

LIFE

ACTIVE HEALTH • BIG IDEAS • TRAVEL & FOOD • BOOKS & TECH • ART & ENTERTAINMENT

THE MONTHLY REVIEW

'Furniture for the apocalypse'

● Jackson Hlungwani's prophetic vision urges us to think, anew, about ecological disaster

Alt and Omega: Jackson Hlungwani. Norval Foundation, Cape Town, until June 2021. Curated by Amos Letsoalo, Nessa Liebhammer and Karel Nel.



MARK GEISSER

When I was a boy, growing up in apartheid Johannesburg, "nature" for me meant the pine plantations my father ran on the Eastern Transvaal escarpment. I remember being about 10, running barefoot on the carpet of needles in the light filtered by these trees marching out into a geometric infinity that inspired my awe.

Retrospectively, the only other childhood experience I can relate this to is that of sitting with my father in the Great Synagogue on Wolmarans Street, looking up at the vaulted ceilings while the cantor sang.

Even if the forest and the shul failed to evoke the divine for me, they gave me my first sense of volume, my place in a bigger world, but a man-made one of course, since I knew that my father had planted the trees and that they were destined for the Acme sawmill in the Sabie valley – where I had watched, in another kind of awe, the way the machines stripped them of their majesty and turned them into objects of use.

My father attempted to preserve the majesty of the forest at the homes he and my mother built, with the collaboration of the architect Steffen Ahrends, in Sabie and back home. They found the grandest pine trunks to be used as exposed columns and rafters, holding up steeply pitched ceilings of unpainted pine planks too. I would lie awake for hours, finding insomniac patterns – routes out of my bedroom – in the cross-sections of rings and knots above my bed. But while I still get lost in reverie doing the same now, looking down at the Oregon pine floors of my own century-old house, the patterns feel like contour maps rather than metaphysical portals.

I didn't think I had a childhood memory of transcendent nature, until I wandered through the Norval Foundation's current exhibition – a spectacular survey of the life's work of the sculptor Jackson Hlungwani – and found myself fixating on the wood itself: not just the names of the indigenous trees that he used –

kiaat, jackalberry, large-fruited bushwillow – but the way he found form and meaning and the sublime in them.

Using his tools often very subtly on what nature had already provided in the form of fallen timber and what the elements would weather, it seemed as if his works were a unique collaboration between himself and the natural world – or, as he would put it, God. There is visionary genius in the way he saw a striding angel's legs in the fork of a fallen tree, or a fish's scales in a wood-borer's incisions, or an epic battle between Adam and Eve, between Cain and Abel, in the natural warps of an ancient *ntoma* (jackalberry) tree.

Looking at these works, and particularly the ones where natural forms dominate – such as his other-worldly "thrones" – I was thrown back to another Sabie memory: that of a little pocket of indigenous forest that remained, below the house my father built, in a plantation called Olifantsgeraamte, "Elephant's Remains".

IN AN OUTDOOR CATHEDRAL THAT DOUBLED AS A WORKSHOP AND A GALLERY, HERE IS WHERE HE LIVED, AND WORKED

The name itself conjures mystery, and history, and loss. The only reason this crevasse remained is that it was too steep to plant. It was here, I think, that I had my own first flickering experience of the kind of metaphysical relationship with nature I now witnessed in Hlungwani's work, or that I had read of, myself, as a young man, in the literature of Thoreau or Wordsworth. When we traipsed down to the Olifantsgeraamte waterfall to swim or have a picnic, I would be entranced by the way everything was different, unique, unrepeatable, and made by something other than man: some presence other than my father and his workers.

There are, of course, still such inaccessible portals to the unknowable, all along this



Natural forms: The writer says it seems as if Jackson Hlungwani's works are a unique collaboration between himself and the natural world – or, as he would put it, God. /Merwenele van der Merwe

country's eastern escarpment, and Hlungwani opened one on a forested hilltop at Mbhokota, outside Elim, in Limpopo, a site scattered with the remains of an Iron Age settlement.

In an outdoor cathedral that doubled as a workshop and a gallery, here is where he lived, and worked, and preached, in a place he called the "New Jerusalem".

Entirely without formal education, Hlungwani was the kind of visionary who, in the West, would find himself in a museum or in a madhouse, and in other parts of the world is seen as being close to the divine. Earlier in his life he had been a lay preacher in the Zionist Christian Church; after an epiphany that spared him from suicide in the late 1970s – he had excruciating lesions in his leg, the result of "Satan's arrows", that refused to heal – he found his calling as a prophet. From the altars he created – one to God, one to Christ, now reconstructed at the Norval, with the original pieces – he preached an idiosyncratic redemptive Christianity not only to local villagers looking to be healed from their afflictions, but to urban art-world pilgrims in the '80s and '90s.

The people who began collecting his work or making the pilgrimage up to Mbhokota might have been seeking African authenticity, or spirituality, at a time when this country was seeking to reinvent itself. Perhaps they were also seeking a connection to the country, its earth and its timber, which had perhaps been dislocated by apartheid



'Christ', on Hlungwani's 'Altar to God', originally at New Jerusalem and now in the Wits Art Museum collection. /Norval Foundation

capitalism. In those days "ecology" was not a word with much political freight, but his ecological vision is inescapably the power of his work today.

The curators note in their label for a 4m-high sculpture of a dark and brooding inchoate "God" that Hlungwani had an "animist respect for the shape of life, acknowledging the ways in which matter is shaped by life's processes and that he in turn as a sculptor respectfully chose to enhance and transform ...". The subject of the sculpture, they write, "is both God and the tree – the two collapsing in on each other representing both God and the nature of God. Traditionally, the tree represents life or the link between earth and heaven."

In *Self-Portrait with Drum*, one of Hlungwani's most strikingly innovative works, he renders himself as that link. He carves onto a hollowed-out tree-stump a likeness of himself, with a piece of cowhide as its hair, fixed with pegs alluding (the curators suggest) both to Christ's crown of thorns and the head-ring of a Shangaan chief. In some African cultures, drums are used to communicate with the ancestors, and the artist saw himself, unwaveringly, as a vessel between the divine and the mortal. But walking through his sculptures today, in the secular cathedral that is an art museum, the message I heard was that a coexistence with the natural world is our species' only hope.

One of Hlungwani's most affecting sculptures is a Christ fashioned out of a gnarled *mbhesu* (white kiaat) trunk,

hollowed out by the elements to such an extent that it seems you can see into the figure's brain. But then Hlungwani crowns it with a rusty old ploughshare. There is humour here, and a fine sense of aesthetic balance; wisdom too. Ricky Burnett – the curator who introduced Hlungwani to the art world and first represented him – has noted in his work "a fusion ... of his love of nature and his love of being in the world, of having an imagination".

Hlungwani himself had worked as a manual labourer – he lost a finger in an industrial accident on the Reef – and in one of his earliest works on display, a piece called *Parliament* made in the 1960s, he depicts a hierarchy of self-important men who might be about to break into a Babel of a squabble. But even after his epiphany, and his apparent loss of interest in the affairs of men (he actually saw the world's redemption in the world of women, whom he compared to the fish he loved to carve), his drum-like, tree-like, intercessory identity meant that the world was always present: it needed to be cared for, and protected.

Egg-like orbs populate his sculptures, and we read in the exhibition that Hlungwani liked

THE CURATORS OF JACKSON HLUNGWANI: ALT AND OMEGA MAKE MUCH OF THE SCULPTOR'S INFLUENCES

The context in which both men had their visions was, of course, apartheid SA and then its passage to democracy. Hlungwani references this only obliquely, if at all; the curators see in his work a "vision of SA as a unified nation not separated along racial lines". Certainly, his sculptures yearn for the peace and for unity he preached at his altars. But his consciousness as a black, rural South African, forcibly removed at one point from Venda to Gazankulu, and later subject to the caprice of the art market, remains opaque.

After Hlungwani's brief celebrity, he returned to a life of rural obscurity and died, in poverty, in 2010. In its laudable quest to place Hlungwani in the canon of great SA art, the Norval exhibition does not, adequately, explore this biography, and what it says about black SA life in the 20th century, and the artist's own shifting status as a commodity.

A BATTLE RAGED, IN THE ART WORLD, ABOUT WHETHER THE ALTARS SHOULD HAVE BEEN MOVED INTO MUSEUMS IN THE FIRST PLACE

Nel had been instrumental in initially acquiring the two altars for the Johannesburg Art Museum and the Wits Art Gallery, respectively, in 1989. But moving the sculptures to the city, Nel said, "disrupted Hlungwani's sacred terrain and removed a sense of power from the site." White pilgrims to the New Jerusalem might have sought an encounter with authenticity or spirituality, and report that this otherworldly prophet was not interested in money at all. But MJ Maluleke, a Tsonga-speaking black researcher who spent much time with him and wrote an unpublished 1991 monograph, records bitter disaffection: "An hour would not pass without Hlungwani complaining about people whom he says are enriching themselves with his fortunes."

The money Hlungwani earned, lavished primarily on a feckless son, brought fast cars that were totalled and local feuds with headmen and rivals in the taxi business his son sought to enter. Meanwhile, Hlungwani started training young wood-carvers to work alongside him to make more for the market and bring resources into his community: the art became thinner, receding back

into the status of "curio", and Hlungwani was largely forgotten, particularly as a younger generation of artists established themselves in the 1990s and beyond, with more wordly concerns and nous.

Currently his work is shockingly undervalued in the art market.

A battle raged, in the art world, about whether the altars should have been moved into museums in the first place.

"We all thought it was a tragedy," Nel said, "but the truth is they would no longer exist today, if they were left at Olifantsgeraamte. Time and "progress" march on. If the elements would not have "curated" them into abstraction – the Christ with the ploughshare helmet was already cracking apart in 1989 – they might well have been pawned off or stolen, as indeed the two remaining sculptures were, at Hlungwani's 2010 funeral. The prophet's heirs remain as poor as they have ever been, in a corner of the country as forgotten as those crevasses of wilderness such as exist at Olifantsgeraamte. Time and "progress" march on.

How to think, then, about the value of Jackson Hlungwani's work, in that space between totem and commodity that much great art occupies, and in the context of our world today?

In *To Have and Be Had*, a bracing new collection of essays about whether it is possible to live ethically under capitalism, the African-American author Eula Biss describes an itinerant life: buying and then binning, cheap wooden furniture made by Ikea, "the third-largest consumer of wood" on the planet. The Swedish company, she writes, "has made furniture into something that gets used up. It's furniture for the apocalypse."

I have begun thinking of Hlungwani's sculptures as the opposite kind of "furniture for the apocalypse". Rather than fuel for the bonfire of consumption that is going to – in turn – consume us all, his work offers a redemptive vision for our relationship with the natural world all the more urgent as we hurtle towards ecological armageddon. Thank God, in his altar, Hlungwani has provided us with an escape vehicle, *Cain's Aeroplane*, sort of a canoe, actually, without wings. It is carved out of a trunk of *mbvangazi* (wild teak), and the way he has placed it on his Altar for God makes it seem headed into the earth rather than away from it.

Can we listen to the prophet? Will we take it?



Jackson Hlungwani's 'Hand of God'. /Norval Foundation



Jackson Hlungwani's 'Self-Portrait as Drum'. /Nessa Liebhammer

The latter seems more of a reach than the former, but it is interesting to note, as co-curator Karel Nel does, the way that Hlungwani's life tracks Nelson Mandela's almost exactly: "Both had a vision of a transformed SA within a pan-African context," Nel told me. "One was deeply metaphysical, and the other political."