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## CONTENTS

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### EXPOSURE

- 7 Latest work by various Artists/Ceramists

### FEATURES

- 9 Modisa Tim Motsomi; Post-Colonialism? Exhibition at the Benyamini Contemporary Ceramic Centre, Israel.  
13 Greg Barron & Jin Ling: A Sustainable Life – Building on Experience - Penny Hoets & Greg Barron  
19 A Review of Socio-Political Expression in Contemporary South African Ceramic Figuration in the Works of Fifteen Artists Part 2 - Ann Marais

### EXHIBITIONS

- 25 CSA Western Cape Regional Exhibition - Wendy Coleman

### IN MEMORIAM

- 29 Chris Patton – Ronnie Watt

### INTERVIEW

- 31 John Shirley – interviewed by Colleen Lehmkuhl

### PERSONAL JOURNEY

- 33 There is a plum tree in my garden - Charleen Brunke

### INSPIRATION

- 37 Fire for Effect - Amelia Jacobs

### TEACHING STUDIOS

- 39 Information regarding teaching studios

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**Back Cover:** clockwise from top left: Maartin Zaalberg; Carol Hayward Fell; Christine Williams; Sue Meyer.

**Front Cover:** Modisa Tim Motsomi

**Content page:** 9 Modisa Tim Motsomi, 13 Greg Barron, 9 Nicolene Swanepoel, 25 Ralph Johnson, 33 Charleen Brunke, 31 John Shirley



# Modisa Tim Motsomi

Wendy Gers in conversation with Modisa Tim Motsomi  
regarding the Post-Colonialism? Exhibition at the  
Benyamini Contemporary Ceramic Centre, Israel.



Article by Wendy Gers

Photographs Zamir Nega, Shay Ben Efraim and Yael Gur

The Benyamini Contemporary Ceramics Centre is a non-profit organisation that promotes all aspects of the ceramic arts, and includes a gallery, shop, studios, ceramics school, library and archives. It was established in the 2001 in a vibrant arts hub in south Tel Aviv. In late 2016 and early 2017 the Benyamini hosted an international cross-cultural residency and exhibition project, *Post Colonialism?* guest-curated by Wendy Gers. Together with the Louise Bourgeois exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum & the Ai Wei Wei show at the Israel Museum, *Post-Colonialism?* has been recognised as one of the ten most important Israeli art events of 2017.

From 2015, over a period of about thirty months, this exhibition was conceived, confirmed and produced. The project required local Israeli and Palestinian artists as well as international artists-in-residence to question the current situation in Israel and develop original, personal works which responded to the central question, 'What is the significance of post-colonialism in contemporary Israel and beyond?' The open call for participants in February 2015 resulted in 85 applications, and the 19 finalists represented an impressive international diversity, hailing from Argentina, Botswana, Canada, England, Germany, India, Israel, Palestine, Taiwan and the USA.

The resulting exhibition, *Post-Colonialism?* was an eclectic artistic inquiry into specific modern and contemporary colonial practices. Participating artists (ten from Israel and nine international) explored ideological, socio-political, cultural and environmental issues within Israel. Collectively the works were dispatches of rage, disgrace and compassion. Many of the works engaged in forms of artistic and intellectual resistance via the creation of counter narratives, strategies of subversion, mimicry, pastiche, parody and hybridity. However, the 'post' in post-colonialism clearly has not arrived, and the works on exhibition were primarily engaged with aspects of contemporary settler colonisation. *Post-colonialism?* mapped volatile constellations of land, occupation, borders and

checkpoints; maimed, moulded and manipulated bodies; transnational flows of capital and commodities and diasporic itinerancies. Most of the works were anti-monuments linked by a generosity of spirit and the necessity to speak out against occupation.

*Gers: How did you hear of the Post-Colonialism? Residency & Project?*

Motsomi: In 2015 I first heard of the project from Wendy Gers, whilst I was at the University of KZN. She had come into the ceramic studios to have a look around and had seen some of the works in progress in my studio. At the time the project was in its infancy stage and she recommended that I keep a look out for the project online and apply when the opportunity became available. I wasn't sure what the project involved and where it was. I was also very aware that my having met Wendy didn't mean I would automatically be accepted, as there was a strict application process in place and so many great ceramic artists would be applying.

*Gers: Was the experience of working with a professional Curator beneficial to you?*

Motsomi: Working with an experienced curator was very beneficial. Prior to the exhibition, Wendy and the Benyamini staff took it upon themselves to travel across the country to meet with, see and discuss each artist's work. This proved very valuable considering that they brought fresh perspectives and ideas for consideration to the works in progress. Through the conversations, some of which were very difficult for the artists, as is evident in the documentary of the project, we all gained certain insights that we might not have previously considered. I think that it also helped streamline our ideas so that the works were more concise to the framework of the narrative at hand.

The international artists and I chose to come to Israel to obtain first-hand insights and experiences to make informed decisions. The experience of living, working and travelling in Israel has confirmed our resolution to respectfully speak out.





*Gers: Can you tell us about your residency? What were the highlights? In addition, what were the challenges?*

Motsomi: During the residency I was primarily based in Kiryat Tivon at Oranim International College, near Haifa in northern Israel. I was offered a sizeable workspace inside the ceramic studios and all was provided for me. I had previously asked for certain materials to be able to complete the intended work and was fortunate that everything was sorted out by the time I arrived in Israel.

Many of the highlights during the residency took place outside of the studio. I was fortunate to have been linked up with a curator in the area, Shir-Meller Yamaguchi, and through her I was able to experience Israel's amazing museum culture. The other great highlight was meeting everyone involved in the project; from the other artists in residence based in other parts of the country, and the Benyamini Staff who were so friendly and helpful. It was through them that setting up the exhibition, and their various insights into each of the artists, that made the final exhibition a great success.

As expected the language barrier is always difficult in a foreign country, and as a result on one of my solo trips in Tel Aviv I got lost. Luckily I was able to retrace my route and find my way. In hindsight, the incident was positive challenge because I got to see an area of Tel Aviv that I wouldn't have seen otherwise!

The international artists and I chose to come to Israel to obtain first-hand insights and experiences to make informed decisions and work with Wendy, the Benyamini team and our respective host institution. The experience of living, working and travelling in Israel was extremely interesting. The challenge which all the participating artists faced was the apprehension, to some extent, of being a little bit too critical of the authorities. Being mindful and respectful yet simultaneously critical was the resolve, and I think that because the works on display used metaphor and symbolism to great effect all the works had a poignant subtlety.

*Gers: How do you feel about the Cultural boycott in Israel?*

Motsomi: Prior to the residency I had many conversations with regard to this issue, many of which were against my participation in such an event. I think that having been to Israel and having garnered the little experience within the month I spent there my viewpoint is that a cultural boycott is not the most effective means through which to try change the situation. Many of the people I met in Israel were not of the stereotypes that are envisioned through the media. I think that having heard some of the personal stories I have become more empathetic to the situation, for both sides. Granted there are many problems in relation to Israel and its occupation of Palestine which has been further exacerbated by certain entities of late. I think that projects of this nature help highlight a way forward that is more discursive and less violent and I am proud to have been part of such an adventurous and brave project. The success of it alone shows that art can still be relied on to shed light on our current world circumstances and hope more projects of this nature can be conducted in the future.

*Gers: How has your experience in Israel made an impact on your understanding of the region?*

Motsomi: Israel is one of the most complex countries I have ever been to and I don't believe that one month is enough time to fully understand the complexities of the situation of Israel and its relationship to the rest of the Middle East. It's both a very beautiful and cultured space, but it has a very ugly and perplexing side to it. My hope is to make a return trip, so that I can have a better understanding that will afford me a better opinion of the area and the situation.

*Gers: Did your work evolve in respect to the original proposal? If yes, How?*



Motsomi: The work did evolve, and I had expected that to be the case. When writing out a proposal for the project I had kept in mind that if I was going to work on an installation the parameters of the space and how the work related to the space would in some way be a definitive measure of what was possible and what was not possible. I didn't however consider the time constraints and eventually amalgamated the three ceramic components of the installation into one sculpture. What was most interesting was my subconscious desire to consume as much space as possible which in retrospect was a talking point, part of the project in terms of ideas surrounding invasion and appropriation of geographic space.

*Gers: Please tell us more about your work, 'Terra Incognita, Terra Nullius, Terra Pericolosa'.*

Motsomi: The work consisted of a large mixed media sculpture and wall intervention. It focused on multi-layered meanings of body, land, memory and mapping. It was a site-specific response to diasporic flows, control and statehood as well as the invisibility of migrants.

*Gers has described my project as follows:*





## FEATURE Profile

Motsomi investigated various contested dualities, including place and space, the 'native' and the 'other', the whole and the partial. His project embodies metanarratives of identity and relation to geographic contextualisation. The installation incorporates 'tapet', a local vinyl adhesive product for covering walls and shelves. He used this material as a trompe l'oeil covering for the plinth as well as on the wall, where it maps space, creating and defining a patchwork of layered terrains. This popular material evokes simulated marble and serves as a metaphor for the artifice of luxury and the symbolic act of dominion over vast resources.

The metaphor of artifice is also evoked in the glazing of the figurative sculptural form that connotes metallic, bronze-like qualities. The use of the plinth and the stacked and layered qualities of the sculpture also evoke histories of conquest and notions of trophies. Topographical mapping practices are incorporated into the vinyl and onto the ceramic forms. This highlights the visible and invisible negotiations inherent in the map-making process, and imaginatively play with the notion of defining, naming and claiming land and assumptions of sovereignty.

*Gers: What are the benefits of an international residency for a young artist like yourself?*

Motsomi: The residency had many benefits. Being the youngest artist on the programme meant that I was able to learn a great deal from the artists who were far more experienced than I was at the time. Through our interactions we learnt of each other's practices and shared many ideas. I also think that being in an unfamiliar environment lends itself well to finding new ideas and inspiration.

*Gers: A year down the line, has this exhibition opened or closed doors for you?*

Motsomi: Most certainly the exhibition and project have had a positive effect on my career. I think that validation through such an impressive project has definitely opened doors. One such opportunity is that I have been invited to create a public sculpture on the St. Andrews College Campus in Grahamstown. The commission relates to issues around land and mining and contests the problematic depiction of black South Africans and the annexation of South Africa's mineral wealth by Colonial powers as represented on a frieze on the campus. I was also invited to take part in an international online event called 'Conversations' during American Clay Week, which was organised by Artaxis.org; a platform promoting ceramic arts, which entailed 30-minute dialogues from 16 artists from all over the world over a 24-hour programme.

*Gers: Has your experience in Israel made an impact on your work?*

Motsomi: The residency has led me to further interrogate installation as a greater part of my practice which has opened up my horizon both practically and thematically. One of the great aspects about being a resident artist was that it encouraged me to be more adventurous and inventive in my problem solving which has led to some new experiments of form and method in my practice.

*Gers: What are your current and future projects?*

Motsomi: I am currently working on a personal project titled "Mine" that follow the trajectory of issues around belonging, representation and geography. My hope is that at some point I will make bronze casts of some of the original sculptures from this series of works. Later in the year I will be taking part in a residency programme in Neumunster, Germany.

*Gers: Would you recommend an international residency for young (and not so young!) artists?*

Motsomi: I think residencies, both local and international are great opportunities for artists and they should apply to as many as possible... irrespective of the competitiveness. Residencies help you engage with the world outside and it's also an opportunity to gauge audiences in a different context. But most of all it is an experience; to meet other artists and creatives. It also provides a networking opportunity for future projects and collaborations

Further information on this courageous international exhibition, residency and symposium can be obtained on the website,  
<http://www.benjaminic ceramics.org/postcolonialism/>

