

THE MATERIAL EARTH



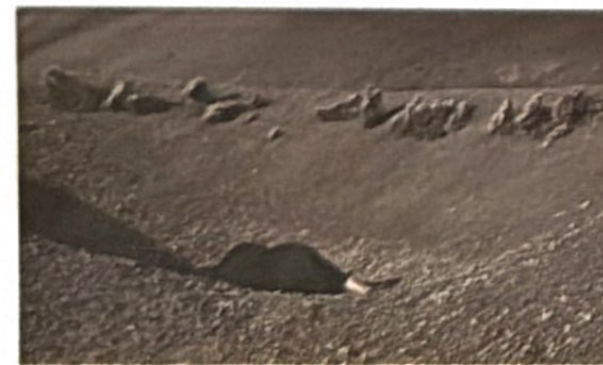
*There has always been land. The land existed before we met it...
Then man worked on it. When you point to people with land,
they did not get it themselves but from the strength of their ancestors
who first cut paths and cleared in those old days.*

—IGBO ARTIST UGO, INTERVIEW WITH
HERBERT M. COLE, 1982

TOUCHING THE EARTH

I live in Washington, D.C., and whenever I can make the time I like to go for a run along a trail about a mile from my home. As I set out, I jog amid bungalows and duplexes that are slowly being torn down in favor of new, larger houses with very little property around them. Then I climb a hill and head out along the Potomac overlook, with its views of Virginia and the trees across the river. When at last I leave the tarmac and reach the trail, my feet touch the soil. In winter, the frosty ground is almost as unyielding as the sidewalk. By spring, the roots of trees melt through the mud and a blanket of violets begins to spread across the uneven terrain. Summer leaves form a dense, emerald canopy above the trail that, come autumn, will cause each of my footsteps to produce a gratifying crunch as they descend on dry, brown leaves. I love the scent of the soil, the change of the seasons, and the ability to feel myself in contact with the land. I often stop at the lowest point on the trail, where it curves along a creek, and stand amazed that this woodland oasis can exist within city limits. For me, my footsteps—

FIG. 1* (OPPOSITE)
(front and back views)
Bijogo artist, Ilha de Orango
Grande, Bissagos Islands,
Guinea-Bissau
Figure to honor Orébolé Oloro
or Eramutó (Great Spirit
Possessor of the Earth)
Date unknown (early 20th
century or older)
Wood, cloth, green stone,
earth, crushed plant materials,
sacificial materials
38.7 × 10.6 × 12.4 cm
(15 1/4 × 4 1/8 × 4 7/8 in.)
Collection of Robert T. Wall
Family, W-530



these moments when my feet touch the earth—conjure a sense of gratitude for the ability to escape, an opportunity to just be, to think, and to feel that I am part of a greater whole. Each step is a release because I am able to feel that I belong there. But the confidence of my footsteps both counters and complements those of Berni Searle in her 2008 video *Seeking Refuge*. (FIGS. 2 A–E).

Commissioned by the Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno, in Las Palmas, Canary Islands, as part of the exhibition *Travesía* (*Crossing*), *Seeking Refuge* opens with a glimpse of hands holding a black veil as it whirls in the wind against a backdrop where sky meets ocean. The past is thus poetically whipped away before we see Berni Searle's two feet planted firmly in the surf. In this brief single-channel video, Searle once again uses her body as a vessel by which to explore complex human phenomena—in this case, the journey of an immigrant and the role of xenophobia in shaping one's relationship to the land. The artist's two feet are painted red, creating a shadow of shoes missing from her feet.¹ As they come into focus amid the whirls and ebbs of the surf, the crimson pigment highlights the point where Searle's body touches the land, and we are made to realize the intense intimacy and urgency of human contact with the landscape.

Seeking Refuge is a subtle, haunting, and ambiguous video in which viewers are compelled to watch a woman make her way through a dramatic landscape that appears to retain little trace of her passage. Searle's stained feet step methodically from the foaming, sparkly surf to navigate between deposits of dried seaweed on the black, volcanic sand. The camera is focused on Searle's feet; we do not see the broader environment as she takes one slow step after another, moving from firm sand to a looser dust that swallows her toes, to a rocky terrain upon which she gingerly places her feet. As the gray and brown rocks give way to a crust of white salt, the noise of the wind is replaced by the crunch of salt compressing beneath her feet. For more than two minutes the camera focuses upon this—a pair of feet and their dogged contact with the changing surfaces of the earth.

W. J. T. Mitchell has powerfully reminded us that "Landscape is a medium of exchange between the human and the natural,

the self and the other. As such, it is like money: good for nothing in itself, but expressive of a potentially limitless reserve of power.² For Searle, the intimate focus of the camera on her naked feet is replaced by a panoramic view that places her black-clad figure against a stark landscape of charcoal gray sand and rocky outcroppings. The nature of the exchange between Searle's character and this landscape of contrasts is skillfully opaque. The power of landscape to which Mitchell refers is the human power to lay claim to a landscape—to assert ownership and authority through the representation of turf, trees, and sky. In Searle's powerful use of the charged landscape of Lanzarote Island, however, it remains unclear if the figure claims the land or the land claims her. The woman in black has made it to this land of clear skies and contrasting surfaces, but does it welcome her? Is she alone? Who has come before her? Who will come after? Is anyone looking out for her? Will the salt, surf, and sand bear the traces of her crossing? This terrain devoid of cell phone towers, barbed-wire fences, beach chairs, or backpacks is a clean canvas upon which to imagine the intertwined narratives of people and the land. We are made to feel the tension between loss, hope, and belonging as one woman finds her way in a land that is at once timeless and new.

The light shifts as the film continues and Searle wends her way across the sand and rocks until we see her legs move around a wide, sand-filled crater. As she progresses along the outer curve of the basin, her body moves beyond the reach of the camera to be replaced by its shadow moving slightly and stealthy across the sandy depression. The film concludes as Searle reemerges, her back to the camera, and walks to the center of the crater's basin, where she lies down. The scene then fades to black as she returns to the earth.³

Searle's visual journey across this land of sea, sand, salt, and stone finds its roots in both the place where she was commissioned to work—the Canary Islands off the northwest coast of Africa—and the place from which she came, South Africa. The Canary Islands have been the site across which unknown numbers of immigrants have passed in their search for a new home and access to more resources. South Africa has been home to too many xenophobic attacks, which culminated in 2008, the same year that Searle made *Seeking Refuge*. In that year's riots, forty-six immigrants and twenty-one South Africans were killed. Searle was all too aware of both the promise and the cost of the aspirations that different individuals invest in the land. The landscape that she has chosen reveals the variety and complexity of what we encounter as we cross the earth's surfaces. Surf, sand, salt, and stone; each landscape is particular. Add to this soil, savannas, and cities, and the evocative potential of the landscape becomes unlimited.

We invest many meanings in landscapes on both personal and societal levels, but at the core, the power of a landscape comes from this moment, expressed so eloquently by

FIGS. 2 A-E* (OPPOSITE)
Berni Searle
b. 1964, South Africa
Stills from *Seeking Refuge*
2008
Streaming video
(5 min. 51 sec.)
Edition of 5 + 2 artist's proofs
Courtesy Michael Stevenson
Gallery, Cape Town,
South Africa

Searle, in which our human skin meets the skin of the earth. Each individual walks upon and touches the earth. Each community comes together to create a sense of cohesion in their proximate habitation on the earth. We rub the earth's materials as pigments on canvases and draw medicinal and spiritual strength from its natural resources. We paint pictures of the earth's surfaces and map it in exquisite detail. We create policies and fight to protect our ideals of the earth and its natural environs. It is from this union of human contact and the earth that meaning is made, and it is on this fundamental relationship that this study focuses.

We live in an age dominated by territorial disputes and environmental debates. In the months leading up to the writing of this text, one nation divided its territories in two. Now, the African continent is home to the republics of both Sudan and South Sudan, though the disputes over borders and oil resources have yet to be resolved. Likewise, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank remain contested spaces between Palestinian and Israeli authorities, and the ways we map these zones to which so much passion and tension has been attached propels artists like Egypt's Hamdi Attia into action. In his *World Map* project, Attia has taken "real" maps of Palestinian territories and reinvented them to imagine a very different world of autonomy, power, and possibility (FIG. 3). Attia makes

FIG. 3
Hamdi Attia
b. 1964, Egypt
Archipelago, A World Map 2
Digital prints on metal
cut outs, steel grid
Amman, Jordan, 2010



the “bigger picture”—in this case, the biggest picture he could imagine, the atlas or world map—personal. What may look like the tiniest dot on the world map may be the sum of someone’s lived experience; for that individual living in the Gaza Strip or in Cairo, their bit of land is the Earth as they know it. Land matters. Earth matters, and the multiple ways in which we create meaning through our relationships with—and challenges to—the earth and its resources fundamentally informs how we shape and protect its landscapes.

Concerns over environmental land rights can raise passions as ardent as those of sovereign rights and territorial land claims. Scholars, politicians, and citizens alike campaign over issues of deforestation, clean air, waste management, protection of biodiversity, and climate change. At the heart of each of these debates, be they territorial or environmental, is the profoundly complex and frequently contradictory ways in which individuals and communities set stake in their relationship to the land.

As Ugo reminds us in the epigraph, we must look to those who have worked the land before us. African artists across time have turned to the land, the earth, as a surface to inscribe and as the source of material inspiration. In Benin, Togo, Zambia, and throughout the vast African continent, artists and communities have come together to visually articulate their relationship to and appreciation for the earth in shrines and altars, and through the practices of faith-based associations. Such praxis has captured the attention of art and architectural historians and anthropologists, and yielded (among others) such important studies as Suzanne Blier’s *The Anatomy of Architecture* (1987), Herbert Cole’s *Mbari* (1982), Allan Dawson’s *Shrines in Africa* (2009), and Matthew Schoffeleers’ *Guardians of the Land* (1978). But heretofore, connections have not been drawn between these studies that analyze the earth as an entity to be revered and thanked for cultural and territorial continuity, and complementary studies that either analyze the terrain as a resource to be interpreted and mapped, or as a substance to be harvested for food, construction materials, medicine, and spiritual and aesthetic purposes. Mary and Allen Roberts’ award-winning work on the relationship between art and memory among the Luba of the Democratic Republic of the Congo includes an insightful analysis of mapping techniques,⁴ and their research is enriched by such cross-cultural studies of the relationship between domesticated and “wild” spaces as Martha Anderson and Christine Kremer’s *Wild Spirits/Strong Medicine*⁵ and Allen Roberts’ *Animals in African Art*.⁶ Likewise, Suzanne Blier’s work on Fon *bocio*,⁷ Patrick McNaughton’s analyses of Mande power arts,⁸ and Wyatt MacGaffey’s detailed decoding of the materials empowering Kongo *minkisi*,⁹ are among a body of influential works that address the incorporation of earthen materials into medicinal and power-based objects. Each study acknowledges the instrumental power of the earth both as a surface and as a material, and each contributes a distinct perspective to the fundamental role of Earth—its land and material—in the art

and thought of diverse artists across the continent. And yet studies, such as Kirsten Swenson's 2010 award-winning issue of *Art Journal*, that focus on land use in contemporary art overlook the place of Africa within the art historical literature on landscape. What landscape studies do exist are localized and tend to focus on South Africa, such as Clive van den Berg's *Panoramas of Passage: Changing Landscapes of South Africa*, Tamar Garb's *Home Lands—Land Marks* (2008), Virginia Mackenny's *Other Landscapes* (2004), and Michael Godby's *Lie of the Land: Representations of the South African Landscape*.¹⁰ Nessa Liebhammer's *Landmark: Visions of Land in Africa* is an important exception. While this book focuses on South African arts, it does include such works as a Baule *bo nun amuin* mask.¹¹ This project seeks to link these diverse literatures and address some key gaps in the scholarship as it relates to the uses and interpretations of land in Africa and the arts.

What the land means as a substance and as a subject is a vast topic that could never be treated comprehensively in one volume, but six themes do emerge, and within each I will explore some key examples. They are: 1) The Material Earth; 2) Power of the Earth; 3) Imagining the Underground; 4) Strategies of the Surface; 5) Art as Environmental Action; and 6) Earth Works. The first two address the materiality of the earth, what we mean by and what we do with this stuff we call "earth." The next two follow the logic of a *dikenga*, the Kongo cosmic symbol—variations of which are found throughout central Africa—that links the movements of the sun to the journey of a human soul along four cardinal points.¹² This complex and fundamental philosophical principle has been visualized alternately as a diamond, a circle divided by two intersecting lines, or a cross with circles at each end. Each pattern charts profound spiritual, solar, and *spatial* concepts—for the world of the living meets the realm of the ancestors along the *kalunga* line, a horizontal axis made manifest in water or dense forestation. The *dikenga*, however, also maps interaction along a vertical axis or "power line."¹³ Thus, this inquiry will look to vertical landscapes—complex and suggestive imaginings of the underground—as well as the strategies by which the earth's surface has been interpreted through mapping or landscape representation along its horizontal axis. The last two chapters of this book move away from consideration of the earth according to conceptual framings to focus upon human agency in relation to the land. One explores sustainability and the active role of African artists and communities as agents of positive environmental change; and, to conclude we will look to the particular history of producing land art in Africa with a focus on five artists, three of whom are the first ever to install earthworks on the grounds of the Smithsonian Gardens. As with the 2011 exhibition in Johannesburg, *Water: The [Delicate] Thread of Life*,¹⁴ this exhibition, *Earth Matters: Land as Material and Metaphor in the Arts of Africa*, deliberates "how integral and fundamental" earth is "in all its manifestations: physical, ecological, spiritual, social, philosophical and political."¹⁵

ON TIME

Landscape's most crucial condition is considered to be space but its deepest theme is time. —Rebecca Solnit, *Savage Dreams*, 1994

Time is mutable, or as George Kubler phrased it more than fifty years ago, time is “like the mind, not knowable as such.”¹⁶ Nevertheless, we surround ourselves with constructs of time: technological time, biological time, geological time . . . “African time.” Each of these temporal constructs comes with assumptions that are all too often left unchallenged, yet they profoundly inform how knowledge is framed and presented.¹⁷ Time is used to shape the narratives by which both individuals and nations lay claim to the land, and temporal assumptions inform the categories by which we interpret their arts.

Along the shores of the upper Zambezi River within the Lozi kingdom of Barotseland, the word for king, *litunga* (pl. *matunga*), also translates into English as “land.” According to the official royal history, *Litaba za sicaba sa Malozi*, recorded by the Swiss missionary Adolphe Jalla in 1903, Lozi *matunga* and their Luyana ancestors have lived in the Zambezi floodplain since time immemorial. At the turn of the twentieth century, King Lewanika had authorized court historians to recount a dynastic history that commenced at the beginning of time, when Nyambé (the sun) lived with his wife, Nasilele (the moon) alongside the mighty Zambezi. When Nyambé discovered the talents of humankind, He ascended to Heaven to safeguard His knowledge, leaving behind a daughter, Mbuyu, whose son and son’s sons would assume political control over the region. When Mbuyu died, she was buried in a mound on the floodplain and all subsequent kings have been invested with their power at this sacred site. Likewise, all subsequent kings have been returned to the earth in sacred mounds that dot the Zambezian landscape.¹⁸

In this way, Lozi royalty have become one with the land itself. Though Lozi kingship may now be embodied forevermore in the landscape, it is unlikely that this phenomenon began at the dawn of time. All evidence, in fact, points to the arrival of the Lozi dynasty as part of a seventeenth-century Lunda diaspora from what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo¹⁹ and that this migration introduced a system of royal graves that was built on an existing network of “territorial cults” that might date back as far as the fifth century C.E.²⁰ Two features are telling for our purposes: First, as the term *litunga* demonstrates, “land” is not a neutral word and can have a host of embedded meanings that must be teased out; and secondly, we should draw our attention to the date in which the tale of Nyambé, Mbuyu, and their progeny was told: 1903. In 1902, Lozi King Lewanika was among a select number of African kings invited to attend the coronation of Edward VII in England. Within a year of his return, Lewanika authorized his court

historians to dictate a history that emphasized such British values as dynastic longevity and territorial expansion.²¹ It is unlikely that the contact brought about by travel and colonial interference changed the line of succession outlined in *Litaba za sicaba sa Malozi*, but the timing of this record does suggest that the insights Lewanika had gained by negotiating the competing interests of the British South Africa Company, the Paris Missionary Society, and Portuguese slave traders, in tandem with an international voyage, profoundly influenced how he and his kingdom articulated their relationship to the land. Whether by the experience of having his people stolen involuntarily from Lozi territories for decades, the intensification of external interests in his lands, or his own travels, the increase in international contact changed how Lewanika saw and represented the land in Barotseland. As is made clear by the Lozi legend of the Sun and Moon descending to beget a kingdom where kings would become one with the earth, the land has always been important. But how that relationship has been expressed and how it appears to have impacted the arts takes a fundamental turn during the nineteenth century.

FIG. 4
Engraved ochre
70,000 BCE
Blombos Cave, South Africa



It was in the nineteenth century that European explorers arrived at various points on the African continent in search of a “virgin land, unsullied by human hands,”²² though of course such a place never existed. Humans (or hominids) have occupied and modified Africa’s landscapes for two million years. It is impossible to say with certainty when human beings began to make arts to mediate their relationship to the land. Earthen pigments, such as ochre, have been employed—and even decorated—for 70,000 or more years (FIG. 4). Cave paintings from what is called the “Apollo 11” site in Namibia date back to 23,000–25,000 B.C.E. These paintings stand as evidence of some of the earliest demarcations of sacred space in the African landscape and the earliest use of such

earthen materials as ochre and chalk.²³ They depict what are likely antelopes painted in red, accompanied by white chevrons and lines which, based on later paintings, could provide the spatial logic by which trance-induced, out-of-body travel in dreamscapes was expressed. There is also a honeycomb design, which may allude to trance and dream-state transformations.²⁴ David Lewis-Williams has argued in relation to much later southern African rock paintings that a bifurcated red line fringed with white dots may represent “threads of light”—or routes of shamanic travel—while antelopes refer to the trance state and honeycombs the visual pixilation that occurs as San Bushmen enter a trance²⁵ (FIG. 5). Thus, it is possible that these ancient, smudged marks may express a similar symbolic logic that imagines movement through landscapes both lived and dreamed in pursuit of animal migrations, water, and sites of healing.

By the time of the ancient Egyptians, the earth was conceived as the body of the god Geb, son of air and moisture (FIG. 6). Geb’s laughter caused the earth to quake, but as the beneficent giver of new life, he was also frequently depicted with plants rising from his back.²⁶ Curiously, Geb’s symbol was the goose—and while it is not unusual to have an Egyptian deity represented by an animal, not all gods were, and therefore Geb’s ability to be personified as recumbent human, animal, or plant suggests the complex interplay between terra firma, flora, and fauna at the heart of many definitions of “earth.”

FIG. 5

Line drawing of San rock painting depicting “threads of light” route

Ink

73 × 86 cm (28 3/4 × 33 3/4 in.)

Rock Art Research Institute/
SARADA University of
Witwatersrand

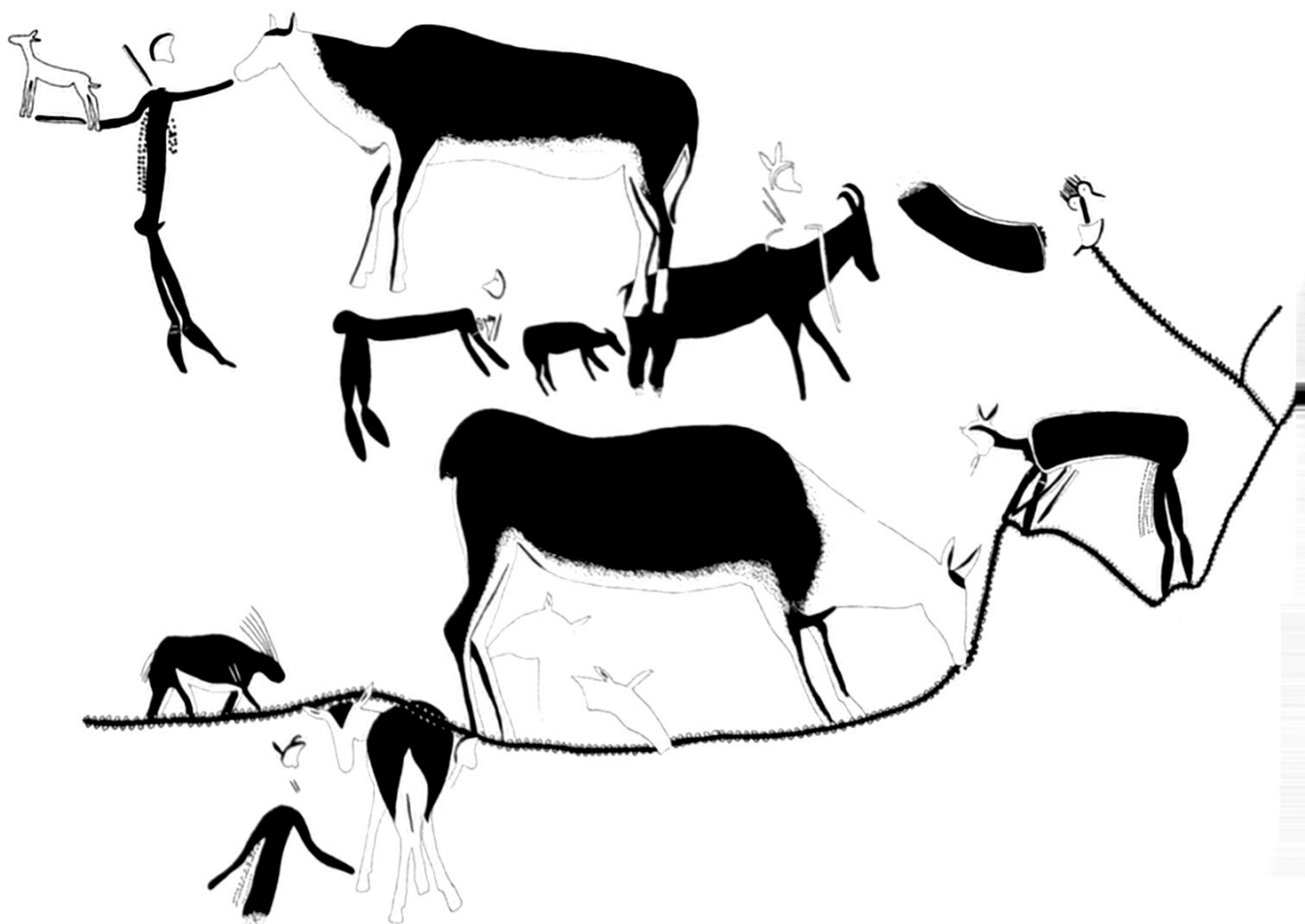
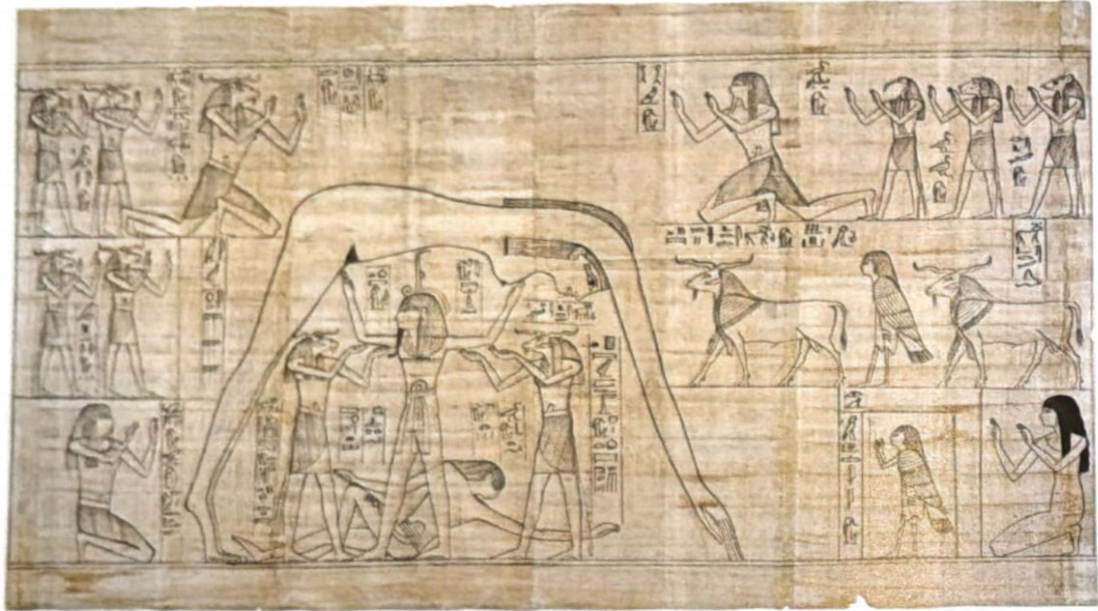


FIG. 6

Geb, the Egyptian god of earth, lying beneath the goddess Nut
 From the Greenfield papyrus,
 Deir el Bahri
 c. 1940 BCE
 Ink on papyrus
 The British Museum



The dominance of Geb came to a close with the arrival of Christianity, and later of Islam, to the shores of the Nile, signaling just a few of the more dramatic cultural shifts to transform humankind's relations to the African landscape. Our inquiry begins at the close of the eighteenth century, when relationships with the land changed fundamentally for many Africans across the continent. In July of 1798, Dr. Francisco de Lacerda mounted the first major European expedition into the central African interior in pursuit of copper. Though de Lacerda did not survive, his diary did and "waves of explorers, missionaries and prospectors" followed in his footsteps.²⁷ And this is just one example of intensifying international interests in African raw materials. Nine years later, in 1807, U.S. President Thomas Jefferson signed into law a bill abolishing the importation of slaves into the United States. Within weeks, the British House of Lords followed suit. While these acts did not end the horror of the slave trade in and out of Africa, they do represent the waning years of living under the fear that one might be bound and stolen from one's land. Within a few short decades, however, the "scramble" by European powers to claim colonial territories began in earnest, culminating in the Berlin Conference of 1885. As the new century dawned, Africans traveled more frequently beyond the borders of their continent. As seen with Lozi King Lewanika of Barotseland, these shifts in the movement of peoples, and changes in how land access and ownership were understood, created new attitudes toward "here" and "there"; and "mine," "yours," "ours," and "the ancestors." The *Earth Matters* exhibition and this book begin with that seminal moment and move through to the present day, to trace a diverse array of African arts that were made in this new consciousness of what land and landscape can and cannot convey.

Artworks created during this era have been termed “traditional,” “modern,” and “contemporary,” but these words often obscure rather than clarify the contexts in which Africa’s arts were created and circulated. For instance, photography is a medium most often discussed in relation to the contemporary.²⁸ As Jennifer Bajorek and Erin Haney write, “photography has played an important role in securing critical and curatorial as well as popular interest in modern and contemporary African art.”²⁹ The critical roles that photography—and painting—played in the formulation and propagation of changing relationships to the African landscape in the nineteenth century has not been explored in depth alongside other art forms of the day. At the other end of the temporal spectrum are two of the newer works in this exhibition, wooden vessels (c. 2000) by the Lozi artist Sinyinda Mukuti who continues to carve for the Lozi royal court and sells his works anonymously through the Mumwa Crafts Association. These fall within the stylistic and production practices most commonly associated with the “traditional.” As discussed in chapter 5 of this book, the sale of wooden vessels in western Zambia today is part of a contemporary reforestation initiative on the part of the local population. Thus, the works of art discussed herein will be examined with attention to the time and space in which they were created, rather than the classification systems by which they have been framed.

THE LANGUAGE OF THE LAND

Land, landscape, earth, and territory are not synonymous. Indeed, even one of these words can mean different things in different cultures. When I first began this project, I was amazed by the e-mails I received. Friends and colleagues would send me links and notes on anything that had to do with the earth: satellite imagery, information on game reserves, pictures of Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s installation *The Gates* in Central Park, and more. The word *earth* conjures associations that can diverge according to personal perception and disciplinary focus. The breadth of ideas connected to “earth” can seem insurmountably large. For some, “earth” equates with nature, the whole of ecosystems and the greater biosphere. For astronomers, the picture is larger still, with “Earth” referring to a small planet orbiting a rather small star, the Sun, in just one of innumerable galaxies. But “earth” can also mean simply soil or clay. Karl-Ferdinand Schaedler gave the great title *Earth and Ore* to his study of archaeological terracottas and metalworks,³⁰ but he never actually defines what he means by “earth”—though it is clear he refers to clay and that his interest lies in the enduring social role of potters in relation to smiths and metalworking across sub-Saharan Africa. Noteworthy, however, is the fact that Schaedler and his contributors do not tease out how clay and ore are considered by the cultures discussed to be part of the “earth,” in similar or different ways to the scholars’ own notions

FIG. 2
Kurumba artist, Burkina Faso
Storage vessel
Mid-20th century
Ceramic
64.5 × 49.5 × 50.2 cm
(25 3/8 × 19 1/2 × 19 3/4 in.)
National Museum of African
Art, Smithsonian Institution,
gift of Saul Bellow, 81-10-1



of each material being distinct from or part of the "earth." Though both clay and ore originate in the ground amid stone and dust, in the English language one becomes metal while the other remains "baked earth." Is one "earth" while the other is not? Our terminology perhaps confuses rather than clarifies the significance of earth and earthen materials when considered as constituent elements.

The Bambara language provides a ready example in which to address what is lost in translation when dealing with words like "earth" and "clay." Among Bamana, the word *bogo* refers simultaneously to earth, dirt, mud, mortar, and clay, or to earth's additive, constructive, and material properties. Its spatial dimensions are addressed with other words, such as *dine* or *dugukolo*.³¹ And so we must be careful to untangle what con-

notations these words encompass or exclude and whether our own linguistic biases influence what we read as arts or visual mediations of the "earth" or "land."

Frank Herreman endeavored to uncover the meaning intrinsic to distinct materials such as wood, ivory, brass, iron, and clay.³² He divided his query according to the qualities of transformation in a given material: whether or not it was fired, added to or subtracted from, or ephemeral in nature. In so doing, however, one might say that the leaves become separated from the wood of the trees on which they grew, and the clay of ceramics is not considered alongside the clay and related earthen materials used on accumulative sculptures. While great technical insights can be gained from such categorizations, one loses the conceptual underpinnings that might unite them. Here it is worth looking at two examples from Burkina Faso that, while quite different in medium and technique, share affinities of renewal and intergenerational connection through their association with the earth's abundant offerings. The materials of their manufacture and the language used to describe them once again raises practical questions of precisely what we mean by "earth" in relation to just one of its connotations: nature.

The first of these is a magnificent ceramic storage vessel produced by a Kurumba woman in Burkina Faso during the middle of the twentieth century (FIG. 7). Impressive in scale, the jar is more than two feet tall and would once have been proudly displayed in a Kurumba kitchen. Its surface has been skillfully adorned with raised decorative elements that recall the scars applied to the abdomen of a married woman who has borne a child, employing a symbolic logic that links human and agricultural fertility. For just as a woman's body can sustain life, so too did the millet, sorghum, and other grains once stored within this vessel.³³ Thus, not only was it made of the earth in the sense employed by Schaedler, it was also used to store the bounty of the earth and to honor the cycle of life.

Though made of neither soil nor clay, *Do* masks also honor the earth's bounty and the cycle of life by virtue of their connection to agricultural productivity and fertility in general (FIG. 8). Spectacularly embodied by leaf masks, variations of which can be found among Bwa, Bobo, Marka Dafing, Senufo, Bamana, Dogon, and Jula peoples in Burkina Faso and Mali, *Do* is the god of nature. In performance, *Do* moves from sacred ancestral shrines to the homes of the living, to the surrounding fields that sustain them.³⁴ Through the rites that honor *Do*, "the human community is reintroduced to the cycle of nature, and therefore renews its forces, through the image of the vegetation that is reborn each year."³⁵ *Do* masquerades appear in association with the funerals of elders—when deceased community members are returned to the earth—and the masks are linked inextricably to the fertility and bounty of the earth through their association with crops and new growth. Like the Kurumba storage vessel, *Do* masks are closely associated with the "earth," but by virtue of their association with the plants, foliage, and "nature," not soil or clay per se. So when does "earth" mean clay or soil, and when does it mean "nature"? Can its definition include salt? Sand? Cities? Where does the definition of "nature" end? And who is making these decisions—the artists or the art historians? As we shall explore in the next section, the



FIG. 8
Bwa *Do* masquerade,
Burkina Faso, 1985

"earth" is a concept invoked through many materials and for purposes both mundane and profound.

"Nature" does not simply shape how we see the earth as a medium or material, however. As the British art historian Kenneth Clark opened his canonical work *Landscape into Art*:

We are surrounded with things which we have not made and which have a life and structure different from our own: trees, flowers, grasses, rivers, hills, clouds. For centuries they have inspired us with awe. They have been objects of delight. We created them in our imagination to reflect our moods. And we have come to think of them as contributing to an idea which we have called nature. Landscape painting marks the stages in our conception of nature.³⁶

In the decades since Clark wrote these words, scholarly understandings of the landscape have become more complex, but his words still point to the ongoing confusion that lingers in what we mean by, and how we use, such words as "nature," "landscape"—and, as we have seen—"earth." "Landscape" is a word and a concept that has inspired many volumes of literature that range from poetic evocations of the role of memory in our understanding of nature and the landscape,³⁷ to political readings of the transformations of the American West,³⁸ to cultural understandings of how social identity is formed through framings and interpretations of the land,³⁹ to attempts to untangle "landscape" from a single definition.⁴⁰ For the purposes of this study, we will agree with W. J. T. Mitchell in his proposition that landscape is a medium⁴¹ and not a genre—as suggested by Clark—for this will allow us to address what landscape *does* over what it shows. In addition, we will build on understandings explored by Denis Cosgrove, Kenneth Olwig, and others who recognize the landscape as culturally constructed and open to multiple interpretations or definitions.⁴² And so the case is being made here not for singular definitions or understandings of any one of these words, but for critical awareness of how, where, and when we use them. It also seeks to understand how the language of scholarship clarifies or obfuscates the differing and overlapping contexts of production and use for the aesthetic creations connected to this stuff upon which we walk, in which we dig, and with which we make art.

THE MEDIUM, EARTH

In *Dirt: The Ecstatic Skin of the Earth*, William Logan Bryant has written a reverential series of essays about the stuff that forms and covers our planet's solid places. He opens with the tale of an abandoned pick-up truck in the bed of which seeds begin to sprout. As he

writes, "wherever there are decay and repose, there begins to be soil. It would be hard to imagine a more improbable set of ingredients, but even a truck can become dirt."⁴³ So what are the ingredients of earth? How have artists worked with sand, sea, salt, soil, plant, and ash to convey poetic and pragmatic messages of the earth and its many uses?

CLAY, MUD, AND SOIL

Clay is perhaps the material first thought of and most frequently associated with concepts of the earth. The relationship between earth and clay has been described as "intimate,"⁴⁴ and as Nigel Barley has pointed out in relation to Judeo-Christian tradition,

Noah was the first potter and his work was a sacred charge. Moreover, the potting process, the giving of form to clay and its transformation through fire, has a primeval quality. Small wonder, then, that potting offers ways of thinking about creation and creativity and that God is pictured making Man from clay.⁴⁵

The unstructured, primordial goo of clay and its potential to become constructive ceramic yields endless opportunities for metaphors of creation and renewal, concepts that have been realized for millennia across the African continent and beyond. Vessels such as the Kurumba jar (SEE FIG. 7) symbolically and conceptually link the life-giving capabilities of women to the transformational and productive attributes of clay. But clay and mud have also been employed with remarkable creativity when it comes to architecture, as can be seen in the extraordinary earthen structures of Mali—and throughout much of the continent (FIG. 9). It was clay's protective and constructive utility that inspired Côte d'Ivoirian sculptor Aboudramane (FIG. 10).

Aboudramane first came to the attention of international audiences in the early 1990s for his fabrication of architectural maquettes inspired by the structures he had seen in African landscapes during his childhood. He was working as a cabinetmaker in the studio of Swedish painter Gösta Claesson when he began to fashion tableaux of daily life.⁴⁶ As his style evolved, figures were dropped from his completed works, yet one still feels the longing for people of an imagined past or a possible future in the unoccupied space that surrounds these structures. Each of Aboudramane's maquettes and sculptural assemblages is placed on a base. The artist paints these bases and uses them to tightly frame his work. In so doing, he isolates each structure in a way that begs one to consider the history and silent conversations that haunt the surrounding space.

In the 2000 mixed-media architectural sculpture, *La Citadelle du Désert*, Aboudramane has crafted a tabletop-size fortress to protect invisible forces from a desert that we cannot see. Set against a vibrant red base, the structure seems to emerge from the cracks of



FIG. 9 (ABOVE)
View of earthen architecture,
Djenné, Mali, 2011

FIG. 10* (BELOW)
Aboudramane
b. 1961, Côte d'Ivoire
La Citadelle du Désert

2000

Mixed media

51 x 37 x 20 cm

(20 1/8 x 14 5/8 x 7 7/8 in.)

Courtesy Marc Patras Galerie

he has never lived is embedded in Aboudramane's creative visions, but this is held in sophisticated tension with the possibility of a future built upon ecological and cultural balance. Raised in Abidjan and based in Paris since 1988, Aboudramane is a self-taught artist whose work has largely been framed in terms of magic and notions of a timeless Africa, but his structures reveal a critical awareness that is both current and timely. His architectural sculptures fuse contemporary style with time-tested earthen architectural techniques, forecasting recent initiatives to return to sustainable earthen building materials. Although some might fear that his work reinforces negative stereotypes in which earthen materials are associated with the primitive—barefoot Africans living somehow

closer to the earth—instead Aboudramane subtly challenges any lingering misperceptions through his ingenious experiments with tennis rackets, eggshells, and soil. His "earth" is made of materials and icons that are at once historic and futuristic, organic and synthetic, sustainable and recycled. The finished effect of Aboudramane's sculptures speaks to both the longstanding utility and ingenuity of mud or adobe architecture in Africa and the specter of urban lifestyles that so profoundly influence how we see rural spaces and the built landscape.⁴⁸

While Aboudramane's architectural sculptures provide microcosms of large-scale built environments in which culture, style, and technique interplay, the arts of



personal adornment can apply the practical utility of clay and mud to the intimate expression of cultural identity and individual style. Men of Karamajong, Turkana, Pokot, and related populations of western Kenya and Uganda through the 1970s worked mud and earth into their hair to create elaborate hairstyles called "mudpack coiffures"⁴⁹ (FIGS. 11, 12). This practice has been rekindled, though to a lesser degree in recent years, and can still be found in some areas of the Karamoja region of Uganda. Coiffures can range from unpigmented but elaborately formed assemblages that stretch down a man's back, to smaller caps painted with vibrant clay coloration. The example in the collection of the National Museum of African Art fits within a corpus of mudpacks with similar compact shapes and pigmentation that suggest they were made by a handful of artists in the second half of the twentieth century.⁵⁰ A man would adopt such a hairstyle as he reached maturity and typically would maintain the same style throughout his life.⁵¹ Well-groomed hair was considered a sign of strength, courage, and masculinity, and ostrich feathers spoke to the wearer's status.



FIG. 11 (ABOVE)

A Jie man from the Panyan section of northeast Uganda wearing a colored version of the removable hair cap, 1990s



FIG. 12*

Karamajong artist, Kenya and Uganda

Man's wig

Mid- to late 20th century

Fiber, clay, metal, ostrich feathers, hair, rawhide,

35.5 × 70 × 60 cm

(14 × 27⁹/₁₆ × 23³/₈ in.)

National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution

gift of Emile and Lin

86-8-1

Creating an elaborate coiffure could be a communal affair. Frequently, a Karamojong man would add donations of hair from friends and family to make his own coiffure, or would take the hair to an artisan skilled in the style he desired. The maker would spread the locks of hair like a carpet on the ground and begin the time-intensive process of compressing the tufts over a framework that might include metal or sisal.⁵² Many coiffures, such as this example, were then mudded over with clay. Once dry, the clay was divided into sections and colored with various ochres, stippled with a comb, and decorated with beads, chain, or bits of metal.⁵³ All evidence suggests that the use of mud and clay was purely pragmatic—it was available and served the purpose of lending structure and color. Nevertheless, one can imagine additional insights that might be gained if future research included questions targeting the significance of materials and color arrangements applied in these works. Does the connection to the earth upon which the pastoralists of Karamoja graze their cattle hold significance for the warriors and elders

FIG. 13*

Nakunte Diarra
 b. c. 1939, Kolokani, Mali
Bogolan cloth
 (mud-dyed cloth)
 1992
 Mud, cotton
 136 × 122 cm
 (53 1/4 × 48 1/4 in.)
 National Museum of African
 Art, Smithsonian Institution,
 anonymous gift, 2012-9-1

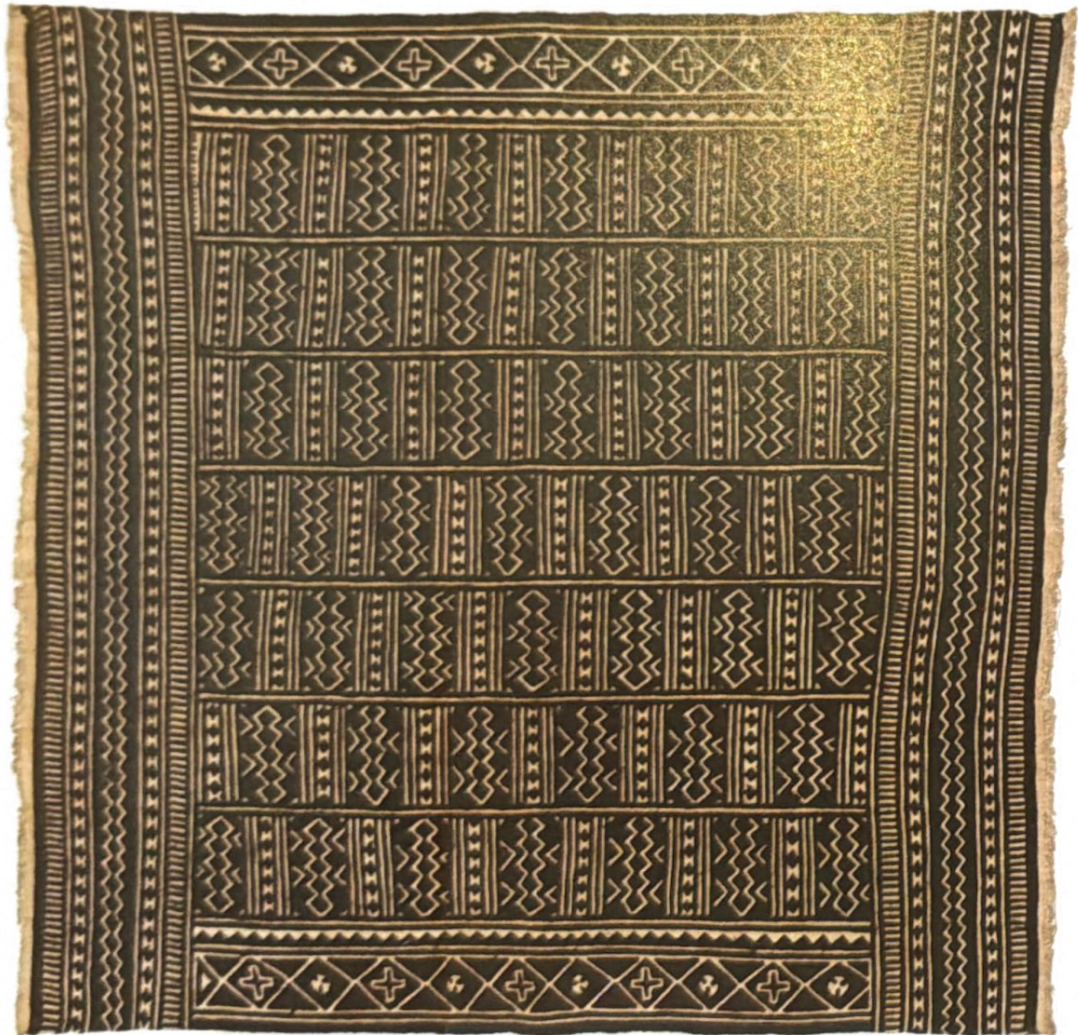


FIG. 14 (OPPOSITE, TOP)

Nakunte Diarra mixing her
 mud dye, Beledougou, Mali

FIG. 15 (OPPOSITE, BOTTOM)

Nakunte Diarra painting a
bogolan cloth,
 Beledougou, Mali

who chose to wear these caps? Is there any symbolic significance to the selection or arrangement of colors?

In the case of Bamana *bogolanfini* artists, we know that the arrangement of motifs is of great symbolic significance and, as with the Karamajong, the mud has proven to be practical, as well (FIG. 13). *Bogolanfini* is mud-dyed cloth. (As discussed on page 22, *bogo* means "mud" or "earth"; *lan* is "of" or "with"; and *fini* "cloth." Thus it is correct to say either "*bogolan* cloth" or "*bogolanfini*" [pl. *bogolanfiniw*]). Its highlighted patterns encode medical, historical, social, and moral concepts, and it is worn by many Malians: pubescent girls who are making the transition to womanhood; hunters in the forest; and, in increasing numbers, fashionistas in Bamako and around the world.⁵⁴ Kandiouira Coulibaly, founder of the artist collective Groupe Bogolan Kasobane, once stated that *bogolan* cloth was "literally made of the earth, forests, rivers and sun of Mali."⁵⁵ Its materials and process of manufacture speaks to powerful holistic connections with the earth as a material resource.

Bogolanfini is made through a time-consuming, labor-intensive process that involves the use of river soil, leaves, and sunlight (FIGS. 14, 15). Mud-dyed or stamped textiles can be found in San, Mopti, and Dogon regions of Mali, though Beledougou is widely recognized for the superior quality of its cloths. The textile artist Nakunte Diarra of Kokani, a small town in the heart of Beledougou, has received international attention for the outstanding quality of her *bogolanfiniw*. Widely recognized as the best living *bogolan* artist, Diarra has been making cloth for nearly fifty years.⁵⁶

She begins making the cloth by harvesting iron-rich soil from a streambed and placing it in a large clay jar with water, then leaving it to ferment for up to a year. Individual artists may have their own recipe for their mud, adding coveted leaves to enhance the depth of color it will later yield when applied to the cloth. Diarra is no exception. The cloth she uses for her dyed *bogolanfini* may be made from locally grown cotton that has been cleaned, carded, and spun into threads by women of the region, then turned over to men who weave it into long strips that will be cut and sewn together to the desired dimensions. The fabric designer soaks the cloth in a solution of mashed and boiled shoots and leaves of the *n'gallama* (*Anogeissus leiocarpus*) and *n'tjankara* (*Combretum glutinosum*), then dries the fabric in the sun. Next, she maps



FIG. 16*

Yoruba artist, Nigeria
Staff and sheath for
Orisha Oko

Late 19th to early
20th century

Staff: iron, wood

152.4 × 9 × 9 cm

(60 × 3 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 3 $\frac{3}{8}$ in.)

Sheath: beads, thread, fabric

133 × 35.2 × 11.6 cm

(52 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 13 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 4 $\frac{5}{8}$ in.)

National Museum of African
Art, Smithsonian Institution,
gift of Walt Disney World Co.,
a subsidiary of The Walt
Disney Company,
2005-6-71.182

out her design plan and begins to carefully apply the mud with a piece of bamboo or a metal tool to fill in and stain the negative space surrounding her design motifs, which remain undyed. After the entire design has been completed, the mud is left to dry. The cloth will be washed, only to have the dyeing process repeated until the color saturation is deep and rich. The final step is to wash away with a soap made of millet bran, caustic soda, and ground peanuts, the yellow tint produced by the leaf baths, thus heightening the contrast between the design motifs and their meticulously mud-dyed background.

Bogolanfini is an art of transformation. Plants such as cotton, leaves from trees, soil from waterbeds, and sunlit air combine to form a new whole. Their combined power in this cloth can absorb a young woman's blood following excision (also known as female circumcision) or her first marital night, or hold amulets that strengthen a hunter as he takes on the wild. As Sarah Brett-Smith has argued, the signs and symbols that adorn *bogolanfini* retain the knowledge of herbs that heal and other esoteric messages, but

the very taming and transforming of the natural materials used to create these cloths also give them the fortitude to control *nyama*, the spiritual force or "energy that animates the universe."⁵⁷ The earth of these cloths is more than just mud.

PLANTS AND THE LIVING EARTH

Bogolanfini reveal that the "earth" utilized within a work of art might be conceived as far more inclusive than simply the mud or soil that provided its color or its structure. Often, the human capacity to transform these materials enhances the high regard with which these materials are held. Among Yoruba of Nigeria and Benin, the creative power to transform the land through agriculture and to domesticate plants is protected by the deity, or *orisha*, Oko. As far back as 1875, Orisha Oko was described as the "god of the farms, fields, garden, planting, agriculture and natural (human) fertility." Robert Farris Thompson has stated that iron staffs have been made in his honor since time immemorial⁵⁸ (FIG. 16). Oko is one of a complex of Yoruba deities overseeing powers of creativity, with farm-



ing—more particularly the ability to heal through herbs and to assess witchcraft—serving as his particular purview.

Orisha Oko can be honored in more than one form but, interestingly, this is rarely done with the plants he protects. Instead, the power of plants to yield food, pharmaceuticals, and even poisons is honored through the medium of another of the earth's transformational resources: iron. Among the objects central to his worship are staffs forged from iron hoe blades, sheaths, and hats that have been regally adorned with luminous beads (FIG. 17). According to Thompson, the staff "guards the farm by allusion to the hoe; and the work of the hoe, in the fecundity of the earth, seems a logical source of the power to grant children to the barren devotee. And, most impressively, the staff is also the sign of acquittal in important trials on witchcraft, and hence embodies ideal perfect justice."⁵⁹ Staffs forged in the god's honor are likened to his body, with the lower blade suggesting torso and limbs; the central rectangle with incised cross, a face; and the upper portions, the head.⁶⁰ The upper body is both male and sky; the lower, female and earth.⁶¹

In the case of the National Museum of African Art's turn of the twentieth-century staff, formerly in the collection of Paul and Ruth Tishman, the lower blade has been incised with suggestive geometric and zoomorphic motifs—including bird, lizard, and snake, all creatures acknowledged for their ability to cross realms, shed skin, or otherwise transform. A wooden shaft has also been attached with metal to the upper portions of the iron head, providing an overall phallic appearance that reinforces the staff's association with both human and agricultural fertility. While the iconography of both staff and sheath offer suggestive overlays of the significance of flora and fauna, it is the staff's materiality that is perhaps most evocative. Each stage of the iron's transformation reveals a symbolic progression: from raw earth or ore; to tiller of the earth or an iron tool of the human realm; to an iron of denser, finer composition once it is ultimately refigured for divine purpose and judiciary insight. With human attention and divine support, plants—just as iron—can be cultivated and transformed from the wild, to field, to food and medicine.

FIG. 17
Orisha Oko shrine, Nigeria



FIG. 18*

Andrew Putter

b. 1965, South Africa

*Hottentots Holland:**Flora Capensis 2*

2008

Archival pigment ink on
cotton rag paper

79 × 65 cm (31 1/8 × 25 1/2 in.)

Photography and compositing:

Tony Meintjes

Flower arranging:

Christopher Peter

Courtesy Michael Stevenson

Gallery



FIG. 19 (OPPOSITE)

Artist's diagram of plant
and insect species indigenous
to South Africa's Cape

These plants and insects can be found in *Flora Capensis 2* by Andrew Putter. All are indigenous to the Cape. Many of these plants—which have been replaced over the centuries with flowers from other parts of the world—are now threatened; some are extinct. The Latin names of the species appear first, followed by their common names in brackets.

1. *Restio bifarius*
2. *Junania hierta* [Yellow pansy butterfly]
3. *Phylica pubescens*
4. *Clivia miniata*
5. *Buddleia salviifolia*
6. *Erica perspicua*
7. *Gerbera linnaei*
8. *Searsia lucida* [Taaibos]
9. *Morea bellendenii*
10. *Gerbera Linnaei* [Varingblom]
11. *Ixia maculata* [Kalossie]
12. *Scabiosa incisa*
13. *Gladiolus tristis* [Trompeter]

Though he works approximately one hundred years later and thousands of miles to the south, artist Andrew Putter has also drawn on the power of plants to interpret his own life and experiences in relation to those who walked his homeland before him. His earth is personal—it is found in the place where history and memory connect among stone, snails, flowers, and butterflies. In his 2008 series *Hottentots Holland: Flora Capensis* (FIGS. 18, 19), the artist teases out the untold stories of the people whose history lies within the landscape of the Hottentots Holland Valley near Cape Town, where he was born. A total



14. *Lachenalia unifolia*
[Viooltjies]
15. *Leucadendron coniferum*
16. [Drumsticks]
17. *Leucadendron gandogerii*
[Sunshine conebush]
18. *Melianthus major*
[Kruiddjie-roer-my-nie]
19. *Gerbera linnaei*
20. *Chasmanthe floribunda*
var. *duckettii* [Cobralily]
21. *Pseudonympha bipipia*
[Table mountain brown butterfly]
22. *Pelargonium capitatum*
23. *Leucadendron* sp.
24. *Leucospermum oleifolium*
[Overberg pincushion]
25. *Berkheya armata*
[Cape thistle]
26. *Albica flaccida* [Tamarak]
27. *Leucospermum*
28. *Gladiolus* sp.
29. *Mimetus cucullatus*
[Pagodabush]
30. *Arcotis stoechadifolia*
[Gousblom]
31. *Valtheimia brachiata*
32. *Leucospermum cordifolium*
[Pincushion]
33. *Helicoprism* sp.
[Scarab beetle]
34. *Leucospermum cultivar*
[Pincushion]
35. *Watsonia borbonica*
36. *Serraria* sp. [Spiderhead]
37. *Mylabris oculata*
[CMR beetle]
38. *Phaecomma prolifera*
[Everlasting]
39. *Leucospermum reflexum*
[Rocket pincushion]

of six photographic works carefully imitate seventeenth-century Dutch flower painting, except that in Putter's work, each leaf, flower, shell, stone, and insect is indigenous to the pre-colonial landscape of the Cape of Good Hope. The butterfly that alights upon crisply delineated clusters of soft pink and fuchsia blossoms is a species that would have flitted among the foliage through which the Cape's native population walked centuries ago. These blooms, in their lush crimson, lilac, ivory, gold, and verdant variety, teeter on the verge of extinction today, but their tenuous presence alludes to the Cape Khoikhoi people, who had also been a part of the landscape in 1652 when the Dutch arrived and began to call them "Hottentots."

It took Putter years to scour the Table Mountain basin and locate each of these plant species (FIG. 20). For Putter, the biota in these floral arrangements mirrors the fragile status of the spectral Khoikhoi, whose surviving environment and history is threatened. At the same time, the bouquets depicted in these photographs imply not just the pres-



FIG. 20

Locations to which artist traveled to find flora and fauna

The land within a thirty-mile radius of Andrew Putter's home has some of the highest indigenous plant species diversity on the planet. The artist collected flowers for the *Flora Capensis* series from out-of-the-way farms, national parks, and private gardens in spring 2008. Many of these flowers only grow in the wild, but just four percent of the habitat in which they naturally occur still remains.

ence of the individual who assembled them; they also conjure ideas of who might have done so. The arrangements have been placed in nineteenth-century vessels made by Nama descendants of the Khoikhoi, in front of the wall of a local cave. The possibility is thereby opened that it was the Khoikhoi, and not the Dutch, who envisioned these dramatic still lifes. Putter imagines a history in which the seafaring new arrivals (the Dutch) are linked by this visual grammar to the culture that, within a mere fifty years of contact, would be almost completely eradicated. In creating a shared language, an aesthetic vocabulary that is quite literally rooted in the bounty of the landscape, the fraught encounter between Dutch and Khoikhoi is reconceived in a context of hope.

The *Flora Capensis* are one of three complementary elements to Putter's Hottentots Holland series. Other components include educational performances and the award-winning video installation from 2007, *Secretly I will love you more* (FIG. 21), in which the image of Maria della Quellerie, wife of the first Dutch commander at the Cape of Good Hope, sings a lullaby in Khoi to Krotoa, daughter

of a Khoikhoi chief, who came to live as an interpreter in Quellerie's home. The lyrics, written by Putter, translate in English as:

Do not fear me little one—
welcome into our home!
How beautiful you are,
little shiny one, with your woolly hair,
smelling of sweet buchu.
Your differences from me make you so precious!
Your smallness belies your significance.
Meeting you has changed us forever.
I will love you as I love my own children:
Secretly I will love you more.
The warm summer wind blows and it makes me dream.
I dream of your people and my people changing each other.
Welcome into our home precious child.



FIG. 21
Andrew Putter
b. 1965, South Africa
Secretly I will love you more
2007
Video installation

By opening a space in which a tragic, very real and marginalized history could be reconsidered, or could allow for an instance of love, Putter shows not how history is buried but how it lives, and how it can be beautiful. As he says,

Hottentots Holland: Flora Capensis is part of my ongoing attempt to communicate with these ancestors, these forgotten, demonized, marginalized inhabitants of the landscape out of which, and in the middle of which, I was born. It uses materials drawn from those parts of the landscape that the pre-colonial Khoikhoi and I share, to invoke their spirits, and gives me a focus for my attempts to connect with them.⁶²

And so it was with stone, snail, flower, and butterfly that Putter envisioned an earth not that he could transform, but that he could share.

WATER AND SAND: THE EARTH, WET AND DRY

Oceans, rivers, lakes, and lagoons cover approximately two-thirds of the earth's surface; the second most abundant element along the planet's crust is silica—the material that becomes sand.⁶³ In many ways, sand is the antithesis to water. One quenches thirst and nourishes new growth; the desiccating power of the other yields deserts and metaphors of death. As both “a physical property and metaphysical allusion,” sand provides a foil for explorations of the passage of time.⁶⁴

If Putter's flora and fauna reveal that which is shared by individuals and communities across time, the sands of the Namibia-based photographer Helga Kohl expose that which cannot transcend time. For Kohl, sand moves like a wave, swallowing the remnants of human life. Kohl relocated permanently to Namibia in 1970 and has been working there as a freelance photographer since 1975. Over the decades, she has returned on multiple occasions to Kolmanskop, an abandoned diamond-mining town in the southern Namibian desert.⁶⁵ Once its subterranean riches had been exhausted, residents no longer found reason to stay, and by 1954 the small town's homes, ballroom, hospital, school, and theater were left to hold their own against the forces of nature (FIGS. 22, 23). And so these

FIG. 22*

Helga Kohl

b. 1943, Silesia (Poland)

*Family Accommodation/**Portfolio Kolmanskop*

1994

Photograph (Agfa RSX 50

slide film)

50 × 50 cm (19 1/4 × 19 1/4 in.)

Collection of the artist

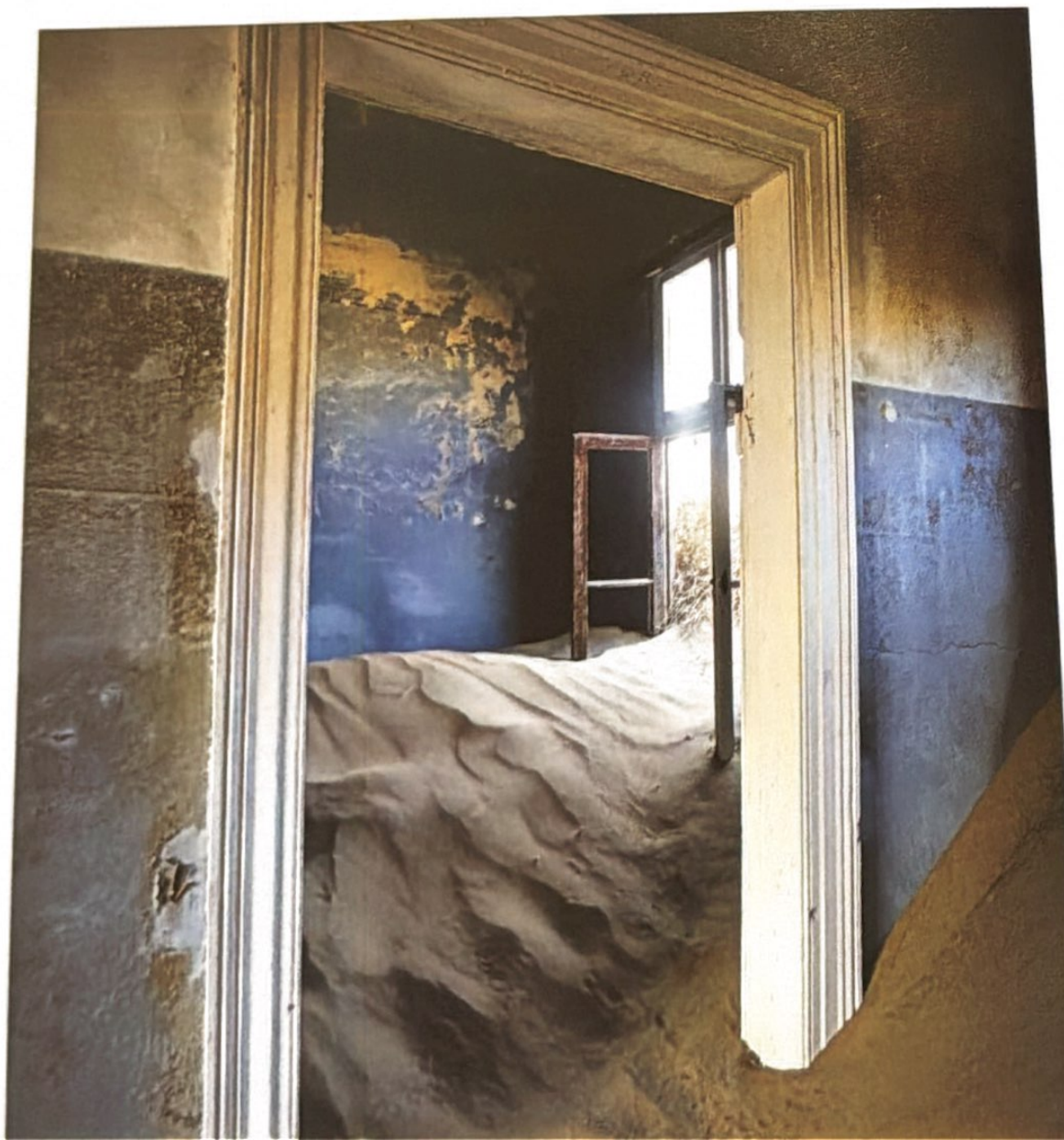




FIG. 23
Helga Kohl
b. 1943, Silesia (Poland)
*Family Accommodation/
Portfolio Kolmanskop*
1994
Photograph (Agfa RSX 50
slide film)
50 × 50 cm (19 3/4 × 19 3/4 in.)
Collection of the artist

structures, with their fading walls and milled woodwork, are slowly being returned to the earth—an earth of endless sand and blue sky. Sand pours through windows, props open doors, and covers over floors. Desks sit unused with nothing for company but the changing light and shadows. Kohl has focused her lens on this slow drama of human whim and terrestrial endurance. The final series of images took her approximately four years to complete, and Kohl has described her working method:

I returned many times over the years and carefully scrutinized each house, I examined every corner and noted every hole in every roof and wall. Much of my time was spent simply watching the shifting of the dunes in the rooms as I examined them all through the various open windows and doors. I sat in the room and listened to the wind. I observed the play of shadow and light with the beautiful colours of the walls. It was in these moments of solitude that I transformed myself into the past, and in so doing saw a life which somehow brought a profound understanding of the present. . . . One day I knew I was ready to capture the beauty once created by people and taken over by nature.⁶⁶

Kohl's evocative photographs became the signature images for the 2005 *Rencontres Africaines de la Photographie* in Bamako, Mali; its theme was "Another World." There is

irony as well as poetry to this selection, because while Kohl's work captures the disintegration of another time—a time that can fill our dreams—it portrays a place that is still real and will endure beyond the temporal blip of its human habitation. The sand came before the structures and it will continue after. It is both of that world and this.

Like Helga Kohl, the young U.S.-based, British-Nigerian photographer Jide Alakija has turned his camera to the ongoing struggle between humans and their environment and the structures we leave over time. His drama is set against a stage of water, but unlike the tides of Kohl's sand, Alakija's water appears not to flow. Though water may be the "source of life," in Alakija's vision it provides a provocative foil to the dehumanizing, de-naturalizing aspects of urban living. In his *Invisible Cities #1 (Bombay)*, row after row of ramshackle shelters are supported on stilts above water with inky reflections that suggest pollution and stagnation (FIG. 24). The heavy, steely gray sky bears down on the monotonous succession of tin roofs and stained walls. Unlike Kohl's sand, which is steadily reclaiming houses that seem to have been built with a belief in their permanence, Alakija's precarious shacks stand unexpectedly resilient as they sprawl across the surface of water.⁶⁷ Here, the water provides a backdrop not for nostalgia, as did the Kolmanskop sands, but instead offers an unsettling display of anonymity in the present and future. Even in this scene of teeming construction, the people seem insignificant. The photograph's distant and isolated figures do not interact with each other, their environment, or the camera. They do not dispel the loneliness of the scene; and in their loneliness, we seem to be asked the cost of building cities over our waterways.

FIG. 24*
Jide Alakija
b. 1977, England
Invisible Cities #1 (Bombay)
2008 (2013 exhibition print)
Fuji crystal archival print
80 × 125 cm (31½ × 68¾ in.)
Courtesy Tafeta and Partners





With a painterly palette and crystalline clarity, Alakija offers insight into both the creative lengths to which individuals will go to create shelter and the potential toll wrought by urban sprawl. For better or for worse, human ingenuity transforms the water and claims the landscape. But it is Alakija's title that is perhaps the most provocative. In his series *Invisible Cities*, Alakija photographed the vast Nigerian city of Lagos from multiple vantage points and gave each a name that situates it elsewhere: Ho Chi Minh City, São Paulo, Karachi, Miami, and Bombay. In Alakija's world, place has lost its specificity. Not all the photographs in the series feature water, but in the generic interchangeability of Alakija's cityscapes we sense the degree to which we have come to associate our earth's surface with cities. In *Invisible Cities #1 (Bombay)*, the city is not invisible; it is omnipresent and unnoticed in its ubiquity. It is just as easy to believe we are looking at the slums of India's largest city as we are the irrepressible sprawl of Lagos. That we are able to read this site as an "anywhere" reveals how prevalent cities and their impoverished outer reaches have become as part of the human, and earthly, landscape. Today, city sites such as this are part of the material composition of the earth.

Water, the element against which Alakija has set his exploration of Bombay and Lagos, has long offered rich metaphoric allusions for artists; it rarely appears as a medium itself, however. While it may be "the lifeblood of all forms on earth... [providing] sustenance to all living organisms,"⁶⁸ water is used more often as a conduit by which to transfer pigment than as a medium in its own right. For Sandile Zulu of South Africa, however, water is an essential ingredient in making his work, even if one cannot see its presence in the completed object (FIGS. 25, 26). Fire, air, water, and earth combine in the creation of each piece, regardless of its scale, materials, or subject. Working in a sunlit corner of his loft studio, Zulu places a burning candle, polished stones, a basin of water, and such



FIG. 25 (TOP)
Sandile Zulu
b. 1960, South Africa
Spinal Diagnosis—a regenerate case no. 1
2010
Fire, water, earth, air
145 × 660 × 35 cm
(57 1/4 × 259 13/16 × 13 3/4 in.)
National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, museum purchase, 2012-5-1

FIG. 26 (ABOVE)
Sandile Zulu at work in his studio, Johannesburg, South Africa

tools of his craft as a bottomed-out cooking pan, newspapers, paraffin, and a blowtorch. Zulu credits the four principal elements for his materials. Fire is joined by the water he uses to wash his hands. Stones then guide the patterns of his flames and serve as a tribute to the earth, a connection Zulu sometimes reinforces by sprinkling dust in the air. The fourth element, air, surrounds Zulu, providing him with breath and fueling his fire.⁶⁹ For Zulu, water does not equate with “earth” but is its complement, and along with fire and air provides a holistic understanding of the principles that underlie the creation and creativity of life. This holistic approach to earth as a medium for communication, and water as one of its more evocative elements, is echoed in Kongo philosophy and arts of the Loango Coast, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Angola.

CHALK AND THE EARTH IN COLOR

Kongo earth is not the dull brown of dust or dirt, but the rich red of blood, the shimmering white of water and reflective surfaces, and the deep black of decay and organic processes. Each of these symbolic colors and their earthen associations can be found in an affecting power figure in the collection of the Musée royal de l’Afrique centrale in Tervuren, Belgium (FIG. 27). Known as *nkisi nkondi mawenze*, this bristling figure, associated with the leopard for its prowess, was designed to identify and hunt down wrongdoing.⁷⁰ Over the course of untold years of use, it acquired an elaborate surface accumulation that suggests intricate and complex notions of “earth” that go beyond mere spatial and material terms.

Carved before 1914, this commanding figure, nearly thirty-five inches tall, stands on solid block feet. Its basic form—that of a frontal figure with right hand raised and clutching a dagger and left arm resting solidly on its hip—is consistent with other *minkisi* (sing. *nkisi*) and may suggest directional influences, the raised hand signaling airborne powers while the other is grounded.⁷¹ Its surface accumulation is remarkable, with a face caked in thick layers of white chalk or clay, interrupted only by the bold black pigmentation that defines its nose, eyebrows, and lips. A thick cake of red medicines, or *bilongo*, into which a seashell has been pressed, crowns its head. Red and white were also used to frame a mirror that has been lost from the figure’s belly, and across its blade-encrusted form one can find feathers, fabric, fibers, seed pods, and other organic items. Together, these elements draw on the power of a complex continuum of “earths.”

Anthropologist Wyatt MacGaffey has evocatively described the Kongo power figure, or *nkisi*, as “a personalized force from the invisible land of the dead that has chosen, or been induced, to submit itself to some degree of human control through ritual performance.”⁷² This force can take various forms but it is disproportionately represented in



FIG. 27*

Yombe artist, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Angola, and Republic of the Congo

Nkisi nkondi (power object)
19th century

African teak (*Chlorophora excels*), metal, feathers, pigments, earth, glass, textiles, mirror, claws

83 cm (32 1/2 in.)

Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale, Tervuren, Belgium,
EO.o.o.22438

museums in the form of anthropomorphic wooden figures empowered with medicines that include "white clay and other earths"⁷³ and other materials employed for their linguistic or metaphoric associations. In other words, it is not the figure that is essential but the materials that the figure contains.

White clay, kaolin, or chalk are joined with soil and sediment from graves, gullies, streambeds, and "other places regarded as the abodes of the dead" to empower *minkisi* vessels.⁷⁴ The white chalk, *mpemba* or *lubemba*, comes from streambeds; the material contains the reflective waters that serve as a membrane separating this world from the ancestors. *Mpemba* also means "cemetery" or "land of the dead," for the dead live in the water and are white in color.⁷⁵ As a color, white also signals the moral rectitude and clairvoyance of the deceased. Pierre Petit has demonstrated that across numerous central African chiefdoms, including Luba, Ndengese, Yaka, Lunda, and Bisa, white earth is sourced from "the place where sacred power originated."⁷⁶ This material that offers insight and clairvoyance, connects land and water, and links the power of the ancestors to the needs of the living, resided in the site from which kings and leaders were invested with their supranormal powers. White earth connected the sacred realm of the ancestors to the regulatory powers of leaders overseeing the land of the living. Operating as much more than just medicine, pigment, or metaphor, white earth came from the supernatural world of those who dwelled *in* the earth, to assist those who live *on* the earth, and was regulated by those with the power to *represent* the earth. It reveals a concept of "earth" that is more intricate than place or substance; it is a system of interconnected energy or power that moves between states of being.

The shell inserted into the figure's red medicine pack reinforces the imbricated manner in which the *nkisi*'s composition conveyed spatial, material, and metaphysical ideas for Kongo. Like the pigment white, the shell alludes to the significance of water as a threshold between the living and the occupants of the earth beneath their feet. The red earth is similarly associated with the dead, but instead implies transition, danger, and the ability of the ancestors to mediate on behalf of the living.⁷⁷ Interestingly, scholar Raymond Dart has shown that red earth has been used in southern African burial contexts for at least twelve millennia.⁷⁸ Thus we can see that the power of the earth as a vehicle of transition and transformation is longstanding and widespread, though it is worth noting that red pigments can be derived from both vegetal sources as well as mineral or ochre, which again suggests an understanding of "earth" that is more conceptual than purely physical.⁷⁹ Thus white signals the power and "earth" of the dead, red symbolizes the "earth" of birth and transition to the ancestors, and black represents soil made dark by decay but fertile for new growth. For the peoples of Africa, the earth in all its colorful richness embodies the forces of renewal that complement the temporal model of the sun as it relates to the

journey of the human soul and the structure of the universe (see page 16 and chapters 3 and 4 for discussions about *dikenga*).

Materials could shift in meaning from one *nkisi* to another, but the necessity for earthen materials is consistent across *minkisi*. Indeed, MacGaffey has even noted that, should a client simply require good luck, he could be given “nothing except earths” in order to be placed in contact with the ancestors.⁸⁰ Earth was the substance of subterranean realms occupied by the ancestors, the material constituting the division between the living and the dead, and the signifier of power and insight. When combined from sources that provided red, black, and white pigmentation, these earths further offered a mode of thought addressing a symbolic balance between opposing forces—like the living and the dead—and the unknown, the ambiguous or the threshold.

To this power of the earth, other materials such as seeds, leaves, fruit, and other organic matter have been added to the Musée royal de l’Afrique centrale’s *nkisi* figure, for their pun-like capacity to evoke desired outcomes. For instance, when spoken aloud, the word *lutete* (gourd seeds), sounds like *teta*, “that it may cut down,” and thus might suggest the *nkisi*’s ability to cut through obstacles or fell opponents. The ears of this *nkisi* have also been medicated with bundles that enable it to hear properly and that connect it metaphorically to the realms of earth, air, and water, thus extending and reinforcing the metaphysical powers of colored earth.⁸¹

SALT OF THE EARTH

Salt can be found within the earth and in human tears. It brings the experience of the earth to the body. Zambian artist Anawana Haloba has turned to the medium of salt in three works, each of which speaks eloquently and sensuously to human interactions that have fallen out of sync with the landscape. For *Earth Matters*, she created a fourth called *This and Many More*.

Haloba’s engagement with salt began in 1999, when she created a series of performances in which she alternately spread salt, sugar, and chili pepper mixed with clay on pieces of paper and then used her tongue to create cartographic-like drawings.⁸² By licking these seasonings of the earth, Haloba induced her salivary glands to leave the “routes” of her “personal existence” in a physical and profoundly intimate manner.⁸³ The interaction was marked both on the paper and in the burning sensation on her tongue. At the same time, witnessing the contact of the fragile tissues of her tongue with the sensation of heat from the chilies and the intense abundance of salt caused many onlookers to salivate and thereby to share in her experience. Yet just as the resultant drawings show the course taken by the artist’s tongue, they reveal her subsequent absence. With



FIG. 28

Anawana Haloba

b. 1978, Zambia

Still from *Lamentations*

2005

Performance-based video/
sound installation

poetic precision, she has mapped the places where she is not; we can see where she has been but cannot join her. Haloba's *Salt Licked* maps bring us into intimate contact with the distances that cannot be overcome.

By 2005, when the artist began her video work *Lamentations* (FIG. 28), she was based in Norway and salt became the medium through which to explore immigration and language. With a logic akin to that of the ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, Haloba links speech not to cooking but to a seasoning that is shared by both the earth and the body in their physical composition.⁸⁴ In this second salt work, Haloba focused a video camera on the course of her tongue as it moved through a dense layer of salt. Here, the salt references the salt of tears shed when missing a distant home, the salt of

oceans crossed, and the "pain of not being able to integrate, of not being able to communicate through language."⁸⁵ Gripped by salt, Haloba can neither speak her mother tongue nor bite her tongue, holding back words—or an accent. And this time, we are not given the chance to see the course charted by Haloba's tongue as it "tears, drags and pulls" its way through the salt.⁸⁶ She holds us in close, so that we cannot see the distance but must feel the immediacy of her thirst and her longing.

Haloba expanded on the potency of salt to provoke thought and to foster audience participation in her *Road Map* installation, which she created for the eighth Sharjah Biennial (in the United Arab Emirates) in 2007 (FIG. 29). For this work she cut out the shapes of thirteen Middle Eastern countries, including Pakistan and Afghanistan, and placed them on legs to create tables. She then coated the cut-out maps with a solution of sugar water, which helped a subsequent layer of salt to adhere to the surface. The tables were set up so that visitors could walk among them, with an invitation from the artist to "draw a roadmap to peace with your 'tongue' on the map surface."⁸⁷ Visitors chose to use their fingers instead of their tongues, and the sounds of fingers running through the salt were picked up and amplified by microphones. These joined a soundtrack of the sounds of everyday life—children playing, a conversation, a telephone ringing—offered as an alternative to the blasts of bombs and guns too often associated with the Middle Eastern soundscape and landscape. Concerned by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the political tensions reaching from Iran to Palestine, Haloba wanted to use salt in this work because many of the locations she represents were once known not as conflict zones but as "cities of salt."⁸⁸ Salt had also long connected the African continent to the

Middle East through the trans-Saharan trade. For Haloba, salt both connects land and people and reveals the distances still to be overcome.

For *Earth Matters*, she created another interactive installation that includes four containers cast in the form of oil drums with video imagery projected from within onto their surfaces. The footage includes scenes from the “salt marches” in India in which Mahatma Gandhi led protesters in non-violent protest against British colonial rule, and individuals jumping over a line drawn in salt. In addition, the artist designed a meditative space in which visitors sit on cushions surrounding a mound of coarse rock salt that allows each to smell and taste the salt that lingers in the air.

In his book *Salt and Civilization*, Samuel Adshead has described salt as a “weapon of culture supplied by nature.”⁸⁹ Haloba has been able to skillfully draw upon this “weapon” to reveal cultural disconnects. Similarly, António Ole of Angola turned to salt to draw attention to history’s ruptures. Ole wanted to expose the often-overlooked role of salt throughout history as a currency during the slave trade. His approach, however, also



FIG. 29

Anawana Haloba

b. 1978, Zambia

Road Map

Interactive mixed-media
installation

Sharjah Biennial, United

Emirates, 2007

draws attention to salt's place in nature. Ole questions how we choose to see—or remove from view—the presence of human culture on the land and in the landscape (FIG. 30).

António Ole created his *Salt Cycle* in 1998, when he was best known for creating installations from discarded metal, wood, and cardboard used by the urban poor to create *musseques*, as the shantytowns of Angola are known. Ole had long been fascinated by the aesthetics of urban decay and the resilience and vision of those who live in poverty but were still able to take a piece of blue plastic or other detritus and lend beauty to their homes.⁹⁰

After more than a decade of focusing on crumbling walls and repurposed materials, Ole felt the urge to “reconnect” with nature.⁹¹ As part of a broader body of work called *Hidden Pages, Stolen Bodies*, Ole traveled to the western Angola region of Benguela, to take photographs under the golden light of the “magic hour.”⁹² In *Salt Cycle*, the artist created ten digital prints on aluminum that reveal his ongoing engagement with textures and surfaces. The suite of images does not form a narrative so much as a series of relationships. The images should be arranged in two rows of five, one above the other, and might be read as a pattern of two pairs followed by a single image. Each photograph is tightly focused, with both sky and surrounding context carefully eliminated. In the first of Ole's

FIG. 30*

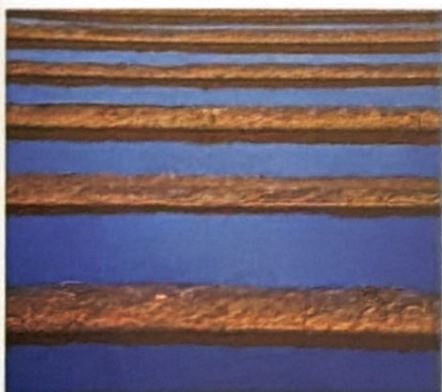
António Ole
b. 1951, Angola
Salt Cycle
1998

Digital prints on aluminum

16.5 × 25 cm (6½ × 9¾ in.)

21 × 16.5 cm (9¾ × 6½ in.)

Iwalewa-Haus, Afrikazentrum
der Universität Bayreuth,
Bayreuth, Germany



pairs, we see the ripples of shallow waters as they move beneath the sun. The dancing rhythm of the water is then replicated in the second image, which shows a bed of dried mud with cracks that weave and intersect into the distance. The pair shows the pathways carved by water still flowing and long dry. These busy swirls are replaced by translucent water so still that we can only discern its presence in the subtle fingers of reflecting light that hover above the sand and a fringe of salt crystals. Next come round pools of brown water scattered across a field of cracking and crusted white ground. When viewed as a set, we see deposits of salt offered alternately as either a gift of the water or through the intercessions of human hands making depressions for evaporation. The fifth image heralds the products of these saline deposits with a heaping pile of white salt that takes on a heavenly aspect as it glows and floats, surrounded by impenetrable black shadows.

The lower five photographs focus more on the impact of salt production on the land. The first is a minimalist treatment of the emphatically and artificially straight arrangement of irrigation ditches, paired with a marker of the aftereffects of human interference in the landscape: a rusted pipe. The mouth of the pipe aligns perfectly not with the channels of water in the irrigation ditches, but the dried and cracking earthen barriers that confine and direct the water. Ole invites us to dream and ponder with these images,



shutting out all exterior detail. He focuses on the pipe, a small patch of dry and cracked land that no longer receives water, and nothing more. He invites consideration of what is lost, the people we cannot see. In his last pair, Ole has changed the orientation of his photographs from horizontal (landscape) to vertical as he again focuses on a pile of salt, but this time from above. In many ways this is the most haunting of the series, for it appears as if someone has drawn a finger through the salt, creating the effect of an eye. Salt, a currency of the slave trade and witness to history, now looks back at us. In the last two images, Ole depicts first a patch of earth indeterminate in scale, for all surrounding cues have been obliterated in shadows. He then zooms his camera up and away, providing an aerial view of a river or channel of water, but the land it feeds has been cast into darkness.

Ole's images are simultaneously beautiful, poetic, and haunting. They tell the story of salt as a gift and as a weapon of human culture without ever showing the human presence. Using the vocabulary of salt, he invites us to decide whether or not we want to see ourselves and acknowledge our role in the production—or obfuscation—of history and nature.

ASH, CHARCOAL, AND THE SCORCHED EARTH

Landscape and its demise also haunt South African printmaker Diane Victor. Struck by the biblical phrase “ashes to ashes, dust to dust,” this artist has brought her considerable control and technical precision to the challenges of drawing with ashes as a way of “thinking about the fall-out of our society, of things that collapse, the remains that are left, not just on an individual basis but the stains or the traces that a population leaves on the land.”⁹³ In *Rain Horse*, Victor has drawn a horse using the ashes of burnt books dedicated to apartheid-era land policies above a landscape that also floats, ungrounded, in the shadow of the beast that flies above it (FIG. 32).

Victor had been looking at Henri Rousseau's 1894 painting, *War (La Guerre)* (FIG. 31), when she created this 2010 work and a 2009 series of four etchings and digital prints, *4 Horses Baited*, in which she fuses an image of her own figure into or onto that of the horse. Like Rousseau's horror-struck equine, her horses have all four legs outstretched in a pose that, while anatomically impossible, can “traverse history in one leap.”⁹⁴ The figure was drawn by cutting a stencil, through which the artist carefully sifted the ashes from her barbecue, the remnants of books burnt for past drawings, and the new ashes of Afrikaans atlases. She then manipulated the distribution of the ashes by means of speakers; the vibrations of their sound waves beneath the paper gently moved and bounced the ashes into position. Once finished, she intensified some of the shadows and lines

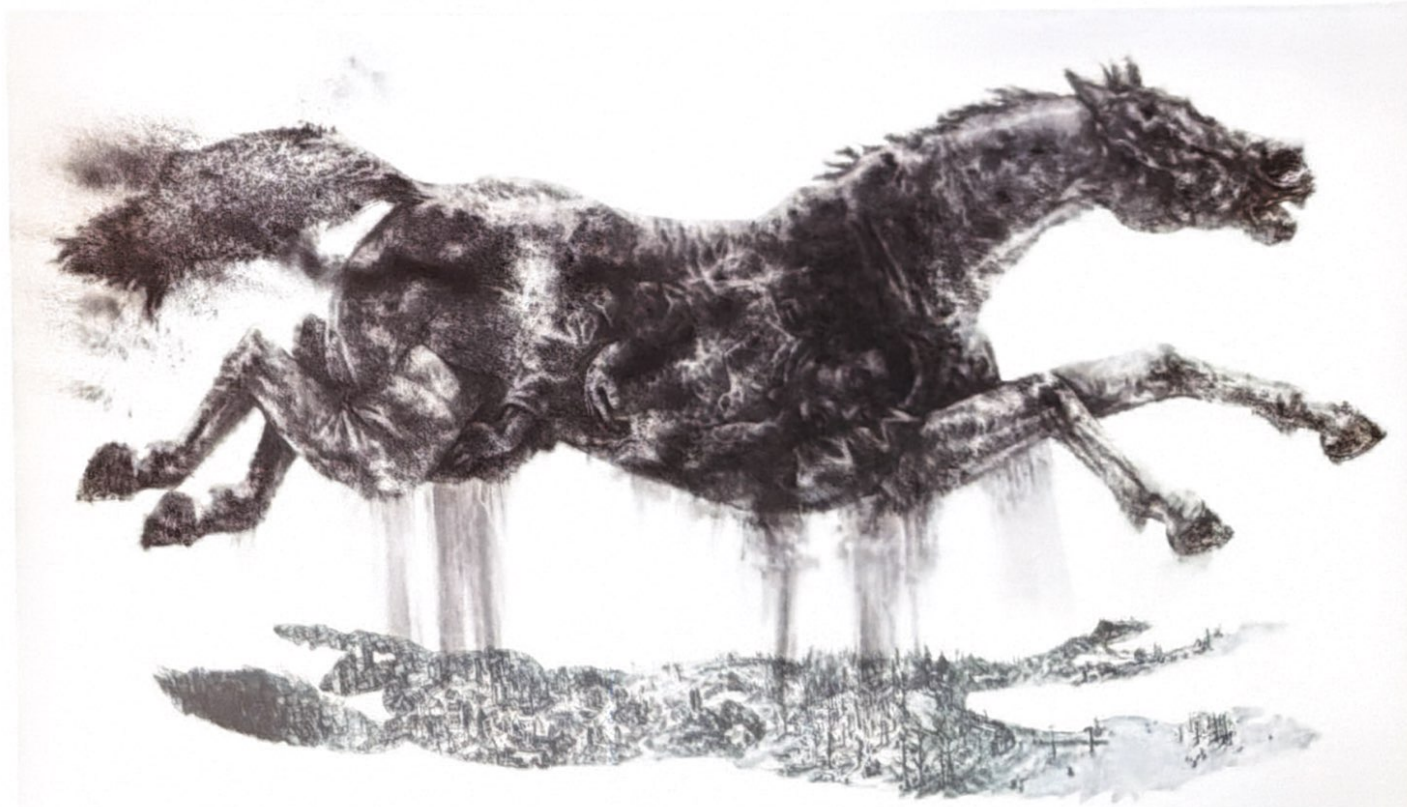


FIG. 31 (LEFT)
Henri Rousseau
1844–1910, France
War, or the Horseride of Discord
c. 1894
Oil on canvas
114 × 195 cm (44 7/8 × 77 1/4 in.)
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

FIG. 32* (BELOW)
Diane Victor
b. 1964, South Africa
Rain Horse
2010
Ash and charcoal dust drawing
with digital printing
106 × 200 cm (41 3/4 × 78 3/4 in.)
Private collection

with charcoal before adding a fixative. Some ashes were purposely left loose, to fall like rain on the digitally printed shadow beneath it.

There is an impossible disconnect between the land and the rain beast in Diane Victor's *Rain Horse*. Her mythical horse offers neither escape nor relief. No sun could shine from behind the horse to cast this shadow, for it has been inverted and moves away from the viewer. Within this impossible space, Victor has drawn the crumbled remains of the



city of Dresden after the Allied forces' firebombings, the ruins of South African townships, and the charred remnants of a scorched veld. Here, Victor has drawn the ashes of a landscape with the ashes of the words used to quantify, describe, and own this landscape.

Victor allows her memory to distill and animate her images, looking at neither models of horses nor photographs of landscapes as she draws. These creatures and places dwell in her imagination and come to life on the paper, not to document a particular past or specific future, but calling on the humor needed to face our cycle of devastation in the ongoing duel between humankind and the land.

STONE AND WHAT REMAINS

The land is made of mud, soil, sand, chalk, salt, and ash; through its interactions with water and sun, it is host to a cornucopia of flora and fauna. Each artist and each community defines these elements and their role in constructing a broader or more exclusive understanding of earth according to personal perspective and experience. But as we have seen, paying attention to the messages embedded within these materials can point to a host of insights into the relationship between individuals and the land upon which they frame their days. With an eye to the encoded significance of these materials, we might also begin to intuit new insights into a range of objects about which too much remains unknown.

Among Bijogo of the Bissagos Islands, an archipelago off Guinea-Bissau, sacred figures have been made in honor of Orebok Ocoto, also known as Eraminhô, the "Great Spirit Possessor of the Earth." These figures have been made of carved wood; "earth and crushed vegetable elements; or else the leaves of a mangrove, a sacred plant, plays an important role, as do such human materials as hair and nail clippings," and—in the case of at least two remarkable twentieth-century figures of Orebok Ocoto from the collections of both Robert and Margaret Wall and the Brooklyn Museum—stone.⁹⁵

These figures fall within a multicultural pattern of assembling diverse materials from the earth to honor it as a spiritual force, but what is extraordinary about these two objects are the eyes. The Walls' Orebok Ocoto stands a little over twelve inches tall and consists of a simplified and densely encrusted cylindrical body, neck and head with detailed ears, and facial features, and two gleaming eyes of stone (SEE FIG. 1). The Brooklyn Museum's comparable figure has been x-rayed, and this technology has revealed that the inset stone eyes are not shallow adornments but reach deep into the figure, suggesting profound intentionality and significance to their use (FIGS. 33, 34). In the case of the Walls' piece, stone can be seen emerging through the back of the figure's head. Such figures were considered to be repositories or vessels for the spirit, and the fact that their eyes—the site

FIG. 33 (OPPOSITE, RIGHT)
Bijogo artist, Bissagos Islands,
Guinea-Bissau
Soul container (*Eraminhô*)
Late 19th or early 20th century
Wood, earth, crushed plant
materials, copper alloy chain,
sacrificial materials
36.8 cm (14 1/2 in.)
Brooklyn Museum, gift of
Ruth R. Gross, 71.176.4

FIG. 34 (OPPOSITE, LEFT)
An x-ray of the Brooklyn
Museum's Bijogo figure reveals
the inset stone eyes are not
shallow adornments.



of their vision and insight—and their interiors were made of stone—the most permanent and enduring of the earth's materials—opens new avenues of consideration. Made of and for the earth, these figures have cores of stone; perhaps it was through this medium that the spirit connected to the earth and empowered the living to remain in contact. Much remains to be known and understood.

Clay, mud, sand, salt, water, plants, and urban sprawl have all been considered “earth” by artists. Working with these materials, they have produced extraordinary ceramics, masks, photographs, installations, drawings, and sculptures to raise important questions of stewardship in relation to the land, one another, and how we remember our past. In the next chapter, we will delve further into how artists have employed the earth as a medium to imbue their work with power and meaning.



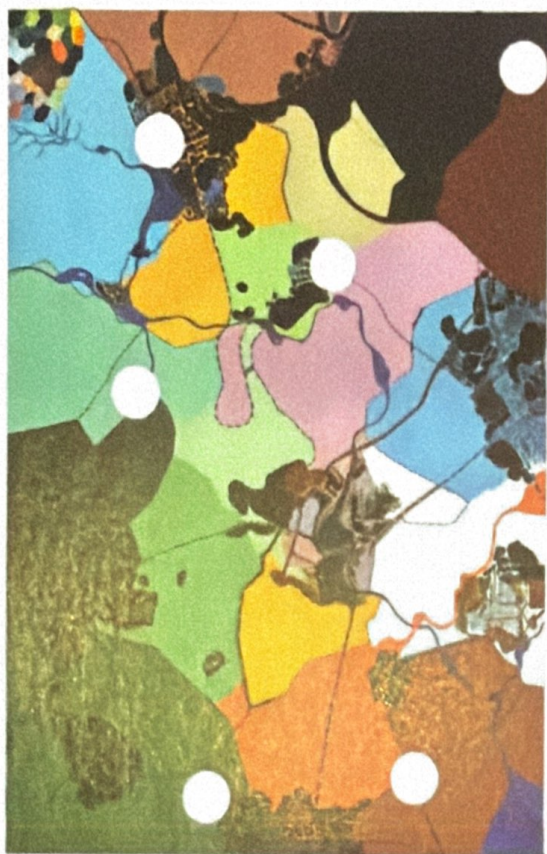
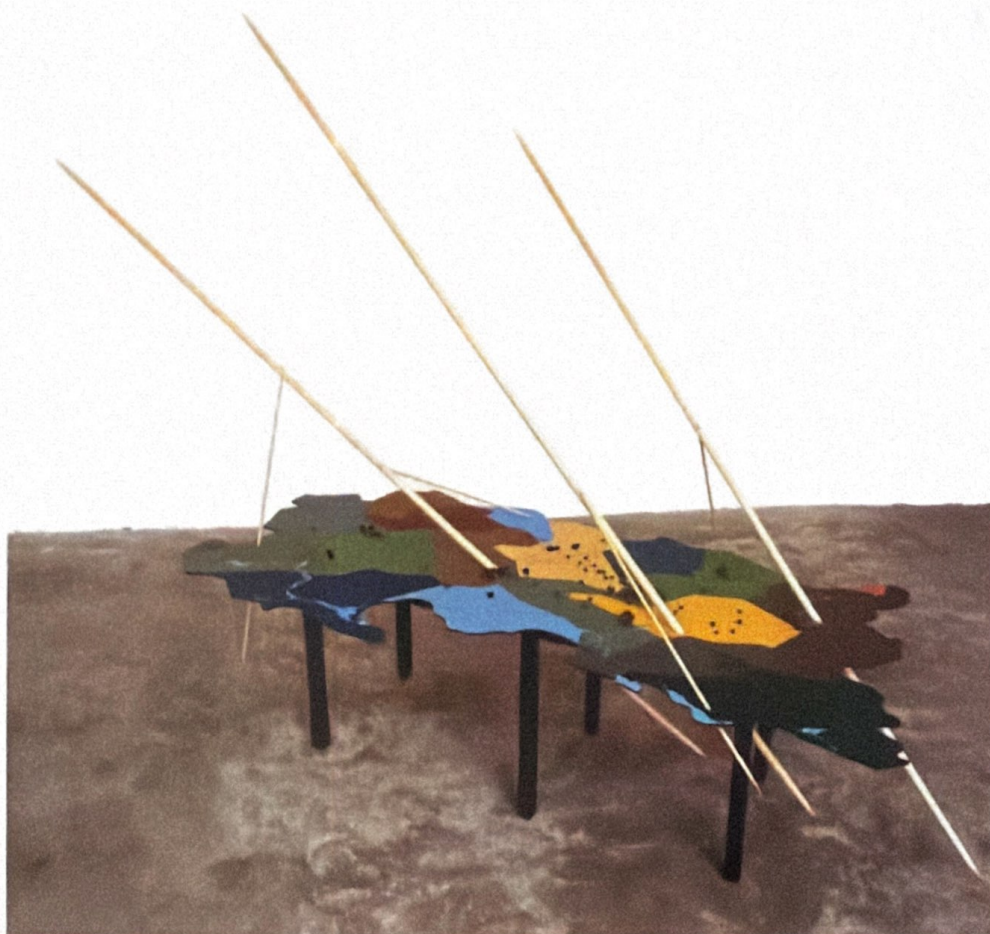


FIG. 150 (ABOVE)
 Otobong Nkanga
 b. 1974, Nigeria
Spots of Amnesia
 2006
 Acrylic and lacquer on paper
 54 × 36.5 cm (21 1/4 × 14 3/8 in.)
 Collection of the artist

FIG. 151*
 Otobong Nkanga
 b. 1974, Nigeria
Limits of Mapping
 2010
 Wood, acrylic paint, metal
 100 × 250 cm
 (39 3/8 × 98 3/8 in.);
 height with poles:
 180 cm (70 7/8 in.)
 Collection of the artist



sly wit and cheeky precision, S'himi points out that we are all part of a world in which the pressure from competing sources and insufficient resources is escalating. And time, like our resources, is running out like water through a pot with holes. She is able to borrow the vocabulary of maps to ask questions about women and their place in the new "glocal,"⁹⁷ because she has seen how "the world offers itself to us, whether we are in the Moroccan countryside or in the great cities of the world. Travel [and] the Internet forced me to look at the world and draw on my daily life."⁹⁸

Otobong Nkanga's longstanding interest in "conversations within the landscape"⁹⁹ led to visual inquiries, beginning around 2005, that fall within the paradigms of "protest maps" or "counter cartographies"¹⁰⁰ (FIG. 150). The erasure of six white spaces within her maplike painting, called *Spots of Amnesia*, draws attention to "the (psychological and social) links between amnesia and the changes in the landscape"¹⁰¹ and poses such questions as: what happens to a person when their place on the map disappears? How do the processes of mapping influence our memories and identity? By 2010, Nkanga had developed these ideas into a three-dimensional, inter-

active sculpture. The *Limits of Mapping* takes as its basic form the table—that everyday object used to keep one's coffee mug off the ground (FIG. 151). But it is also the piece of furniture above which politicians, military tacticians, and geologists hover as they divide territories, plan battles, and search for resource deposits. The artist cut her table's exterior edges to follow the irregular contours of a brightly colored map and pierced it with sharp rods that hold the viewer at bay and suggest the history of blood that would be shed at the hands of tacticians whose decisions were made while poring over maps. The artist's use of human-scaled rods recalls earlier works in which she used oversized needles to contemplate the language of war and the "surgical hits" that were targeting the landscape of Afghanistan. Her approach is pragmatic: we must penetrate the earth to extract its resources as part of human survival, but in piercing the earth we damage

FIG. 152*

Dan Halter

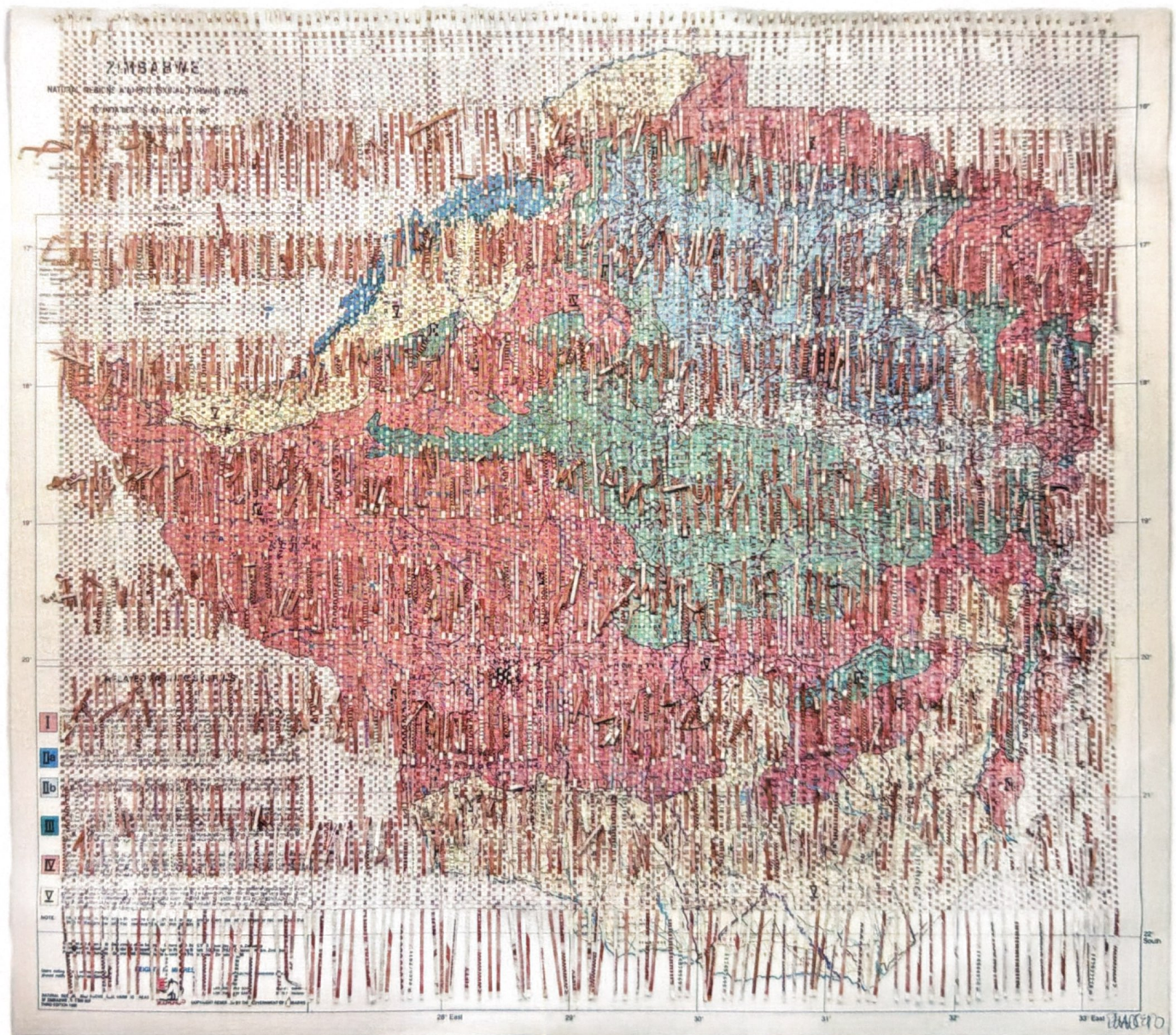
b. 1977, Zimbabwe

One Dollar

2011

Paper

82 × 89 cm (32 1/4 × 35 in.)

Collection of the artist,
courtesy WHATIFTHEWORLD/
GALLERY

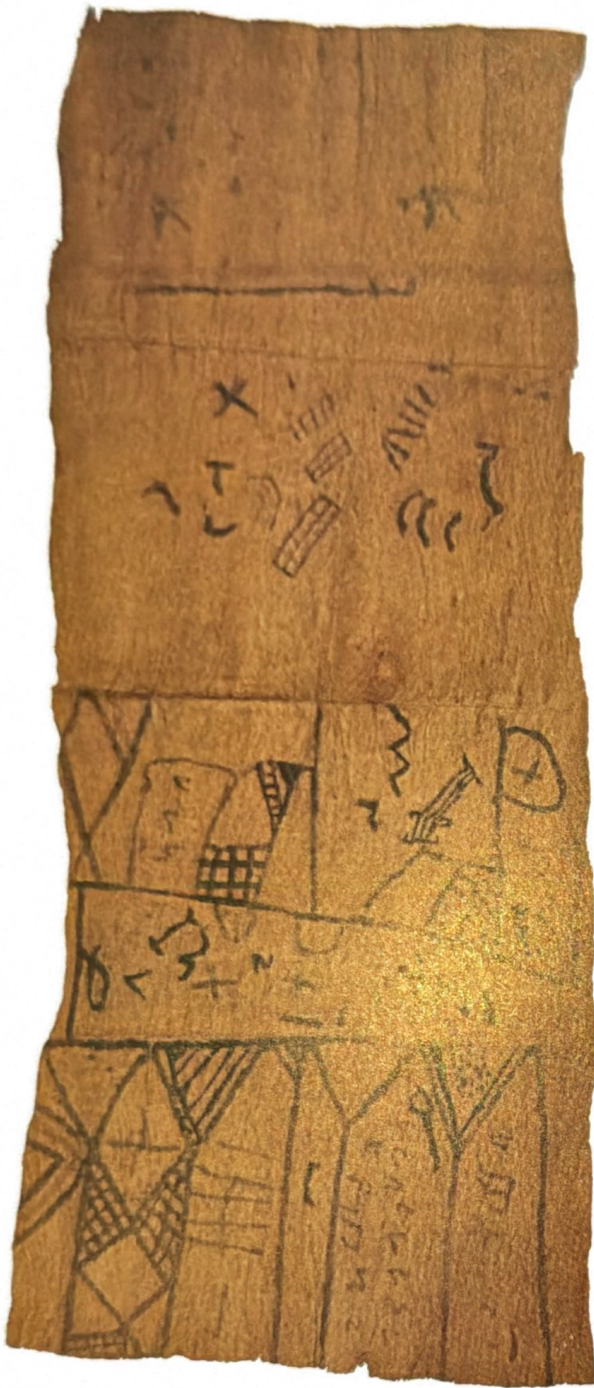


FIG. 153*

Mbuti artist, Ituri forest,
Democratic Republic of
the Congo
Painted bark cloth
Mid-20th century
Bark, pigment
72 × 31.5 cm (28 3/4 × 12 3/8 in.)
Felix Collection

it.¹⁰² Her maps recognize that landscapes are drilled, shelled, pierced, and “hit,” but she implicates each of her viewers in the decisions that shape landscapes and their cartographic representations. Nkanga pokes through our illusions, breaks through barriers between a passive object (be it tactical table or road map) and the viewer, and holds us captive in the tension between the banal and the threat. From this vantage point, we are forced to consider not only who gets to look at maps, but who must live in the spaces they define, and whether or not the inhabitants of these mapped landscapes had any say in shaping their contours or distributing their resources.

Dan Halter knows only too well what, and who, gets left out of maps. Halter is a white Zimbabwean whose family lost their property under Robert Mugabe’s controversial land-redistribution policies. Halter’s personal experiences, historical knowledge, empathy, irony, and razor-sharp wit manifest themselves in his selection of materials, techniques, and subject matter. Under his obsessive hands, maps are cut apart and reconstructed to dizzying effect. Adopting the techniques of women weavers who eke out a living selling baskets on the side of the road, Halter has sliced the pages of phone books with numbers that correspond to lines long since disconnected, has shredded worthless Zimbabwean currency, and has reduced Joseph Conrad’s famous 1899 novella *Heart of Darkness* to narrow strips, which he then meticulously wove into Zimbabwean government land classification maps. Halter describes how, in 2005, he visited the surveyor general’s office in Harare and bought up every map he could find.¹⁰³ As many are now defunct or discontinued, he is left reinscribing a vision of a world that no longer exists—and may never have existed. In *One Dollar*, Halter interlaced a farming region map of Zimbabwe with strips from 300 trillion Zimbabwean dollars, the sum required to purchase one U.S. dollar on the black market during

the height of Zimbabwe’s inflation crisis, a situation caused in part by the government’s policy of seizing farms from white farmers (FIG. 152).

For Halter, blurring the line between textiles and maps, fabrics and fabrications, points to the illusory line dividing fundamental structures and false statements.¹⁰⁴ He describes how these flimsy remnants of history, economics, and culture do not tear as he weaves them into the maps. As one strip ends, he weaves in the next, until the whole piece becomes something new, something “alive.”¹⁰⁵