**exhibition review**

**Ngezinyawo—Migrant Journeys**  
Wits Art Museum (WAM), Johannesburg  
April 10–July 20, 2014  
reviewed by Steven C. Dubin

Small bits of metal: circular, rectangular, square, triangular—improbably small, given the profound economic shifts and social transformations that they once signified. Hut tax tokens such as these represent the material residue of injurious statutes that colonial officials imposed in Africa in the nineteenth century, requiring “native peoples” to pay for the right to occupy their own rural homesteads (Fig. 1). The enactment of such laws forced legions of Africans to become wage laborers in back-breaking jobs in factories, mines, and white households, often in faraway urban areas. With workers absent for the bulk of the year, their families were profoundly unsettled and customary ways of living fundamentally disrupted.

These hut tax tokens, undoubtedly a novelty to present-day urban museum visitors, were featured near the beginning of the exhibition “Ngezinyawo—Migrant Journeys,” curated by Fiona Rankin-Smith at the Wits Art Museum (WAM) in collaboration with Peter Delius and Laura Phillips (Fig. 2). “Ngezinyawo” (isiZulu for “on foot” or “with the feet,” i.e., walking) took stock of the historic costs and consequences of migration by featuring a remarkable medley of photographs, paintings, prints, sculpture, installations, film, and videos, as well as presenting an intriguing array of artifacts and ephemera.

This exhibition was conceptually adventurous and packed a social wallop—an important aesthetic and intellectual venture whose time was overdue. It held a special poignancy coming in the wake of the Marikana Massacre of 2012, when thirty-four striking platinum miners were killed after South African police opened fire on them. Moreover, the historical arc of the show was punctuated with a particular immediacy: its run coincided with a massive five-month-long strike, once again in the platinum industry. Whereas some of the objects on display may have been glazed with layers of patina, the 100+ year timespan of “Ngezinyawo” also struck some very contemporary chords.

Spread across four levels of the museum, the exhibition was organized thematically under titles such as “The Migrant’s Journey,” “Urban Migrant Life,” “Women and Migrancy,” and “Resilience and Creativity.” Surveying the works in the exhibition, even deeper leitmotifs emerged: the idea of setting off on an adventure was counterbalanced by the harsh quotidian reality of actual work and living conditions: being packed with multitudes of others into buses, hostels, and mine tunnels was contrasted with experiencing spirit-numbing isolation and estrangement. A fundamental sense of people continually on the move suffused the show, as did repetition, monotony, and being subjected to an all-encompassing, race-infused bureaucratic system. “Ngezinyawo” was captivating, in multiple senses of the word.

1  Hut tax tokens, tangible evidence of legislation that forced Africans to work within a capitalist, cash-based economy, various dates.  
*Photo: Mark Lewis*

2  Migrants Arriving on the Diamond Fields in Search of Work (1886), artist unrecorded.  
*Photo: Fiona Rankin-Smith*
Visitors to the exhibition were first greeted by two colossally enlarged photographs. In one, a pair of barefooted men carried their rudimentary belongings along a dusty rural road on their way to the gold fields of the Witwatersrand (Fig. 3). In the other, a solitary man wearing sharply creased slacks, a sports jacket, shoes, and hat, balancing a kist (storage trunk) on one shoulder, treads a similar pathway on his return to his “native homeland” after a year’s toil (Fig. 4).

The spacious main gallery boasted large sculptural installations as well as intimate glimpses into migrant life. The evocative photographs by Ernest Cole and Gideon Mendel revealing the dehumanization of migrants once they entered the maws of the mining industry put a fine point to Jane Alexander’s creepy Integration Programme Man with TV in which a rather stupefied chap gazes at an endless video loop (1995); George Tobias’s Untitled (Gold Bars) (1984)—stacks of gold-painted plaster of Paris slabs embossed with miners’ bodies that resemble foil-wrapped blocks of chocolate but are more like heaps of grave markers; and Michael Goldberg’s Hostel Monument for the Migrant Worker (1978)—tightly stacked cots, each with an alarm clock whose face has been blacked out—emitted a claustrophobic aura (Fig. 5).

Nearby, Claudette Shreuders’ painted wood sculpture Mother and Child (1994) epitomized the artist’s signature style of creating unnerving diminutive, wide-eyed figures, in this instance an African nanny offering up the white infant entrusted to her care as if it were a choice slab of meat at a local market (Fig. 6). This piece generated a remarkable response from a 12-year-old pupil who completed an assignment in the educational booklet which requested that students write a postcard to someone who had not viewed the exhibition, describing one artwork and their reaction to it. He wrote to the domestic worker in his own home, “I have just visited an art museum and it reminded me of you. It is amazing how you can live without your family for so long. I wouldn’t be able to not see my family for that long. How do you?”

3 Migrant Workers Bound for the Gold Fields, equipped and expectant; artist and date unrecorded.

4 Xhosa Migrant Worker Returning to the Transkei (c. 1950s), bedecked with newly purchased goods after laboring in the city. Photo: Anne Fischer
Visiting the museum thus triggered a stunning moment of self-awareness for this particular child, sparking a previously unacknowledged recognition of an emotionally fraught relationship that remains central to the experiences of many white South Africans. The relative invisibility of such women was stunningly captured in a haunting photo by Gisele Wulfsohn, Domestic Worker, Johannesburg (1986), wherein a uniformed woman is literally shrouded by a sheer curtain as she cleans the expansive window in a home; a crisply made bed, undoubtedly also her handiwork, is reflected onto an adjoining television screen.

One of the most important aspects of this exhibition was its insightful and pervasive integration of “art” with “craft,” the “traditional” with the “modern.” Works by big names such as William Kentridge and David Goldblatt were included, to be sure, but so were prosaic items made by craftspeople, most of whose names have gone unrecorded. For example, beautifully hand-wrought beaded bags designed to hold the despised dompas (literally, “dumb pass” or registration book) that black Africans were required to carry were displayed alongside Sue Williamson’s installation For Thirty Years Next to His Heart (1990), a photocopied page-by-page deconstruction of one man’s pass book, reproduced with its hand-signed monthly “endorsements” by employers and festooned with a variety of official stamps.

The South African artist Barbara Tyrrell, renowned for her midcentury in situ drawings of people in their traditional trappings, noted some curious cultural traceries of the changed circumstances that large-scale migrancy prompted. One woman she met wore the tuft of a rabbit’s tail around her neck, drawing an equivalence between the animal’s warren and the underground workplace of her miner son; another had incorporated a zigzag pattern into her beadwork, alluding to the road to town that her beloved had taken (Tyrrell 1996). “Ngezinyawo” likewise revealed such hybrid creations: a “wooden pillow” (carved headrest) supported by train wheels, the legs of another headrest breached by the long barrel of a gun—exemplars of the industrial economy in which their owners slaved.

Downstairs from the main hall, highlights included a massive ledger book from Rose Deep Mine, a separate page devoted to recording the hours worked and wages paid to each Chinese laborer early in the twentieth century (a group whose experiences have been sparsely documented), partnered with a comparably ponderous Register of Accidents to Native Employees. Upstairs featured a wide variety of traditional trappings, as well as some compelling artistic images. Trevor Makhoba’s painting Gumboot Dancers (c. 2001) deftly embodied the rhythmic uniformity of a troupe of leisure-time performers. The Ghost (2002), by his protégé Sibusiso Duma, portrayed a migrant’s return home, sharply outfitted in a hat, attaché case, and shoes, gripping a beaded knobkerrie...
(club); but the surreal sight of this skeleton has caused a woman to drop her broom and flee the scene in fear.

Ilan Godfrey’s C-Print Mahloma William Melato, Silicosis Victim, Oppenheimer Park, Tabong, Welkom, Free State (2012) depicted an emaciated man, one of the many casualties of long-standing mining practices, lying in a femme fatale-like posture against an absurdly capacious pink-tufted, French-inspired headboard (Fig. 7). Additional photos by Oupa Nkosi captured strikers at the Lonmin mine in Marikana shortly before shots rang out there in 2012, while a group of images taken by Mark Lewis in 2014 documented desperate zama zamas (illegal miners, the name meaning "take a chance") who enter dangerous abandoned mines in hopes of extracting any leftover gold dust, or mercury. With that series, the saga of "Ngezinyawo" came full circle.

As disquieting as much of this material was, humor and flights of fancy were incorporated, too. Tito Zungu’s envelopes decorated with naively rendered airplanes once lightheartedly carried messages between separated family members; studio portraits from Marabastad (Pretoria) were achingly sweet and earnestly aspirational; a bicycle embellished with the beaded facsimile of a radio was jovial, frivolous. As challenging and dreadful as being a migrant could be, there were nevertheless moments that might annul the pain in their lives, at least temporarily.

All too often migrants are shunned, exploited, or brutalized. Hugh Masekela’s 1993 heart-wrenching song "Stimela" (train)—an epic event when performed in its entirety—captures the pain experienced by all these people, drawn from their homes throughout Southern Africa by necessity: "And when they hear that Choo-Choo train / They always curse, curse the coal train / The coal train that brought them to Johannesburg." Like this musical composition, "Ngezinyawo" offered a multifaceted and compassionate perspective. By featuring provocative artworks along with arresting artifacts and organized along strong narrative lines, this exhibition endowed the men and women whose lives it reflected with a deep sense of dignity—heroism, even.

A Long Way Home: Migrant Worker Worlds, 1800–2014, edited by Delius, Phillips, and Rankin-Smith, a book that explores many of the issues and ideas raised in "Ngezinyawo," was published in conjunction with the exhibition (19 contributors, Wits University Press, 2014; 320 pp., 90+ illustrations, $45, paper). Special events included the premiere of The Underground, a sound and visual installation...
by Philip Miller featuring projections onto one of the walls of windows in WAM’s façade; “An Evening of Sartorial Slendour,” corresponding with International Refugee Day, which gave center stage to a group of swenkas (stylishly dressed workingmen) from a Johannesburg hostel competing in a raucous fashion smack down against the ensemble Les Sapeurs from Congo (Fig. 8); and WAM After Hours, a program for young people, during which gumboot dancers strutted through the galleries.

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References cited

Film Review

Market Imaginary
Directed and produced by Joanna Grabski, with Christian Faur, Jacques Daniel Ly, Fanta Diamanka, El Hadji Sarr, and Aissata Barry
Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013; $25.00 DVD
reviewed by Leslie W. Rabine

The film opens with an energetic scene of order and disorder. The Dakar Highway overpass to the Colobane Market cuts across the middle of the screen. A stanchion cuts the screen vertically. Crowds of people, cars, buses, trucks, and motorcycles move incessantly in four directions: right and left across the top half of the screen, back and forth on the highway below. It suggests the market as a place of both “chaos” and “convergence.”

Several of the interviewees in Market Imaginary have told me they like the film because it portrays Dakar’s infamous Marché Colobane “in a positive light.” Yet Joanna Grabski’s documentary does so much more. Narrated completely through interviews with merchants, residents, and artists, the film represents Colobane from the inside. It invites empathy with the people who live the life of the market. The stereotype of danger and squalor fades into just one leitmotif of the market mystique as Colobane steps forward in the guise of a dense nexus in a multiplicity of local, global, and historical networks. Further countering the stereotype of infamy, this nexus is full of people manifesting the famous Dakarois charm. They present themselves as standing up to the rigors of dire economic poverty with their equally famous débrouillardise (ability to improvise, to devise ingenious solutions) (Fig. 1). Merchants, artists and residents beguile us with their tales of courage, cunning, and creativity.

Stories and images cluster around themes of mobility and reinvention. People move incessantly through the teeming maze of the market, but they also move economically, dreaming of moving upward (Fig. 2). A close-up of blindingly white and impossibly bright athletic shoes introduces shoe merchant 2Pac Colobane. He represents the ideal trajectory that vendors desire but seldom attain: “Little by little, I started doing this and that. Then I started buying used clothes and reselling them on the street. I changed and started a table stand. Then I moved into a store.” Illustrating the possibilities for giving “new life” to second-hand objects, an image shows a worker’s hands over a tub of soapy water. With a stiff brush, the hands energetically scrub used shoes inside and out.

Mobility includes the circulation of objects. Artist Aboulaye Ndoye tells us: “Everything coming from inside or outside the country stops by Colobane first.” Used shirts and jeans, sunglasses, caps, bicycles, wheelchairs, cell phones, computers, all things imaginable arrive from every part of the globe to settle temporarily—as in the turn of a kaleidoscope—on the shoulders of street vendors or in market stall arrangements.

Vision is also mobile. Ndoye says: “Everybody is looking at you to see what this man really needs in this market and they follow by the eyes. And seeing you looking right, left, up and down, they will know right away what you want. They will know right away what type of price they can put in the object that you want to buy.” Prices are very mobile.

The camera’s eye performs mobility, demonstrating more than just a multiplicity of...