefi Maditsi

Masindi Ikhona Nafisa Mbolekwa

# Buthelezi comes first.

MPUMELELO BUTHELEZI

“Buthelezi”

With this piece of work I created the image of a resting chair, a reflection of my thoughts or rather imagination when sitting down on a daily basis because I always reflect my visual thoughts when resting and a chair was the perfect reflection of those thoughts in this piece of work. The chair is a valuable resting place only insofar as it is a contrast. The visual narrative I wanted to convey with the work is that rest is a fine medicine and when I am sitting on this chair is a reference to that and it enables my mental, emotional and physical body to repair and be geared up for another day. I am trying to re-emphasise the importance of rest and the benefits it has on inner self. Everyone has a choice, but we don't have a choice of those consequences that make us rest.



Mpumelelo Buthelezi is a South African photographer and visual artist director who lives and works in Johannesburg.



# Ego comes first.

DANYA FLOWERS

“Labyrinth”

It started with my ego.

In the first few days of the workshop, I reflected on the way I speak; I use big words to seem smart. I learnt that art comes from knowing yourself primarily. For me to start doing, I had to get through the confusion in my head. The confusion was not necessarily not knowing the answer to a question or the meaning of a word – it was the chaos of not knowing how to introduce me to myself. Simon Njami suggested the idea of a labyrinth. My first response was no, because when Daedalus created the labyrinth he did so with the intent of trapping a deadly monster within it. I did not want to trap any part of myself. “But you’re not the architect,” Mr. Njami told me. “You are the Minotaur.” And my ego flared.



Danya Flowers is a creative with an MA in Digital Arts by research in the works. Danya is a copywriter at a boutique dev house and is always learning.



# Love comes first.

LUNGI HLATSHWAYO

“The Ocean is Infinite!”

The root of my work is based on a search for love everywhere but within the self. Gazing into the depth of the ocean and being reminded of its vastness, the urgency to share it with all living creatures.



Lungi is a Social Worker, co-founder and co-director of Safe Study, an organisation working with marginalised and underprivileged children in Johannesburg. Lungi is working on an urgent project to fortify the levels of social cohesion, promoting equity and advancing research on effective strategies on the inequalities of our education system.



# Dance comes first.

VICTORIA KGONGOANA  
"Room 35B- Genesis"

In a nutshell this is an image of a transformational God encounter, i had back in 2017 in my room (Room 35B) which happened in the midnight hours after a traumatic experience. This was the Genesis of my journey to my promised land. The Mandala fabric patterns reveal the secrets God revealed about my life and purpose on earth in the sacred place. Proverbs 3:5 many are the plans in the man's heart but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails.



I am the offspring of my Creator created to do exploits for His Kingdom. I am a performing artist (singer and dancer) and an upcoming Creative entrepreneur in Fashion and Interior design.



# Evolving comes first.

SIPHELELE MABASO  
"Evolution of my Song"

It is inspired by the process of making music from the initial thought and emotion, inspiration, recording and the song that is created. The song tells my story and my evolution that I know what to share with others.



I am Sophelele Mabaso, student, daughter, lover and friend. I love to play ukulele and guitar to make music for myself that I can share with others.



# Hokgotofala comes first.

THLALEFI MADITSI  
"silence-hokgotsofala  
(to be content)."

That is what it is. It's a kind of magic.  
To know that for all you need/want/desire; all the things  
you can want to change...  
you have the tools to change.  
It's internal. Contentment, resolve.  
An act of intentionality, to pursue and be satisfied as a  
result of having pursued a thing.  
The silent cause of the act.



I write, I curate, I photograph. I am a creative.



# Liberation comes first.

GABRIEL MASENYA

"African Oedipus

(A pocket Sized Movie)"

What comes first to me is liberation which will in turn lead to stillness. As pessimistic as it may seem, I believe complete liberation in the physical is an illusion. A false promise engraved into the back of humanity's minds. Longing for it is eternal, therefore desire is eternal, which makes imprisonment eternal and in turn suffering becomes eternal. Even if I'd live without a single care, I'm well aware that I'm enslaved by something I want to share. I could be oppressed by my mind, I could be oppressed by my lust, ego and pride, but I rest assured because I know it'll end in due time, I'll truly feel liberated the day I lose my life.



Gabriel Masenya is a filmmaker, screenwriter and photographer.



# Exile comes first.

KAMVA MATUIS  
"Neglected"

The piece is inspired by the state of being of feeling neglected, having inner worth and contents worth taking care of, but instead the opposite happens - neglect happens, being cast away, left to rot, decay and damage.



Kamva Matuis is a Joburg based artist using creativity and art to discover self while also interacting and negotiating with the external world.



# Solitude comes first.

NOBUHLE MEME  
MAVUNDLA  
"Into the Void"

My journey begins in complete darkness. My Journey is the void waiting to be filled.  
My journey is choosing solitude even in spaces that threaten it. My journey is making it to spaces where I am seen and loved for who I truly am. My journey is individuality, my journey is not being defined by my past experiences.



I am strong. I am voice. I am solitude. I am powerful. I also happen to be a photographer.



# Insanity comes first.

MANDY MBEKENI

"There's a Dead Body in the water"

"Tell me what happened" is a prompt that acts as a buffer to gauge if, I am worth your time, if we have similarities, if my entire existence is enough to justify whether you see me as a "person enough", or, rather, "human enough". The question then becomes; is seeing humanity - my humanity - dependent on regurgitating facts about myself, traumas included, for you to fully see me?



Mandy is a Johannesburg based writer and is passionate about reimagining and creating visual links between past, present and future.



# Distance comes first.

MASINDI IKHONA NAFISA  
MBOLEKWA

“Sondela Ungcole”

I once found romance in the idea of an inner being, a deeper self, a true me. There is simplicity in the idea that there is ‘pure’ within us all, that I project upon the surface only the faintest traces of my “real” person. I find now that there is no simplicity to human-ness, no romance to be found in the ease of stillness, for the self is active, she is moving, she is fluid; he is in and he is out; a reflection of the human condition: they are change. Distance is a matter of relativity, and “Far” is only a measure, not a place. I now find romance in the knowledge of my absolute lack of knowledge.



Masindi Ikhona Nafisa Mbolekwa is a son, a friend, and an imager of things.



# Awareness comes first.

KUTLWANO MONYAI  
“Tswelopele (Progress)”

When, I observe my movements, I always get this feeling that something is missing. Stepping out of my shoes to view from a distance, it’s just not the same when I’m too close. The reflections are diffused and multi-layered. It is not just a single crochet. It was not easy disentangling my tapestry for people to see through it, through me, to feel the strings attached to my roots. I do not trust because, I’m resistant, however I can be worked into beautiful shapes and enormous sizes. The pieces and patterns I came with before I was asked “what comes first?” were missing solidified poise to be in conversations. “Ke tswetsepele” (I have progressed), however it does not end here.



Kutlwano Monyai has been conversing and experimenting with the self in order to translate that information spaces.



# Wealth comes first.

TEBOGO MOTSHABI  
(NOVA SACHS)

“Health is Wealth”

Waking up every day with a dream to be healthy and striving to be wealthy – the journey has been an enlightening one. The truth is that it is not about the individuals however the wealth of the entire collective, which required us to gain self-knowledge.



Tebogo Motshabi is an Athlete best known for his elaborate creations that aim to cultivate minds of the future generations.



# Transformation comes first.

SIYABONGA MTSHALI  
“Siyahubeka sizonyisa”

My work embodies the ideas of transformation from scarring to a continuous healing affair. The 25 participants exposed themselves to vulnerable emotions as we told our stories to a room full of strangers and implanted our fingerprints on this art work. Our stories unified us, making us a community. From wounds and scars. I've made myself a diamond.



My name is Siyabonga Mtshali, a conceptual designer-artist hailing from Kwa-Zulu Natal. I founded and am director of Siyababa Atelier, a conceptual brand that pioneers in a new African avant-garde by marrying the two ideas of art and fashion, drawing direct inspiration from black queer narratives.



# Safety Pin comes first.

LUNGILE NGCOBO

“Safety Pin”

The work is inspired by a generational fashion Passover. I took the threads used from my grandmother’s machine. I’m trying to express the word isolation and privacy in my “book” as a sense of the mental burden of loneliness and constant search for belonging in familiar spaces.



Lungile Ngcobo is a visual artist that works with digital collaging and her work is inspired by fashion and family archives. She aims to explore ways of finding herself and her roots through documentary fashion and uncovering her feelings by manipulating and collaging in her art.



# Experience comes first.

KWANELE GODFREY  
NGWENYA

“Sweet Eternity”

I was very personal on this one. I was attempting to create an image of the most traumatic experience of my life through my object. And the only thing that came to my mind was a grave. Thinking of my brothers, sisters and other young people who never got the chance to rewrite their lives.



Social & Climate Justice Activator, lead policy drafter at SAYCAP.



# Resilience comes first.

AIDAN JAYSON PETERS  
(MUIS)

“Swans in a Thunderstrom”

A fully functional handbag protects my seven swans of resilience. The handbag is the product of the work of the seven swans, without their combined resilience none of this would be possible. Each swan represents the capacity of my own resilience. Monica (my grandmother), Mandy (my mother), path, love, art, creativity and possibility. With this piece, I tried to tie together the craft, I have dedicated my life to and how it is the result of the work of my resilience. The Seven Swans of Resilience have made it possible for me to be able to withstand any thunderstorms.



Muis is a fashion designer focused on producing work that turns friction into frictionless.



# Shame comes first.

TRISTIN ROLAND

“My Shame is a Landscape”

What comes first for me is shame. I wear my shame as a landscape wears its shadows. Within my notebook, I wrote about my shames, and what I am shameful of, and then decided to destroy the paper and create a landscape from it. Whilst I do show my shame, it is only in the context in which I choose. My shames form and shape who I am, how I choose to interact with others, and even how I choose to engage with myself, in the same way the landscape directs the environment which inhabits it.



Tristin Roland is a producing artist based in Johannesburg.



# Freedom comes first.

KAGISO SHILABJE

“Bloody Walkin’”

The journey to freedom starts with one step. Nelson Mandela’s journey to freedom was a long walk. The root of my work is the concept of freedom and how the walk to freedom is often distressing, leading to bloodshed, sweat and tears. The experience towards freedom is also very enlightening, much like reading a book. I learnt that freedom doesn’t exist so, I aimed to create a symbolic starting point of my own sense of freedom in my life.



I come from a small family from the north of South Africa. My home language is Sepedi. I am a tall, slim, messy haired young black man.



# Transparency comes first.

MAMMA SIBIYA  
“We (I) are not that  
transparent”

I have Dissociative Disorder (DID) and struggle with the concept of honesty and openness. I do not lie, it is just that there is not only one truth about me. My personalities are all different. They think differently and believe in different things. That makes it difficult for me to be a “transparent” person. A friend of mine once told me to be transparent with my emotions but most of the time, I don’t even know how I’m feeling. Through my writing, I try to leave bits and pieces of me.



Writer, poet, podcaster, curator and aspiring filmmaker.



# The Immeasurable comes first.

MTHABISI SITHOLE

"Misdirection/Re:"

I would commune with the forests' glitter  
become mould or mulch, something that nurtures  
anything but this that poisons and dies with ease,  
the unnatural ache straddling concrete



Mthabisi is intrigued by distinctions between a village and a city – its messy putting together consistently coherent notations in proximity to a notional self.



# Curiosity comes first.

RORY TSAPAYI

"Itchy"

Curiosity is knowing that there are things I don't know, and yet feeling that I can know them. There is promise beyond the surface, I have to scratch the itch.



Rory Tsapayi has curious eyes and questions. He looks at art, not to find answers, but options.



# Balance comes first.

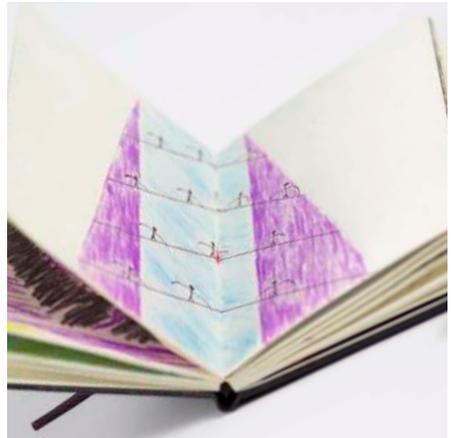
LLEWELLYN VAN WYK

“Balance”

Llewellyn’s work acknowledges the search in finding a balance in this life.

The making of this work is a symbol of seeking this balance, through the medium of creative fashion.

It also represents the importance of looking for ways in finding stability and staying on the slack line of life as a moving meditation. The work seeks to distill a sense of balance for the artist and anyone who witnesses the work.



Llewellyn is a Software Engineer who loves to watch and draw birds. If something remotely interesting comes up that is completely new, he would usually, at least, open the door to the rabbit hole to get even just a basic understanding of the subject.



# Ulwazi comes first.

UVILE XIMBA

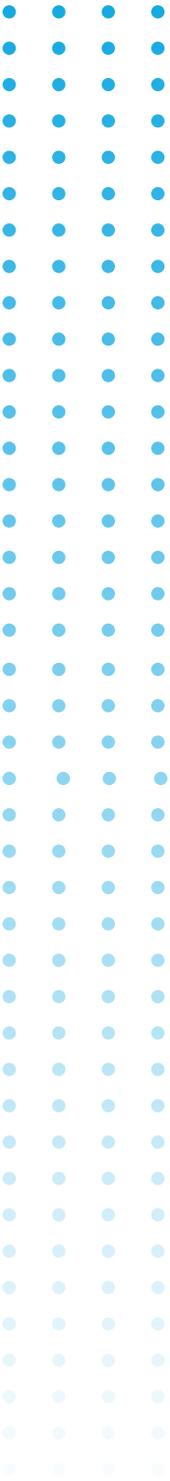
“Everything, Everywhere,  
All At Once”

What is Ulwazi? Is it to see, hear, touch, feel, experience, to name a thing? What can we call knowledge/knowing and where does it come from? How do we qualify truth? And can we ever know it?



I am a writer, a creative, and the sun. Through my creative work, I find and share spirit. In a previous life, or a parallel one, I was/ am a cat.





# Partners:

Main Partners:



With the Support of:

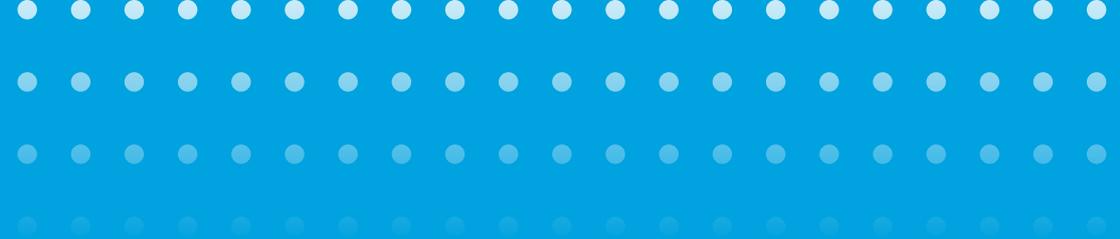




## We Wish to Thank:

Simon Njami for igniting new languages that liberate a new pace, a new perspective and nurturing a space where we could be seen completely.

We also extend our thanks to Refiloe Musandiwa, Lwando Xaso, Elena Korzhenevish, Adama Sanneh, Marina Mussapi, Fatou Alhya Diagne, Ngaire Blakenberg, Luca Dimoon, Lesole Tauatswala, Londi Modiko and Siwa Mgoboza



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