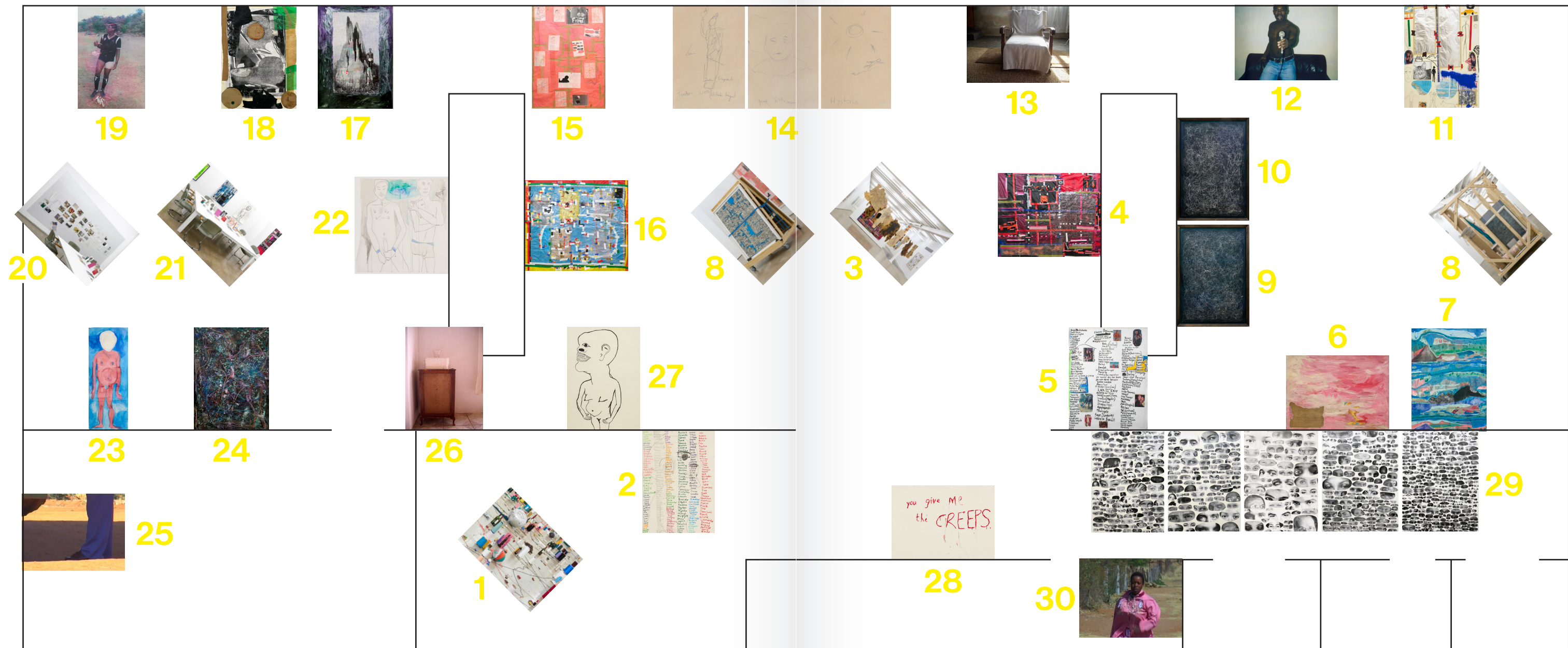


How to make a book

**Moshekwa
Langa**

About the exhibition

We are making a book about Moshekwa Langa. The research is arranged in the style of an exhibition, titled, *How to make a book*. In this hybrid bookmaking environment, we install four different hangs of Moshekwa's artworks over the course of three months, run a series of design tests, and invite practitioners to sit at a table set for conversations (or online, where a visit in the real is not practical). The 'book' in *How to make a book* is a heuristic tool to think through Moshekwa's work, inviting visitors to engage with his artworks while holding an imagined book about the artist in mind. The hope is that applying the lens of 'bookmaking' returns an interesting kind of thinking about Moshekwa's practice. Eventually, a real book about Moshekwa will emerge, its story constructed from the fragments, anecdotes, and research from *How to make a book*.



Hang One

(select works pp. 20–23)

1 *Temporal Distance (with a criminal intent) you will find us in the best places...*, 1997–
Mixed media installation
Dimensions variable

2 *Ulmann*, 2001
Mixed media on paper
122 x 85 cm

3 *Untitled*, 1995
Mixed media installation
Dimensions variable

4 *Untitled*, 2014
Mixed media collage on plastic film
227 x 291 cm

5 *I love my Pashmina*, 2002
Collage and mixed media on paper
150 x 116 cm

6 *Untitled XII*, 2006
Mixed media on paper
100 x 140 cm

7 *Dithabeng*, 2013
Mixed media on paper
162 x 122 cm

8 *Boxes of works*

9 *For John*, 2009
Mixed media on paper
152 x 103 cm

10 *For Nicholas*, 2009
Mixed media on paper
152 x 103 cm

11 *Untitled*, 2001
Mixed media on paper
140 x 100 cm

12 *True Confessions: My Life as a Disco Queen, as told to John Ruskin [1]*, 1998
C-print mounted on aluminium
124.5 x 150 cm

13 *Untitled XVIII Setilo (armchair)*, 2005
C-print
27.9 x 35.6 cm

14 *Select ink drawings on paper*, 1999
Ink on paper
5 drawings, each 21 x 14.5 cm

15 *Ramothibedi*, 2003
Mixed media on paper
200 x 139 cm (framed)

16 *Untitled*, 2011–2013
Mixed media collage on plastic film
227 x 260 cm

17 *Anthill*, 2002/2010
Mixed media on paper
140 x 100 cm

18 *Double Portrait; The absence of silence*, 2018
Mixed media on paper
140 x 100 cm

19 *Magaola*, 2008
Inkjet print
132.5 x 92.2 x 3.5 cm (framed)

20 *Editorial wall*

21 *Table for books and conversation*

22 *Untitled*, 2007
Mixed media on paper
150 x 150 cm

23 *The Day of the Wedding*, 2008
Mixed media on paper
212 x 94 cm

24 *Untitled*, 2004
Mixed media on paper
140 x 100 cm

25 *Where do I begin?*, 2001
Single-channel video, sound
4 min

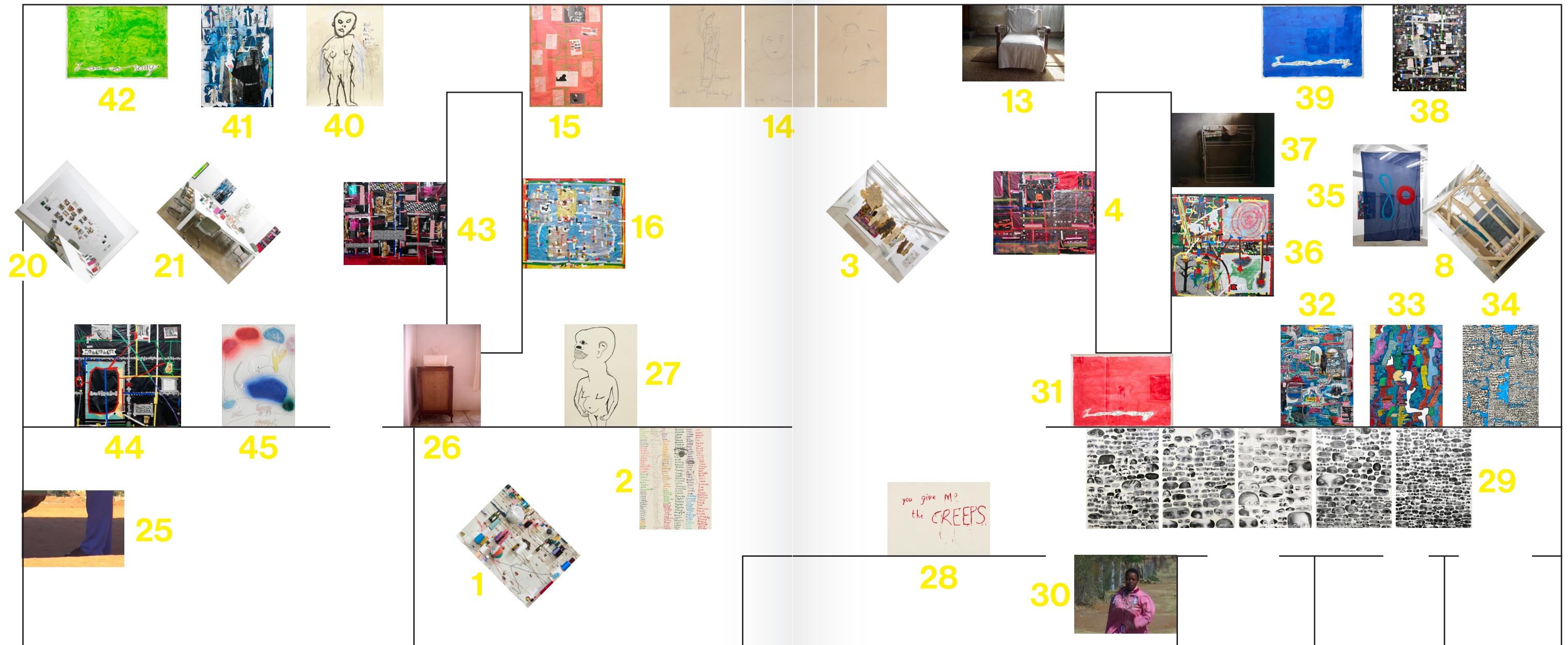
26 *Untitled XX Saepoto (sideboard)*, 2005
C-print
27.9 x 35.6 cm

27 *Night Life I*, 2002
Mixed media on paper
150 x 110 cm

28 *You Give me the Creeps*, 2000
Mixed media on paper
100 x 140 cm

29 *Untitled*, 2004
Mixed media on paper
140 x 100 cm

30 *Martha*, 2011
Single-channel digital video, sound
7 min 19 sec



Hang Two

(select works pp. 28–33)

31 *I am so sorry, Red, Green, and Blue*, 2001
Gouache and pencil on paper
100 x 140 cm

32 *John and Nicholas*, 2011/14
Mixed media on paper
140 x 100 cm

33 *Untitled*, 2005
Mixed media on paper
140 x 100 cm

34 *Mkwenyana (Son in Law)*, 2006
Mixed media on paper
140 x 100 cm

35 *Dor*, 1998
Fabric flag
290 x 188 cm

36 *Collapsing Guide II*, 2000–2003
Mixed media collage on plastic film
236 x 234 cm

37 *Untitled II*, 2005
C-print
27.9 x 35.6 cm

38 *Untitled*, 2013
Mixed media collage on plastic film
200 x 137 cm

39 *I am so sorry, Red, Green, and Blue*, 2001
Gouache and pencil on paper
100 x 140 cm

40 *No More Drama*, 2004/5
Mixed media on paper
122 x 85 cm

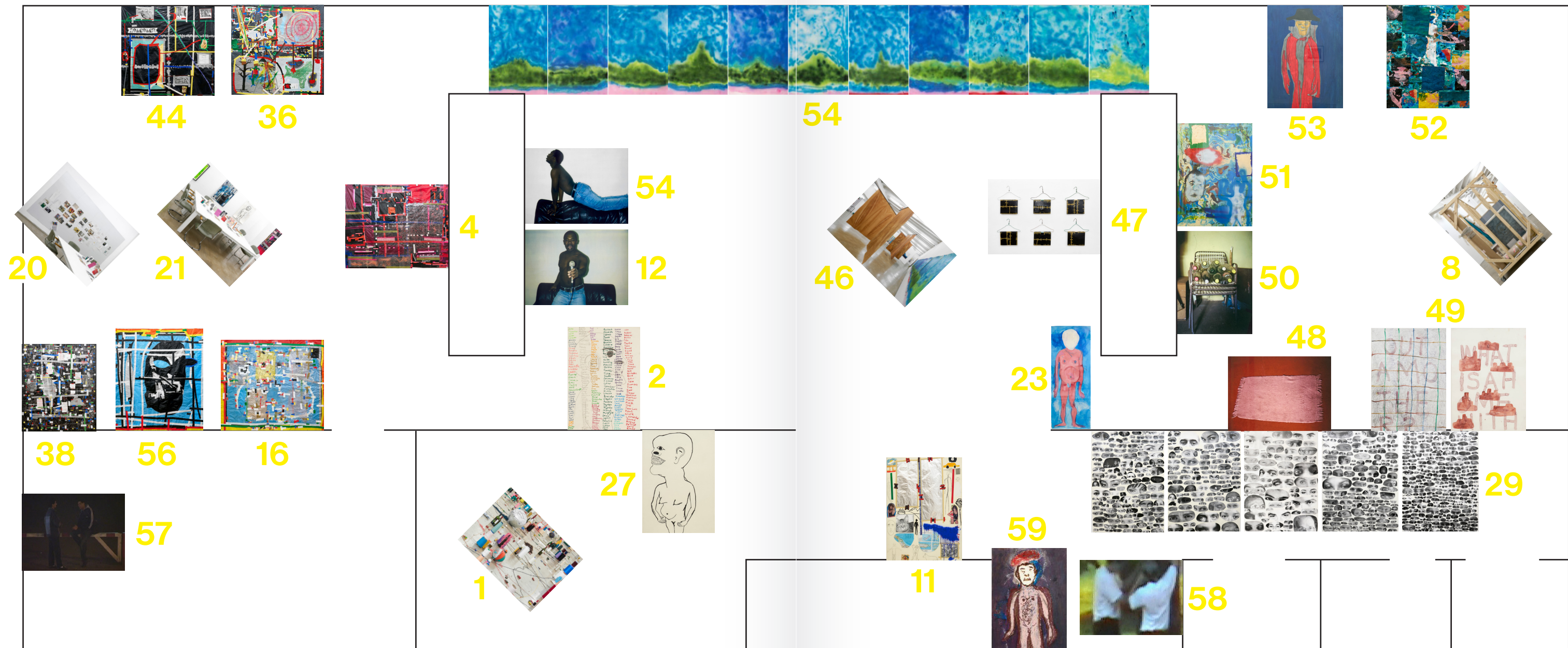
41 *Waiting in the Wings*, 2012/14
Mixed media on paper
140 x 100 cm

42 *I am so sorry, Red, Green, and Blue*, 2001
Gouache and pencil on paper
100 x 140 cm

43 *Untitled*, 2014
Mixed media collage on plastic film
275 x 230.5 cm

44 *Collapsing Guide IV*, 2000–2003
Mixed media collage on plastic film
252 x 244 cm

45 *Music Man*, 1998–1999
Mixed media on paper
140 x 100 cm



Hang Three

(select works pp. 38–45)

46 *Drag Paintings*, 2016
Soil and lacquer on canvas
Installation dimensions variable

47 *Untitled (telephone directories)*, 1995
Telephone directories, plastic vinyl, packaging tape and coat hangers
Installation dimensions variable

48 *Untitled XIII Mmetse (rug)*, 2005
C-print
27.9 x 35.6 cm

49 *What is a home without a mother*, 2008
Mixed media on paper, diptych
Each panel 149 x 109 cm (framed)

50 *Untitled III Botlolo di empty (empty bottles)*, 2005
C-print
27.9 x 35.6 cm

51 *hand thrown distance*, 2000
Pen, pencil, acrylic, enamel and spray paint on paper
140 x 100 cm

52 *Dawn*, 2021/2023
Mixed media on paper
152.5 x 124 cm

53 *Socialite*, 2006
Mixed media on paper
140 x 100 cm

54 *The Islands*, 2015
Mixed media on paper
Installation dimensions variable

55 *True Confessions: My Life as a Disco Queen, as told to John Ruskin [2]*, 1998
C-print mounted on aluminium
124.5 x 150 cm

56 *Untitled*, 2011–2013
Mixed media collage on plastic film
256 x 228 cm

57 *Bus Stop*, 2001
Single-channel digital video, sound
25 min 47 sec

58 *Bull*, 1995/1997
Single-channel digital video, sound
6 min 6 sec

59 *Hairy Chest*, 2007
Mixed media on paper
140 x 100 cm



Hang Four

(select works pp. 48–49)

1 *Temporal Distance (with a criminal intent) you will find us in the best places...*, 1997–
Mixed media installation
Dimensions variable

About the artist

Moshekwa Langa, b.1975, Bakenberg
Works between Amsterdam and South Africa

—
Ask Moshekwa Langa to speak to an artwork, and he returns a series of detailed anecdotes across time, place, and scale. “I am an episodic river,” he offers –

There is so much urgency around making... I'm always doing things, working out things that are disturbing, difficult, impossible, latent through my hands. When I pause, I have to stop and name everything. The objects are extracted from the river, the outpouring... Everything is shorthand – notes upon notes, confluences and influences. Where am I in that?

Reading Moshekwa's artworks recalls the stream-of-consciousness style of James Joyce. He recounts his experience of coming upon the latter's *Ulysses* (1918–1920), fresh out of high school, as significant. “Later, when I was becoming an artist with a career, I would arrive at places and I would not have had a formal education in art, which was difficult for people who studied for their degrees over four years to accept. But I had read things, and made, and learned. I had poured over *Ulysses* at least twice, cover-to-cover, developing my vocabulary because there were many things I did not understand and at the same time I was mesmerised.”

The text compelled, beguiled and frustrated the young artist. One can sense, in Moshekwa's materially limber records of becoming and displacement, traces of the observations – in colour and manner – of Joyce's alter-ego and protagonist in the first chapters of *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus. (Dedalus appears in this novel, aged 22, grappling with early adulthood after his bildungsroman in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 1916.) In *Ulysses*, Dedalus recalls a dream of his mother's death, a materially rich encounter with wax and rosewood, her breath, that had bent upon him, mute, reproachful, a faint odour of wetted ashes. *What is a home without a mother?* (2008) mourns one of Moshekwa's paintings, in which red washes faintly browned resemble the colour of dried blood. Or in Moshekwa's paint, crayon and watercolour landscapes, one might find Dedalus' *snotgreen sea. The scrotum tightening sea*. So too, can one hear Moshekwa in Buck Mulligan's camp inflections (Dedalus' social parrying partner and foil), particularly through the artist's wry explanations. *What? Where? I can't remember anything. I remember only ideas and sensations*, says Mulligan. And Moshekwa – “I have no memory, at least not in the conventional sense,” before listing, with encyclopaedic accuracy, the time, place, and people who were present in the very moment he made a work, irrespective of whether one or thirty years have since passed.

The artwork that first brought him renown in 1995, made from repurposed cement bags, set the tone for Langa's unfolding practice, marked by a distinct material confidence and economy of means. *Untitled*, assembled at his mother's home in KwaMhlanga and informally referred to by curators and critics at the time as 'Skins', was exhibited at the Rembrandt van Rijn Gallery in Johannesburg and later acquired by the Iziko South African National Gallery in Cape Town. This precipitous success was shortly proceeded by the artist's two-year residency at Rijksakademie, during which time he participated in biennales including Johannesburg, Istanbul, and Havana (all 1997), a list to which he added in the following decade to include both São Paulo and Venice twice over (1998/2010 and 2003/2009 respectively), Lyon in 2011. Berlin and Dakar followed in 2018. Reading his works as indexes of memory, one can experience crossing over that suspension bridge between the "small communities" of youth into the world overseas. By his own measure, he was at the time "formed but unformed, uninformed," finding meteoric fame in the post-apartheid optimism of the late 1990s. The experience – of being South African, black, always feeling other, living in a foreign country under the glare of artworld limelight – was a mixed blessing. Much like the title of an early photograph from 1998, he felt *Far Away From Any Scenery He Knew or Understood*. Having stepped into this astounding number of international biennales so quickly, the funding opportunities one might suppose follow an art career of significant international renown had not yet caught up. By European and American standards, he was "skint", "arriving with my small bag of tricks and making it all happen", a singular practitioner, inexperienced to the ways of big cities, of art world opulence, yet gathering and making use of the substances and mediums in his vicinity, whether plastic or cement bags, nail polish, candle wax and crayon, ink, watercolour, pencil, or dust.

This immediacy of working with materials arising from the location in which the artist finds himself invariably becomes its own kind of social record – a gesture towards time-keeping and a subjective mapping of place. Langa's work is perhaps fugitive, an adjective he has offered up to describe his practice, in that the artist's subject is more often transitory, of a moment soon passed, a self-portrait of the self in all its flux and complexity.





Untitled, 1995

“How to make a drawing that depicted life?... I was eighteen or nineteen. I had very mixed feelings, already into my matriculation at the end of school. I tried to write about my experience of how I came to be the young man I was, and I knew I didn’t have the patience of a writer. I would try to extend the explanation, and thought that one day I would have a big pile of paper and make these beautiful drawings. I started with A4 exercise books and tape, but what I am seeing around me, in this growing township where I live, are these cement bags blowing in the wind. I’m writing and beginning to make diagrams on the cement bags, and I decide, I like them the way that they are, I don’t need to reconfigure them. Somewhere between making pencil lines on the cement bags, I decided, maybe, these would be a thing in and of themselves. But the dust and drawings kept coming off. I took candle wax, and I would go over the drawings that I had made. It became a process that grew on me, and then I used bitumen from the roof, Jeyes fluid, improving everything and using things around me. I found that I could be ok with what I made. Whatever I was making, it was always very important to shape myself out of the surroundings that I found myself in. I was shaping myself, leaving boarding school and wondering how I would become as a person – there was no clarity that I would be a successful artist, I didn’t know how that could come about. I decided I would continue making things in a way that was acceptable



and exciting to me.” (Moshekwa Langa, October 2024, in conversation at A4 for *How to make a book*).

This work is on loan from the Iziko South African National Gallery. It was first exhibited in 1995 at Langa’s debut solo show that was held at the Rembrandt Van Rijn Gallery under director Steven Hobbs. As a byproduct of its euphoric reception by critics, it acquired the moniker ‘Skins’. In 1996, Langa sent SANG’s director a fax expressing his reticence at the work being acquired. “My headspace is very much cluttered with various references to the work in question,” he wrote, underscoring his feelings towards the interpretations and meanings that became tacked onto the work through its showing.

Ramothibedi, 2003

Encountering *Ramothibedi*, the accompanying label reveals itself lacking. 'Mixed media on paper' might do for the coincidence of established mediums – watercolour, oil stick, pastel, etc. – on a shared substrate, but here says nothing of the artist's material dexterity. The label would perhaps better include a more exhaustive list: assorted studio detritus, sketches torn from a notebook, facsimiles, packaging tape, biro, glue or varnish, words and phrases. Among the texts written in sloping script, the name 'Ramothibedi' is repeated, as are the phrases 'Le bonheur qui se t'ai donne' (*The happiness that was given to you*) and 'Contre ma volonté' (*Against my will*). In block letters, partially obscured, 'PASSION FRUIT' is inscribed in white paint; a pencil drawing of two figures – father and son? A young man surveying his older self? – accompanied by the caption 'Rolling Stone'. The texts, taken together, afford no clarity, performing as obscure coordinates.

Included in *Ramothibedi*'s collaged elements are traces towards a later series of untitled, greyscale works (all 2004) composed of cut-out eyes photocopied from magazines and newspapers, five of which are featured in *How to make a book*. Seen together, the two modes of making offer insight into the generative spillage that occurs between Langa's works and the accumulative form of their compositions.





Hang
Two



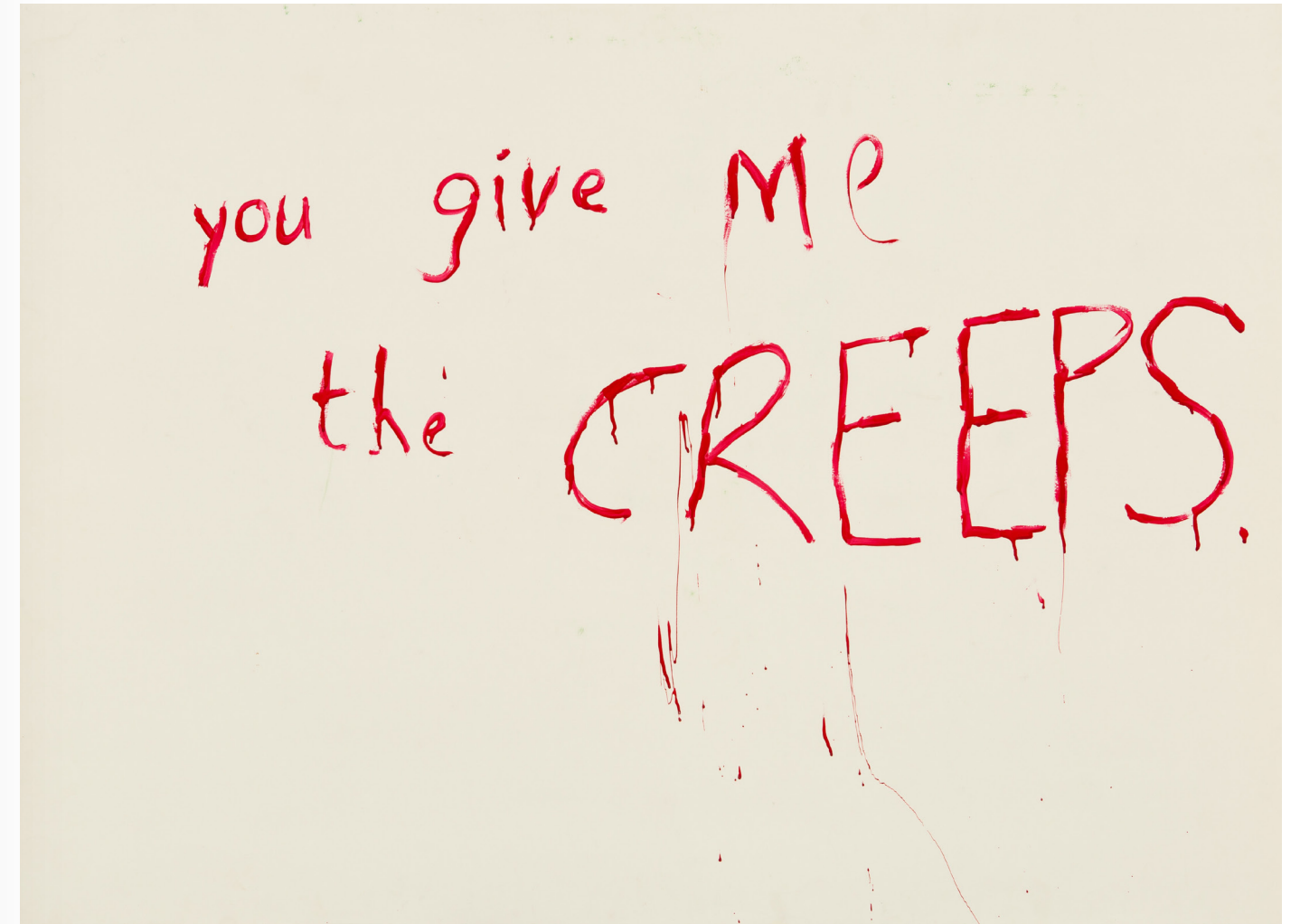
Hang
Two

Mkwenyana (Son in Law), 2006 and other *Index* drawings

“Many things have happened to me, around me, and away from me,” Langa says. “I do not remember them sequentially. I remember some of them... I recollect certain things.” *Mkwenyana (Son in Law)* is a gesture against forgetting. Whether living in Amsterdam, or finding himself travelling from one biennale to another site-specific installation for an international exhibition, Langa found himself adrift from the small communities in which he had always grown up in, whether his home town of Bakenberg, or the Waldorf boarding school based on the principles of Rudolf Steiner he attended for his last years of high school in Pretoria. “There were too many stimuli at once, and everything was slippery. I needed something to ground myself...” Langa said of his note-taking in a conversation towards *You to Me, Me to You*, an exhibition in A4’s Gallery. “Shorthand became the material for me to make sense of my world.” The words written are seldom linear, arranged as they are in constellations of associations and synonyms. Committing to paper past impressions, Langa allows the remembered and invented to coincide. Memory, he suggests, is fluid and indefinite, necessarily nonfactual – “what I make are a series of mental annotations and every time they are told differently.” As a stream of consciousness made visible, each word-image becomes a marker, “an anchor...notes for things I would rather not forget.”



You Give me the Creeps, 2000



“At the Rijksakademie, it was on trend to talk about the death of painting. From where I was coming from, and how everything was quite wonderful and new for me, the narrative of, *I can't be a painter because it's the death of painting* was not going to be a conversation that was very nurturing to me. I could sidestep it – I was someone not really working with oil paint, which was too expensive in any case. I thought, well, I can work with make-up, and not involve myself in a lot of these conversations. Instead of rubbing things out, I used Tippex. I used ballpoint pen, I worked within my means, adaptable within the money and budget that I had. Where I grew up, people still read those photo-romance paperbacks. I recalled one story in there about a woman who slept with a guy who gave her an STD. She took make-up and wrote on the vanity mirror, *the curse will get you too*. This creepiness stayed with me, and the 'creepy' works written in nail polish absorbed this from there.” (Moshekwa Langa, October 2024, in conversation at A4 for *How to make a book*.)

Untitled, 2011-2013
Untitled, 2014
and other plastic works

“I was very skint. There was a cobbler in the town Diepsloot and I asked if he could stitch together these groundsheets. At the time, I was running out of material. I began to reuse some of the threads again, a beautiful way to keep recycling material but also to let me just zig zaggey boogie woogie with the materials. I said, *I’m working on plastic and drop sheets, can you put everything together?* I took things to his house and he kept everything structured and sound, it may look haphazard but it is important to me that things hold. I also collected shopping bags – free to use – and I reconfigured patterns into these compositions. I went to Belgium in 2014, the studio was an old post office and didn’t really have a budget, and so I found these reddish-pink plastics that the local municipality used. I thought I had lost all of these previous works, from the Lyon Biennale and elsewhere. I had space, little money, and I didn’t know anybody. I went to town and found these. That time in 2014 in Belgium was a way of recovering things I thought were lost.” (Moshekwa Langa, October 2024, in conversation at A4 for *How to make a book.*)





Hang
Three



Hang
Three

Where do I begin?, 2001 ***Martha, 2011***



Two videos included in *How to make a book* stand as a metonym for Langa's moving-image works: *Where do I Begin?* (2001) and *Martha* (2011). Though separated by a decade, both feature his hometown of Bakenberg, Limpopo, offering a direct record of a place to which he more obliquely returns in memory and mixed media. "From his earliest works, produced in the mid-1990s when he was not yet twenty," art writer Tracey Murinik suggests, "Bakenberg became for Langa a deeply personal marker of relative distance from wherever else he found himself or felt himself or had to explain himself."

At the time a small village, Bakenberg did not appear in apartheid-era maps of the surrounding area, then KwaNdebele, a designated 'homeland'. That Langa grew up in a place without corresponding cartography, without road signs or street names, unmarked until the new political dispensation, proved formative in his continued preoccupation with notation and mapping. Now a mining town, Bakenberg is again at risk of disappearing – not in official listings but on the ground. An open-pit platinum mine has begun encroaching on the town's southern boundary, the far edge of the prospecting rights cleaving Bakenburg in two; the geographical fulcrum around which so many of Langa's preoccupations turn threatened by industrial creep.

Included in the artist's *Fresh* residency exhibition at the South African National Gallery in 2002, *Where do I Begin?* takes its title from Shirley Bassey's 1971 song (*Where do I begin*) *Love Story*. Filmed in a lo-fi digital format, the handheld camera trains on the feet of people waiting in line to board a bus while a short excerpt from Bassey's song recurs in a seamless loop as the soundtrack. The earth of Bakenberg serves as backdrop. Canvas lace-ups, polished brogues, dusty sandals – the feet move forward in slow progression, hesitating before stepping up and out of frame. This otherwise unremarkable scene, coloured by Bassey's repeated refrain, assumes a pervading sense of loss, and with it, the conflicting desires to return and to depart. Like the song's unanswered question, the footage too loops, and the line at the bus stop draws out – without beginning or end.

In *Martha*, the artist turns his camera to his childhood friend and neighbour, Martha Mbiza, the artist as cameraman running after her down an untarred Bakenberg street. Trying and failing to hold her in frame, the image shifts between her bare feet pounding the earth and the sky above her head, the horizon line moving jaggedly across the screen. The effect is close, almost abstract, all rhythmic footsteps and heavy breathing – with the exception of two brief moments, in which the camera assumes a momentary stillness (Martha, however, continues running). A smile passes over her face, as too does a look of concern, and she waves her hand as if to flag a passing car or to gesture at something in the far distance. Gold necklaces bounce against her pink shirt, a handbag swings from her arm; she is all dressed up yet shoeless, lending their inexplicable action the guise of a game. But there is longing here, too. As art historian Gabriella Nugent writes, Martha perhaps exemplifies:

[S]ome kind of rootedness that the artist cannot attain but is forever chasing. After leaving Bakenberg, Langa could only ever return as an outsider, with experiences of elsewhere that set him apart. As though to emphasise the contrast between them, Martha does not go anywhere in the video, only around the block and back.



Drag Paintings, 2016

The artist's *Drag Paintings* (2016) are perhaps the 'truest image' of Bakenberg, physically made by the place they record – each a Veronica's Veil, a direct impression, of the town's dusty roads and laterite soil. Driving the dirt roads, dragging a canvas out back of the vehicle, the speed, the untarred routes, the place performs the painting. These are given without intervention, the stained lengths of canvas appear to the artist as "locked documents", their images set by lacquer, each a fixed artefact from the landscape of his childhood.



True Confessions: My Life as a Disco Queen, as told to John Ruskin, 1998

“I staged myself as a main character in a romance by myself. Lost in translation, as I was in Amsterdam, I was performing that gay soft-core porn thing, hanging from the rafters. The Polaroid was the perfect thing. What is one supposed to do, I kept wondering, as an artist? Everywhere else I had been, magazines were used as wallpaper in homes. I was discovering myself.” (Moshekwa Langa, October 2024, in conversation at A4 for *How to make a book.*)





Temporal Distance (with a criminal intent). you will find us in the best places..., 1997–

Temporal Distance (with a criminal intent) you will find us in the best places... (1997–) finds slight shift in form and shape across iteration and repetition. The materials travel, boxes are unpacked, photographs of past installations become references. Placing the installation in the room involves improvisation. Colourful threads connect a large mirrorball and several of its smaller friends and relations to vintage toy cars, plastic fir trees, empty alcohol bottles, small toy creatures and characters, fax paper, thread unspooling from large machine reels, and balls of wool. Even its name takes on slight adjustments or losses, becoming more colloquial along its travels, where various custodians and critics add capital letters, drop an 'a', perhaps neglect a once-used phrase. In 2004, Colin Richards wrote of *Temporal Distance (with a criminal intent) you will find us in the best places...*: "This is a contingent, lightly felt network... the cars were imported and the bottles collected in Cape Town, marking a very particular libidinal and financial economy in that region, where vineyard workers were paid in wine." It is most likely that Richards got the name right, and that alterations have occurred since. In 1997, he curated the work onto Graft (South African National Gallery, for the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale). In 1999 it was shown at the Renaissance Society in Chicago. Perhaps the most magnificent photograph of the work is from its installation at the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009, between those grand brick columns and worn plaster. At A4, a portion of the work was installed at the landing to our gallery for *How to make a book* and remained there throughout the course of three hangs as artworks were exchanged for others. The fourth hang saw this work only, installed as quick research project for a single day across the entire gallery floor, (and beginning to climb the stairs towards our offices). Seeking a view of this 'map' from above, we flew a drone across the gallery. For a few short moments, a great wind visited the town of *Temporal Distance*. The thread billowed, a single plastic tree tipped over, the fax paper rattled.





Moshekwa Langa | How to make a book
Wayfinder, 2024

—
Design: Ben Johnson
Editor: Sara de Beer

Texts by Lucienne Bestall and Sara de Beer with quotes from Moshekwa Langa in conversations with the artist towards this process

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A4

**10 Aug —
23 Nov '24**