

# WE KOPPEL, WE DALA

text by Naomi Velaphi

Zimbabwe is one part of my motherland but also my ‘other’ land. Leaning on the name of Roberta Rich’s video work *M/other Land* (2018), sites and place evoke important memory for us brown folk here in the settler nation of Australia.

Zimbabwe is not home but there is a longing and memory as if it could be home. As I think about my upcoming trip to southern Africa drawing closer, I can’t help but feel a deep sense of anxiety in amongst the excitement. Between reconnecting with family I’ve not seen for over a decade and touring through cities with my own new family, a constant question dwells as to how my separation and distance from the air, the soil, the people and the politics can possibly make me belong.

Taking in the sites, objects and voices of those who share a familiar yet different version of Africa, like me, release the sense that a new type of empowerment, for a diaspora so far reaching can feel comfortable with the distance and the unknown.

There are sites and stories from southern Africa which remain in my imagination and *WE KOPPEL, WE DALA* by Rich is a collection of works which remind me that remembering, reeducating and reinserting oneself to create new narratives is how one can keep pushing to share a true tale of an African diasporic experience.

There is an immediate resonance with both site and gesture throughout the work *M/other Land*, where Rich traverses across sites in Naarm (Melbourne), Cape Town and Johannesburg, drawing together colonised lands and reinforcing the vast impact of colonial dominance. The seamlessness by which these sites fold into one another amplify Rich’s presence as though the sites are now one and reclaimed by her - repeatedly.

Bare foot, stand tall, walk forward, arm up, clench fist, head tilts up  
Bare foot, stand tall, walk forward, arm up, clench fist, head tilts up  
Bare foot, stand tall, walk forward, arm up, clench fist, head tilts up

Rich combines both personal and political sites including the streets of Cape Town, the recently heritage listed Bo Kaap known for its origins as a slave residence quarters, and District Six (an area referred to in Apartheid South Africa, as a predominantly ‘Coloured’) where her father's side of the family lived. She also visits sites in the suburbs of Wynberg, Goodwood, Walmer Estate and Rondebosch, the last place her father's’ family resided before being forcibly moved out. Rondebosch, a now affluent area, is only one of many examples in Cape Town of this systemic action of Apartheid that led to a loss of wealth within their community, more specifically illustrating the depth by which such inequitable systems continue to linger.

Beyond former private residences, public sites reclaimed by the black power pose Rich performs, includes the former location of the Cecil Rhodes statue on the grounds of the University of Cape Town. This now simply exists as the base which held the statue and nothing more. Removed in 2015 through pressure from the student activist movement #Rhodesmustfall this site is now known as a symbol of decolonisation<sup>1</sup>. Absence is what speaks volumes in this location with a void of where the colonists once stood against the backdrop of Table Mountain and Rich’s figure now representing a significant voice which should be heard.

Cutting to parts of Johannesburg, Rich identifies a smaller site of decolonisation performing in front of a road sign with a red slash through the coloniser Kitchener’s<sup>2</sup> name and a new street sign now named after anti-Apartheid activist

Albertina Sisulu. Youth movements are again referenced via a stop at the Hector Pieterse Memorial in Soweto, a site where the brutality of the Apartheid regime was embodied through the death of the 12 year old Hector Pieterse, who was simply protesting the right to speak his own language at school and not that of the coloniser, Afrikaans. This is where Afrikaans is complex. Afrikaans for Rich, is not the language of the coloniser, but a language appropriated and claimed by the coloniser<sup>3</sup>.

These sites and Rich’s body and gestures together in *M/other Land* form the frame for asserting a decolonised space in this exhibition. The space is accompanied by voices of the people of District Six in the video work *Remembering District Six* (2017). Declared a ‘Whites’ only area in 1966 during Apartheid, District Six became known as a richly diverse community forcibly removed to the outskirts of town. District Six was originally established as a community of freed slaves, artists, labourers and immigrants - home to many brown people<sup>4</sup>. In sharing space these works create a narrative of people new and old, controlled and uncontrolled. Through the verite style filming of District Six, audiences are encouraged to remember those displaced, and the ongoing battle for new housing in District Six that the government promised post 1994 when Apartheid was abolished. The parade documented in 2016 celebrates strength of a community, which to this day remains vibrant and intergenerational.

Objects and reference items drawn from Apartheid make up the final pieces of the space. Placed on plinths enclosed in clear vitrines, one contains a 1967, 1 Rand coin - featuring Hendrik Verwoerd inverted, a ‘dom’ pass - essentially a passport of the Apartheid era - and an Afrikaans social atlas of Cape Town. This map in particular defines the segregated areas and includes detailed cartography of religions, genders, fertility, occupation, ages and ‘races’ to the Cape metropolitan. These objects now flooded by a disruptive red light, re-assert the pain, anger and brutality of Apartheid. The other vitrine serves to fight this. Echoing hues of the ‘purple rain protest’<sup>5</sup>, showered in a purple light and elevating the likes of Rich’s late aunt’s identity card. The card with its K for *Kleuring*, translating as ‘Coloured’ in Afrikaans, acts as both Rich’s own memorial of her brown community and reclaims her so called ‘Cape Coloured’ identity as valid and liberated.

What Rich has gathered and collected, both objects and recorded footage, speaks to her process of deep research into archives from family stories in Cape Town through to university collections in Johannesburg. This process of searching, collecting and thus remembering and reflecting upon what we imagine our people - family, friends and their experiences to be, in contexts that are complex and at times brutal and painful, highlight a struggle you feel but can’t always connect with when you culturally exist across two continents.

The geographic separation only serves as one form of restraint with the other being the embedded histories of forced segregation and displacement. As these items and moments now sit together on stolen land here in Australia, one can’t help but reflect on the fact that the segregation and white supremacy legally enforced here through Queensland’s *Aboriginal Protection Act* (1897), has anecdotally been described as the blueprint for Apartheid in South Africa. These histories of segregation are much more connected to the settler nation Australia as opposed to a distant idea that happened elsewhere.

Whilst there is a discomfort in how institutionalised racism can be picked up from one country and dropped of to the next, one can hope that our people be it ‘black’, ‘brown’, so called ‘Coloured’ or ‘People of Colour’, are slowing taking back and unravelling the work of the colonisers. The slang phrases of Koppel - meaning ‘to get or gather’, and Dala - referring to an action, ‘to do’, together with ‘we’, a tone of a community gathering and ‘getting’ or ‘taking’ back, is reinforced collectively through these works.

The thread of personal objects, story and history are reclaimed and memorialised

by Rich in a manner that speaks of a struggle which empowers us as African Australians to decolonise our hearts and minds so maybe we can belong. The hope is we can actively do this by continuously being present from where we were once absent and not for one moment forget we are on stolen land.

*Naomi Velaphi is an arts producer, curator and arts worker of Japanese and Zimbabwean heritage. She resides on Kulin country, Naarm (Melbourne), Australia.*

**The artists, writers and Metro Arts respectfully acknowledge the Turrbul and Jagera people as the Traditional Owners of the Land on which this exhibition takes place, and pay respects to Elders past, present and emerging. We acknowledge that Sovereignty has never been ceded.**

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> The #Rhodesmustfall movement was born out of students from the University of Cape Town protesting their rights at an institution which celebrated white culture with little support for black students. See <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2015/nov/18/why-south-african-students-have-turned-on-their-parents-generation>

<sup>2</sup> Kitchener, Horatio Herbert Kitchener later known as Lord Kitchener was a British army officer who was known for military strategies such as the ‘scorched earth policy’ and the very first concentration camps inflicted on the ‘Boers’ during the Boer war. See [https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic\\_figures/kitchener\\_lord\\_horatio.shtml](https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/kitchener_lord_horatio.shtml)

<sup>3</sup> A language that was created by the indigenous San and Khoe peoples of the land, the Cape Malays and many brown and black slave groups brought by the Dutch East India company to the Cape. But for Hector Pieterse, this was not his native language, his language among at least 11 now ‘official’ languages of South Africa as a country that were not all part of educational curriculum at this time. If one listens to working class Afrikaans in contrast to Dutch “Afrikaner” Afrikaans, its structure speaks to class and proximity to Dutch, where for Rich, Afrikaans spoken by self proclaimed ‘Afrikaaners’ is a colonial appropriation and not a departure from a language they already spoke. Afrikaans is very much rooted in blackness in its creation and demographic of speakers today. See <https://theconversation.com/more-than-an-oppressors-language-reclaiming-the-hidden-history-of-afrikaans-71838>

<sup>4</sup> About District Six available at: <https://www.districtsix.co.za/about-district-six/>

<sup>5</sup> Weekend Argus, "Purple Rain halts city demo", front page, Saturday, 2 September 1989.



**EPSON**  
EXCEED YOUR VISION

**Metro Arts**

*Metro Arts is supported by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body. Metro Arts is supported by the Queensland Government through Arts Queensland, part of the Department of Environment and Science. Metro Arts is proudly supported by Brisbane City Council. Metro Arts is a proud partner of EPSON, Bones Accounting, Dendy Cinemas and The Victory Hotel.*

**The FREEDMAN FOUNDATION**

**na va**  
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE VISUAL ARTS

**M**  
CITY OF MELBOURNE

**ARTS HOUSE**

**QCA Galleries**

**Griffith UNIVERSITY**  
Queensland College of Art

**NEXT WAVE**

*M/other Land presented in this exhibition, premiered at Arts House as part of Next Wave 2018. This project was assisted by The Freedman Foundation Travelling Scholarship. The program is administered by the National Association of the Visual Arts (NAVA).*

**WE  
KOPPEL  
WE  
DALA**



**ROBERTA JOY RICH**

**JUNE 26 - JULY 13, 2019  
METRO ARTS**