

Celebrating the complexity of contemporary dance makers in Africa through the lens of South Africa's JOMBA! Contemporary Dance Festival (2015 - 2024): a reflective visual article.¹

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Abstract

In an interchange between two South Africans, one a dance photographer and the other a dance festival curator and dance scholar, this article sets out to debunk the homogenising by (primarily) global North rhetoric around 'African dance'. This visual article seeks to celebrate the complexity of contemporary dance makers in Africa through the lens of South Africa's JOMBA! Contemporary Dance Festival.

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³ Val Adamson was born in Kenya in 1963 and remained there until the age of twelve when the family moved to Scotland. After graduating in 1984 from Napier College, Edinburgh with a Higher National Diploma in Photography, Val moved to South Africa to pursue a professional career. In 1987 she was approached by the Playhouse Company to set up and run their photographic department in Durban. During the 5 years spent at the Playhouse Company she held two exhibitions. Val has been the festival photographer for JOMBA! since its inception in 1998.

Framing this visual article

In a text and visual interchange between two South Africans, one a dance photographer and the other a dance festival curator and dance researcher, this (primarily visual) article sets out to debunk the often-painful homogenising global North rhetoric around 'African dance'. We set out to celebrate the complexity of contemporary dance makers in Africa through the lens of South Africa's JOMBA! Contemporary Dance Festival⁴. The JOMBA! festival is Africa's longest running annual contemporary dance festival. This article selects 10 key photographic performance images taken by festival photographer Val Adamson between 2015 – 2024 (10 years and 10 images – one from each year) that opens up the visual awareness that there is no one 'African Dance' as a style or as a tradition and offers, instead, an encounter with a diverse and complex continent who refuses – through contemporary dance practices – to be the homogenised 'other' created by primarily Global North dance scholars, writers, artists and curators as they imagine Africa from an historically situate privileged, and often uninterrogated colonial, lens.

Each image is accompanied by a short reflective commentary by author Lliane Loots, that offers both a socio-historic account of the dance maker and photographic image, as well as a negotiated insight on how this work feeds into a growing lexicon of critical contemporary dance making on the African continent.

We use this reflexive visual article to contest the use of the phrase 'African Dance' (and further labels like 'African contemporary dance') as we work from a postcolonial lens (see for example, Gandhi: 1998) that queries how a vast continent and its hugely diverse local, spiritual and traditional contexts from north to south and east to west, can be reduced to a singular space/place.

Awam Amkpa (2010: 83) offers the following contextual comment about his Nigerian and African heritages,

I come from a continent where the body is spoken for. We don't have the luxury of stepping in and out of the textuality of the body. From that very moment when the body is born, that body is immediately named and sometimes mired with all kinds of social crisis. So, the body now finds itself having to do two things. One is to learn how to textualize the mythologies, the grand truths and moralities, and the other is to learn how to deconstruct them.

⁴ See: <https://jomba.ukzn.ac.za/>

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In this visual article, in a small intervention, we set out to de-mythologise what Amkpa above identifies as “grand narratives and moralities” (2010: 83) that do not emanate from the African continent and the bodies of its myriad contemporary dance makers. In a refusal for our bodies to ‘be spoken for’ the visual tracings we offer, are a shout (maybe even a scream!) against the insistent reduction of the continent of Africa to a singular place and space.

In many global dance spaces, tracing contemporary dance often incurs a slippage with Modern Dance Histories – usually always navigated by historical discussion of the Euro/American axis of the early 20th century dance makers like Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, Rudolph Laban etc. Often referred to as ‘pioneers’ (see, for example, Kraus, 1969:152) there is little awareness of North-South contexts, of colonial dance histories the set-up value systems, and of the absences in the written and researched dance archives of the South. Even Kraus’s seminal 1969 book, *History of the Dance in Art and Education*, engages Modern dance in America and Europe as if this is the entire global dance history. When African is engaged, it is to discuss – reductively - masks, ritual, and drumming. And while much has been written and revised since 1969, the context of ‘Modern (America and European) Dance’ is archived and written as a very specify moment in history that charts the rise of Western modern dance as an expressive and vital art form set against the burgeoning politics triggered by (amongst other historical concerns) the industrial revolution in Europe and America, women’s suffrage, the rise of capitalism and the factory system - it is not necessarily and entirely synonymous with all global contemporary dance histories, and certainly not in Africa.

Understanding Modern Dance as a very specific historical moment in Western/global North dance history allows an opening to begin to engage the more contested terrain of what is meant by contemporary dance. When engaged less as a response to a specific historical context (like ‘Modernism’), contemporary dance can perhaps be articulated as an aesthetic provocation that transects impulses from feminist studies, post and decolonial studies, critical race studies (etc) to begins to look to what bodies, narratives and traditions are include and excluded, what ways of moving and creating have been included and excluded into an archive. This both highlight gaps and significantly allows for dance studies to engage contexts outside of the centring of the Euro/American axis. As Hershini Bhana Young argues (2023), differential embodiment and movement refutes stereotypical notions of Africa as ‘less progressive’ than the West (*her term*) and points to modes through which both Black and Africa subjects have survived various violences; of colonialism, slavery, poverty and war, as direct consequences of Modernist endeavours of progress, industrialisation and global expansion.

Contemporary dance, as we set out to offer, is any physically embodied performance form that responds, firstly, to the idea of the dancing moving body as the leading means of communication, storytelling and expression. Secondly, contemporary dance is an evolving form that responds politically, socially and aesthetically to the now - to the present contemporary. So, contemporary dance may even sometimes include traditional and classical dance forms, but only as they are evolving and responding to contemporary concerns and uses. It is a political art form for the very reason that the (post-modern) body must be understood as a site of struggle where bodies – moving and being moved - deal with the lived intersectional realities of nation, race, class, gender, disability, decoloniality (to name a few axes of power).

As we confront colonial histories in Africa and begin the narratives of decolonising, contemporary dance becomes a vital and cutting-edge modality of speaking truth to power and disavowing histories written for and on behalf of the Global North's violent homogenising of Africa and many divergent African bodies. This visual article is a small window into a much larger lexicon of dance making but sets out to disavow the idea of a 'mythologized' (Amkpa, 2010: 83) singular 'Africa' of global North imaginings, and is a small act of celebrating difference and the uniqueness of many diverse African dance voices that can only but reject singular categorisations.

Finally, given that two of the JOMBA! years discussed (2020 and 2021) saw JOMBA! set up a digital festival due to the impact of COVID-19 and a national shutdown, this visual article also reflects on the idea of returning to the archive and how the Black African body enters into a performance archive (Xaba: 2021), but also on how images like the festival photographs of Val Adamson become collective memory around practice, and multifaceted negotiations around complex African identity/ies.



1: 2015: *rite*

Siwela Sonke Dance Theatre (South Africa)

Choreography by Jay Pather

Jay Pather, a leading South African dance maker, curator and cultural activist, started Siwela Sonke Dance Theatre out of a development programme that began in 1994 in Durban, and eventually gave rise to this company that consistently challenges post-independence nostalgia and the mythologies of a South Africa named 'the rainbow nation'. Pather, himself part of a long history of Indian Diaspora in South Africa, uses his own multifaceted (South) African identities to question ideas of race, gender, sexuality, and belonging. Significantly, he now directs the Gordon Institute for Performing and Creative Arts (GIPCA), and curates the Cape Town based *Infecting the City* Public Art Festivals; both space that have seen Pather's work move out of theatres towards a search for shifted realities of how an African audience may connect and engage performance.

In 2015, her presented 'rite' at JOMBA! and offered an ongoing re-imagining of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* (Rite of Spring), first presented with Nijinsky's choreography in 1913. The original work written in several demarcated movements or ritual, culminates in the sacrifice of a young maiden to appease the Gods of Rain. In this production these rituals become vehicles to probe roots of abnegation of the feminine though a traditional (AmaZulu) restaging of the classic work that is then constantly interrupted by contemporary fragments that are both

narrative and performative. Pather's *rite* becomes a conversation of forms: classical, traditional AmaZulu dance, and contemporary dance, ritual, text, image and video. Pather's deeply felt feminist decolonial evocation to some paternalistic and colonial memory of spring, has porous edges that allow Stravinsky's music to bleed in and out of a contemporary South African moment.

Pather's own intercultural heritages that speak of clashes of identity and ideas of 'home', are sculpturally evoked in *rite*, and as Adamson's photo offers, we see the messy conflation of religious South African Shembe tradition, shrouded bodies, and reed dancers – all space where the Black female body is often isolated, denigrated and utilised as commodity.



2: 2016: *LADY LADY*

Initial concept: Gaby Saranouffi

Choreography: Desiré Davids (South Africa/France), Edna Jaime (Mozambique), Gaby Saranouffi (Madagascar/South Africa)

A festival space like JOMBA!, often allows for unprecedented meetings and collaborations of divergent African artists who, due to funding and travel / visa restrictions, often do not find opportunities to meet and work. In 2016, three

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independently established Southern African female dance makers collaborated on *LADY LADY*. A witty, self-deprecating and aggressively ironic work, *LADY LADY* offers a journey into a female universe built up by the personal journeys of three different women from the Southern African region. These three artists (Gaby Saranouffi, Edna Jaime and Desiré Davids) shared, explored and exchanged their gendered realities to give voice to various commonalities, challenges and images that offered a challenge to the continued objectification of Southern African women of colour.

Saranouffi lives and works in Madagascar and South Africa and is a pioneering female artist in her birth country of Madagascar. She has set up a new strategic vision within the cultural policy in Madagascar that has benefited dancers of Madagascar. Jaime is a dancer and choreographer born in Mozambique. Often referred to as the 'first lady' of contemporary dance in Mozambique, Jaime's ongoing commitment to training a younger generation of Mozambican dancers continues to see the dance scene growing. Davids, a South African dancer who now lives in France, is well respected dancer and choreographer. Coming from a ballet background, Davids has been fearless in traversing contemporary idioms in search for a dance language that speaks to her own embodied storytelling.

Adamson's photo captures these three dancers defiantly clothed in the sexualised and commodified markers of contemporary womanhood; high heels, fishnet tights, breast augments, short skirts ... and at the same time draped in a vacuum cleaner (Saranouffi - centre) and carrying metal buckets that hint at gendered social expectation. *LADY LADY* was a rebellious look at gender stereotypes by three of Southern Africa's leading female dance makers.



3: 2017: *SABELA*

Choreography by Thandazile 'Sonia' Radebe (South Africa)

Set against a national rise of xenophobia in post-apartheid South Africa, and amidst the ongoing administrative heavy needs for citizens who endlessly line up for grant aid, identity documents, schools and universities, Thandazile 'Sonia' Radebe's *SABELA* (roughly translated to 'how we respond') begins to interrogate contemporary identity where Africans are reduced to ID numbers, student numbers, employee numbers, prison numbers, patient numbers, fingerprints, bar codes and biometrics. This loss of a name is explored as a loss of African identities in a continent where various religious and cultural practices hold the naming of a child as part of an archival legacy that remembers who we are and where we come from.

A stark work performed by three dancers (Thandazile Radebe, Phumlani Nyanga, and Thabo Kobeli) and to live music created by Matthew MacFarlane) in a set that surrounds that stage with wooden boards, all of which are miked to create a harrowing percussive soundtrack when a sjambok (a traditional whip used in South Africa) beats the walls echoing violent and dehumanising encounters between people. The work, essentially a series of deeply personal solos, unfolds a need for looking inward in a constant and painfully personal search for what

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Radebe called “the unknown candle burning under the bed” (JOMBA! 2017 Programme)

Radebe, a graduate and dancer from Johannesburg based MOVING INTO DANCE, made this work as part of the South African National Arts Festival’s Young Artist commission. Radebe is currently the Creative Director of Song and Dance Works with her husband and long-time creative collaborator, Nhlanhla Mahlangu.

Adamson’s photo captures Radebe tracing the dance floor in a solo where she keeps being forced, physically and metaphorically, to stay within the lines.



4: 2018: *ASLAMA*

Choreography by Yaseen Manuel (Cape Town, South Africa)

Danced by FLATFOOT DANCE COMPANY (Durban, South Africa)

Arguably one of South Africa’s most unique dance voices is Yaseen Manuel. The unique intersection of his own Muslim South African history with the confluence of both personal and political dance storytelling, offers dance work that constantly connects (South) Africa to bigger global geopolitics. While he works as an independent artist, he is also a member of the ground-breaking integrated dance company Unmute Dance Company. Manuel’s own Muslim spirituality and legacy features prominently in his work as he weaves interconnected dance works that link race, religion and ideas of masculinity in choreographed evocations of deeply neglected stories and identities in the South African landscape. *ASLAMA*, linked

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the Syrian massacre to a more internal battle for self and identity, and is both terrifying and beautiful with the intertwining of video projection, voice, dance and music.

Manuel, a graduate of the JAZZART DANCE COMPANY training programme in Cape Town, embodies a strong physicality and contemporary technique alongside a neo-classical training, which often makes his engagement with the unfolding violence and politics in places like Syria, Palestine and Gaza even more shocking.

In 2018, his work *ASLAMA* grew out of a small solo as he collaborated with Durban's FLATFOOT DANCE COMPANY to create a full-length work. FLATFOOT, made up of Black South Africa dancers, gave the work a localised resonance that allowed Manuel to engage how contemporary colonial practices and land grabs in places like Suria and Palestine, echo memories within the African continent.

In Adamson's photo above, Zinhle Nzama (L) and Jabu Siphika (R) lean on and support one another as the step forward to begin identifying bodies in the aftermath of conflict. The work, perhaps didactic in the tradition of anti-apartheid Protest Theatre, is also a fluidly danced evocation of shared community.



5: 2019: *The Encounter*
Choreographed by Lulu Mlangeni (South Africa)

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Lulu Mlangeni is a powerful and unique storyteller who, in *The Encounter*, evocatively stepped into an arena not many female choreographers have tackled in South Africa; ritual and women's sacred rites. *The Encounter* is a duet danced by Mlangeni (back dancer on the L) and Bafikile Sedibe (front dancer) and is an emotional ritualised unfolding of female friendship and support in sacred and religious spaces - often cooped by men - which have denied women agency and community. Two ghostly female figures weave in and out of obstacles, (created by stones, and a dazzling lighting design by South African, Oliver Hauser) as they finally find their way to each other. *The Encounter* builds on the spiritual power Black women harness, as these two dancers move and communicate beyond dancers' bodies choreographed on stage.

Mlangeni, hailing from Soweto, is a dancer who often moves between deeply serious works like *The Encounter*, to finding and creating work for herself in more commercial space like television, and offers a reminder of the on-going terrains traversed by dancers to keep working and to keep their art alive.

In Adamson's photo, Mlangeni (L back facing) and Sedibe (front) are clothed in tulle that shifts between echoing complex ballet histories in (South) Africa, to also navigating ritual shrouds that hide and hold bodies in process of transition. Evoking female rituals that are simultaneously both real and not real, Mlangeni's *The Encounter* is a rare and unique look into female friendship founded in collectively traversing spiritual spaces often not seen to hold women.



6: 2020 (2023): *deus nos acudi* / god help us

Choreographed and performed by Pak Ndjamena (Mozambique)

As 2020 hit Africa, so did the Covid-19 virus and all the ensuing systematic shutting down of public spaces. JOMBA! was affected but made the decision to offer an on-line festival. A new territory for an African dance festival but also a step into the opening of Digital Screen Dance, and a decision to keep this artistic space alive for primarily African artists at a time of devastating loss of work and income. Interestingly the digital domain allowed a stream of new artistic connections being made primarily in Southern and East Africa – spaces where visa issues and costs of flights had often forced JOMBA! to rely (ironically) on European funders like IFAS, Goethe and Pro Helvetia to make African dance exchanges possible. JOMBA! began a long associating with Mozambique and in 2020 Pak Ndjamena, working with filmmaker Ivan Barros, sent in *In-Box!!* - a dance film that has subsequently won numerous awards globally. *In-Box!!* navigates a stark post-independence Mozambique in the wake of Covid-19, corruption, the offshore gas wars in the Cabo Delgado region – all through Ndjamena's body that slips, falls, walks and runs through eroded and devastated landscapes.

A digital festival, of course, did not allow Val Adamson to take photos so as an archival step forward – and celebrating JOMBA!'s on-going relationship with Ndjamena - we offer here an image taken at JOMBA! 2023 when Ndjamena (and Barros) did finally make it to Durban. Ndjamena presented *deus nos acudi*, a solo work that interrogates contemporary African male identities set against religions and cultural colonization and the desire for the (male) body to remember the ancestry of where he came from. It is a work that traverses' tradition and contemporality in a stark reminder of the legacies of violence that sit on African (male) bodies.

Damson's image above catches Ndjamena – toward the end of the work - on a table, Christian bible to the right, as he begins the ritual of applying white clay to his body. This is a cleansing that in Nguni tradition is about warding off evil spirits; for Ndjamena these are the imaged spectres of colonialism and post-independence corruption that has sold out its own place in contemporary Mozambique.



7: 2021 (2023): Time Machine: Unveiling the Inner Strength

Choreographed and performed by Joseph Tebandeke (Uganda)

As with the 2020 festival, JOMBA! in 2021 also remained online as South Africa (and global communities) continued to negotiate various Covid-19 lockdowns. Over the full year – from 2020 to 2021 - digital dance began to push boundaries and choreographers were getting more sophisticated in understanding the power of film to construct dance and messaging. And while JOMBA! curated a full screen dance programme, it also set up various encounters with artists that allowed for dialogue and shared community. One such significant encounter was with Kampala based Joseph Tebandeke, a dancer living and working with disability.

As with 2020, the digital festival did not allow Adamson to take photos, so we offer here an image taken at JOMBA! 2023 when Tebandeke did finally make it to Durban and the JOMBA! festival.

His solo work *Time Machine: Unveiling the Inner Strength* opens with a variety of crutches suspended and littering the stage at various heights and configurations - perfectly captured by Adamson in the above photograph. The image is of a maze of these support structures and, as the work slowly unfolds, Tebandeke finds ways to engage these crutches. He dances seamlessly with and without support in a circumnavigation of the stage – the crutches both a reminder of Tebandeke's physical reality, and of how these 'stage obstacles' in turn become the support he uses to literally fly across the stage in a series of increasingly dangerous jumps. Notably the work takes its time to build; it asks audience to sit with the real time it takes for Tebandeke to access his support crutches. The audience are

confronted with a myriad of disruptions that include, race, nation and significantly, access. Tebandeke's disabled Black African body is alone on the stage in an overt reclaiming of an historically ableist space and in a context where the audience are asked to not only look at, but truly sit with, a body that has historically been excluded from this and so many other spaces.

Interestingly, some of the audience (primarily non-disabled) commented that the work was 'too long'. The solo work was 45 minutes long – much like other curated solo works at the festival, but that Tebandeke's unapologetic refusal to seduce an audience with a speeded-up version of his physical and dancing reality, was a political act of self-representation. Tebandeke's 'time' in his poignantly titled *Time Machine* and his embodied commitment to 'taking time' – especially as an African artist living with a disability - becomes part of the experiential message of this unfolding performance.



8: 2022: *KOMA* (- transitional rites, sacrificial change of ethos in time)
Choreographed and performed by Vincent Sekwati Mantsoe (South Africa/France)

2022 saw JOMBA! return to a primarily live festival and the beginning of its platform called "The JOMBA! Legacy Artist" in which the festival pays homage to

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established dance makers who have had a significant impact in (South) Africa and more globally. The first recipient was Vincent Sekwati Mantsoe, who in fact, performed at the first edition of JOMBA! in 1998.

Born and raised in Soweto, trained at Johannesburg's Moving Into Dance, and now living in France, Mantsoe's geographical divergences and influences make him an African artist whose redefinitions of home and belonging resonate with audiences globally. As a descendant of a long line of Sangomas, Mantsoe grew up participating in traditional rituals involving the use of song, dance and drumming which has inspired his philosophical approach to dance making; and a self-proclaimed need to pass on his lineage of embodied (South) African dance style and training to younger generations.

He presented a new solo work titled *KOMA*, which looks at layers of the passages of time through a symphony of rhythms and traditional (South) African rites that speak to contemporary ideas of the need for sacrificial changes to shift both ourselves and humanity. With his trademark located spirituality and staged reconstruction of rituals, this dance work offered a beautifully mature Mantsoe as shaman, dancer and healer.

Adamson's photograph captures Mantsoe towards the end of the solo as he begins to pound and stamp on the Earth to wake his ancestors in a ritual-like cleansing that sees white and dusty pink clay begin to rise up and enrobe Mantsoe's body – it is both a physical and spiritual transformation that is danced and enacted on stage. Primarily of note is the deeply personal nature of Mantsoe's performed ritual transformations that begin to resonate emotionally – and even politically - in all who sit and witness them.



9: 2023: *HATCHED ENSEMBLE*

Choreography by Mamela Nyamza (South Africa)

In 2023 JOMBA! honoured Mamela Nyamza with the JOMBA! Legacy honorific for her deeply interrogated Black feminist dance work that spans over two decades of dance making in South Africa (and globally). Nyamza was born in Gugulethu in South Africa. From 8 years of age, she studied Ballet at the Zama Dance School in Gugulethu and proceeded to graduate from the Tshwane University of Technology with a National Diploma in Ballet in 1994. This very short history remains significant as Nyamza's career has seen her radically deconstructing the normative expectations of who qualifies to be a classical ballerina. Her original *HATCHED* (which was created in 2007) was her first work to kick-start a long obsession of unapologetically demystifying, deconstructing and trampling on the norms and standards of the Global North's dance classics.

HATCHED ENSEMBLE is a 'talking back' reflective self-engagement by Nyamza towards her original 2007 solo which initially offered an autobiographical reflection on her own life as a mother and artist. *HATCHED ENSEMBLE* builds on this almost 16 years later, in a work that is performed by nine ballet trained dancers from different racial and gendered backgrounds. Challenging issues of tradition, gender norms within the dance classics, and various issues around

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identity and belonging, *HATCHED ENSEMBLE* references both classical Western music and dance, with traditional (South) African vocal scores.

Adamson's photo, taken at the beginning of the work, sculpturally captures the cast of dancers (male and female) who hover on pointe, in a reminiscent ballet skirt covered in Nyamza's now iconic use of domestic wooden pegs. These pegs, often associate with female domestic work, fly off and become props to the washing line cutting the top frame of the photo, later in the work. These torso-bare Black 'swans' drift across the stage to the echoes of Camille Saint-Saëns' *Dying Swan*, as they carry wire sculptures – an art form deeply located in Southern Africa – of symbolic African iconography like the Baobab tree, a chicken, a windmill pump, an ox ... *HATCHED ENSEMBLE* speaks to Africans who have felt a conflict within their own identity and questioned where they belong within persistent (and deeply painful) colonial value systems.



10: 2024: *we wear our wheels with pride and slap your streets with colour ... we said 'bonjour' to satan in 1820 ...*

Choreography by Robyn Orlin (South Africa/Germany) working with MOVING INTO DANCE.

In 2024, JOMBA! honoured Robyn Orlin as the 2024 JOMBA! Legacy Artist for her innovative, political and deeply interrogated dance and theatre work that spans over four decades of dance making. Orlin was born in 1955 in Johannesburg but now lives in Berlin (Germany). Orlin began her career as a dancer, choreographer

and teacher in South Africa – her work immediately got noticed as much for the singularity of her choreography as for the glorious chaos that reigns in her creations.

Celebrating her icon and poetic titles, she presented *we wear our wheels with pride and slap your streets with colour ... we said 'bonjour' to satan in 1820 ...* at JOMBA!; a collaboration with Johannesburg based Moving into Dance. The work, very particular to Durban and KZN, emanates from one of Orlin's childhood memory visiting Durban and seeing the Zulu rickshaws on the beachfront; a colonial legacy that this work begins to extricate. Orlin, in collaboration with video artist Eric Perroys, connects with how these rickshaw drivers subverted colonial practices but customising their rickshaws and their costumes, especially their headdresses, sometimes monumental in size, made of feathers, pearls, seeds, and cow's horns. The common interpretation was that these horns (identifying the rickshaw pullers to bulls) were both a sign of dignity and power for those who wore them, and yet a strong rebuke of their status as human beasts of burden. In this work, Orlin, looks at the beauty of these ornaments but also how they conceal this colonial history – painful as the rickshaws are still a tourist attraction. With this piece Orlin delving into their mischievous appropriation, sublimation, irony and self-deprecation, as she celebrates the Rickshaw driver's refusal to concede their dignity.

Adamson's image above is taken as the dancers begin to wear the symbolic rickshaw masks set against the live video installation of Eric Perroys. The overwhelming blast of colour is what catches the eye first and this begin to unravel as Orlin systematically humanises (unmasks) what has been dehumanised by colonial process.

Concluding Remarks

Val Adamson's photographic images act here as an archival memory for a larger history and body of African dance makers and their works. These visual prompts, with written reflective text by Loots, are offered to open up the complex dance making and the multiplicities of narratives that are evoked - and written - detailing (selected) contemporary dance makers from the African continent, negotiated via the JOMBA! festival in South Africa. What is set up and challenged is the painful on-going naming of a singular 'African Dance' as a style or as a tradition; a kind of reductionist homogenised 'other' where scholars, writers, artists and curators (mostly from outside of the African continent), continue to imagine Africa from an historically situate privileged, and often uninterrogated colonial lens. These ten curated images and the ensuing descriptors, offer an encounter with a diverse and multifaceted African continent and its dance makers

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that refuses to be enclosed in singular definitions of what is African, or even what is dance making in Africa.

The words of South African choreographer Gregory Maqoma (2006:36) resonate as he talks about what it means to be an African artist;

As (African) artists we sadly ... carry the responsibility of cultural translation. We are aware that in the process of mediation between these different cultures and languages, we are not completely swallowed (by the Global North), and we do not reach a point of no return. We also have to be aware that there is always that threat of mistranslation, bewilderment, misplacement and distortion of our continent's artistic standing and work.

Finally, this visual and text article is a celebration of the complexity of contemporary dance makers in Africa through the lens of South Africa's JOMBA! Festival (2015 - 2024), and may it be part of a growing optical revision - and decolonial reminder - of complexity and multi-layered beauty/ies that defy contemporary homogenisation.

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