

# Anywhere but Here? Part 2

In the previous edition of the Art Times, we asked significant South African and international curators and gallery directors a series of questions to help us understand why they find it beneficial (or even necessary) to exhibit South African art outside of the country.

The panel consists of Standard Bank Young Artist Award winner, **Hasan Essop** (representing both himself and his collaborative partner Husain Essop); **Tanisha Bhana** who is quickly becoming recognised as an artist of international standard; **Claudette Schreuders**, the internationally successful sculptor signed to both Stevenson in SA, and Jack Shainman Gallery in New York; and **Vincent da Silva**, whose bronzes have become very popular in Dubai. Then there are **William Kentridge** and **Lionel Smit**, who hardly need an introduction; **Faith47**, South Africa's best-known graffiti artist, currently 'transitioning' to Los Angeles. She is joined by **Tamsin Reilly**, who has been practicing in London for the last few years; **John Meyer**, whose work reached record highs on last year's single-artist auction with Bonhams, London; and finally **Jonathan Freemantle**, an artist whose extensive history as both curator and gallery director in South Africa and abroad, gives him perhaps the broadest perspective of them all.

## How has your work been received outside of South Africa?

**Tamsin Reilly:** I'm fortunate to have had remarkable support from local audiences and curators in the UK. People respond to the content I am exploring, as well as my approach to the mediums I work with. I was thrilled when in 2014 I was invited to exhibit at the Royal Academy of Arts alongside only a handful of artists, including Georg Baselitz and Tracey Emin.

For further clarity on the subject, we then interviewed a group of South African artists about their experiences exhibiting abroad. It is hoped that their 'conversation' will be of value to visual artists considering the worth of pursuing representation outside of South

**Hasan Essop:** The majority of the people who buy our work are not South Africans. People seem to appreciate having an inside view of South Africa through our work. There is definitely a huge appreciation overseas and it has always been a privilege to go over and see how they enjoy the work.

**William Kentridge:** I think ex-patriots living abroad who really don't like the work very seldom come up to me and tell me that in as many words and ex-patriots who really do like the work make a point of telling me how much they like or how much the work means

## Has cultural difference ever played a role in how you or your work has been received?

**William Kentridge:** I think I have been fortunate in that the milieu in which I grew up as a privileged, White South African, was very close to an American or European cultural world, and so the work fitted into that conversation more easily. English as a mother-tongue makes it easier to communicate in many parts of the art world, but having said that, there are many parts of the world that have very different cultural impulses, different relationships to the enlightenment, in which the work is seen and there are enough sets of associations and connections for people from very different cultures to see and appreciate the work, and I think that it's

Africa. In order to provide a broad perspective, we specifically interviewed artists working in vastly different media, at various levels of exposure, from different walks of life, living both inside and outside the country.

the same if you think of work from completely alien and foreign places that we see and can respond to, maybe without understanding the work properly.

**Tanisha Bhana:** Themes which depict certain aspects of the human or environmental condition are differently sensitive in different parts of the world.

**Hasan Essop:** We make our work with an Islamic influence and background; therefore an Islamic audience has a deeper insight to some of the visual language we use. We have been told at times that our work is difficult to read because of cultural differences, but we try to make it accessible to everybody. Because there aren't many Muslim artists making work within the contemporary space that expresses Islamic values, the notion is still developing. I find it problematic when people put you in a box and try to reinforce a stereotype.

**John Meyer:** Exhibiting at home is less daunting. One has more control over things. I have a long and successful relationship with my Dealers here. They understand me and all my requirements.

**Claudette Schreuders:** I don't think it's easy or comfortable to exhibit anywhere. In the run up to any show I tend to feel anxious and wish it was over. On an emotional level it is not easier for me to exhibit in South Africa than elsewhere.

Tanisha Bhana, *Summer Rain* (detail), digital print.  
Image courtesy of the artist.





Installation Views of Claudette Schreuders' *Note To Self*.  
Image courtesy of the artist.

## Do you think pre-conceived notions of being South African play a role?

**William Kentridge:** I think that preconceived notions of South Africa do play a role and, as always, the looking at an artwork is a mixture of what comes to you from the artwork and what you project onto it. In many cases there's an over-determined, over-specific political understanding that is projected by the viewers onto the work and I think often limits how the work is seen.

**Faith47:** I have never wanted to be promoted purely as a 'South African' artist, or 'woman' artist for that matter. I find that the identity politics in South Africa, while being important for our progression, can also be quite stifling on an individual level. I would like my work to resonate with people regardless of culture, creed or demographic. For this reason I allow my work to adapt to different environments, zoning in on the details of a place that connect us despite our more obvious differences.

## What is the most basic challenge of exhibiting work overseas?

**Lionel Smit:** Not only is it expensive for a South African to travel abroad, but the shipment costs are also very expensive. Getting works to arrive through customs on time for an exhibition is also challenging, especially for art fairs where many works are coming in at the same time from all over the world.

**Vincent da Silva:** The costs of transporting the work will initially lie with the artist and this should be seen as an investment to building relationships with galleries overseas.

**John Meyer:** It is very expensive to show abroad, but is it worth it? Oh yes.

## In order to have access to international opportunities, is it necessary to have gallery representation?

**Hasan Essop:** In the beginning, I think every artist should have a gallery. You can capitalize on a having

access to a gallery's loyal clientele, especially as a young, emerging artist. I think once you're more settled and you have built a personal network then you could possibly market yourself. Selling art privately, you can definitely earn more, as the gallery takes a big commission. So it can be a big sacrifice to be signed to a gallery but as a young emerging artist, it is important. I think if you can make it on your own, then that's the way you should do it.

**William Kentridge:** I think it's much easier to find connections to international exhibitions/curators, if there is a connection to galleries overseas. Having said that there are a lot of curators that make a point of trying to get a sense of the local art scene by making many studio visits when they travel to a foreign country, but this is a much longer odds for an artist to try get their work seen. The best way for the work to be seen is for it to be seen on a curated group show locally, and for people outside of the country to hear about the group show.

**Faith47:** It is definitely helpful to have gallery support/partners and sponsorship as it is very challenging to manifest bodies of work without some kind of external support. When the right combination of gallery and artist combine it is hugely beneficial for both parties.

**Jonathan Freemantle:** I've always managed to find strong international connections and work with them but having your gallery handle the logistics is a big plus. Particularly, as things get busier.

## How does exhibiting with gallery representation compare to exhibiting without – specifically in a foreign country?

**William Kentridge:** I think for showing work in museums, it's enormously useful to have contact and to be working with galleries overseas as they know the people in the museums - they know the curators; this in addition, of course, to it being much easier and better to sell one's work internationally through a gallery than trying to do it on one's own.

**Lionel Smit:** As a foreigner, it takes a lot of time to establish yourself. It is for that reason, that it may be better to exhibit with a gallery who you can build a relationship with.

**Jonathan Freemantle:** A good gallery will work with you and encourage big projects that take you out of the usual gallery environment.

**Claudette Schreuders:** Luckily for me, the institutions I showed at, early on, were big and had a solid infrastructure and lots of staff that dealt with the logistics of insurance and shipping of work. When those things are not in place it is entirely possible for work to get damaged or lost. Besides that risk, the logistics of taking part in travelling shows can be very time consuming and if you have gallery representation they can help you with that work load.

**Tanisha Bhana:** The industry norms and customs can differ from one's home country and an open and honest relationship with a gallery is important to build a mutually beneficial relationship. Local galleries in SA are increasingly partnering with foreign galleries, providing international opportunities for local artists, while filtering the unknown with regards to international norms and customs.

## In terms of sales, how does exhibiting abroad compared with exhibiting in South Africa?

**Hasan Essop:** When we exhibit locally, people enjoy it but we don't sell much or anything. It's difficult to show in your own country. You can spend two years making a show and then no one buys your work; and you don't blame them. In South Africa not everyone can afford it. Don't get me wrong; there are one or two sales that happen here. A lot of South Africans would rather go for the 'safe' investments – the big names. We usually sell our art through art fairs, biennales, word of mouth and through the gallery. If you are fortunate enough for a gallery to take your work to one of the big fairs like Sao Paulo, Basel, Miami, Paris Photo or Frieze, people usually come to those fairs to buy. So we have had some good experiences at these fairs.

**Lionel Smit:** It is difficult to predict what will happen when putting on an exhibition; yet I have been lucky enough to make sales abroad, as I established relationships with several of my clients prior to exhibiting there. Several international clients have first been introduced to my work while travelling in South Africa. Many have become regular clients of the studio and my local and international representing galleries.

**Tamsin Relly:** Overall I have sold more steadily abroad – and more easily at a price that seems to value the work. This may have as much to do with how my work has developed since moving here, but generally, people do seem to have more buying power, and there are more young collectors. But you never know: I had a painting that didn't sell while on show on one of the most affluent streets in London, but subsequently sold at SMITH in Cape Town.

**John Meyer:** I started showing abroad from the beginning. Things became more complicated in the 2000's. Let me explain: In the new world communication is so easy. Established buyers and collectors can access any show. So it is too easy for overseas galleries to sell to one's existing clients from one's home gallery. That means less goes to new overseas clients. Dealers will take the easy way to a sale. It's understandable. This is also unfair to the home (and primary) gallery, who loses out on the sale the artists prime pieces from any exhibition abroad. It's a delicate matter.

**Hasan Essop:** I think that to be an African artist today is a great privilege and an opportunity to showcase what Africa has to offer. I feel that artists here make work that is pure and raw, and that people enjoy that. At the same time, you can be a Standard Bank Young Artist Award winner and still struggle. To be an artist in South Africa is a huge challenge. As an art teacher I always tell my students that as an artist you might have to use your skills to get a job that is not necessarily what you dreamt of, in order to support yourself and your family.

## How do you feel about the potential of South African artists to 'compete' on a global scale?

**William Kentridge:** South Africa being an ex-colony, there's of course the pattern which is not just in the artwork but in the world of literature, in dance, in music; that when local work is well received outside of the country people inside the country from which the work comes are more at ease to celebrate it and respond to it. This is the case with Athol Fugard, with Hugh Masekela, with Miriam Makeba, with so many artists that started in South Africa and then had a good career outside of South Africa and the South African careers flourished after that event. I think this is a sad pattern. It has to do with a lack of confidence of one's own world but it's not unique to the visual arts in South Africa. Neither is South African visual arts immune from this logic.

**Tamsin Relly:** I think that there is an exceptionally high standard of work coming out of art schools, studios and galleries in South Africa that is comparable to the best of what you see abroad.

**Lionel Smit:** Some people may expect us not to be on the same level as the rest of the world, but I believe South Africa can definitely compete on an international level.

A big 'thank you' to all the artists, directors and curators who contributed to this two-part conversation. With a mixed bag of responses, both positive and negative, artists considering their avenues will now be able to make better-informed decisions about how they wish to proceed. Whether they choose to exhibit in South Africa or abroad, we hope that the prevailing attitude will never be 'anywhere but here', but will increasingly lean towards the more positive – 'anywhere, but especially here'.

## One last question: Do you have any advice for artists wishing to increase their exposure?

**Tamsin Relly:** Working in London slowly became easier for me once I started to build up a local network. Until then, the whole scene felt impenetrable. I've also been part of several art studios and set up a small

open access print studio – all these things helped. The same goes for being present, available for public talks, taking an interest in local debates, supporting other artists and curators, being around to talk about your work in person. Taking part in residency programmes that attract artists from across the globe is a good way to build up your international network and can lead to opportunities to show abroad. There are numerous exhibitions and projects one can apply to – often open to international artists living abroad too. Living and studio expenses are extortionate though, so it can be difficult to make it all add up. I think there is a lot to be said for focusing on one place at time, wherever you are, and then slowly branching out from there.

**William Kentridge:** One thing that I have never seen work, ever, is for an artist to take a portfolio of drawings under their arm and knock on the doors of galleries, either locally or internationally. I tried that myself when I was much younger and it is a very painful and humiliating experience, and bears very scant fruit. There is a big new market through online sales, I believe, and many artists have successfully avoided the gallery circuit by working with different online techniques, whether online galleries or themselves, but I myself have no experience of that.

**Lionel Smit:** It took me a couple of years of travelling to London to find a gallery who would work with me. Do not expect that if you are fairly established in South Africa, it will be easier abroad. The best would be to research galleries, and see who is interested in your work. Not all galleries are efficient, so you have to stay involved with them.

**Vincent da Silva:** It is important to meet with the clients, the cultural and social barriers are broken down much quicker in a personal interaction. As for etiquette the worst thing an artist can do is appear vague or disorganized in their approach. The clientele and curators know what they want and the artists should be prepared before meeting with them. Galleries abroad are prepared to invest in the artist as with the few of bigger galleries in South Africa but only if the artist is prepared to bring their share of loyalty and transparency.

Tamsin Relly, *Ice Mountain (detail)*, 2015, Oil on Gesso and aluminium, 46x56cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

