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Performance artist Tracey Rose focused on leaving a legacy

Liz Bolshaw

Durban-born South African artist, Tracey Rose, has never had to struggle for international attention. When only in her 20s, her Felliniesque triple video projection “Ciao Bella” — a feminist parody of Leonardo da Vinci’s “Last Supper” in which she plays 12 female “apostles” including Lolita, Josephine Baker and the water spirit, Mami Wata, was shown at the Venice Biennale in 2001.

Her early work offers subversive reinterpretations of masterpieces of the western tradition to explore the politics of identity. Monochrome photographs show black figures in the pose of Rodin’s “The Kiss” and “The Thinker”, for example. Primarily a performance artist, Rose combines photography and video in multimodal works that are neither comfortable nor decorative.

“People say my art is shocking,” she says. “But what’s happening in the global context is much more shocking than art.” When she graduated with a degree in fine art from the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, Rose says “postcolonial theory and issues of gender, race and identity were super-important”.

A child of apartheid — she was born in 1974 — her parents were activist trade unionists and the family was forced to move to Johannesburg when she was seven. She was educated at a private convent school, one of just five non-white pupils, and describes herself as a “recovering Catholic”.

Her work references the western tradition; there are no motifs or stylistic borrowings from, for example, the cave paintings of animals and people found in the Drakensberg hills near her birthplace. When researching the cave paintings, she was “incredibly frustrated by the fact they had been wrongly interpreted by white scholars. I had to have a white man tell me about myself and I reacted to that fact perhaps more than to the content,” she explains. For all that, “on a subliminal level I think I employ tools that have their roots in African heritage”, she says.



Outside the comfort zone: Tracey Rose's 'Lucie's Fur Version 1:1:1 — The Messenger'

Rose confronts political and social taboos unflinchingly. While studying for her masters degree at Goldsmith's College, London, she persuaded her assistant to photograph her, dressed as a pirate with eyepatch, hook, Union Jack stockings and leopard skin-lined gold boots, urinating on the table at the members' room at Tate Modern. The image was then blown up to depict her as a giant figure crouching over the river Thames, pointing ironically to the gallery that owes its name and foundation to the sugar plantations originally worked by west African slaves. "I thought it was appropriate," she says. While Rose does studio work, mainly drawings, she is known for creating performance work not only linked to a specific exhibition theme but also arising out of the location and history of that place. For example, a recent work, "Tracings", started with Rose walking through Brussels in search of King Leopold II's grave. "I wanted to raise him from the dead to account for his actions," she says of the Belgian king responsible for what is now the [Democratic Republic of Congo](#) being transformed into a forced labour camp.

Rose has been transformed by the birth of her son two years ago. She has moved from Johannesburg back to her roots in Durban, surrounded by her family. “I turned 40 and I kind of abolished anger. I describe it as being more militant, less aggressive,” she says. “Militancy comes from being a mother. You have a lot more responsibility toward the planet than you did before.” She is focused on leaving a legacy. “You don’t make art for the present,” she says. “You make it for the future. You are working for a history that is centuries beyond you, for multiple generations ahead of you.”

Rose is aware her work will not always win her friends, but she is clear that for her it is a vocation. “Art is a way of life. Artists are the neo-shamans of the world. You’ve taken away all the druids, the healers and the witches. “The artist stands between the public and the aristocracy,” she adds. “Artists mediate. They know how to navigate between those two spaces.”