

FART

WRECKAGE, RUIN AND RESISTANCE

A new exhibition brings together a slew of visionary artists who have reimagined waste.

By **Andrea Nagel**

ReFuse-Ability is a group exhibition now on at the FADA Gallery at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) that explores urgent ecological, political and aesthetic questions through the transformation of waste and wreckage into sites of resistance and reworlding.

Curated by Brenton Maart and Leora Farber, the show brings together a group of visionary artists from Africa and the Global South who repurpose the wreckage of extraction, empire and excess into statements of resistance and renewal.

ReFuse-Ability isn't just an exhibition – it's a manifesto for art in the age of planetary crisis that treats waste as a haunted, living material.

Francois Knoetze's cinematic installation *Core Dump* excavates the digital debris of techno-capitalism, exposing the violent afterlives of discarded technology across the Global South. Farber cultivates living moss over the remnants of a colonial dinner table, creating a living monument to biopolitical entanglement and vegetal agency. Masimba Hwati and Michael Gould, performing as The Zebra Collective, sonically resurrect the cultural and ecological of Kariba Dam, invoking the spirit of the Zambezi through a haunting, multisensory score.

Nolan Oswald Dennis transforms Frantz Fanon's revolutionary texts into living compost, with a bioactive earthworm system that literalises the decomposition and regeneration of radical thought. Tawanda Takura mines the shoe dumps of Zimbabwe to sculpt uncanny new life forms that are survivors of economic collapse and creators of post-collapse futures. Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr push the ethics of biotechnology to its limits, culturing animal tissue to recreate primitive tools, thereby questioning the essence of evolution, life and objecthood. Oupa Sibeko uses honey, sea salt and his own body in ritual performances that transform pain into healing and residue into renewal. Usha Seejarim's monumental installation of handbound grass brooms forms a living archive of ecological memory, domestic labour and the poetics of care.

The exhibition forms part of the Bioart + Design Africa research programme of the VIAD Research Centre at UJ, which investigates new materialities through bioart, indigenous knowledge systems and decolonial methodologies.

We spoke to Maart and Farber about the exhibition.

ReFuse-Ability frames waste as both haunted and alive. How did this idea shape your approach, and how did you select artists whose works speak to this concept?

There's a loaded relationship between the living and the dead. That is why ghost stories prompt both fear and intrigue. There's a powerful link between the living and the non-dead, as evidenced by thousands of zombie movies that fling out jump scares as much as they unfurl along the trope of the psycho thriller. As with roadkill, we're simultaneously attracted and repulsed by these macabre coalitions. We're alive in a space occupied by the more-than-living.

Are memories a kind of ephemeral and intangible haunting, operating with both presence and absence?

Are they a way we keep the dead alive within us? Can hauntings be material and corporeal as a consequence, in the way the past continues to plague us via cause and effect? A particular curatorial focus of ReFuse-Ability is the way contemporary artists make sense of the devastation and trauma inflicted by colonialism, and how the aftermaths of these traumas haunt us in the present. It's interesting how contemporary artists use material manifestations – the waste and the wreckage – as new materials with which to make art. Artists who make work from, and in relation to, conditions in

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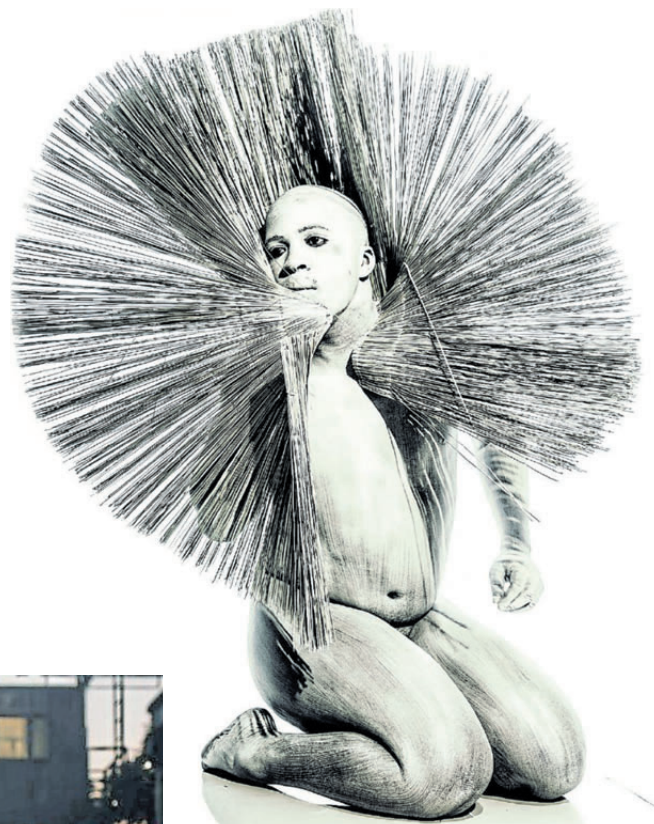


Francois Knoetze's 'Core Dump', 2018, is a cinematic installation that excavates the digital debris of techno-capitalism. Picture: ZIDAN, COURTESY OF THE EXECUTION TEAM AT COSMOPOLIS

the southern hemisphere are creating a new branch of cultural production. The waste materials, archives and memories of colonialism, imperialism and empire are being transformed into a new art movement and a new chapter in contemporary art history. These works are visually arresting and carry political weight. Influenced by thinkers such as Françoise Vergès, the artists invite us to consider how racial capitalism, colonialism and environmental injustice converge in the act of discarding. Waste, in this show, is both material and metaphor: it tells stories not only of extraction, exhaustion and suffocation but also of survival, repair and resistance. Waste is transformed from a toxic pollutant into a means to tell stories and create new paths, understandings and worlds. The artworks are a manifesto in an age of planetary crisis, and the waste is treated as a haunted, living material.

This exhibition brings together artists from across Africa and the Global South. What conversations or solidarities did you hope to activate by centring these geopolitical voices?

Africa, South America and Asia were subjected to colonial extractivism – the armed, violent theft of wealth, minerals, soil quality, biodiversity, water and air quality, not to mention bodies and lives, often via the subversion of sovereignty. The consequence



Oupa Sibeko's 'Reeds of iQhawe', 2018.

Picture: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

of this extraction is the generation of enormous quantities of waste, with ruinous ecological and climatic repercussions. This waste continues to be dumped with increasing impunity in countries that form part of the Global South. The effects on people living near highly toxic garbage are devastating. Also, the impact on the local environment and ecology has global repercussions. It's inevitable that cultural practitioners from these countries would be affected by this abuse and use their work as conduits for reflection, engagement and activism. The more we work with our cultural counterparts in the Global South, the more we find similarities in our cultural practices, which is where we can learn from each other and increase our efficacy. Cultural practices within these countries are, by necessity, forms of collective activism. It's here that much of contemporary art does its work in relation to decolonisation of the mind, body, life and ecology. This complex set of relationships – ironically, the productive entanglement borne from toxicity – forms a crucial aspect of the exhibition.

What do you hope audiences will take away from ReFuse-Ability – not just intellectually, but viscerally and emotionally – when encountering these materials of waste, ruin and transformation?

We hope audiences think deeply and feel something stir in their bodies – something uncomfortable, haunting or perhaps hopeful. The exhibition is designed as a journey through immersive environments where waste, wreckage and residue aren't simply presented as problems to be solved, but as materials with agency. As viewers move through these worlds, they aren't just observers – they become participants in spaces shaped by rupture and repair. The installations are grounded in practice-led research, but they operate on a visceral level as well, through sound, texture, movement and material presence. They ask audiences to sit with the discomfort of decay, the quiet persistence of survival and the possibility of transformation. These aren't passive works – they draw you in, slow you down and insist on embodied attention. Whether through the weight of discarded objects, the echoes of ecological grief or the delicate gestures of care and repair, we want audiences to feel the urgency of our current moment and imagine other ways of relating, creating and living. Ultimately, ReFuse-Ability invites you to reworld – to reckon with ruin and recognise that, even in the broken, something alive is waiting to emerge.

The exhibition is on at FADA Gallery, University of Johannesburg, Bunting Road Campus. ● Please see timeslive.co.za for the extended interview with the curators.



Tawanda Takura's 'Macabre', 2024. Picture:

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