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Between the Conceptual and Artisanal in South African Art

Works by Senzeni Marasela and Christine Dixie

In 1990, the South African artist Willem Boshoff began one of his most complex initiatives—an ongoing project entitled *Blind Alphabet*.[1] Struck by the ways in which unequal relations of power are related to acquisition of language and literacy, particularly of English, Boshoff sought a means of subverting interactions so that those who are usually empowered and capable would be obliged to depend on those who are marginalized.[2] In an art gallery, he reasoned, those who are least able to access works are blind. But what would happen if he made a work in which meaning was conveyed through touch rather than sight? Producing carved shapes in wood that would evoke meanings about a word through touch, each was then placed in a mesh container that blocked it from view, on top of which—embossed in metal—was a description of the relevant word's meaning in Braille. "Do Not Touch," the usual language of the art gallery, would apply to sighted viewers who would see only endless blocks of mesh, arranged much like a graveyard. But for the blind visitor, immune to such signage, the works would be read differently—as discursively descriptive, and with objects that are sensual to handle. To make any sense of the work, the sighted visitor would need to ask the blind visitor for guidance.

Conceptual art is perhaps one of the most allusive designations of art, not only because there are a range of definitions of what might constitute a conceptual orientation but also because, having neither precise global nor temporal specificity, the designation has been applied to works that have emerged in numerous geographies and at various periods. But if, as a designation, it is understood as a mode of practice that responds ontologically to its own standing and identity, Boshoff's *Blind Alphabet* could be understood as a conceptual artwork sine qua non. But *Blind Alphabet* is *not* a work whose making is a "perfunctory affair," a term coined by Sol LeWitt in his famous "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art."[3] Indeed, the artisanal aspects of the work could not have been more important. Boshoff describes how his father was a carpenter, and how he inherited his equipment when his father died in 1985. The artist has also described how, immersed in a background in which he was made familiar with wood, he had made forms and objects in this medium during his fine art studies, fascinated by what it could do formally.[4] All the shapes and forms included in *Blind Alphabet* are exquisitely made,

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with an obvious love and respect for their artisanal qualities and with the memory of the precision and care with which his father treated wood. The artist, in fact, describes how the translation of ideas into material forms is important to what he does:

> I have to make thoughts real. In English you [use the word] "reify" to make a thing. . . . You have too much talk, [so] make a thing! They used to say it in Greek in another way: when you have too much thought "put it." And the word in Greek for "put it" or "show me" is "thesis." A thesis is something you "put." . . . I "put" things, I make things, I "reify," I make the abstract real. You have to "see" the stuff, not just talk it.[5]

In emphasizing his role as a maker, and to "see" ideas rather than just "talk" about them, Boshoff was also by implication recognizing that in making "the abstract real," important aspects of the work would emerge. The sheer exquisiteness of the objects would be felt and appreciated by their audience. A sense that sculpture might valuably be read through touch rather than sight could only happen if objects elicited a response of appreciation and awe about their formal beauty.

Boshoff is not alone or unusual in South Africa in finding the making of conceptually complex work far more than just a "perfunctory affair" but rather a process manifesting a love of exquisite craftsmanship. What I will in fact reveal in this chapter through an examination of selected works by two other South African artists, Senzeni Marasela and Christine Dixie, is how rich and complex conceptual ideas are articulated through an artisanal engagement with materials, and how, rather than preceding making, these often emerge through the process of the work's production. I will suggest that the conceptual and the artisanal aspects of these works are in fact intricately linked to and bound up with one another.

Prior to discussing examples, I offer some brief contextualization of conceptual art in South Africa. I then turn my attention to works that Marasela produced as part of her ongoing interest in the theme of "Theodorah in Johannesburg," focusing in particular on her *Letters to Theodorah* (2009) and *Sarah, Theodorah, and Senzeni* (2010) from a show at the Axis Gallery in New York in 2010. I then consider a work, *DisOrder: Trade-Off*, which Dixie produced in 2020 and which was included in *Blueprint: The DisOrder of Things*, an exhibition at the Wits Arts Museum in Johannesburg in 2022.

1. Conceptual Art in South Africa: A Brief Overview

In an essay first published in 1999, Okwui Enwezor indicates that, as far as he can tell, "there has never existed anything that can be definitively declared a conceptual 'movement' in Africa, at least one in which everybody agrees to its parameters."[6] Rather, "conceptualism in Africa is a practice associated with scattered, isolated, and solitary examples and never blossomed into a full-fledged artistic discourse." The practices Enwezor identifies as representative of

conceptual art in South Africa, specifically, are those of Boshoff, Malcolm Payne, and Kendell Geers. Describing Boshoff's focus on language as indicating the artist's resistance to the idea that the world is knowable, Enwezor speaks about the ways in which his dictionaries and encyclopedia do not reveal so much as conceal. He sees Payne's work as emerging in opposition to the modernist ideas of Clement Greenberg that were influential in South Africa in the 1970s, with conceptualism being used to produce art that resisted the power and authority of the apartheid state: "Appropriating tools of surveillance, Payne began to meld video, slide projections, photographs, and facsimiles of his body and face into a conceptually sophisticated practice, the goal of which was to deny the state's final right of adjudication in the construction of identity."[7] For Geers, however, the politics of art institutions themselves are a focus. Enwezor describes a work from 1995 called *Title Withheld (Boycott)* in which Geers emptied a room in the Johannesburg Art Gallery, suggesting that it "questioned the pervasive modernist hunger for market-oriented post-colonial objects."[8]

If the term "conceptual art" is understood to involve an orientation in which the material manifestations of work are ultimately less important than the ideas they convey, another example in South Africa is the activities of the Possession Arts Group, a collective based in Johannesburg in the early 1980s that undertook various interventions, usually of a performance-based nature. The group included the late Neil Goedhals, Joachim Schönfeld, the late Ivor Powell, and John Nankin.[9] Relatedly, there was also the Flat Gallery—a cooperative of artists who resided in a flat in Mansfield Road in Durban between October 1993 and January 1995. The founders in this instance were Ledelle Moe, Neil Jonker Thomas Barry, and Siemon Allen, and they were joined at various moments by Jay Horburgh, Sam Nthshangase, Adrian Hermanides, Samkelo Matoti, and others. As Allen explains, its "primary program was an active production of documented and undocumented 'actions,' interventions, works created out of the collection and display of 'found objects,' participatory events and audio pieces."[10]

There have been a number of group initiatives in more recent years that continue in this tradition, albeit with a conceptualism influenced by relational aesthetics and new-institutional theory. The Center for Historical Reenactments, for example, was initially conceptualized by Gabi Ncobo and Sobrab Mohebbi in April 2010 and would ultimately include Ncobo, Kemang Wa-Lehulere, and Donna Kukama as its key members. Focused on events, seminars, exhibitions, residencies, and interventions, this Johannesburg-based initiative sought to look critically at history and, as they indicate, how art might "suggest different historical readings and help in the formation of new subjectivities."[11] Relatedly, The Parking Gallery, founded by Simon Gush in 2006 initially in a storeroom in the apartment block in Pritchard Street where he lived but subsequently in a space made available by VANSA[12] in New Doornfontein, was conceived less as a gallery in the conventional sense than as an artist-run experimental platform that resisted producing saleable art objects and instead generated dialogue about art. Robyn Cook explains that the Parking Gallery focused on

> so-called "secondary" institutional activities, such as panel discussions, artists' talks, round-table events and so on. As such, even if artworks are exhibited . . . the gallery's emphasis remains on the production of discourse around the work, positioning the audience as an active participant rather than a passive viewer.[13]

But if activities by groups such as these are largely associated with the "dematerialization" of the object that Lucy R. Lippard saw as characteristic of conceptual art, there are also instances of what has been termed "conceptual art" where the formal impact of the artwork is crucial to its meaning.[14] Boshoff and Berni Searle were the two South Africans among the seven African artists whom Salah Hassan and Olu Oguibe selected for an exhibition of African conceptual art in *Authentic/Ex-Centric*, inaugurated at the 49th Venice Biennale in 2001. The importance of the object and artisanship in Boshoff's work has already been noted. But in Searle's work, likewise, the artwork is never just the aftereffect of an act or event, or simply the means to prompt an idea, but instead has its own integrity as well as visual or aesthetic impact. Engaging with the label "colored" and what it may mean or imply in South Africa, Searle has explored its slippages and anomalies through videos and photographs focused on her own body—works that, in addition to conveying or exploring ideas, have powerful visual forms. Her *Colour-Me* (1998–2000) series, where she photographed her body overlaid with spices, is particularly well known. But it is also true, for example, of her *Profile* (2002). I included this work in a traveling exhibition of self-representations by women artists in South Africa, which I curated in 2004–05 and discussed in an accompanying publication.[15] Comprised of eight photographs of the artist's own profile that are suspended in Perspex, they are constituted into structures designed to be hung in such a way that they can be viewed in the round. Searle appears in the images with traces on her cheeks of objects she had pressed into them. The images, which seem fragile and shift gently through any slight breeze in the room where they are hung, speak poetically—through their actual physical form—about an identity that is itself always fluctuating.

Even an artist such as Dineo Seshee Bopape, whose installations often include found objects, including soil, and are clearly concept-driven, have an evocative materiality. This is clear in, for example, an installation including three videos that she showed in 2022 at the Ocean Space, Venice, called *Ocean! What If No Change Is Your Desperate Mission?* The videos emerged from visits to the Solomon Islands and the coastlines of Ghana, Jamaica and elsewhere. Responding to an interest in the oceans, Bopape—who has always worked with memory—became focused on not simply the sensory and associative aspects of water but also histories of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Maximiliano Duron describes the installation as follows:

> Across the three screens are various shots of moving water—deep blue, turquoise, crystalline gleaming in the sun, reddish, murky brown. They are intercut quickly, and the soundtrack begins to intensify. Soon a hand, clad in a dozen or so bracelets, dips into the water. Then

> two hands drum on the water, followed by various objects floating by: a cut pineapple, half a coconut shell out of which smoke rises, a sliced lemon, green leaves, a potato, pink flowers, sections of a tangerine, a bunch of bananas. At various points, the camera dips below the water's surface and we see fish swim by the objects as they begin their descent to the ocean floor. The sound of drumming becomes all-encompassing at times.[16]

As this description makes evident, Bopape may work within the realms of the conceptual, but her work is simultaneously evocative and elicits emotive responses through her deployment of image and sound. And her making process, far from a "perfunctory affair," is one in which she makes choices and decisions that enable the development of the work's meaning.

2. Senzeni Marasela's *Theodorah in Johannesburg*

An engagement in which works marry the conceptual with the material or artisanal is also true of many other South African works made in the new millennium. Among these are works by Johannesburg-based artist, Senzeni Marasela. Born in 1977 in Boksburg, about twenty-seven kilometers east of Johannesburg, Marasela was educated at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and has had a number of exhibitions and residencies locally and abroad since completing her studies in 1998.

Between October 1, 2013 and September 30, 2019, Marasela undertook an ongoing performance. Dressing daily in a red *isishweshwe* dress of the type worn by conservative married women from rural areas, she would wear this kind of garment on all occasions and to all events to which she had been invited. Over the performance's six years, Marasela obtained thirty-six dresses of this type, all more or less the same, which she subsequently exhibited in a solo exhibition at the Zeitz MOCAA entitled *Waiting for Gebane*, which took place between December 18, 2020, and August 29, 2021.

In taking on this costume, Marasela was constructing herself as a character, Theodorah, whom she named after, and is a type of surrogate for, her mother, Theodorah Marasela. Her mother had relocated from the village of Matatiele in the Eastern Cape to Johannesburg in 1966, at the height of apartheid, to join her husband. In dressing herself in the kind of garments that her mother often continued to don, Marasela experiences the city as her mother must have done when she first arrived—that is, as an alienating and hostile space, one where black women from rural areas would have been regarded with suspicion. But the autobiographical reference is richly poignant in a further sense. Theodorah Marasela suffers from a form of bipolar schizophrenia. Emotionally fragile in a way that is incapacitating, she is inclined to be estranged from the world around her and unable to fully understand people's experiences and their implications. In the context of her own family, she struggled to fulfil a maternal role. Emotionally removed from her children and inclined to behave in unpredictable ways, she was unable to involve herself in the lives of Senzeni and her siblings or to be present

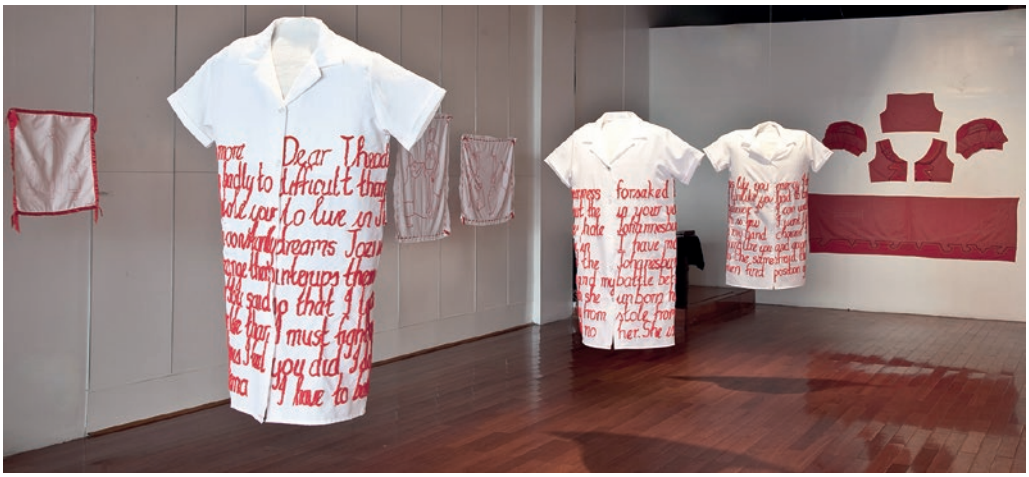
to offer emotional or practical support to them at critical moments. As the artist observed in email correspondence with me in 2003:

> I recall there was a deep shame and angst when it came to speaking about my mother. In a sense her illness was never properly explained to us as her children. We have had to struggle over the years to piece together what made her an absence in our childhood memories.[17]

The artist's engagement with her mother's experiences through this sustained performance also formed part of a narrative that she began developing after reading Njabulo Ndebele's novel, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, first published in 2003.[18] Ndebele's novel speaks of four fictional women during apartheid who, in the same way that Winnie Mandela awaited the release of her husband Nelson Mandela, find themselves in the position of Penelope in Homer's *Odyssey.* Penelope waits faithfully for more than two decades for Odysseus to return from his travels and resists all the suitors who attempt to woo her in his absence or persuade her that he will never return. One of the narratives speaks of a character called Mannette Mofolo, who is left behind in Lesotho while her husband takes up employment on the mines. After she fails to hear from him for two years, she heads off to Johannesburg, where she attempts unsuccessfully to locate him. In *Theodorah in Johannesburg*, the character of Theodorah is conceptualized as perpetually seeking a missing husband in Johannesburg—in this instance a character called "Gebane." Marasela named this elusive male after the husband of her mother's cousin, who had disappeared in Johannesburg, leaving his wife and four children without any means of support. As with the fictional character, Mannette Mofolo, this abandoned wife made an unsuccessful attempt to locate her missing husband in Johannesburg.

In donning an *isishweshwe* dress and presenting herself on all occasions in such a garment, Marasela refers to her mother's experiences of apartheid Johannesburg as well as her mother's personal sense of alienation due to her illness, while also invoking the idea of looking for a man who has disappeared and lost ties with his wife and family. But while richly resonant in its evocation of women's experiences during apartheid, it is perhaps equally resonant in its commentaries about constructs of womanhood within the present. Marasela observes that her dressing in this way accords her a certain conservative respect: "I'm essentially presenting a much older, respectable type. So cat-calling doesn't happen. Men treat you in a particular way, and sometimes people try to help you: when you're in a bus they give up a seat for you."[19] Yet she tends also to be treated as someone alien to the middle-class world of business or the arts. She describes, for example, how security personnel refused to allow her in the building when she had an appointment with the CEO of a bank or how she was followed suspiciously if she entered an upmarket shop.[20]

Marasela's six-year performance could be understood as an example of conceptual art in its "dematerialization" of the object, to borrow the words of Lippard, and its obvious downplaying of the artist's hand. And yet, alongside the performance, and enriching the "Theodorah in Johannesburg" discourse, Marasela has made numerous works where there

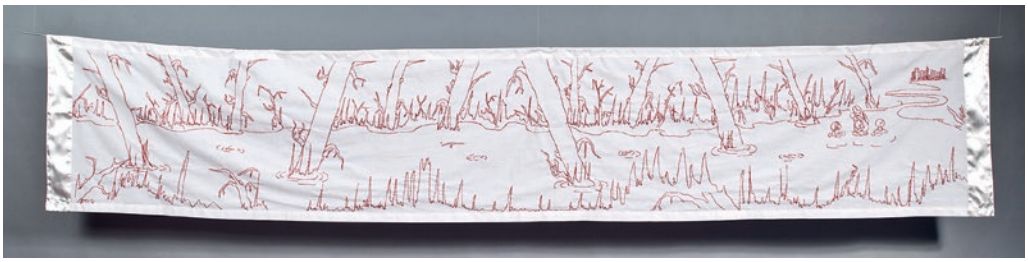


1 Senzeni Marasela, *Letters to Theodorah*, 2009. Series: *Theodorah Comes to Johannesburg*. Polyester uniforms and embroidery, life size

is an emphasis on the artisanal and where meaning and association are bound up with their materiality and form. Some examples of these were included in the exhibition *Beyond Booty: Covering Sarah Baartman and Other Tales* at the Axis Gallery in New York in September 2010.[21]

Letters to Theodorah (fig. 1), a work comprised of three white domestic uniforms overlaid with text applied through a flocking technique, is a case in point. Both uniforms and flocking are key to the meaning of the work. While not a domestic worker (and in fact not equipped to hold down formal employment, given her illness), Marasela's mother was nonetheless inclined to wear domestic overalls from time to time. Such uniforms are also profoundly resonant in light of an apartheid history where domestic employment—and the donning of this characteristic uniform—was often the only way in which black women could be given access to so-called "white" areas of South African cities. But while a point of access, it also marked the wearer as subordinate as well as an outsider to the family she served. But in the case of Theodorah Marasela, a uniform of this type assumes additional pathos: it invokes a sense of her personal estrangement within her own family and her inability to assume a meaningful maternal role.

Marasela employed a former inmate from a Zimbabwean prison to produce this lettering in flocking—a technique he had used while incarcerated to earn money for ordinary amenities such as soap. Associated with skills deployed for survival, it was consequently also pertinent to the negotiation of a hostile environment in a broader sense. Articulated in large cursive script that loops around the garment, the letter to her mother, the implied wearer, consists of thoughts about the difficulties of negotiating Johannesburg. While suggesting challenges that Theodorah may have experienced, these simultaneously speak of the artist's own perceptions of the city as an alien space. Crucially and poignantly, they are observations and thoughts that the artist would be unable to express to her mother in day-to-day life. On



2 Senzeni Marasela, *Theodorah, Senzeni, and Sarah IV*, 2010. Cotton cloth, cotton thread, satin ribbon, 213 × 41 cm

another level, they speak of an era when the handwritten letter would have been a means of communicating with somebody in a different geography and are suggestive of the "threads" of contact maintained (or lost) during relocations.

While the flocking in *Letters to Theodorah* was outsourced, most other works by the artist include artisanal techniques that she herself manages. An example of this is *Sarah, Theodorah, and Senzeni*, a series of four embroidered panels on cotton that represent an imaginative meeting between Sarah Baartman, Theodorah Marasela, and the artist herself, the three of whom then undertake a journey together to Johannesburg. A metaphorical equivalent of a journey to Durban undertaken by the descendants of Penelope in Ndebele's novel, where Penelope assumes the form of a hitchhiker whom the group picks up on the way, the journey here is also transformational. There is a suggestion that the three figures, who negotiate a swamp, aim to emerge cleansed and able to assume new identities at the end of their journey. Johannesburg remains a long way off in the final cloth, and whether or not the trio ultimately complete the trip is left unanswered.

As is evident in the last of the four cloths reproduced here (fig. 2), they are exquisitely embroidered and edged in silk, reminding one of a runner on a sideboard or table and thus of the kind of domestic craft skills of women makers. Marasela's own labor and precision in making the work is in evidence in its meticulous satin stitching. But the artist's deployment of embroidery also has autobiographical resonance. When a child, the artist had watched her mother embroidering and, according to the Axis Gallery, "always using red thread, as if to suture the secret wounds that psychologically inhibited her from mothering."[22] The redness of the cotton has still further connotations. She notes how her paternal grandmother spoke of a period in which isiXhosa-speaking men were recruited to fight in World War II as "the time of the red dust." This time was associated with social upheaval: her grandmother apparently remembered men riding horses into local villages, setting up a flurry of red dust.[23]

Important too is the very fabric in which the embroidery was made. The unbleached calico fabric was purchased from a dealer who commented to Marasela that it was the kind of cloth that followers of Gandhi would wear. For him, it was associated with the practice of passive resistance as a way of bringing about social change as well as indicating the humility

of wearers.[24] This association of it with change as well as humbleness encourages one to associate the depicted figures' negotiation of a swamp as a kind of transformative baptism.

In Marasela's work, clearly, the choice of materials as well as the process of making is important to meaning. Even in a rare instance when the work is outsourced, as in *Letters to Theodorah*, importance was placed not only on the capacities of the maker she had employed, but also on the biographical factors associated with the technique he used and how they might enrich the idea of seeking survival in a hostile and challenging environment. In her work, as these examples illustrate, concept and form or materials are interwoven and inextricably linked.

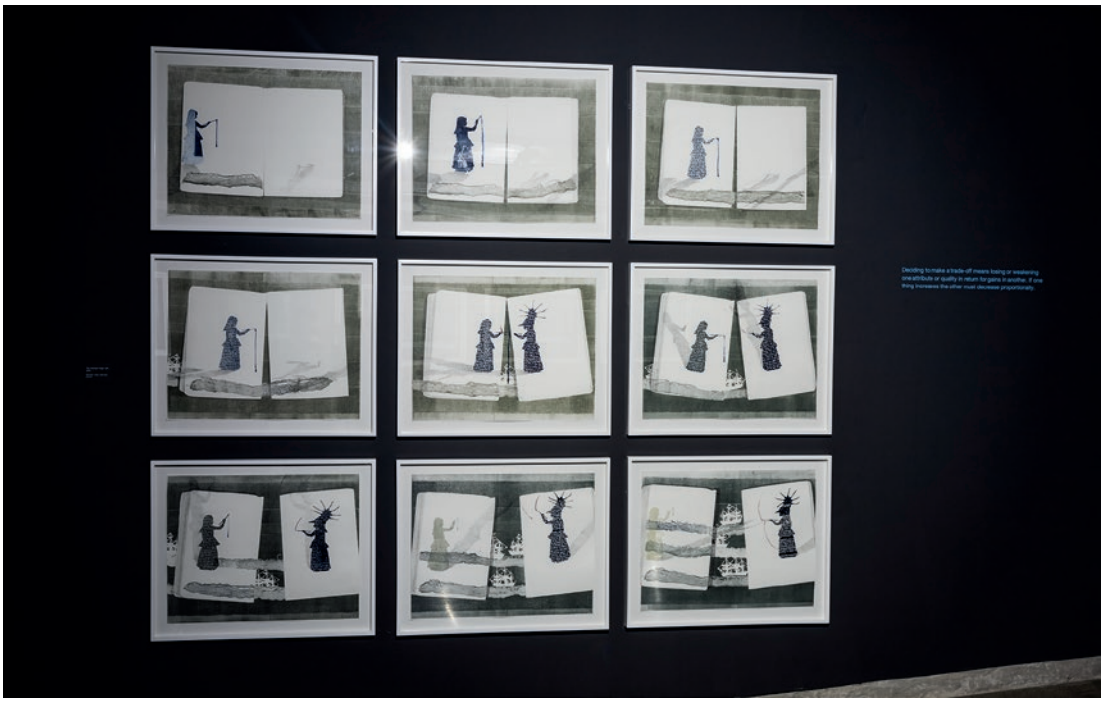
3. Christine Dixie's *The DisOrder: Trade-Off*

Another instance of an interplay between the conceptual and the artisanal can be identified in the work of Christine Dixie. Born in Cape Town in 1966, Dixie obtained her bachelor's in fine arts at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and graduated with a master's in fine arts from the University of Cape Town in 1993. For two decades, she has been based in Makhanda, South Africa, and has worked as a staff member at Rhodes University. Best known as a printmaker, she often works in mixed media. As with Marasela's engagement with Ndebele's novel, Dixie's work is often prompted by textual sources.

In her solo exhibition in the Wits Art Museum in 2022, called *Blueprint for the DisOrder of Things*, Dixie produced a series of works that engaged with what she described in an interview as the inadequacy of language to describe a world changed by COVID-19:

> During the hard lockdown, especially in the beginning, I was very distracted. And I found it very hard to read. I'd read something and then realize I hadn't taken it in. I'd then start to read it again. Language itself seemed to be at odds with what was happening around me. Part of the impulse behind this exhibition was to work out how to disrupt language itself by making it disappear [or become] . . . difficult to read—which is what I was struggling with: I was finding it difficult to read, difficult to make sense of things. Language is about making sense of things but everything didn't seem to make sense anymore. That was the beginning point.[25]

Blueprint for the DisOrder of Things included nine sequential prints called *The DisOrder: Trade-Off* (fig. 3). The earliest work on the exhibition, *DisOrder: Trade-Off*, was made between March 27 and April 30, 2020—that is, during the most stringent of the lockdown periods in South Africa.[26] Its idea of a "trade-off" originated in discourse in news media about a "trade-off" between, on the one hand, the damage to the economy that would result from a lockdown that prevented people from working and, on the other, dangers posed to the population by the spread of infection if people were left to interact as usual.



3 Christine Dixie, *DisOrder: Trade-Off*, 2020. Monotype with embossing and watercolor, nine prints each 54 × 69.5 cm

Dixie indicates that she was listening to an audiobook of Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* while making this work.[27] Defoe's book, first published in 1722, focuses on events in 1665, when a bubonic plague epidemic struck London and killed about 15 percent of its population. Dixie was struck by commonalities between the Great Plague of 1665 and what was happening in the world during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. She indicates that, in both cases, people stayed indoors, viewed other people as a threat, and were overwhelmed by feelings of doom. And, crucially, Defoe also spoke of ways in which fending off infection affected the economy. As she observes, Defoe wrote of Dutch merchant ships that had arrived in London but were not allowed to unload goods; consequently, economic activity suffered, and people began to starve.[28]

But while influenced by Defoe's book, the origins for the iconography of the work and the exhibition as a whole were primarily in another larger project by Dixie: *To Be King*. An installation and video with stop-frame animation that the artist first exhibited in 2014, *To Be King* is a reworking of Velazquez's landmark painting, *Las Meninas*, in light of Michel Foucault's famous study of the work in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, first published in French in 1966 and in English translation in 1970.[29] As explained in the catalogue for the exhibition when it was first shown, Foucault "suggests (amongst other

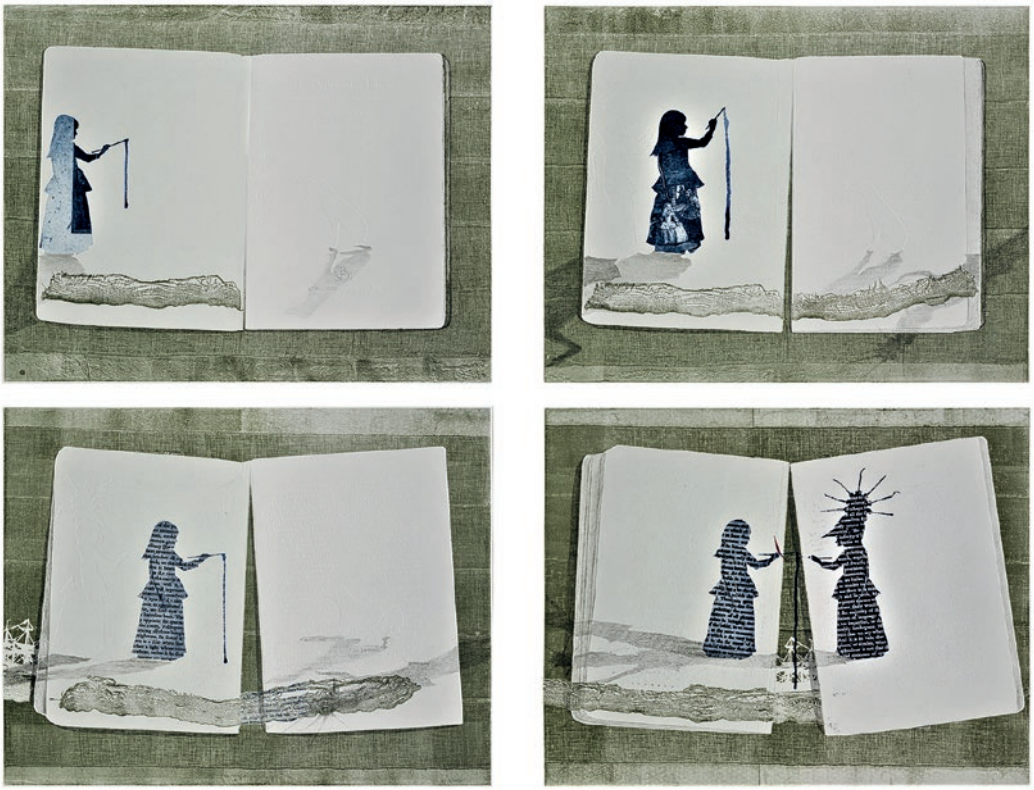
things) that it is through language, the taxonomy of the day, that things are ordered. This order, particular yet tenuous, is dependent on who is in control of the gaze, who is 'king.'"[30] Reworking the painting's language, and destabilizing the gaze, Dixie creates a different order of power in the work. The only sculpted figure in the work is one she named "The Black Infanta," and she stands in front of the video projection—that is, in the implied position of Philip VI in *Las Meninas*.

In his essay on *Las Meninas*, Foucault writes:

> But the relation of language to painting is an infinite relation. It is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other's terms; it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say. And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, metaphors, or similes, what we are saying; the space where they achieve their splendor is not that deployed by our eyes but that defined by the sequential elements of syntax.[31]

This uneasy relation between language and image is invoked in *DisOrder: Trade-Off* through the overlaying of text onto figures as well as the blind-embossing of text—extracted from Foucault's essay—onto the representational field when the work is viewed close-up. Allusive and impossible to grasp or interpret, it speaks of its uneasy and inadequate correspondence to the representational field. Indeed, this uncomfortable relationship between text and image becomes one form of "trade-off" invoked by the work.

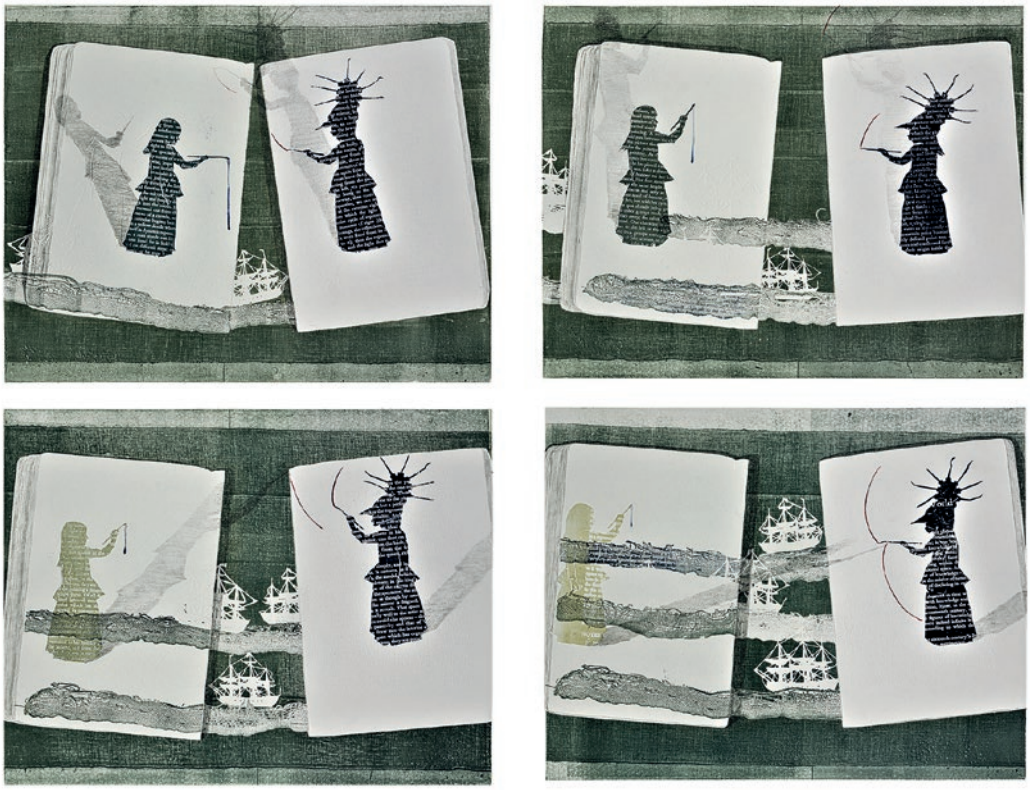
But the "trade-off" suggested by the title is more immediately conveyed through a confrontation between two figures—a princess wielding a paintbrush and a plague doctor wielding a knife—who are its key protagonists. Modeled by the artist's daughter, Rosalie, when she first appeared in *To Be King*, the princess or infanta is derived from the figure in *Las Meninas*. At the same time, she encapsulates the persona of the artist, another key figure in *Las Meninas* and one whom the artist herself enacted in *To Be King*. Associated with creativity, the princess is a positive life force in *DisOrder: Trade-Off.* The figure of the plague doctor became of interest to Dixie shortly after completing *To Be King* and after reading Camus's *The Plague*[32]—but before the onset of COVID-19. The artist had considered making sculptures from strange hybrid figures or personae; however, while she developed her iconography in two-dimensional work, no sculpture of the figure was ultimately produced. The clothes for the figure were based on those of the lady in waiting, Doña María Agustina Sarmiento de Sotomayor, who kneels on the left of the princess in *Las Meninas* and offers her a drink from a red goblet. Finding commonality between this figure and the angel Gabriel in images of the Annunciation, the artist began, however, to think of her as a sinister angel of death. The outline of the figure's head and headdress was influenced by a white spirit maiden mask that Dixie had obtained from the market at the National Arts Festival. Having ascertained that the wearer of the mask is conceived as a conduit between the spirit world and the physical world, and between death and life, she deemed the object relevant to the plague doctor. But



4 Prints 1, 2, 4, and 5 of Christine Dixie's *DisOrder: Trade-Off*, 2020. Monotype with embossing and watercolor, each 54 × 69.5 cm

the design of the figure's profile—with its beak-like form—was also influenced by historical designs of a plague doctor's mask. Having encountered masks of this type during a visit to Venice, she also looked at a widely reproduced print of a plague doctor from 1656—the same year that *Las Meninas* was painted.[33] Finally, in devising the figure, she added medical instruments to its headdress and around the figure's waist.[34]

Important not only to this work (where the princess is dressed in blue and drips blue paint off her brush) but also to the exhibition more generally is the use of indigo. Punning on the idea of a "blueprint," it simultaneously invokes a long history of trade in this dye. Ghulam A. Nadri observes that "Indian indigo reached the markets of Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries via the Levant" but that, after "the Portuguese sailed round the Cape of Good Hope and discovered an allwater route to India in 1498, indigo began to reach Europe through the direct oceanic route as well."[35] If during the sixteenth century, the coast of South Africa saw ships carrying indigo from Asia for European markets, this line of trade was subsequently coupled with the development of another. From the seventeenth century (and the time when *Las Meninas* was painted), indigo began also to be cultivated in Spain's colonies in South



5 Prints 6, 7, 8, and 9 of Christine Dixie's *DisOrder: Trade-Off*, 2020. Monotype with embossing and watercolor, each 54 × 69.5 cm

America. The color, then, is intricately bound up with not only globalization and the exchange of commodities but also with histories of colonization and, by implication, slave labor.

Dixie has increasingly challenged the boundaries of printmaking as a category of production, often combining it with other media. *DisOrder: Trade-Off* is no exception. For each component of the work, one or more figures was printed via monoprint and then cut out and collaged onto a blind-embossed print. Drips of paint were represented via watercolor paint, and shadows were rendered via pencil.

The work is constituted as an open book, and its nine prints create a sequential narrative. In the first four prints, the princess dominates. In the first print, she appears on the top left (see fig. 4). Blind-embossed on the page opposite to the princess, and therefore only faintly visible, is the outline of a dog that also casts a shadow. A counterpart to the dog in *Las Meninas*, Dixie associates the animal with the witnessing of events[36] and situates it in this role elsewhere in the exhibition. The title page of Foucault's *The Order of Things* is also embossed on the right. On the left of the work, and beneath the princess, a bandage extends horizontally across the left of the format—a motif associated with wounding, but which simultaneously also reads as

a sealine. In the second panel of the sequence (see fig. 4, top right), in the middle of the top row, the princess has imprinted on her dress a detail of *Las Meninas* that shows herself, the curtseying maid, and the visitor in the doorway. On the right, the dog remains in place, stoically waiting for events to transpire, his body and the surrounding field being blind-embossed with text. Also rendered in blind-embossing, and therefore hardly visible, is the outline of the plague doctor who appears on the left of the princess. An ominous presence, her association with impending disruption is compounded through the rendition of the bandage across both pages, which have now been cleaved apart slightly. In the third print, the princess's dress has shifted from image to a textual field. The dog remains as is, as does the plague doctor, but the cleavage between the two pages has increased. In the fourth print (see fig. 4, bottom left), the plague doctor remains on the far left, but the two pages have cleaved still further apart. Also entering the field is a motif of a ship, on the far left, which may have been inspired by Defoe's account of ships unable to unload goods, but which also speaks more generally of processes of colonization and the challenges and upheavals left in their wake. The blind-embossed outline of the dog on the right, meanwhile, now shows the animal recumbent.

In the remaining prints, the plague doctor assumes increasing predominance. In the fifth print (see fig. 4, bottom right), she is no longer a blind-embossed figure on the left page but is instead printed in black on the right. Her scythe-like knife has made an actual cut—tinted red, like blood—in the page on which she is placed. The two pages are cleaved still further apart, constituting a dangerous chasm, and a ship now appears on the bandage/waves between them. The dog has disappeared, and blind-embossed text from Foucault's essay on *Las Meninas* is included on both pages and is also imprinted on the bodies of both protagonists. In the sixth print (see fig. 5, top left), the two pages have drifted apart entirely, and a second bandage appears, overlapping the princess's skirt. In the seventh print (see fig. 5, top right), the princess is printed with less saturation than the plague doctor. There is still less saturation in the rendition of the princess in the eighth print (see fig. 5, bottom left), which now includes three ships in the chasm between the pages and where the second bandage now completely overlays the bottom of the princess's skirt. The plague doctor has cut a second red slash into the page on which she is placed, while the drip of the princess's brush has reduced in scale. In the ninth and final print (see fig. 5, bottom right), the princess has faded to a pale ochre, and three bandages overlay the page on which she is represented. The pronounced cuts made by the plague doctor are in the shape of two large scythes, invoking the idea of her increased power. A shadow that extends from the tip of her knife toward the hem of the princess's skirt suggests a showering of infection. It reiterates a motif appearing elsewhere in the exhibition—a hand from the heavens expelling noxious droplets of virus.

Here, as in Marasela's work, a rich set of concepts and ideas are manifest through a creative use of materials. Dixie's engagement with language and its complicated and imperfect relation to image is in keeping with a characteristic of much conceptual art. But her approach is not one in which the concept precedes the act of making, with the latter being simply a rote process of giving shape to an idea. Rather, it emerges through the process of production.

4. Conclusion

Conceptual art has a long history in South Africa, stretching back to the apartheid years. While there have been examples of it that tallied with a notion of "dematerializing" the object or that saw making as a "perfunctory affair," there is—much more notably—a rich and compelling set of examples of South African art where the conceptual is intricately bound up with an artisanal focus on making.

Works by Willem Boshoff and Berni Searle have been included in studies of "conceptual art" in South Africa, whereas those of Senzeni Marasela and Christine Dixie are not normally regarded in this light. Still, the works of Marasela and Dixie—like those of Boshoff and Searle—each begin with a concept or idea while accruing additional potential meanings through its translation into material form. Marasela and Dixie produce works that celebrate craft or the act of making rather than obliterate signs of the artist's hand. Both, it may be concluded, work between the conceptual and the artisanal, never favoring one over the other.

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Notes

1 Photographs of *Blind Alphabet* can be found on the artist's personal website. See https://www.willemboshoff.com/product-page/blind-alphabet.

2 See "A Brief History of Willem Boshoff's *Blind Alphabet*," *Moving Cube*, UJ Arts Centre, 2021, https://movingcube.uj.ac.za/watch/blind-alphabet-documentary-series/brief-history-willem-boshoffs-blind-alphabet/ (accessed in September 2022 but since taken down).

3 Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (1967): 79.

4 "A Brief History."

5 Ibid.

6 Okwui Enwezor, "Where, What, Who, When: A Few Notes on 'African' Conceptualism," in *Authentic/Ex-Centric: Conceptualism in African Art*, ed. Salam N. Hassan and Olu Oguibe (New York: Forum for African Arts Inc, 2001), p. 74.

7 Ibid., p. 81.

8 Ibid., p. 82.
9 See James Alexander Sey, "The Trauma of Conceptualism for South African Art," *Critical Arts* 24, no. 3 (2010): 450.
10 Siemon Allen, "The Flat Gallery: Conceptual Practices in Durban, South Africa," in *Authentic/Ex-Centric*, p. 90.
11 Center for Historical Reenactments, 2013, http://historicalreenactments.org/index3.html.
12 It stands for Visual Arts Network of South Africa, an organisation promoting access and equity in the Visual Arts.
13 Robyn Cook, "The Parking Gallery: Experimental Practice and the Artist-Run Initiative in South Africa," *De Arte* 51, no. 1 (2015): 64.
14 Lucy R. Lippard, ed., *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973).
15 Brenda Schmahmann, *Through the Looking Glass: Representations of Self by South African Women Artists* (Johannesburg: David Krut Publishing, 2004), pp. 70–74. In addition to being reproduced in this book, a photograph of the work that was taken when it was exhibited at the Smithsonian Museum of African Art in Washington DC appears online at https://www.flickr.com/photos/nicmcphee/58684525/. See also the site of the Michael Stevenson Art Gallery: https://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitions/searle/works.htm.
16 Maximiliano Duron, "In Venice, Artist Dineo Seshee Bopape Asks Us to Consider Our Relation to the World's Waterways," *ArtNews*, April 22, 2022, https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/dineo-seshee-bopape-ocean-space-venice-1234626320/.
17 Quoted in Schmahmann, *Through the Looking Glass*, p. 45.
18 Njabulo Ndebele, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2013 [2003]).
19 Interview with the author, April 17, 2018, in Johannesburg.
20 Ibid.
21 For a comprehensive discussion of the exhibition, see Brenda Schmahmann, "Senzeni Marasela's Reworking of Women's Histories in *Beyond Booty: Covering Sarah Baartman and Other Tales*," *Textile: Cloth and Culture* 19, no. 1 (2021): 49–75.
22 *Beyond Booty: Covering Sarah Baartman and Other Tales*, Axis Gallery, undated, https://axis.gallery/exhibitions/beyond-booty/.
23 Interview with the author, April 17, 2018, in Johannesburg.
24 Ibid.
25 Interview by the author on April 12, 2022.
26 Following the adoption of what were defined as five "alert levels" to designate the severity of viral circulation and the readiness of the health system to cope with them, this initial lockdown was designated "Alert Level 5," which signified high spread of the disease and low health-system readiness to deal with it. It was a period in which all those not involved in the delivery of essential services were obliged to stay at home; leaving one's home was only permitted for the purpose of such essential tasks as buying food, obtaining medicine, or collecting a social grant. Along with the police, the army was deployed to ensure compliance. For information on the levels introduced, see "About Alert System," South African Government, August 7, 2020, https://www.gov.za/covid-19/about/about-alert-system.
27 Daniel Defoe, *Journal of the Plague Year*, read by Andrew Cullum, 2018, audiobooks.com, 9:50:00, https://www.audiobooks.com/audiobook/349108/?refId=38712&gclid=CjwKCAjws8yUBhA1EiwAi_tpES4-JiYn51ld8mood1T42vCKb9_s9s4GpMzQPhODpfHbgQZ0xHGIHhoCwRwQAvD_BwE.

28 Christine Dixie and Heléne van Aswegen, online discussion of their collaboration on an artist's book titled *Blueprint for the Disorder of Things*, hosted by the SARChI Chair in South African Art and Visual Culture, University of Johannesburg, October 6, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y56HneQcr7k

29 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2002).

30 Christine Dixie, *To Be King: Christine Dixie* (London and Cape Town: Sulger-Buel Lovell, 2015), n. p., https://christinedixie.com/publications/to-be-king-installation-catalog-2015.

31 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. 10.

32 Published in French as *La Peste* in 1947. An English translation was first published in 1948.

33 Interestingly, a figure with a plague doctor's mask appears on the front cover of an illustrated reprint of Defoe's book, called *Illustrated Journal of the Plague Year*, published by Miravista Interactive and published in April 2020.

34 The insights in this paragraph were from Dixie and van Aswegen, online discussion.

35 Ghulam A. Nadri, "The Indigo Trade of the English East India Company in the Seventeenth Century: Challenges and Opportunities," in *Goods from the East, 1600–1800*, ed. Maxine Berg (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 62.

36 Interview by the author on April 12, 2022.

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