Shifting Contexts: Material, Process and Contemporary Art in Times of Change

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In this essay, I discuss a selection of artworks produced by South African artists in the period 1999–2000: New Identity (1999) by Lungi Magas (Figure 1), Portrait Series (2001) by Zimba Dumesa (Figure 2), Imwakhle (2000) by Nandipha Mntambo (Figure 3) and Lwazi (2008) by Nicholas Hoerl (pp. 50–51 detail of Figure 4). This period is important for three reasons. Firstly, it encompasses the early years of the new democracy in South Africa. Secondly, it points to a moment of transformation during which young artists, particularly black artists, were beginning to gain critical acclaim in the public domain, both locally and internationally. Thirdly, it signals a turning point for South African artistic trends, as new voices entering the art scene claimed their space.

The work of this period has arisen out of the political and social changes that have taken place in South Africa since the new democratic dispensation in 1994. This is important to understand in relation to the progression and evolution of artistic concerns in this period and the ways in which the selected works speak directly to the manifestations of a complicated history into current contexts.

Through this selection, this essay examines artistic strategies employed in the use of materials – such as guatemalan, cowhide, beads and wood, widely regarded as African traditional material in contemporary art. It looks at the way the selected artists use these materials and what importance, why they are drawn to such materials. Arguably, such materials might equally be considered universal and I make this point in order to highlight how, in certain spaces, this material is present and linked to perceptions about African ritualistic traditions based on Western perspectives – which have historiized the arts of Africa in a particular way, with particular results. By working with such materials, these artists

1. The names of the individual works in Zimba Dumesa's Portrait Series are 'Nzimba Nkwezi' (what are you really called?) and 'Khwezela Mkhize' (who do you call yourself?).
2. I have used the word 'traditional' with the understanding that such materials form part of an ongoing traditional practice, which is not absolute and static. The use of materials in contemporary art references the global reach of such perspectives that have worked within ideas that have forced traditional practices into being collected art.