

**A VISUAL EXPRESSION OF PUISSANCE**

**PROJECT REPORT**

**submitted to the faculty of  
The University of Houston-Clear Lake**

**by**

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**in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of**

**Master of Arts**

**in**

**Humanities**

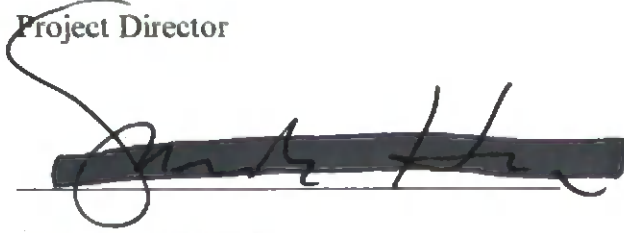
**July 2002**

We, the undersigned, certify that we have ~~read, studied, viewed,~~  
~~examined, depending on the project~~ this project and approve it as adequate in  
scope and quality for the Master's Degree in Humanities.



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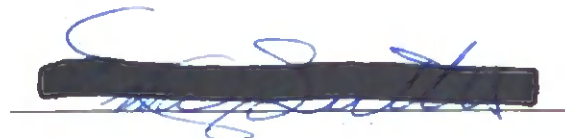
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Most of us go through life believing that our world is true and that other people share it. This grasp of life usually seems valid enough from one day to the next, but occasionally this complacency is shaken. September 11, 2001 is an excellent example of this. We were confronted with the frightening possibility: what if the reality that we took for granted is not actually out there in the world? What if other people live in different realities, different worlds, and believe the universe around them is fundamentally different from ours?

Colonialism is the formation of states and civilization is identified by states. The play, *Death and the King's Horseman*, by Wole Soyinka, is about the clash between colonialism and tribalism in Africa, specifically in Oyo, a Yoruba city in Nigeria. The British, because of their ignorance and arrogance to the Yoruba culture, had interrupted the natives' ritual. There is more death than planned. Jane states, "I think you've shocked his big pagan heart, bless him," then Pilkings says, "Nonsense, come on Amusa, you don't believe in all of this nonsense do you. . ." Amusa replies, "Mista Pirinkin, I beg you take it off. Is no good for man like you to touch that cloth." (p.24) This excerpt shows the distinct line between the natives' tribal values and the British colonial ones. There seems to be no understanding of either culture. The British are arrogant and ignore any of the deeply religious customs and rituals of the culture. On the other hand, the natives do make fun of the British arrogance.

In the article, "The Mirror and the Tomb," from the magazine, *African Arts* (autumn 2001), Françoise Lionnet describes the feelings of the native Africans. He used the character Idris, a Berber shepherd of Tabelbala, a Saharan oasis, who is in Michel Tournier's 1987 novel, *La Goutte d'or (The Golden Droplet)*. He leaves to find a

snapshot of himself taken by a blond, Parisian, female tourist. As he travels north, in a nearby village, he finds himself in front of the Saharan Museum. He is amazed to see that the utensils and objects used daily by his fellow oasis dwellers are part of an exhibit that describes their habitat, beliefs, and customs. These simple and familiar objects are now symbols, an ordinary kitchen utensil, now transformed into an “ethereal essence, frozen in time.” Idris’ oasis life is now an “exotic scenario,” since the museum has formulated the ritual activities of ordinary life into a concise group of symbols, as told by a tour guide. (p.10) As he listens, he becomes aware of the feeling of a transparent feeling, “as if his soul had suddenly left his body and was observing him from the outside.” Idris gazed into the display case and saw his own reflection in the glass become a part of that same collection of objects. The display is both “a mirror and a tomb;” his features and culture are reflected back to him and then broken into fragments. His culture is characterized under glass as “inanimate, soulless objects,” with untrue implications.

(p.11)

Underlying all the tribal rituals is the invisible world of ancestral spirits. The transition from life to death is extremely important and includes the issue of continuity. The African culture bases its tribalism on kinship. Everyone is somehow related to everybody. There is an oral tradition for passing down the stories or myths. Bessie Head’s book, *The Collector of Treasures*, contains stories that are a direct insight into tribal life. The stories are about the independence and suffering of the African countries. They describe the conflict between pagan, native religions and Christianity, colonialism. In the story, “Kgotla,” she contrasts the colonial ideal of the state as a system that needs a bureaucracy with the old tribal ways. “The bureaucratic world was fast devouring up the activities of

the ancient, rambling kgotla world. At the kgotla, it wasn't so important to resolve human problems as to discuss around them."(p.62) In the end the chief was able to settle Gobosmang's case and Rose, his wife, did agree to go to work as a bookkeeper. Kelapile, one of the two old men, said that he saw a wonder today when the Sindebele woman settled this seemingly impossible case. He said that the forefathers were right when good things come from far-off places.

Women have strength, courage, and determination. Bessie Head has also addressed these character traits in her story, "Witchcraft." Mma-Mabele is the heroine. She was not merely a victim, but a survivor with her strength, courage, and determination. She has a powerful reasoning intellect and sees the true spirit of what has happened to her. What does she see? Nothingness or the nature of the mind when it is in a void. She slowed down her thought processes and physically slowed down with her forced rest. She was able to recover her health and her deep sensitivity to the trials of village life. According to Seng-Chao in his book, *The Book of Chao*, "Action and non-action are not isolated, but coalescent. He maintains that non-action does not mean quiescence after action has ceased, but quiescence forever in action." (p.10) So if heaven and earth were suddenly to change positions, we could not say they were in non-action, nor in action. Destruction then is construction, and construction is destruction, thus fusing into one. This identification of opposites will free one from both and that is what happened to Mma-Mabele.

Another idea of Taoism, which can be applied to Mma-Mabele's circumstance, is *tzu jan*, or self-so-ness, the naturalness and spontaneity of things. It is not reached by intellection, but one's mind is awakened to it and it requires no artificial effort. The

Taoist would say this is by non-interference or by *wu wei*. (p.12) Mma-Mabele's enlightenment uncovered unknown recesses of her mind, and set free the powers imprisoned in the depth of her consciousness. As long as she failed to do this, her powers remained hidden in this innermost region and she was divided against herself. Her sudden hair loss was the first manifestation of the hidden conflict. She had buried herself in the superficiality of things and was suffering from some sort of spiritual amnesia. After her parents had died, she had to provide the food for her family. This went badly until she found a job as a housekeeper. When she went searching for answers for her illness, she forgot the source of wholeness. To achieve a balance and harmony of mind and body, one must finally surrender logic and recognize that there is something beyond one's rational ability to understand. Mma-Mabele was able to surrender and to trust her instincts when confronted with the non-rational ways of understanding the truth. She seemed to encounter that mystical reuniting with nonbeing and the beginning of wholeness as she lay in her hut in an almost catatonic state. But upon finding herself, she addressed new responsibilities towards her place in the village.

Her words were filled with anger when her friends asked about her recovery, because they did nothing to help her. Instead of helping when she was so ill, they stayed away and just watched to see what would happen. The stories of the village that she heard were that people so afflicted sat down and began to rot. They thought their prosperity had brought about this illness. They sat until they died. The fear of the baloi or witchcraft was another reason the villagers had for not helping Mma-Mabele. This anxiety that anyone was vulnerable to attack from an evil source was always present. This is the explanation for the role of the Tswana doctor. Being a logical thinker, Mma-Mabele did not trust

witchcraft and knew that his medicines had failed in the past. A final reason for the lack of help is the underlying concept of the patriarchal system itself: a society controlled by men. "Both women's experience and empirical research confirm that violence against women is pervasive in society," as stated in Karen Stout and Beverly McPhail's book, *Confronting Sexism & Violence Against Women*. The male quest for dominance and control underlies many of the crimes against women. Mma-Mabele was labeled "he-man," because she refused to have sex. "The only value women were given in the society was their ability to have sex; there was nothing beyond that." (p.49) The men never looked at Mma-Mabele as a quiet, sensitive person who might suffer an insult or injury. She was a survivor as most women are. Her situation might be compared to American life in the early 1800s, as Alex de Tocqueville, a French observer and political analyst, did. His commentaries on life are often quoted and he made the following observation: "That if he were asked what the singular prosperity and growing strength of the American people ought mainly to be attributed, he would reply, to the superiority of their women." (p.314) Women continue to give birth and raise their children in spite of an unjust world, with the hope that the world will become a safer, saner place for their children to inherit.

Mma-Mabele is an example of all women, who have survived centuries of oppression to grow stronger, wiser, and more determined. Another excellent example of this strength of character is Dikeledi Mokopi in the story, "The Collector of Treasures." She had struggled all her life to maintain herself and her children. She had filled her life with treasures of kindness and love, and she wanted to protect all of this from an evil man. But black women don't have the kind of power to stop someone like Garesego, so she panics.

**She kills him believing that this is the only way to ensure a safe future for her children. A verse from the *Tao Te Ching* by Lao Tzu describes this:**

***"The valley spirit never dies;***

***It is the woman, primal mother***

***Her gateway is the root of heaven and earth.***

***It is like a veil barely seen.***

***Use it; it will never fail. (#6)"***

**My sculptures are an exploration of puissance, one's inner strength and power. The works are relief and freestanding forms. The various types of media I have used include mirrors, PVC pipe armatures, wire armatures, saran wrap, and clay. When I visited Washington, D.C. in August 2001, I discovered the power figures of the Kongo. The National Museum of African Art had a display from the National Museum of Ethnology in Lisbon, Portugal. It was the first time that these objects had toured the United States. From exquisitely created dolls to awe-inspiring masks and power figures, the objects represented many traditions of early Africa.**

**Africa is a vast land of contrasting terrain, including over one-fourth desert and one-tenth rain forest. This has been a major factor in establishing a metaphor for the stylistic extremes found in its art. African art deals with the creative sources, forms, and effects of its art. There are realistic images alongside ones with purified, amplified, and reassembled natural elements. The continental vision of African art has tended towards abstraction. This predominant abstract quality has been the major style for the imagery in tribal art, especially the human figure. Wilhelm Worringer states in his essay, "Abstraction and Empathy," in the book, *Art in Theory*: "The counter-pole of aesthetics**



which proceed not from one's urge to empathy, but from one's urge to abstraction, finds its beauty in the life-denying inorganic, in the crystalline, or in all abstract law and necessity." (p.71) He describes this urge to abstraction as the outcome of a great inner unrest inspired in one by the phenomenon of the outside world and an immense spiritual dread of space. The happiness sought was in taking the object out of the external world and its natural context, purifying it of all its dependence upon life, and to approximate it to its absolute value. If we accept this opinion, then the style most perfect in its regularity, the style of the highest abstraction, is at the most primitive cultural level. A connection then must exist between primitive culture and the highest, purest regular art form. The urge to abstraction is to seek deliverance from the fortuitousness of humanity and to contemplate something that is necessary and irrefragable.

African art works matter not from what they are as created forms, but from what they do for society. They assist in maintaining the physical and the spiritual well being of the peoples of the community. The art includes only what is relevant to the meaning of the work with the images often combining aspects from different unrelated subjects. The quality of one subject, such as an animal, might be transferred to another subject, a person, by combining visual aspects from each. The statement is about the character of the subject, rather than just a record of its external appearance. They have a mythical, magical, and social context and are but fragments of a much more complex unit, which includes rituals, ceremonies, disguise, movement, rhythm, and sound. It also requires a sort of opponent for, or against, whom complex performances are created. These opponents are beings living or dead, natural or supernatural, who have messages that are embodied in the particular form of art. There are many tribal works that deal with

ferocity, horror, or fright, and express certain violence. Tribal expressions of this order appear to be outer-directed in that they are aimed at intimidating malevolent spirits and protecting reliquaries. Even though many twentieth century experts have responded to tribal art ethnocentrically in their modernist interpretations, some artists, such as Picasso, have responded intuitively to the animistic aspects of most tribal art. The messages of the works, most often, are symbols of power.

In Kongo art, an “nkisi (pl. minkisi)” was a special, invisible force from the land of the dead, which was surrendering itself to a certain amount of human control. This force in a healer’s hands was used to defeat the harmful energy causing the anger or pain in the victim. They were for both the visible and invisible worlds: defender of the border from evil. The power figures’ power is accessible by means of a precise copying of visual signs, sounds, words, and songs, which can be applied to the patient’s life. Some of the common ritual codes are black, red, and white lines and dots on the face, wide staring eyes, a cowry shell abdomen, and a profusion of nails.

The sculptural relief, “Puissance,” is a picture of the strength and support of kindred spirits. The difficulty of finding one’s inner resources and like-minded spirits is shown with the backbone structures and the opposite colors of black and white.

“Obelisk” is a monument to a woman’s survival.

This “Figure” collage is heavily textured, which intensifies the visual interest of the sculptural form. Even though the viewer does not know the specific religious meanings, the viewer is able to feel the powers within the sculpture. The medicine pack and mirror are partially obscured from view. The burlap signifies rags, which were tokens from the clothing of patients who entrusted specific missions to the “nkisi.”

**“Guardian” is a more involved relief figure. The mirror is partially covered, but does not interfere with its power. The raised hand gives the impression that this is an aggressive “nkisi,” that when used would inflict violence on the unknown evil force suspected of possibly harming the owner. The color is black, which represents chaos and sometimes evil. The red lines are more ambiguous and stand for danger, blood, and power.**

**The “Dark Mirror” is an abstract form of an “nkisi.” The simple, black, rectangular form has great surface detail and an inner mirror center. The central part of an “nkisi” figure was the site of physiological reproduction and nutrition, as well as the symbol for the basic tribal social unit: the seat of life and happiness.**

**The small clay power figure is black. This piece was sawdust fired in a can in the kiln. The figure has the backbone symbol, a medicine pack, and nails. The backbone represents the figure’s inner strength. The nails are the oaths that tie together the words of the spell forcing the spirit to act in the desired manner. The medicine pack is in the abdomen, thus referring to one of the most auspicious areas of the human body, according to Kongo thought. The white parts of this figure are representative of spirits with supernatural and curative powers. White also stands for the presence of ancestral spirits, mystic vision, and clairvoyance.**

**The animal-like “nkisi” is a symbol of the silent bisenji African hunting dog. This dog cannot bark, but can sniff out evil spirits in a human community. The backbone and medicine pack are on its back. These further connect it with the world around it, creating an overall unit of power.**

**The two extensions on this figure imply a two-headed dog, which the figure sits upon. The intent of this “nkisi” is to protect the owner against evil forces. This symbol is beneficial, because the two-headed, hunting dog defends the border between both the visible and the invisible worlds. The colors are black and white for supernatural powers.**

**The black velvet power figure is a sleek columnar form with a circular power pack. The clay used is B-Mix porcelain, which accounts for the velvety black surface of this sawdust fired piece.**

**The next two sculptures are abstract forms of both the “nkisi” figure and the central life force. The bodies of the “nkisi” contained distinctive objects in the abdomen. The shell forms in these sculptures are metaphorical images of life forces.**

**Medicine packs or power boxes contain various natural ingredients, which are used by the individual or magician. The items are usually opposite in nature, for example male/female. When juxtaposed, the boxes provide a powerful metaphor in regard to a more specific issue about life or society. These boxes contain clay shapes representative of men and women.**

**Mabel, Bessie, and Josephine are spirit sculptures. They are abstract portraits of these women. Bessie is representing the spirit of author, Bessie Head. The other two are my grandmother, Mabel, and my great-great-aunt Josephine. They were milliners during the early 1900s in Chicago. The hats are theirs.**

**V-shells are all about color. The bright colors are the kaleidoscope of the rainbow. They signify courage, innovation, and creativity. Bright lights are an adventure, a spice of life. The form is the vagina/life force/shell. They are made of wire and saran wrap.**

The sky mirror is referring to the idea of the sky as a vast mirror-like expanse, which is equal to an awareness of heaven. The connection between the earth and the sky is made within oneself and it fills one with light. The translucent quality of the saran wrap over the wire form gives the same feeling of openness to what George Lucas calls "the Force." The mirror is a surprise element of unexpected energy.

The poem, "Song of the Bright Mirror," by Samadhi, from the book, *Essential Zen*, describes the images found in this sculpture. "As form and image face each other in a bright mirror, you are not it, but it is you." (p.64) In their book, *The Medium is the Massage*, Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore stated, "the primitive artist integrated time and space as one and would have put in everything one knew, like an x-ray, rather than only what one saw." (p.56) The mirrors have this spontaneous sense of perception, of time and space. Mirror flashes are ways to recreate this multi-dimensional space orientation of the primitive spirit.

The Butternut series of sculptures are little surprises about life and death. Death is the music through which life is woven into a whole containing anything that opens up these fears, that gives one pleasure, and loosens the animal in us. To go far below the surface, this delight will manifest itself in the fears from which it originated, either somersaulting out, or flipping upside-down. Art has this power of arrangement. These sculptures exhibit the delight of risk-taking found in a circus. These pieces send imaginations flying through the air, defying our existence and giving us hope that our souls will survive. They are wire, saran wrap, and found objects from an old Butternut coffee can.

I'm going to end with another verse from the *Tao Te Ching*, #52:

***“The beginning of the universe***

***Is the mother of all things?***

***Knowing the mother, one also knows the children.***

***Knowing the children, yet remaining in touch with the mother,***

***Brings freedom from the fear of death.***

***Keep your mouth shut,***

***Guard the senses,***

***And life is full.***

***Open your mouth,***

***Always be busy,***

***And life is beyond hope.***

***Seeing the small is insight;***

***Yielding to force is strength.***

***Using the outer light, return to insight,***

***And in this way be saved from harm.***

***This is learning constancy.”***

***My strength is my inner spirit.***

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## SLIDE LIST

1. Puissance  
48"x 62", acrylic, paper-mache, mirror
2. Obelisk  
48"x 10", acrylic, mirror, collage
3. Figure  
48"x 31", acrylic, burlap, mirror
4. Guardian  
40"x 31", acrylic, burlap, mirror
5. Dark Mirror  
48"x48"x24", mixed media
6. detail, Dark Mirror
7. Power Figure  
12"x4", sawdust-fired clay
8. detail, Power Figure
9. Power Figure  
12"x6", raku-fired clay
10. Power Figure  
9"x12", raku-fired clay
11. Power Figure  
12"x9", raku-fired clay
12. Power Figure  
12"x5", sawdust-fired clay
13. Power Figure/Life Force #1  
26"x12"x12", wire, raku-fired porcelain
14. detail, Power Figure/Life Force#1
15. Power Figure/Life Force #2  
38"x12"x12", wire, raku-fired clay
16. Spirit Series  
20"x16"x5", mixed media
17. Mabel
18. Power Boxes  
12"x9"x3", cigar box, raku-fired clay, wire
19. V-Shells  
20"x12"x5", wire, saran wrap
20. detail, V-Shells
21. Sky Mirror  
36"x24"x24", wire, mirror, saran wrap
22. detail, Sky Mirror
23. Bright Mirror  
36"x24"x24", wire, mirrors
24. detail, Bright Mirror
25. Butternut series  
16"x7"x6", wire, saran wrap, found objects



**26. detail, Butternut series**

**27. Butternut series**

**18"x7"x6", wire, saran wrap, found objects**

**28. detail, Butternut series**