Into the Grave and Back: Psychosomatic passage through grief in Lindi Arbi's 'Unearthed (2009)'

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Psychosomatic Passage through Grief in Lindi Arbi's *Unearthed* (2009)

Irene Bronner

Lindi Arbi was unexpectedly and suddenly widowed at the age of 39, when her husband Faizal died of a heart attack on 10 February 2000. Lindi, née Hobkirk, was born in Stellenbosch, South Africa, on 10 September 1960. With a Diploma in Education, she took her first job in the town of Orapa, in neighbouring Botswana. Having married Faizal Arbi at the age of 23, and with him built a number of businesses in the town of Palapye, she was then left widowed with three young children. Relocating for much of the year to Grahamstown[1] in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, where her children attended school, Arbi registered at Rhodes University for her Bachelor of Fine Arts, which she obtained with distinction in 2005. This choice was prompted by a desire to make art, long sublimated in the running of their businesses and the raising of children, but brought urgently to her attention as a need following her bereavement. *Unearthed* represents the practical component of her Master in Fine Art Degree (MFA).[2]

This transition in Arbi's identity – from wife to widow to woman – finds its archetypal expression in the journey to and from the underworld. Her sculpture-objects (she herself calls them objects), either clay sculptures or life casts, enacted this journey in her decision to inter them in a cemetery. After 18 months, the sculptures were exhumed in materially transformed states. Here I discuss three iterations of her series of "selves". Firstly, *Self* (2006; Fig. 15.1) is a fired clay double cast of the artist's body. Secondly, *Second Self* (2007; Fig. 15.2) is a cast of the artist's body, misshapenly enfolded over a 1960s shop mannequin, buried in a block of polyurethane, then partially chipped and burnt out (but never fully released), then buried in the cemetery and exhumed. Thirdly, five *Selves* are collapsed clay forms created as variations on the artist's body that deliberately exceed it, folding in on themselves and gaping outward, expressing the ravages of grief (2007; Fig. 15.3).[3] The trope of burial and exhumation, carried by Arbi's *doppelgänger* life casts, centres the experience of a middle-aged woman's grieving process and her excavations into her relationship with her identity, her body and her memories.

This series of works as a "Mistress-Piece" exists intriguingly in a supplementary manner to what may be conventionally understood as the master's canon. Proposed as appropriately iconic, this body of work no longer however even exists in any formal way. One work has been preserved and catalogued in a major South African private collection, mis-named.[4] The other works were given away, recycled or dumped; Arbi has no interest or investment in the works as discrete art works, for her, they were ritual objects, part of a process, which she feels has been concluded (Lindi Arbi, email to author, 6 October 2018). This body of work is also not "professional" but "student" work (Arbi's MFA submission). The artist has been, to date, an intermittent, not a

Figure 15.1 Lindi Arbi. *Self* (after exhumation), 2009, Plaster, approx. 150 × 100 cm. Destroyed. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

Source: Photograph courtesy of the artist.

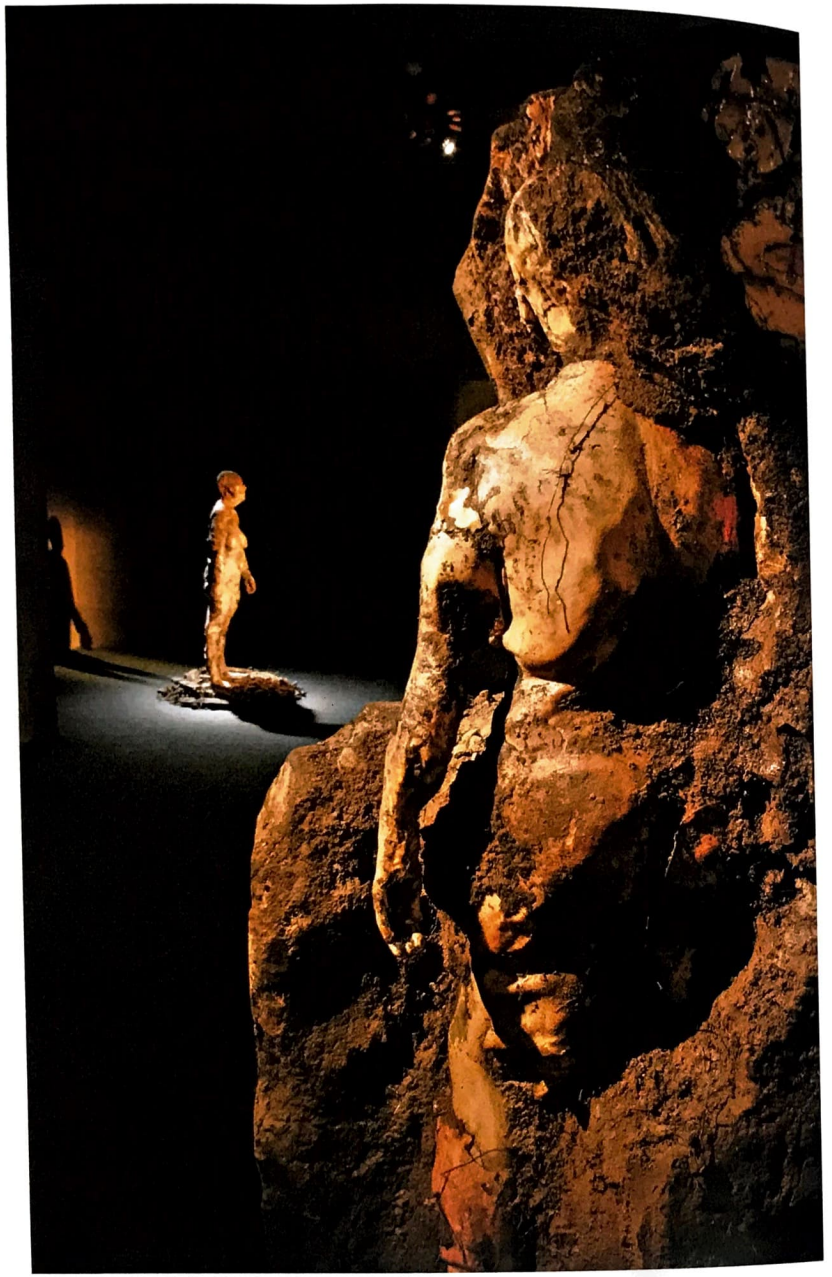

Figure 15.2 Lindi Arbi. *Second Self* (after exhumation), 2009, Plaster, found object, polyurethane and soil, 200 × 100 × 65 cm, Spier Collection.

Source: Photograph courtesy of the artist.

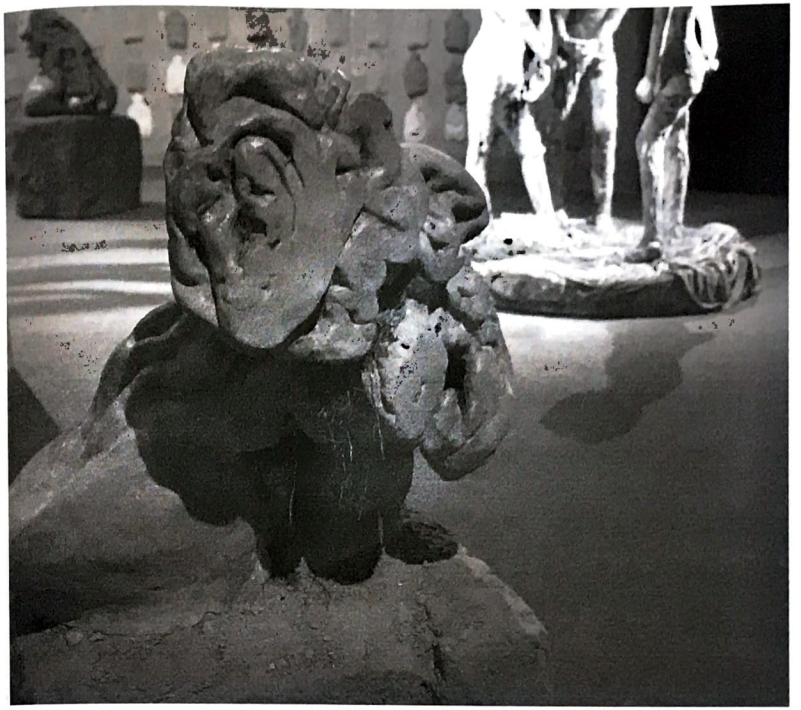

Figure 15.3 Lindi Arbi. *Clay Self, 1 of 5* (before burial, detail of wet clay lustre), 2009, Clay, approx. 180 × 250 cm. Destroyed.

Source: Photograph courtesy of the artist.

prolific, producer. These works have also never received scholarly attention; there exist a few brief local print and online reviews of her exhibition. Arbi's own eloquent writing on her work and process remains the most illuminating available resource, lodged in the Rhodes University Library thesis depository (Arbi 2009). These works could therefore so easily slip from knowledge and discourse.

Plaster, clay and soil are the principal materials involved in the realisation of Arbi's objects and focusing on each in turn is how my examination of this body of work thematises the stages of the works' gestation – through casting, burial, exhumation and completion of the project. What this body of work offers is an opportunity to see enacted a process not of producing (or appearing to produce) a discrete and completed "masterpiece" but of intersecting elements, which slip in and out of temporality, narrativity and, even, their own existence.

Cultural theories of the gaze and the field of vision situate the subject within the highly scopic imaginary that is dominated by an Oedipal, Foucauldian, mastering gaze (Pollock 2004, 32). In response, feminist interventions in the visual arts, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, distrusted the visual image, spectacle and the iconicity of women to the extent sometimes that the corporeality of female bodies was downplayed, lest it open female subjectivities to the restrictions of a regressive

essentialism (Pollock 1996, 285). Since the 1990s, feminist artists have reincorporated the physicality of the female body as an end for representation in itself, for the expression of localised, situated and intersecting identities. Arbi's work here, I propose, provides passage through personal and historical polarities – as expressed viscerally in the uncanny doubles of her life-casting process – through to an engagement with clay and a surrender to soil – in the burial and exhumation process – that offers a practical elaboration of Bracha Ettinger's matrixial subjectivities, as Griselda Pollock explains her theorising.

Casting: Uncanny Doubles in Plaster

Even by the 1960s, life or body casting[5] and plaster – the medium and material that the process used – was not fully accepted as a legitimate method of artmaking within a fine arts context (Schmahmann 1998, 27). As Honoré de Balzac's character Frenhofer, in *Le chef d'oeuvre inconnu*, sneers "[T]ry to make a cast of your mistress' hand, and set up the thing before you. You will see a monstrosity, a dead mass, bearing no resemblance to the living hand" (Balzac 1837 in Pointon 2014, 29). This had resulted principally because the historical use of life-casting and plaster was most prevalent in the fields of biology, natural history and anthropology, during the 19th and early 20th century, where likeness to living subjects was prized (Schmahmann 1998, 13). Consequently, perceptions formed of life casts being "impartial records" rather than representations of their subjects (Schmahmann 1998, 13). Because life-casting was so strongly identified with a so-called "objective" and apparently mechanical copying, they were often used in so-called scientific and museological settings to display body casts of peoples perceived to be "lower races". Being able to satisfy a colonial fascination with racial typography has therefore linked life-casting to ethnographic display practices. Due to their employment in "scientific" settings, and to their supposed lack of artistic intervention and transformation – "servile copy[ing]" as Frenhofer derides – there was aversion to the incorporation and acceptance of this medium into "high art" aesthetic practices.

Arbi chose this medium because, as she reflected, she appreciated its historical associations with a perceived "outsider" art as, at the time of making, she was still ambivalent about naming herself "an artist" (Lindi Arbi, email to author, 6 October 2018). She also wished to evoke for the viewer the medium's connection to bandaging and binding in a surgical or healing sense, and to the "making" or "craft" traditions such as needlework that have historically been feminised and marginalised (Lindi Arbi, email to author, 6 October 2018). Primarily though, her need was to make it a requirement, not a liability, that the cast of her own body be as much of a likeness to herself as possible (Lindi Arbi, email to author, 6 October 2018). She sought explicitly to engage with the abject, indexical "monstrosity" of the uncanny double, to request of these vessel-objects that they enact on her behalf her grief struggles between experiencing herself as both "dead" and "living", in her psychic uncertainty of the boundaries between her own "living" body and that of her lost love object, her husband. As she writes, she has had "to fight to survive against attempts to fuse with the lost love". She quotes Michael Rowlands' reading of Freud's explication of the bereavement stage of mourning: "Bereavement is a period in which the subject identifies with the absent person, idealizes the person and attempts to become him or her, yet comes to realize the impossibility of this fusion" (Rowlands 1998, 55).

In *Second Self*, the mannequin is the ineffectual stand-in for the husband's absent body, over whose idealised form Arbi's cast cleaves but cannot fit. Arbi's polyurethane cast depicts – even revels in – creases and folds of skin, flesh and fat. In this reading, the "double" may also express "all the unfulfilled but possible futures to which we still like to cling in phantasy, all the strivings of the ego which adverse circumstances have crushed" (Freud 1955, 236).

At about the same time as the casting process was developed, the fascination with the double (*doppelgänger*) began in Europe, during the age of colonial empire, where encounters with other belief systems and exposure to and domination of other cultures led to more complex engagements and self-assessments on the part of the colonisers (Warner 2002,188). Marina Warner has written on how the excess and tension of the encounter for both colonisers and colonised peoples gives rise to differentiation and to the doubling of self. In his 1919 essay "The Uncanny", Freud elaborates how the phenomenon of the double, together with "a compulsion to repeat" and "omnipotence of thoughts", is the paradigm of the Freudian uncanny (*unheimlich*). For a subject, an experience of the uncanny is frightening because it is secretly and long familiar in that, after early trauma, and then latent repression, the experience seeps up through repression and partially returns to the conscious mind (Freud 1955, 245). Freud claims that the double emerged originally as an insurance against and denial of the inevitability of death (of the ego) and therefore the "immortal soul" was initially figured as a double of the material body (Freud 1955, 235). Yet, Freud continues, "[f]rom having been an assurance of immortality, it [the double] became an uncanny harbinger of death" (Freud 1955, 235).

The death mask is an imprint taken of a recently deceased person, the making of which reached its peak during the 19th century, which Marcia Pointon (2014, 31) notes as the age of the mechanisation of the object; it also saw the flowering of the cult of mourning. When preserved or displayed, a death mask is aestheticised so as "to distance the cast face from the actual face, to rinse it clean of the touch of the corpse and therefore of its association with decaying matter" (Pointon 2014, 33). The need for such rinsing and dissociation is psychically necessary for the tending of bodily boundaries because as Julia Kristeva (1982, 4) notes "[t]he corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life". However, that it is difficult to distinguish between life and death casts is, as Pointon (2014, 33) says, "axiomatic: both in the drama of their production and in their material characteristics, these masks epitomize the conundrum of the relation between life and death".[6] The "drama of their production" is real: to create a cast of a face, the model must breathe through, usually, straws inserted into the nostrils, enacting being buried alive. In their "material characteristics", both life and death casts are dependent on a body imprint, which as Pointon (2014, 33) describes "is in itself deathly, regardless of the condition of the subject from which it is taken. The artefact invokes in the viewer the melancholy of an absence that is most definitively that of death". It is reasonable therefore to assert that in casts and masks of this kind, "the connection between portraiture and mortality is here at its most vivid" (Pointon 2014, 25). Arbi's own doubled face and blinded gaze look back at herself, asking the material question of where her memories are to be anchored, and how they are to be written.

Second Self may also be interpreted as representing the non-rational, uncontainable grief that has no place or form, its excess breaking out of the armature of the body, sloughing off its skin. Arbi writes of trying to negotiate a deeply personal

and unknown journey of processing grief, while simultaneously needing to "tidy up" memories of the deceased for the living, mothering children who are also bereaved and running a family business. Othered from her own body in its experience of loss, a woman grieving in her early 40s, with a body and stature not conventionally considered a contemporary feminine ideal, Arbi was also unable to find a mould of grieving into which she easily "fitted". She did not conform to any conventional tropes, such as the sentimentalised tragic young widow, or the sexually knowing, moneyed, independent widow, or to the elderly matriarch whose life is given up on the preserved altar of her deceased husband's memory. Her cast-object *Self*, therefore, embodies these losses, this othering, at the same time as it intimates the more generative possibilities of doubling. *Self* and *Second Self* carry the indexical traces of the artist's imprinted body, but for Arbi, these casts gave her physical space from and perspective on her embodied experience of grieving.

Non-pathological mourning, which Arbi's artwork here exemplifies, is not a process of detachment to be achieved in finality, as Freud's (1917) early prescription in his seminal *Mourning and Melancholia* appears to itemise. The dark double does not run amok, a monstrous liminal being severed from the intentions of its creator. Rather, such mourning is a process of the subject's transformation, an integration of memories of the deceased love object, the acceptance of the mutability of those memories, in death as in life, and the creation of a sustaining internal relationship that allows the bereaved subject to maintain ties with the inner representation of the love object, but that also leaves room for investment in new relationships and activities.[7] This is the model of grieving most recognised today, across psychotherapeutic and psychoanalytic fields, established by recognised researchers as diverse as Mardi Horowitz, John Bowlby and Melanie Klein. As Arbi (2009, 57) says, "Once separated from the role as material marker for mourning [the deceased husband], the widow is now free to re-embody herself". *Self* and *Second Self* are also thus sent as witnesses, as emissaries, to encounter the death of a central aspect of her own identity. Arbi chose to bury, literally, her objects.

Burying: Time Underground

Arbi followed what she describes as an unsettling, instinctual need to bury her sculptures (Lindi Arbi, email to author, 6 October 2018).[8] "Descent" and "beneath", in addition to burial, are established metaphors for activities associated with grief work; as Francis Weller describes, "Grief takes us below the surface of our ordinary lives [...] we all take this journey downward into the belly of the earth. This is a sacred terrain filled with memories, the artifacts of a lifetime, ancestors, and spirits" (Weller 2015, 122). Arbi had decided to bury her objects while working with fired clay (Arbi 2009, 44). She was experimenting with ways to regain the lustre and corporeality of wet clay after it had been fired; she found that rubbing fat (butter) into the fired clay of the five collapsing *Selves* and infusing this with soil appeared to achieve this (Arbi 2009, 44). On a technical level, therefore, she wondered what would happen materially to the works if they were subsumed in earth for a period of time. She obtained permission from the Makana Municipality to buy the sculptures in the Waainek Cemetery as part of a temporary art project. She hired workers and a digger to make individual grave-cuts for each sculpture, sited at a respectful distance from existing graves, but still within the cemetery perimeters, thus situated within both

bureaucratic and consecrated demarcations. In seven separate graves over an area of approximately 80 m^2, the sculptures remained buried for 18 months, from mid-2007 until 10 February 2009.

The process of creating a body cast or a cast "from life", it bears emphasising, involves a "burying" of the model or subject in alginate moulding material and plaster bandages in order to create the initial or exterior cast. As a ritualistic practice, therefore, the experience has an unexpected congruence with some healer and shamanistic traditions, where an initiate is literally buried alive. Called variations of the "burial of the warrior", the initiate prepares him/herself, digs his or her own grave and spends the night in the grave, covered by earth with a hole roughly the size of a tennis ball to ensure sufficient oxygen supply. Through this kind of experience, connections to the spirit realm are established in support of the initiate, death is embraced as a teacher, fears are overcome and humanity's closeness to the earth is affirmed. In African cosmology, the earth – below the surface of the ground – is frequently understood as home to the spirit world, rather than as the passage through the female body, as the feminine principle or as a gateway to hell. The spirit world does not thus exist in the sky realm, but below (*phansi*, in the Nguni languages). This is why the ancestors, the living-dead ancestral spirits, are often referred to simply as *abaphansi* ("those of the below"). The metaphysical and spiritual qualities of the land therefore are central in providing continuity between the unborn, the living and the deceased.

Christine Dixie's *Even in the Long Descent I-V* (2007; Fig. 15.4) speaks to this motif in a South African context. The five panels combine mezzotints of landscapes and etchings of figures embedded in those landscapes, modelled on the artist's own naked body as well as her husband, her brother-in-law, a friend's child and a pet dog. In the five panels, the normal scale of value in landscape is reversed: the top third of each is ordered around a gently recessional farm landscape, with brooding oncoming storm, while the lower two-thirds pull the viewer's eye down into, as David Bunn (2002, n.p.) writes, the stratigraphy of the grave. Bunn (2002, n.p.) observes, "The implicitly narrative landscape elements at the top, are met and matched by an older, obverse universe of the body". The huddled vulnerable bodies, covering eyes

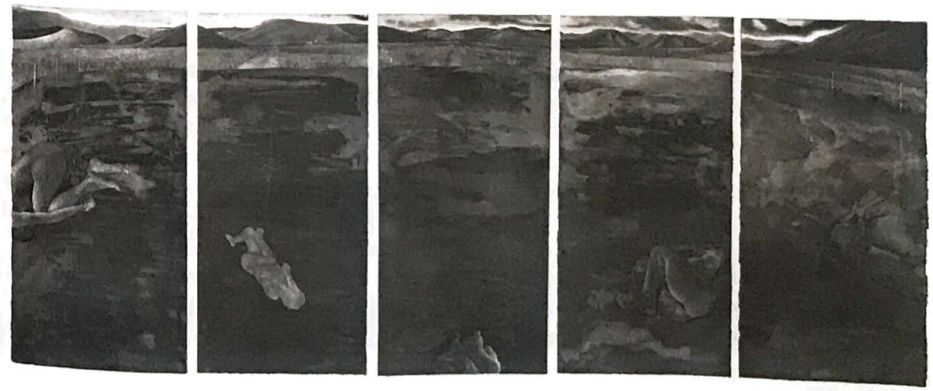

Figure 15.4 Christine Dixie. *Even in the Long Descent I-V*, 2007. Etching and mezzotint on paper, each panel: 116.5 × 69.5 × 6.3 cm.

Source: Photograph courtesy of the artist.

or genitals, appear either to be buried in a bank of earth (if the work depicts a cross-section) or else adrift in a dark pool of oxblood (if the perspective is horizontal). Because they are delicate and detailed etchings, the figures in their materiality are at odds with the broader swathes of the mezzotinted landscape. If these are burials, they are unquiet. Dixie states that the work is her response to the blood-red soil and the strata of sedimentation of the Eastern Cape, where her family has white settler ties dating back to the Frontier Wars of the 19th century, with all the layers and ambivalence that those histories bring. Dixie describes a visionary image that she worked from of "a family buried far beneath the ground, like a memory that sometimes wants to surface but the weight of the earth presses down" (Dixie 2007, n.p.).

For Dixie, therefore, burial here has a strong association with repression, conscious or unconscious, of memories forgotten, deliberately or not. The charged, complex and ongoing contestations over rights to land in South Africa, in the aftermath of settler colonialism and apartheid, have created, among other things, a recognisable trope in South African literature of the resurfacing of a body from a shallow grave that testifies, in its unquiet unrest, to its violent end. In Nadine Gordimer's (1974) Booker Prize-winning novel *The Conservationist*, for instance, the body of an unknown black man resurfaces after a storm on a white farm owner's land. On this land, death, violence and collapse are ever present, just beneath the surface; disinterment, an eruption rather than a rebirth, symbolically heralds the end of black African dispossession. In this trope, burial must be followed by exhumation, or eruption. The subject, above ground, digs down deep to bring something back up, something that may or may not wish to rise or return to the surface. On the other hand, the spontaneous rising of the dead, of their own volition, speaks from the grave of injustice.

Arbi's burial and exhumation of her objects are of a different order, more akin to the "burial of the warrior" motif and grief as a descent that Weller describes. The hero's descent down into the underworld is also a mytheme in many cultural narratives, the purpose of which, in the Greco-Roman tradition, is to confirm his quasi-divine status as a mediatory being between gods and people.[9] For Arbi, gestation and transformation are fundamental to the time her objects spent in the dark, held by the earth, below ground. The casting process may give the illusion of an absolutely literal, immutable likeness captured. The very solidity of the various sculptural forms speaks paradoxically of the sudden and wrenching absence that called them forth. Their solidity is also an attempt at compensation for what Arbi describes as the non-representability of loss and grief. It bears emphasising that no representation of Faizal, her deceased husband, is buried or exhumed: this process is about the living. Here she gives the transformation process over to her doubles, so that they may do, beneath ground, beneath the conscious mind, what she felt, day by day, she could not. This corresponds symbolically with Arbi's reflection that she habitually overworks her pieces, so literally burying them to get them out of her reach allowed her to not "destroy" them but rather to "allow" them to enact their own material gestation. Trying to keep the look and feel of wet clay before firing, still in its formless or not-yet-formed state, seems to be a metaphorical refusal to allow emotion to cohere into new forms.

Exhuming: Passage through Abjection

Arbi's attendance at the six-month process of the Burial Exhumation Project at the Botswana International University of Science and Technology (BIUST) Project Site in

Palapye, Botswana from June 2008 to January 2009 provided an important context for her to the burial and exhumation of her own artworks. An ambitious plan for a new university in Palapye required the identification of burial sites scattered across farmland earmarked for development. The development company, E.I.A. Projects, employed a team of forensic archaeologists to do this, whom Arbi got to know. She was invited unofficially to accompany the forensic team as an interested witness; her presence accepted due to her ties to the community and the place, and as a postgraduate researcher (Lindi Arbi, email to author, 6 October 2018). More than 15 graves were exhumed in consultation with family members and communities. Remains were relocated to the nearby municipal cemetery. These graves in Palapye were not violent but natural deaths. Nonetheless, they offer perspective on what forensic archaeologist Clea Koff, who worked on exhuming bodies of the Rwandan and Kosovo genocides, describes as crucial tasks: the necessity of proof of death for living family, to begin the mourning process, and also for the gathering of evidence (Koff 2004, 31). The bodies need to surface, so that they may be laid to rest; the duty is to the living as much as to the dead (Koff 2004, 313). It was principally through the memory of the living that these burial sites could be located, behind a tree perhaps, or beside the remains of a dwelling, as in many cases, no burial markers above ground remained. Arbi reflects poignantly on how memories must disintegrate as much as physical traces:

> I was privileged to closely observe the remains of those people exhumed. All that remained in some cases was dry soil flecked with bone fragment, and these were collected in zip-lock plastic bags to be re-buried in coffins. In other cases, as I examined bones, clothing and ritual objects of persons unknown, I was able to witness through traces of physical evidence the scant narratives of their lives. A green stain on a finger bone indicating a copper ring, layers of winter-clothing shoring up an empty space a body once filled, a tenderly crocheted cap on a small child's toothless skull.
>
> (Arbi 2009, 46)

As she drove back to Grahamstown from Palapye, following her experience with the Burial Exhumation Project, Arbi passed Waainek Cemetery. She knew then that she was ready to exhume her works. As she reflects, "If they were emblematic of myself, then I had no desire to remain in that space. Either decomposed or intact, the burial would have effected enough change to witness their altered state" (Arbi 2009, 47). The role that soil played in affecting the transformation of the sculpture-objects – the absorbing and neutralising of the emotional abjectness of the corpse-objects – is my focus in this section.

Her objects' time underground, their sojourn in the underworld as it were, had wrought material changes to them, as Arbi had hoped. The shards of bone from the archaeological sites in Botswana were evoked for her in the decayed wooden fragments and paint flecks of the woven basket in which she had buried some objects (Arbi 2009, 47). Vegetation had reclaimed the surface of the burial sites; soil had shifted and settled. One grave, without a marker, was for some time lost. During exhumation, one of the collapsed, contorted clay *Selves* shattered, appropriately fulfilling its purpose as a vessel of psychosomatic grief (Arbi 2009, 47). The surface lustre that recalled wet clay that Arbi had sought was ironically more effective on the polyurethane objects (such as the bandaged mannequin casts of the *Three*

Muses representing her children) than on the clay (Arbi 2009, 47). The butter that impregnated the clay left a residual smell of decay on them. Roots had grown into the objects; soil had compacted into their crevices (Arbi 2009, 47). What struck Arbi most, on reflection, was how soil, and time, neutralised the Kristevan abjection of the corpse. As Arbi says:

> The alterations it [soil] makes to objects are a fitting metaphor for the excavations of memory-work, and for the processes of widowhood itself [...] I propose that "soil" as the stuff of altered states metaphorically absorbs "bodily wastes", thereby facilitating transition for the widow.
>
> (Arbi 2009, 53)

Soil emphasises the porous boundaries of the objects' surfaces, their ability to interact with other elements. The objects do not however leave the soil behind, once they are exhumed; they are not "cleaned" because the soil is not "defiling". Arbi valued the contribution its presence, together with compaction, growing roots, and so on, gave to the objects once they were above ground, and in the exhibition space. Soil may here "absorb" yet it does not "retain".

This "absorptive" yet non-retentive quality is, arguably, another way in which the acquisitive, surveying gaze may be neutralised. Arbi's work is not in the contemporary trend among a number of South African artists to produce glossy photographic editions of performances undertaken by the artist. Such works may be interpreted as dramatising the skin as impregnable, the performer "returning the gaze" in a hyperbolised, self-aware manner. Arbi's objects, I suggest, manage to "neutralise" the gaze just as Arbi sees soil as symbolically neutralising abject emotions.[10]

Ettinger joins Freud's passage on the uncanny aesthetic effect of womb phantasies (*Mutterleibsphantasien*) with Lacan's re-theorising of the gaze in his 1964 seminar. Here he repositions the gaze as a phallic *objet a*, as "a non-optical psychic inscription of a trace of what came to be felt to be lost as the subject emerges through its successive severances from archaic unity with the m/Other" (Pollock 2004, 50). Ettinger's proposal is for a matrixial gaze, theorised further as a matrixial *objet a*, that is

> not the psychic inscription of what is forever lost whose scar forms the incitement to desire, but as a borderlinking mechanism that is never totally lost as it is not phantasized in retrospect as being had or being submerged in.
>
> (Pollock 2004, 50)

This is significant because the gaze proposed is not essentialising, nor utopian, nor based upon the creation and opposition of differences, but rather on the relationships that exist between even ambivalently connected individuating subjectivities.

The opportunity offered by Pollock's reading of Ettinger's matrixial subjectivities, particularly relevant in Arbi's body of work, is a way to think passage. To speak of passage by relying on binaries – burial/exhumation, life/death, before/after, sky/earth, above/below, wife/widow, sterile/impregnated – is easy; as Pollock (2006, 38) cautions, "Under phallic logic, any oppositional move only reconfirms the logic, even in inversion". As Pollock says: "The ambivalence of passage between life and death, between one stage and another, or the perverse

'contagion' of contact across a boundary, such as the living with the dead are the stuff of phallically re-ordering rituals" (Pollock 2006, 38). Arbi, as discussed already, was compelled by the transformational properties of soil, and the passage to change offered by the abject processes of decomposition. Here I seek a move "beyond [the] theoretical pairing of castration (division and logic setting) and abjection (the repudiation of incest as the contamination of the maternal body's porous boundaries)" (Pollock 2006, 38). What Ettinger offers is her theorising of the "screen" or "transferential, unconscious field" that spreads itself out between the shared thing and lost object that becomes "the transport for affects generated in this libindinized textile of connectivity and dissemination" (Pollock 2004, 50–51).[11] In Arbi's work, I suggest, this is facilitated by the immersive, non-differentiating qualities of soil.

Releasing: Conclusion

Arbi sent her objects on a journey that she could not go herself. Her chthonic forms have had, for her, an avowed function and purpose of providing passage through what was the most undoing personal experience of her life. Her mourning was expressed through what Pollock (2006, 274) has termed "the relief of signification", allowing time and distance from the "undigested" presence of overwhelming traumatic presence. Ettinger's theorising of matrixial subjectivities, as Pollock describes them, explicitly makes way for signification and representation: "a passage into the temporality of narrative that encases but also mutes trauma's perpetually haunting force by means of a structuration that is delivered by representation" (Pollock 2004, 40). Crucially, this "structuration" is not one built through polarities beginning with inclusion/exclusion but rather through the immersive, non-differentiating qualities of soil and its relation that Arbi establishes to memory. As much as Arbi created these objects, she was also (co)created with them and by what they facilitated. The investment of her life force in the objects gave them a certain agency. The doubles – the art works – sought release from their mother-maker.

The ambiguous, uncanny doubling of Arbi's life casts and sculptures, and the process they underwent, supplements the mytheme of the (male) protagonist's descent into the earth and the return, materially altered. The works do this by contesting conventionalised representations of women in middle age, of body image and of bereavement. Although facilitating one woman's journey of grief through an embodied process of mourning and witnessing, the sculpture-objects are rooted in socio-historical landscapes in South Africa and Botswana. Arbi photographed her process, but not in order to profit or to extend the life of the works through images; she gave or threw away the majority of the works, observing:

> I gave most of the works away [...] They are not precious to me. I may have collaborated materially with my grief and conjured up objects, but beyond that they are not mine. If they exist still, they are for someone else.
>
> (Lindi Arbi, email to author, 6 October 2018)

Her lack of investment in her works as discrete objects following their journey also indicates a relationship with her works that prioritises their ability to facilitate ritual transformation.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1 In October 2018, Grahamstown was renamed Makhanda.

2 Arbi's MFA dissertation (Arbi 2009) examined representations of widows in Renaissance and early Cape paintings and contemporary works, and chronicled and theorised her own practical work, supervised by Prof. Brenda Schmahmann and Maureen de Jager. In 2010, Arbi received a Spier Contemporary residency in South Korea. In 2015, Arbi moved to France with her partner. On 8 March 2020, her current exhibition *L'ésprit des lieux* opened at La Cabane, Tayrac.

3 Other works that formed part of the *Unearthed* exhibition are not discussed here. As her *Three Graces*, Arbi's three children are represented in bandaged casts of a child mannequin, as the prototypical "wounded child", and the "eternal child", in its sinister *puer eternis* incarnation, in arrested prepubescence at the time of their father's death. In *One More Night with You*, 600 fired clay hot water bottles are unyielding and cold fetish objects, ineffectively standing in for the absent body of the loved one. These works are included with the *Selves* as *Unearthed*, the works that were buried and exhumed. The hot water bottles facilitated the transition to the second part of her exhibition *Unearthed*, titled *Anon*, where the same hot water bottle form was repeatedly cast in clear polyurethane and filled with soiled fragments of treasured images and mementoes of Arbi's husband. In *Anon*, the loss of the body, that of both the loved object (the husband) and consequently the artist's self (now redefined as a widow), becomes a painful meditation on issues relating to the re-presentation of memory, and to the failures of language, relating to the "packaging" of grief for others in the social or external life.

4 *Second Self* was acquired by the Spier Collection in 2009. At the time of writing, it has been catalogued under the title *Unearthed*.

5 Life/body casts are created by applying first grease and then wet plaster bandages to the body of a chosen model. The front and back halves are often done separately. When the cast is released from the model, which is a dangerous and delicate process, the inside of the hardened plaster body cast, which was in touch with the contours of the model's body, becomes the outside of the fibreglass cast because the wetted fibreglass cloth and fibreglass resin are placed inside the plaster cast. The fibreglass is then separated from the plaster and the two halves are connected.

6 The most well-known plaster casts, arguably, are those first made of the victims of Pompeii (beginning in 1863 by Giuseppe Fiorelli). Buried in ash after the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in the year 79, the bodies decayed while the ash and debris that covered them hardened into pumice, enabling a plaster mix poured into the voids to reveal their emotive forms at the moment of their deaths. Arbi recalls a "vivid memory" of seeing photographs of the Pompeii casts, when she was three or four years old, looking at her parents' *National Geographic* magazines (Lindi Arbi, email to author, 6 October 2018).

7 Both Penny Siopis and Steven Cohen, two significant South African artists, have lost their life partners relatively contemporaneously with Arbi – respectively in 2012 and 2016 – and have made bodies of work that expressed their grief and mourning. But Siopis' works in the exhibition *Still and Moving* (2015) do not explicitly represent herself as widow, or refer directly to herself, but rather concentrate on trauma and loss through a body of work that is non-representational and rendered in glue and ink. Cohen's work *Put your heart under your feet ... and walk!* (2017) is shaped by his performance background and his experience as a gay man; he screens a pre-recorded performance of a grief-burdened yet morbidly curious dance with death in an abattoir and ends the performance by ingesting a spoonful of his deceased partner's ashes on stage. Cohen's desire to fuse with his lost love is unlike Arbi's, who acknowledges yet fears it and rather seeks differentiation through her works.

8 Arbi is not the only South African artist to have worked with a form of burial ritual. Buhlebezwe Siwani, for example, produced a performance piece *Inzilo; Ngoba ngihlala kwabafileyo* (2015) where she lay in meditation in her symbolic grave. She describes how the work was created as a response to the deaths of several members of her extended family, whose funerals she was not able to attend.

9 In the Greco-Roman tradition, *katabasis* (the descent) and *anabasis* (the return) frame the epic convention of the hero's journey into the world of the dead. Herakles, Theseus, Orpheus, Odysseus and to an extent Psyche and Penelope all undertook this journey. This hero appears in other cultural narratives, including the Sumerian Gilgamesh and the Pacific Māui. These examples refer to the trickster hero figure who "cheats" death rather than to the martyr god. There is also significant cross-over in these narratives with religious framings of the resurrection god. The "hero's journey" of the descent into and return from the underworld, with stolen prize or boon in hand, may be read arguably as a male gestational narrative.

10 Arbi also elaborates on how the textured, "rough", "unfinished" exteriors of her polyurethane objects "trip" the "detached" gaze. She draws here on Brenda Schmahmann's argument about how George Segal's cast sculptures of women necessitate Bryson's "glancing" viewing, thereby challenging a canonical representation of the female subject (Schmahmann 1998).

11 I have theorised in a related manner about Siopis' use of paints in blood reds and placental purples (Bronner 2019, 35–36).

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