

PAPER - in conversation with Helena Uambembe 2024/2025

# ***FORMS*** ***UNSETTLED - ON*** **HOME AND OTHER** **MIGRATORY** **LANDSCAPES**

Images by Wolfgang Stahr



## A CONVERSATION BETWEEN

## NISHA MERIT & HELENA UAMBEMBE

*I don't usually have these conversations remotely. Though video calls have become second nature, discussing art and artistic practices without the physical presence of objects, without wandering through a studio and letting ideas take shape in situ feels strangely disconnected and reinforces the slightly schizophrenic nature oscillating between looking at myself and the artist Helena Uambembe. At the time of our conversation, she is in Berlin, where she currently resides, while I am in Johannesburg, where we first met years ago.*

*Meeting in this neither-here-nor-there virtual scenario resonates with Helena's practice, which is deeply rooted in notions of home. Home, one might argue, is a simple and universal concept - an intrinsic part of the human condition. But sometimes, it is not merely a home; rather, it is a meeting point of histories and lives, of converging forces that, for instance, link Pomfret to Frankfurt and suddenly one stands amidst thousands of yellow flowers - endearing at first, yet beneath their charm an acrid sensation, a persisting bitterness, like the weight of historical entanglements, past and present.*

*Through her meticulous installations, Helena crafts subtle visual entry points that lead the viewer into deeper, more complex narratives - connections that unfold into layered histories and, ultimately, a question of complicity.*

*There is a generosity in Helena's engagements, moving between heavy topics and genuine joy. With absolute clarity in her eyes, she holds space for conflicting emotions.*

### **Nisha Merit**

You are an interdisciplinary artist primarily working with printmaking and performance, though you also incorporate installation and photography into your practice. A common thread in your work appears to be an investigation of historical narratives and their ongoing impact, spanning from domestic spaces to societal structures. Could you describe how these various mediums interact and shape your creative process?

### **Helena Uambembe**

I've been thinking about that a lot, especially being quite new in Germany. What *interdisciplinary* means and if it's confusing to people. My practice is one of storytelling. It's about the message rather than just the materiality of the work. Depending on the project and what I want to convey, I will do research on materials and what they mean, where to get that material, where the material comes from, ... Then it will come together as a work. But the connecting themes are of domesticity, revolving around the house, the home and the family. So my practice is me looking at how global history and politics are personal and domestic, because that's how I came to exist and how my community came to Pomfret which is connected to global history and politics - having fled from the civil war in their own country, Angolan men in the refugee camps of Namibia faced the choice of returning home or joining the South African apartheid government's military. With the end of the Cold War and Namibia's imminent independence, the soldiers were transferred to Pomfret in northwestern South Africa in 1989.





## NM

Your installation *Blooming in Stasis: 25.8230° S, 23.5312° E* at the Museum für Moderne Kunst (MMK) showed a deserted piece of land, dusty and unlivable except for these delicate looking yellow flowers that seem to strive against all odds. Bringing Pomfret to Frankfurt as a staged landscape in which the visitor walks through, slowly deciphering what all this means and how it is connected to them, how was it to build this immersive and large scale installation?

## HU

The MMK is a former Zollamt, a customs building, so it's huge and you still see the industrial remnants like the pillars and the flooring. Because it was my first institutional show and spatially that big, I was scared that whatever I did was not going to be good enough but I challenged myself to go big and I was lucky to work with a team and a curator that supported me throughout.

I am really passionate about making statements, and I conquered that fear because I've always wanted to work on a large scale. I respect women who work big, who make sculptures, and who make things that are tangible that people can engage with. So creating with that multidisciplinary aspect of my work, it's about touching all the senses. If you can touch, feel, smell it, you will also have a deeply visceral experience. With the installation at MMK I wanted to evoke the experience that it is all shared - to make people understand what the effects of colonialism are and to realise that it really messed up South Africa and the so-called Global South. I also wanted to work with the earth, to look at these yellow flowers as a cursor of time which are all over Pomfret, they grow wild and are invasive, they now even grow into the houses that are abandoned. Although the village is changing, these flowers are a constant. By putting them on copper wire - about 50 thousand - I am alluding to landmines and bombs. The question was, how to connect Pomfret and its history which is linked to the Cold War - and



the disregard of humans and human life - with what people lived through in Germany with the divide, the wall, which in turn also affected us - it was really hard for Angolans and people in Southern Africa. But how to unpack that? How can we have this conversation of Self and the idea of Europe being this amazing, superior place and the notion that Europeans are always safe and then realising that at any moment, anything could happen? Essentially, the installation looks at the passing of time.

### **NM**

You're raising critical issues, especially in today's context. There's a widespread illusion of a democratic system that, having supposedly learned from history, is viewed as permanent and self-correcting. Yet, this system was built in isolation, often ignoring its historical and contemporary ties, especially those tied to colonial legacies. Preserving this illusion stifles more complex, nuanced discussions that could uncover these connections and reveal the colonial structures still embedded within it. In your work, you often engage with ambiguity, particularly in your material choices. The installation at the MMK, for instance, invites viewers to walk through the landscape you've created, effectively casting them as characters within its layered stories. This setting asks them to take a position both toward and within the narrative. With that in mind, could you share your perspective on working from Berlin, Germany, while actively exploring your South African and Angolan heritage?

### **HU**

My family's heritage is always a reference point. And from there it is about the actual global connections that have shaped it. As much as it is my starting point, it is about the correlation of what happened here and how the threads unfold. The relocation to Germany expanded my world which I'm able to translate into my practice. I have the space to experiment, to make work and I



am developing my mark making and drawing skills. I also realised that my work does deserve a global stage. Germany is a big player in the art industry and the fact that I get to take part in it is amazing. Coming from Pomfret, I feel like if it's possible for me then it is possible for anyone.

There's space for all of us to make and experience and to talk about whatever we want to talk about. And I think that's what I've been enjoying about Berlin particularly, that there is space for everyone and everything. I've been here almost one year, I'm gonna say it in baby years - I've been here for 18 months. And I still keep getting thrown off with things I see and experience but I'm here. I'm doing it and I'm occupying space, I'm occupying people's minds with my work, which I feel good about. I don't have an end goal but I'm glad that my work and my practice is creating chatter and discomfort. Because in discomfort, growth is possible. For me personally, if I'm uncomfortable, I start unpacking and digging and growing. For example, I did a performance at a symposium at the Freiburg University, something I've always wanted to do. I used words that are of interest in Germany - I'm trying to learn German, unsuccessfully except *genau*. So for this performance I used words like *Genozid*, *Schuld*, *entschuldigung*, *genau*, *bitte*.

I wanted to do a performance where the artist and the audience are going to write a poem - a 'Dada-esk' performance since it has origins in Germany. People selected a word from a hat and I would point to them, they would have to read their word and then I would point to another person to read their word. And it kind of became this song for which I was a conductor of *Schuldgefühle*, *Genozid*, or *flüstern*, like to whisper (one of the first things I learned is whispering and being told to be silent after a certain hour). It was so interesting to see a room of mainly European people, the discomfort of having to hear the words in repetition. Are you thinking about what *Schuldgefühle* means? Because it's often used as an excuse, 'we have that German guilt'. But what does guilt mean? And if you are guilty, you try and repent and you apologise, you try and do good

to everyone you've wronged, including those you've committed genocide against in Africa. And you give people's things back.

So I would move on like that for a while then give them a break - it was like a chorus. And then I would point again, and I'll repeat the word, *Genozid*, *Genozid*, *Genozid*. And I would try and put this mechanical voice on. That was really interesting to do. First I was worried because people can get easily offended but it was within a university setting, it was a small group and they understood and they were open to be given things to think about, which I would like my work to do, to give people moments and space to think about what things really mean, and how we feel. I want to create an after effect between a general perception and individual experience.

## NM

It brings to mind your performance *How to Make a Mud Cake* at the Berlin iteration of my exhibition *Soil Conversations*. You used the familiar children's game - an innocent act of making a mud cake and "sharing" it with others on the playground - as a powerful metaphor. The simple ingredients of mud became symbolic, evoking the brutal impacts of colonialism: the atrocities, the loss, the theft of land and lives. Staged like a surreal cooking show, it blended humour and dark truths, oscillating between playfulness and profound discomfort. What draws you to this approach in your work, moving between lightheartedness and challenging subjects?

## HU

It helps me to cope with these hard topics. Making it fun is a way to lure people in and then bait them -, *gotcha!* Because it's really heavy to think about. I remember, when I started interviewing my community and hearing the heaviness of the stories, the loss that people went through, it almost broke me. I had to accept things about my existence and how much violence and trauma is







part of my DNA. And in order for it not to sit and drive me crazy, I had to find ways around it.

I was lucky to have worked with Teresa Kutala Fermino [Johannesburg based multimedia artists, who grew up in Pomfret during the same time] and we found ways to deal with that together through writing fairy tales. And from there I continued to write stories but I made them fun. Living in a military camp, in the middle of nowhere, the women and children would still find time to have fun. There was still time to play. There was still time to do their hair.

I have pictures of my mom and my sisters in curls because they were attending a wedding or a baptism. The women would decorate their homes and compete who had the best decor. They performed normalcy and I took that into my work, bringing in the subtle things because now you live with that violence, but you try to mute it down. It's like that unwelcome guest that's just lingering in the house. We are trying our best, whatever the best means, we're still human in whatever we're going through. And I think joy and choosing to live is a form of resistance.

## **NM**

I admire this quality in your work. The layers you introduce mean it's never just one straightforward idea; instead, your work requires patience and a deeper look to grasp the full scope of what's presented. It encourages caution, curiosity, and a drive to question assumptions. For example, the yellow flowers in Bloom in Stasis—they appear harmless, even beautiful, yet they're invasive, like landmines in disguise...

## **HU**

Because it's never what it seems to be on the surface. And if you look deeper, you can never ever look away again. The world is complex, things feeding into each other, cohabitating. I want to feed people's curiosity. That's why I can't

make work like painting pretty sunflowers, fields of which you find so many in the north of Berlin. But even if I would, what does it mean painting landscapes in a black body? And I would love for black women to just be, and in some ways we are ourselves by doing what we do but because the way the world is set up, it's seen as something rebellious, provocative and revolutionary. But I would just love us to be happy, be carefree, paint that sunflower because it's looking at the sun and I have melanin.

## **NM**

Is there a sense of responsibility, having that historical inheritance that is very personal, at the same time being an artist also means having a platform to visualise things unseen, unspoken? What's your wish?

## **HU**

To exist without fear, that would be ideal. But besides being African, being a woman, the levels of it, no matter where you go, it's always there. I try not to let that dictate how I move, but it's there. It's that lingering feeling. I started feeling a bit more responsible because I got so tired of these dynamics.

There was a time I described myself as a storykeeper because I have these archives I would love to make accessible to my community. I have photographs that I've been entrusted with and I document funerals and weddings. That's where the printmaking and the performance come in, that responsibility of keeping people's stories. Like the people who experienced trauma, the war,... it's not just stories about the military, it's stories about where do I come from, who is Helena Uambembe really? Where is the land, where are the grandparents from, where is home, that's something I've always held on to. And that's why Teresa and I started doing the work, we realised that family isn't just blood - it's community, it's your neighbour. And we are all intertwined. These are the stories, keeping self, keeping identity, keeping an archive of culture and







language. And that's for me the most important part of the work.

## NM

That element of you as a custodian of your community's history - preserving it through your archive and deep engagement with the place and its people is powerful. At the same time, you're an artist who layers, stretches, and reshapes these stories and the materials you use, adding new dimensions to how they're interpreted. What are you working on right now?

## HU

I am making a carpet. What prompted the work and what is prompting a lot of the work I'm doing in general, is trying to understand the militarisation of people in various ways. We constantly have to mobilise and be militant in some ways and on varying levels. So I'm working on this vinyl carpet with patterns using bullets from AK-47 tanks and creating these beautiful intricate patterns. It's also alluding to the linoleum tiles we used to have at home and in many homes across South Africa. People will get to sit and lay down on the work and walk over it. It's titled *Standard Issue*. There's also an aspect of ambient sound that's coming in. It's that trap we were talking about - where you can take your shoes off, lay down and relax and listen to a composition of ambient sound and deconstructed gunshots. The first layer is nice and fluffy...

Most of us don't really care what's happening globally. And although the evidence is there, we just continue. I'm really intrigued what mass mobilisation means? How do we get all to the ground? I don't know. It's that standard issue where we continue with our daily lives while these things are happening.

## NM

Lastly, what's on your current studio playlist that keeps you going?

## HU

I've been listening to Justino Handanga a lot. He is an Umbundu singer from Angola, from Huambo, where my parents are from. And I will listen to him a lot at home. He recently passed away, but I've been feeling more and more connected to his music. I've been using his lyrics for titles for some recent works that I've been doing. I love his music. It gives me comfort. It reminds me a lot of my parents, even how his dialect is like my parents' and some older members of the community who speak Umbundu. And that has been keeping me grounded. And of course, a lot of South African music too.

Nisha Merit aka *Work of Merit* is an independent curator and writer.