“Where Shall We Place Our Hope?”

COVID-19 and the Imperiled National Body in South Africa’s “Lockdown Collection”

Mark Auslander, Pamela Allara, and Kim Berman

all artwork shared courtesy of the artists and The Lockdown Collection

During April 2020, for the first twenty-one days of what South Africans term “the Lockdown” (elsewhere in the world referenced as “shelter in place” or quarantine), prominent South African artists were invited to create or share work that spoke to COVID-19 and its unfolding crises. A second series was organized in May 2020 as the national Lockdown was extended. “The Lockdown Collection” (TLC), was underwritten by sponsors in business and cultural communities and has generated funds to support vulnerable artists as well as the South African President’s Solidarity Fund. The initiative has also occasioned an open call to other South African artists and creation of a special collection devoted to works by student artists.

Our essay explores how the initial project came about, the circumstances that led so many artists to respond with great energy and imagination to its call for submissions, and how this varied group of creative figures engaged with the challenges of representing COVID disasters and beginning, tentatively, to imagine new worlds that might emerge once (and if) the pandemic subsides. We conclude with a discussion of challenges faced by students at Johannesburg’s Artist Proof Studio, who represent an emerging generation of South African artists and who inherit the deep challenges that this pandemic represents in a country of extreme inequality.

Our title is taken from the work which launched the collection, William Kentridge’s Where Shall We Place Our Hope?, a drawing of a great tree in full foliage, inked across a ledger page from a late-nineteenth-century mine on the Rand. The work is drawn from Kentridge’s production of the opera Waiting for Sibyl, in turn inspired by the classical figure of the Cumaean Sybil, guardian of the Underworld, who is said to have written her prophecies on the leaves of an oak tree, gathered at the mouth of her cave. Winds would chaotically rearrange the leaf-inscribed messages, rendering those seeking guidance from the soothsayer, uncertain as to which message might be intended for them.

The haunting question, “Where shall we place our hope?” is perhaps the oldest human lament. It echoes the opening of the 121st Psalm, “I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.” This interrogative takes on particular poignancy in Kentridge’s home city of Johannesburg, a metropolis built on the backbreaking labor of millions of African migrants who toiled in the gold mines, driven by often-unrealized dreams of a better life, even as they and their descendants forged vibrant cultures of dignity and resistance. The deep shafts and tunnels they created, a persistent motif in Kentridge’s work, are resonant with the Sybil’s ancient cave, in which the future was hinted, but invariably elusive.

Kentridge’s enigmatic query, which he inscribes on a low wall in front of the tree, is an apt frame for the works of TLC. In various registers these artists and their works approach the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to pose challenging questions about the nation’s past and its uncertain future, grappling with climate change and environmental catastrophe, socioeconomic inequality, unresolved legacies of colonialism and the “colonization of consciousness,” and a long-term crisis of alienation and social fragmentation under conditions of modernity. As we shall see, they also approach these novel plaguescapes as opportunities to reimagine new worlds founded on emerging visions of compassion, social justice, and solidarity, while transcending patriarchal and other parochial interests. The works draw upon and refashion histories of late Apartheid resistance art informed by indigenous cosmological and ritual imagery. Taken together, the creations ask us to ponder the promise of a democratic South Africa that, like so much else in our world, hangs in the balance. Where shall we place our hope?
THE PROJECT’S ORIGINS AND GOALS

On March 25, 2020 South African President Cyril Ramaphosa announced Lockdown for twenty-one days. While listening to the speech, Carl Bates, CEO of the Sirdar Group for Boardroom Performance and an international entrepreneur, conceived of a bold idea: inviting artists to respond to COVID-19 each day of the Lockdown. He contacted Lauren Woolf, whom he knew through the Young Presidents Organisation (YPO). Founder and owner of MRS WOOLF, an advertising and marketing company, she serves on the board of Artist Proof Studio and reached out to Kim Berman as cofounder and director of APS and professor in the Department of Visual Art at the University of Johannesburg. Berman readily agreed to invite artists and, through APS’s extensive network, to identify vulnerable artists needing support.

Woolf and her design team came up with the term “The Lockdown Collection.” Its acronym evokes the compassionate phrase “tender loving care” and reminds one of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the restorative justice body assembled during South Africa’s transition out of apartheid. Designer Tanya de Jongh formulated a logo of a padlock with an open clasp, contrasting Lockdown with the inclusive openness of art itself. The approach would present the artist’s works, biographies, and statements as social media posts released daily at 2.00 PM on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. The images retweeted on social media took on an urgency and popularity that extended across social networks, flattening the elitism of refined gallery contexts in which some of these works would otherwise be confined.1

On the evening of March 26, 2020, before the Lockdown at midnight, Berman drove to see William Kentridge, presented TLC’s project to support some of the most vulnerable artists, and asked him if he would contribute a work. He immediately agreed to share his drawing Where Shall We Place Our Hope? (Fig. 1). He made it clear that he would not recommend the benefit auction model, as artists are tired of giving work on which no one bids. This advice and Kentridge’s generosity helped the team establish a model to ensure every artist’s contribution was funded, with a guaranteed amount of money upfront. The Kentridge drawing was sold to a USA-based collector for R500,000 (US$30,000) with the stipulation that the funds be shared equally by the President’s Solidarity Fund and the Vulnerable Artist’s Fund. The three founders, dubbed “The 48-hour Team,” recruited volunteers of lawyers, accountants, social media specialists, designers, and writers. They also set up checks and balances with an auditing firm to establish a dedicated Vulnerable Artists Fund (VAF), which enabled the opening of funding applications two weeks into the campaign. The process was powerful, in that the team was able to tap into the urgency of the moment and draw on the energy and connections that characterized what the country identified as “as state of disaster.”

1. William Kentridge
Where Shall We Place Our Hope? (2020)
Indian ink, charcoal and red pencil on found ledger pages; 46 cm x 63 cm

2. Christiaan Diedericks
St. Corona: A Single Diagnosis of Health (2020)
Monotype on 300gsm Hahnemühle etching paper; 96 cm x 87 cm
a matter of a few phone calls in the first two days, Bates and Woolf raised R25,000/day to underwrite the first ten artists, whoever they were. Berman identified the artists who could come up with a work for each day for a minimum value of R25,000. Bates and Woolf also reached out to artists whom they knew, making the collection more eclectic and unusual. Each day, the core leadership checked in through two-hour Zoom calls with the various teams, and with much correspondence and many exchanges.

Twenty-one art pieces, each created by different South African artists, were revealed daily during the initial twenty-one day lockdown period. The artworks reflect the thoughts, feelings, vision, or captured moments of their COVID-19 experience. The moment in time was an extraordinary opportunity for South African artists to provide leadership and generosity while recording a vision of the time. Some of the well-known names in the collection were drawn from Artist Proof Studio alumni, who were enthusiastic to be able to pay it forward, as they come from extremely low-income backgrounds and have remained active in APS’s extended network.

At the end of the first collection run, the resulting artworks were auctioned in an unprecedented online webinar event, with a virtual realtime auction raising R2,000,000 (about US$116,000); 25% of the proceeds went to The President’s Solidarity Fund, 15% to the participating artists, and 60% to The Vulnerable Artist Fund that was set up in partnership with Artist Proof Studio.

After the president’s announcement of an extended country-wide lockdown, the team decided to build on the momentum and extend the invitation to the many artists coming forward to participate. Gordon Froud, well known curator and colleague of Kim Berman at the University of Johannesburg, agreed to be the curator for second call to another round of twenty-one artists, which was termed the TLC Extension Collection, and hosted on the Artist Proof Studio website. The proceeds of this collection were to extend support of the flood of applicants to the new Vulnerable Artist Fund to distribute grants to artists in great need, including low-income art students. Over 330 grants reached vulnerable artists in the first two months of the project. However, by the time of the Extension collection was launched, the concept had been replicated in many sectors and a fatigue among the South African art-buying community has set in. Other approaches such as the production of a commemorative portfolio and poster signed by William Kentridge have enabled the sustainability of the fund.

**FROM RESISTANCE ART TO ART THAT RESPONDS: THE LEGACY OF THE 1980S IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICAN ART**

In her preface to the reissue of her seminal survey “Resistance Art in South Africa,” Sue Williamson asked, “Is there an ethos that distinguishes South African art? … [P]erhaps what was learned from growing up or being an artist during the struggle years was how to confront issues, whatever they might be, and how to use this in one’s artistic practice. Culture is still, in its way, an instrument of struggle (2004: 6).”

The Resistance Art movement of the 1980s appeared to have ended with the unbanning of the ANC and the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990; certainly, Judge Albie Sachs, his classic 1989 editorial “Preparing Ourselves for Freedom,” argued that it was time to put art that served political agendas be set aside to allow for complex works of the imagination (Sachs 1990). However, post-1994, South African artists have been denied the luxury, if one could call it that, of pure self-expression; rather, many have been compelled to examine the here and now, given the enormous tensions and divisions in the country. In addition to the ongoing racial and economic disparity in South African society at large,
the xenophobic outbreaks of May 2008 and the catastrophe of the HIV/AIDS pandemic were events that few South African artists could simply ignore, even as they entered the international art world with its different sets of concerns.

Unfortunately, the “new” South Africa, and all that it foretold of an equitable future for all of its citizens, went hand in hand with AIDS denialism, as exemplified by the presidency of Thabo Mbeki (1999–2008). Soon after Mbeki was inaugurated, the thirteenth international AIDS conference in Durban in 2000 countered the president’s denials and stressed the need to break the silence of denial about the disease and the stigma of those affected. Artists responded immediately and directly. As artist Judith Mason wrote at the time: “During the anti-apartheid struggle we identified the enemy, confronted it and prevailed against it. We need to do the same today…” (quoted in Marschall 2001: 20). As Allen F. Roberts noted, Kwa-Zulu Natal was “home to the fastest-growing population of those living with HIV/AIDS” (2001: 37). The extensive responses on the part of artists and crafts collectives discussed by Roberts include the billboard portfolio by artists from South Africa, Britain, Mozambique, and Namibia produced by Jan Jordaan and the Artists for the Human Rights Trust, as well as artist Kate Wells’s Siyazama Project, which used beadwork sculpture and wire baskets to educate about HIV/AIDS.

A similar sentiment motivated the establishment of The Lockdown Collection/Extension some twenty years later in response to the coronavirus pandemic. It is not surprising that some of the artists who participated in the Break the Silence campaign also made work for TLC. One of the artists, Christiaan Diedericks, has stated about his St. Corona linocut (Fig. 2) in the TLC extension:

A second narrative exists in my Saint Corona and investigates the parallels between the dreaded HIV virus in the eighties and the Coronavirus pandemic today. During the early 1980s during the outbreak of the HIV virus, the entire world turned a blind eye and labelled the pandemic “the gay plague”… (Diedericks 2020)

The parallel is inexact, as the Ramaphosa-led government has responded proactively to the virus; nonetheless, its concentration in the townships and rural areas is a clear indication of the continuing White/Black, rich/poor divide.

Because the Resistance Art movement has itself been “stigmatized” as a political project, the high quality and vast range of the works produced has arguably been undervalued—this despite the fact that almost every well-known South African artist participated in the movement. Each artist responded to the urgency of the moment with powerful works that avoided clichés such as raised fists. Several Resistance artists of the time, for example Sam Nhlengethwa (Fig. 3) and Penny Siopis (Fig. 15), have contributed to TLC as well, their contributions evidence that “resistance art,” broadly speaking, is a continuing tradition. Certain themes are revived as well: for instance, in the late Nhlanhla Xaba’s AIDS Exodus (2000) an endless line of people tread across a darkened landscape that is echoed in Thembo Khumalo’s Waiting for Food Parcels.

The connection is not coincidental: Khumalo is a graduate of Artist Proof Studio in Johannesburg, founded by Xaba and Kim Berman in 1991. In addition to skills in printmaking, Artist Proof Studio students are required to participate in community engagement and outreach projects, so that they are educated not just as artists, but as active citizens. One of its largest and longest-lasting projects has been Paper Prayers, a national AIDS Awareness campaign that Berman initiated in 1996. Fanning out across all of the
provinces, students worked with AIDS educators, which let people involved in the workshops express their feelings about the disease, which led to activism and awareness to participate in the testing campaign learn their HIV status. After the informational session, each participant would make a small print, or Paper Prayer, for someone they knew who was affected by HIV. The program subsequently expanded to include cloths created at embroidery collectives as well as crafts centers, thereby creating employment and income for some members of the collectives even today. Given its history of community engagement, it is only logical that APS is a core partner in the series of TLC Collections that create awareness and support for vulnerable artists by artists.

To be sure, many Resistance artists and the younger TLC artists employ a style derived from the modernist tradition of figurative expressionism. However, at the same time that the students at Artist Proof Studio, for example, are shown and study works by Goya, Beckmann, and others, they are also instructed to base their art on their individual cultural identities. Often this has led to in-depth discussions with parents and grandparents that had not previously taken place (Berman 2017). The differing individual responses to the coronavirus pandemic by artists from the TLC Extension Collection illustrate that these socially concerned artists, like Resistance artists before them, avoid cliché.

Ramarutha Makoba’s Miner (Relwa ntwa ya kokwana took ya Corona; together we are fighting the sickness of corona) (Fig. 4) and Senzo Shabangu’s Nurse are portraits of masked frontline workers engaging us directly, but although this is a familiar motif in art responding to the pandemic, each is an individual response. Confronting the viewer directly, Makoba’s miner is an image of strength. Behind him in the lower register are the township houses that frequently appear in Makoba’s artwork. In front of the house on the right is a boy, partially obscured by the miner’s arm, playing with a wire toy car. A woman carrying a bag has her back to us, as if she is about to enter the house. Beyond and above the domestic scene is a tree and an electric light fixture. The courageous miner is “keeping the lights on” and the family together in a time of crisis.

Shabangu’s Nurse, in contrast, is seen only from the shoulders up, and despite the military-style epaulets on his uniform, the expression in his eyes conveys fatigue rather than strength. This frontline worker is understandably exhausted emotionally and physically. Backed up against a government green wall with strong electrical lighting reflecting off his face, our nurse apparently practices in an institution or hospital with few open spaces in which to rest or relax. This nurse provides support to others, but is also deserving of our sympathy and support. No rest, or spiritual solace, for the weary.

Significantly, these artists, as well as Lehlogolo Mashaba, Lindokuhle Zwane, Bambo Sibiya, Colbert Mashile, Stompie Selibe, and Themba Khumalo, all featured in the TLC collections, are alumni of APS. They see themselves as role models to the next generation of APS students and continue the legacy of activism by artists, not only to envision a more humane future but to express their commitment to contributing to greater economic justice and support through their participation and example. They are a vital bridge between the South African history of resistance art and the new generation of emerging artists discussed in this essay’s conclusion.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEYS AND RITES OF PASSAGE

In the face of this crisis, many works in the two collections signal journeys of self-discovery and rebirth that draw on the rich cultural repertoires of southern African indigenous histories and cosmologies. In Colbert Mashile’s The Sneaker we behold two animal figures in anthropomorphic form, a standing white goat wearing a light green sweater with collar and, cast in a darker shadow, a hyena, its dangerous teeth bared, standing ominously just behind him, wearing the same kind of sweater but of a darker color. Having herded goats as a child with his age-mates in Venda, Mashile has extensive experience protecting his flock from predators, including hyenas. As in many rural southern African communities, hyenas in Venda are understood as witchcraft familiars,
or as dangerous beings into which malevolent persons may nocturnally transform themselves (Harnischfeger 2000). The hyena, while a terrifying alien being, can also be understood as a manifestation of the most feared aspect of a person’s mind, the interior forces that threaten to destroy him or her from within. Hence the formal parallels between the goat and the hyena in the painting, which both take on humanlike bipedal appearance and wear the same kind of clothing. At one level, the hyena may be read as entirely alien, a dangerous invader from the bush, stalking the unsuspecting goat-victim. Yet, the hyena can also be understood as emanating from within the goat/human subject, as if he is stalked by aspects of his own fears and self-doubts.

The complex, plural terrain of the self is also suggested in Lehlogolo Mashaba’s Relentless Hosts (Fig. 5). We see the head and upper torso of a multicolored figure, composed of two faces, one looking directly at us and the other turned down and to the right. The Januslike figure is composed of multiple colored shapes, some of which may be evocative of the novel coronavirus or of the human cells it attacks, as well as faintly sketched human figures, pieces of machinery, and perhaps the many houses within which we are now confined for the duration.

Mashaba’s title, Relentless Hosts, speaks not simply to the way human bodies host the novel coronavirus but also to the ways persons share, or at least should share, flows of information, emotions, and social bonds. Small, delicately traced images seem to enter and drift out of this open composite figure, a testament to the interdependent models of the person celebrated in timeless principles of ubuntu, in which webs of human relationships bind the living and the dead, integrating mortals and the ancestral shades in mutually enriching exchanges. While exhibiting traces of Leonardo da Vinci’s Vetranian Man, the double-headed figure also signals engagement with the global aesthetic of Afrofuturism and the high-tech era of the cyborg, composed in part of gears and other mechanical devices that extend purely organic conceptions of human life.

Shadowed selfhood and improvisational energies are also explored in Stompie Selibe’s The Old Births and the New (initially titled Shangaan Dress) (Fig. 6). In contrast to the artist’s earlier printmaking work, the painting appears spontaneous, with its thick, layered impasto registering his emotional, intuitive response to each color and shape as it was laid down. Selibe is an accomplished musician who composes songs for his penny whistle, and improvisation from music extends to his visual processes as well, linking sound, image, and dance.

The painting’s inner dark masses may allude to the Vatsonga-Shangaan concept of the ndzuti or shadow, a kind of bodily life force that sustains a person, intimately linked to the moya, a spiritual presence that rejoins the ancestral realm at death (Magubane 1998). The artist writes that the period of confinement during the Lockdown has led to a rediscovery of one’s shadow as profoundly important attributes of the self, previously forgotten or neglected, are rediscovered. Appropriately, radiating out from the painting’s inner, dark shadow are a grand panoply of colors in powerful solids and gentle washes, ultimately merging into the surrounding lighter field. We behold a great dance of life and death, from which something new, both terrifying and strangely beautiful, is about to be born and reborn.

The Lockdown occasions a different kind of inward spiritual journey in Lindokuhle Zwane’s Meditation. This large, circular painting is dominated by the face of a remembered maternal figure who wears the uniform of a church member in the Zionist Church of Christ fellowship, which the artist previously attended. Fellow white-robed women members of the faith, one with a cross stitched on her back, are seen in the background.

In many African independent churches, including Zionist denominations, the church uniform is understood as a ritual object...
of great power, offering strength and protection to its wearers as they channel the life-giving flows of the Holy Spirit (Comaroff 1985). At this time of great trial and tribulation, when we are all isolated from one another by the Lockdown, the artist invites us to take comfort in this memory picture of a community of uniformed believers bound together by grace, solidarity, and healing currents of the spirit, focused on the matriarchal figure who has long united diverse African collectivities (James 1993). Even in urban Johannesburg at a time of Lockdown and confinement, amid the encroaching terror of the virus, the artist travels inwards to recover the recalled gaze of the Mother in northern Zululand; taking on her serene point of view promises to sustain us all.

Other artists hint at parallels between the enforced national experience of Lockdown and the deep structure of coming of age ceremonies. In Lebohang Motaung’s And Yet I Smile, the outline of a face mask is painted on the face of smiling girl, allowing her gleaming smile to remain visible. The work draws on the rich Basotho cultural aesthetics of the face anchored in the female initiation process. Basotho female initiates emerging from isolation cover their faces with woven reed masks, signifying their rebirth and intimate connection with the watery, reed-covered space of Creation (Merkel 2011). Young women traveling out from initiation spaces may adorn their faces and bodies with painted substances, known as letsoku, manifesting their transitional status as they move towards adulthood (Klopper and Nel 2002). The face, outward expression of individual distinction and difference, thus becomes the appropriate medium through which the emerging young person is integrated into the continuity of the collective—which spans the interwoven community of the living and the dead.

Other artists evoke the initiation rites of the sangoma or spiritual healer. Sifiso Tembo’s The Defender (Fig. 7) presents a male, bare-chested figure who is identified as both a patient and a medical worker, wearing an enormous antique gas mask that gives him an insectile appearance. Novice Xhosa traditional healers (igqirha) experience disorienting dream-visions of wild animals and ancestral shades, to whom they become intimately bound as they learn how to care for those in great need (Bool and Edwards 2014). As “wounded healers,” diviners embody the difficult transition process between disease and recovery which their patients urgently require (Comaroff 1980, 1981). The body of the spiritual healer thus becomes, in Milisa and Nel’s terms (2014), a “spiritual barometer” in which the patient’s positive and negative energies are registered, embodied, and then productively rechanneled. Such would seem to be the case with the hybrid figure envisioned in Temba’s painting, binding together the afflicted and the healer, the human and the nonhuman, the wound and the salve, in the striking image of a Christlike defender who is no stranger to great suffering.

Comparably, Mongezi Ncaphayi’s A Place in Time (Fig. 8) traverses the heavy burden carried by the diviner (isangoma) in Bhaca society and cosmology, who are called by prophetic dreams to intervene when relations between the living and the ancestral shades become unbalanced (Hammond-Tooke 1955, 1962). Out of the wash of overlapping colors, a dreamlike apparition is called forth. The flakes of white glimpsed throughout the painting may be evocative of the white beads and other white coloration deployed in Bhaca divination, as well as the white goat sacrificed during the diviner’s initiation, through which darker forces, glimpsed in the snakelike black line in the lower part of the image, may be neutralized, as light is shone on previous troublesome mysteries. This prophetic work evokes both the agonies of this disorienting “place in time” and a glimpse of healing reintegration.

**A DOMESTIC UNCANNY**

As billions around the world are largely confined to their homes, it is hardly surprising that many of the featured artists are drawn to the motif of the house interior. Many of these works may be approached through Sigmund Freud’s insight, in his 1919 essay on the Uncanny, that the house is an especially resonant model for the dynamic human mind, presenting vistas that are simultaneously familiar and eerily disturbing.

In The Broom Closet (Fig. 9), Usha Seejarim slices broomsticks into pegs that, when strung on wire, resemble strands of human hair, complicated by the insertion of rigid iron bases that resemble *vagina dentata* with “iron-hard” teeth. Seejarim notes that...
women who transgress power are labelled as “witches” and those who transgress sexuality, “whores.” In coming out of the closet, this female sculpture brings along with its swinging freedom a threatening core, as the quotidian domestic elements of brooms and irons become unexpectedly aggressive and empowering.

The well-known association between female witches and broomsticks is a historical reaction against classic imagery. The ancient Roman goddess Deverra, symbolized by a broom, safeguarded women in childbirth, midwives, and newborn babies from the dreaded divinity Silvanus of the Wood (Dorsey 1992). A sacred broom, sweeping away evil, was thus honored within Deverra’s temples. Yet, in the fifteenth century, an era of renewed assaults on women’s ritual capacities and autonomy, all lumped together as “pagan,” this ancient symbolism was violently appropriated and transformed by men: women with special, transgressive powers were branded as witches who supposedly flew on phallic broomsticks between their legs to the “Witch’s Sabbath.”

Seejarim’s Closet may thus be understood as an enduring temple to the domestic in the inner recesses of the house and also as a symptom of how, in this strange era of fear and separation, the fundamental values of the domestic realm, including compassion and nurturance, are under daily assault, chopped into little pieces. As Bachelard insists in The Poetics of Space (1969), our dwelling places need to retain places in which we might dream of shadowy pasts and unclear futures. We need, in our quest for sanity and integration, to honor and repair all that is gathered enigmatically within The Broom Closet.

In the era of lockdown and anxious social distancing, even the most interior household spaces, our supposed sanctuaries, become anxious, disorienting, and destabilizing. Such is the topsy-turvy world that Gerhard Marx evokes for us through his scissored, raw-edged, ruffled, and ruffled fragments from the “front” to “back” walls, which run diagonally like M.C. Escher’s impossibly constructed worlds. By the private security force, the Red Ants. The “punctum” of this image, in Roland Barthes’s terms (1981), the thing that pierces the heart, is the solitary empty chair, its red upholstery or stuffing spilled out. The upholstered chair, the symbolic heart of a household, is the solitary empty chair, its red upholstery or stuffing spilled out. Splotches of red are glimpsed on the rocky ground of the middle foreground, below the chair, and to its left, as if they are traces of the blood that has drained out of the invisible, removed family, wrenched from the precarious home they had carved out in the city. Somewhere on the streets, under conditions of deepening hunger and without ready access to clean water, the absent family is presumably more at risk to viral infection than ever before.

**RECASTING THE NATIONAL BODY; MASKED FACES, GLOVED HANDS**

Lurking danger is also signaled in depictions of personal protective equipment. In Walter Oltmann’s wire sculpture Frontliners (Fig. 11), a testimony to medical workers, two gloved hands reach out into a field that is filled with about twenty circular shapes denoting the novel coronavirus; there may even be pathogenlike blotches infiltrating the gloves themselves. The three-dimensional nature of Oltmann’s wire wire gloves invites us to ponder putting our hands inside of them, taking on the bodily experience of the imperiled caregiver. We are thus all as viewers of the work implicated in the great drama unfolding around us, and can potentially interpolate ourselves into the heroic yet fragile outstretched hands of the medical worker. The outstretched hand, normally an instrument of friendship, mastery, care, and love, at this uncertain moment in human history, reminds us there is no fully safe “home front,” as we all find ourselves on the “front lines.”

In similar vein, in Michael Meyersfeld’s Fenced (Fig. 12) two shadowy gloved hands press against a wire fence as if seeking to break through. The artists’ shared fascination with wire may be conditioned, in part, by the long, painful history of wire and wire fencing in South African history. Under colonial and apartheid conditions, wire restricted the movement of livestock and of people across previously unconfined landscapes. Wire-strewn landscapes are, as well, an enduring, horrific memory of the Great War. Zombie films and TV shows often feature the hands of the living dead pressing...
against wire fences. More recently, in the US–Mexico borderlands, wire fencing has taken on particularly ominous attributes associated with images of detained migrants, even separated children, confined in wire cages. The specter of wire fencing haunts our collective nightmares and seems oddly fitting as we contemplate our current, surreal predicament.

In Ramarutha Makoba’s *Relwa ntwa ya kokwana took ya Corona* (From sePedi: “Together we are fighting the sickness of coronavirus”) the heroic figure of the miner, clad in protective mask and gloves, stands in for the national body, preparing to do battle with the virus. Lines of energy seem to circulate around the upper body of the miner, some suggesting (as in many depictions of frontline medical workers around the world) that he is angelic.

A green face mask dominates Senzo Shebangu’s painting, *The Nurse*, which may be approached with reference to Hans Belting’s (2017) argument that portrait painting is a kind of “mask” which paradoxically reveals the subject’s inner life in a manner that cannot be normally apprehended. (As Oscar Wilde [1891: 108] famously remarks in “The Critic as Artist,” “Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.”) In the Shabangu painting, the nurse’s face is partially obscured by the required protective face mask, yet this act of concealment has the curious effect of overemphasizing her or his eyes as a “mirror of the soul,” granting us a deeper appreciation of subject’s care and compassion for the nurse’s charges.

**ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS**

Visions of fractured ecosystems and the global body politic inform many works. Two artists foreground the pangolin, the world’s most trafficked mammal. As has been widely reported, viral RNA strands from bats may have been recombined in pangolins, perhaps confined in Chinese wet markets, and jumped to human populations at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. In a ceramic bowl sculpture, Thabiso Mohlakoana carves pangolins circling the rim, honoring multiple endangered species of pangolin. The circular procession, around a bowl shaped like the lower half of a globe, evokes an interrelated global chain of being, particularly salient now that so many members of the human family, close kin of the pangolin in African cosmological systems of thought, are now endangered from the virus all over over fragile planet.

Circular forms also dominate *Eating One’s Own Tail—Pangolin* by Diane Victor (Fig. 13), which plays with the ancient symbol of the ouroboros, a serpent consuming its own tail, archetypal signifier of renewal and cycles of death and regeneration of life. The shape recalls the pangolin’s tendency to roll itself into a dense ball when sensing danger. In Victor’s circular rendition, the animal comes to resembled the spherical, spiky SARS-COV2 virus itself, possibly emergent within this perilously fragile creature. Will the pangolin solely be a harbinger of disaster, or will it serve as a clarion call for resetting the balance of humanity and global ecosystems?

Richard Penn’s *Manifold IV*, in turn, ponders the imperiled microcosmic foundations of global biodiversity, depicting a conglomeration of diatoms, microcosmic organisms that produce something like half the world’s oxygen. Penn encases these microorganisms within the jagged shaped metal frame of a B-2 stealth bomber, a radar-evading nuclear weapons delivery system of almost unimaginable destructive power. Advanced industrial civilization seems increasingly prone, as the present COVID-19 crisis reminds us, to unleashing catastrophic biological dangers upon the world population, accelerated through passenger jet travel and population density.

Macrocosm and microcosm are also spanned in Robyn Penn’s
Warped Time (Fig. 14). In contrast to standard landscape paintings of the Highveld, we do not look up at clouds, but are perched above them, an unstable vantage point that suggests a precipitous fall. In addition, the clouds are red—not a soft sunset red, but a red suggestive of wounds or bruises, or even fire. We cannot be certain either where we stand or what we are looking at. Our feelings of uncertainty are augmented by our lack of control over the expansive formations. During the pandemic, what has become clear is that any confidence we may have had in our ability to control nature is illusory. As Penn has written, Warped Time visualizes “nature’s indifference towards us.” We might even be caught up within a cytokine storm induced by the invading coronavirus, as the overproduction of immune cells induces hyperinflammation in the lung tissue, leading to serious illness or death.

The title of Penn’s painting alludes to physicist Carlo Rovelli’s characterization of Einstein’s model of curved spacetime as “warped time.” A planet orbits a star because the star’s greater mass curves the fabric of spacetime itself, a curving we experience as gravity, so that the planetary body perpetually falls partially inward. Time is not experienced as an absolute constant throughout the universe but is itself organized differently according to the speed and location of the observer: time in effect runs faster where gravity is weaker, and slower when gravity is stronger. In this spirit, our experiences of time are elongated under conditions of the Lockdown, when we are isolated in our abodes, compressed as it were by the mass of our immediate surroundings and the vast weight of suffering the world over.

DIVINING THE FUTURE?

Day One of the first TLC collection opened with a composite work by Gordon Froud, integrating his new sculpture of the virus with his older drawing View from August 3 (2016). Froud’s sculpture of the virus was delicate, unassuming, and amusing in its construction from a hockey ball, golf tees, and push pins. Yet superimposed over the chalk and charcoal drawing of an empty Johannesburg cityscape, the novel coronavirus appears, as if floating in air, shining in all its terrifying glory. We were reminded of William Butler Yeats’ poem “The Second Coming” (1919), written just after the Great War and the global influenza pandemic: “And what rough beast, its hour come round at last/ Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?” (Yeats 1996: 187). What precisely does this new visage in our firmament hearken for all of us?

Three weeks later, the first Lockdown Collection concluded with a tentative answer to the question, through Penny Siopis’s captivating painting The Giant Soul (Fig. 15). The scale of the work is both cosmic and intimate. We see echoes of the vast pillars of creation digitally reconstructed by the orbiting Hubble Space Telescope, allowing us to gaze into a stellar nursery 6,000 light years away. Equally, we may be in the presence of a kind of spiritual sonogram, gazing into a womb, beholding emergent new life of a kind we cannot yet even name. The work’s title and the words in newspaper clippings that seem to have been blown by the force of explosive fire down to the lower left of the composition offer a sense of optimism amidst all the terror: “This is the time of the giant soul,” “we will rise,” “a people of strength and resilience.” During this time of viral contagion, solidarity and human connection might also spread like fire.

Siopis’s epic image may be read from right to left. We begin with the watery ocean, from which all life emerged, and then enter into the burning fires of the present pandemic, in which we have lost, and will lose, so many loved ones before their time. Then the “rough beast” emerges. The white-yellow figure might be a woman, her face in profile to the left, her hands put forth as if presenting a blessing or an offering. From her outstretched hands flow forth words of hope and charity. We see an echo perhaps of Kentridge’s ancient sibyl, who wrote her prophecies on scattered leaves, honored in the drawing with which the collection began.2

Artists of round two, the TLC Extension Collection, continued to grapple with the problem of hope amidst crisis. The sequence began with Sizwe Khoza’s Kuzolunga, Mfana (All will be well, young man) (Fig. 16). A young man of color in running shoes sits on a high wall, gazing into the middle distance, pondering his past and future. The first word of the title phrase, “Kuzolunga” (“it’s gonna be OK,” in isiXhosa and isiZulu), at times is used in popular music, a reassuring term amidst trials and struggles. The phrase may also be used in reference to the comforts of prayer, which lifts the heavy heart of the afflicted, and the theme of prayer is certainly emphasized by the rosaries and crucifix that he holds. The yellow that surrounds the youth is a standard marker of caution, appropriate to these anxious and perilous times. Yet the yellow shape might signal a giant hand held aloft, granting benediction. Alternately, in this era of global #BlackLivesMatter mobilization, the youth may be pondering the burdens of systemic racism that continue to wall in...
young people of color even as public health restrictions are lifted.

In this ambiguous spirit, the works of the two collections offer no easy solutions. Many engage directly with the agonies imposed by disease and Lockdown, in particular on low-income communities of color. Themba Khumalo’s Waiting for Food Parcels (Fig. 17), already mentioned, is a haunting summation of the current predicament and the unresolved echoes of the resistance era. A queue of hungry people out of work, bent down with the weight of worry, stretches back to the horizon, under rolling storm clouds. Electrical power pylons are bent down as well. During the anti-apartheid military struggle, power pylons were targeted by Umkhonto we Sizwe, the military wing of the African National Congress, as (largely symbolic) military targets, potent signs of the apartheid superstate. Now, the pylons themselves look skeletal and decrepit, echoing the conditions of the starving men and women trudging below. Perhaps even the teetering pylons, which ought to feed the national grid and economy with pulsations of energy, are themselves waiting patiently for nourishment during these lean times. Where then is the possibility of faith in the future?

LOOKING FORWARD, LOOKING INWARD: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

These questions are especially urgent for Artist Proof Studio students, who come from exceptionally poor communities and require subsidies for transport to town. Many lack the means to pay registration fees or buy materials and often use their student subsidy to feed themselves and family. During the months of the lockdown, teachers have been tasked with managing WhatsApp groups, and up to 35% of students have dropped off the list. They have no data in their phones, which is a lifeline for applying for funding or for food parcels. Some have no food, no electricity, share a tap for scarce water, live in grinding poverty, and have almost no means to connect. Some have sold their phones to buy food. Domestic abuse of women and children in homes has increased as much as 500% according to some reports. Teachers are trying their best to pull students out of extreme despair, but they are not trained psychologists or social workers.

In this context, many of the students have created powerful art works, as they are being supported with grants from the Vulnerable Artist Fund, generated by sales of TLC works donated by established artists, including many APS graduates. We conclude with three of these poignant works, which are illustrative of vitality, creativity, and hope amidst the growing despair of surrounding poverty.

Lungile Mbelle’s Conversations with Myself depicts two heads facing one another, one with mouth open and eyes obscured by newspaper text. A symbol denoting the coronavirus is pressed into the figure’s hair, and vertical poles seem to pierce the head like a trophy. The other head has a closed mouth and open eyes, but is pierced by a horizontal stick with a circular end that might also signal the virus. The artist writes that much of the violence of the Lockdown is between Black people, many of whom are police officers, “sent frequently to Black communities to physically abuse and arrest those who don’t stay indoors.” Who precisely is self, and who is other, under these conditions?

Mirror imagery also characterizes Cinthia Sifa Binene’s Etre Femme (to be a woman), set in an interior room with an open closet, inspired by her experiences living at home at age eight, just after her family moved to South Africa from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. A beautiful young woman in an elaborate fin de siècle dress gazes into a dresser mirror, almost embracing her reflected visage; a young woman seated at the base of a closet gazes into a hand mirror, as a boy in shorts stands off to the side. The mirrors are not, one senses, simply signs of Vanitas but rather signal the self knowledge and growing compassion for others that come from this involuntary period of prolonged pause.

Finally, the doubled self and transformed interior state of mind are also signaled in Khosi Kunene’s 19 (Fig. 18). A winding tree shaped like a person is topped by a large skull, filled with a half visible brain. She writes of the work,

From nature we are given
From nature we are taken  
We think twice about what they say a pandemic is
We grow more and
More conscious everyday
We stay indoors to know ourselves more
Protect ourselves more
As we patiently wait to flower empty spaces.

Like a number of the established TLC artists, Kunene is drawn to arboREAL symbolism, inspired by the significance of trees in African cosmologies and indigenous healing practices. Confined and surrounded by mass death, our minds may develop in ways that will allow survivors, like trees emerging out of long winter hibernation,
to flower and fill the empty spaces of the soul. Her work recalls the iconography of the early modern dance macabre, created during periods of plague, in which skulls served as reminders to the proximity of death and the futility of earthly pleasure.

Yet this is not a vision bereft of optimism; this skull, normally a signifier of death, is filled with a living, growing brain. Kunene’s tree promises the emergence of mysterious new knowledge out this time of sorrow, connected by its roots to the wisdom of the ancestors and all who have gone before. Here, perhaps, we have a answer to William Kentridge’s haunting question, posed at the base of his enigmatic tree: Where shall we place our hope? Within a

The minds and dreams of the nation’s youth, who have seen such despair and loss, and yet who, through their art, present us with visions of undaunted courage and collective rejuvenation.

References cited


