



Consuming passion: Nolan Oswald Dennis's installation *garden for fanon* (above and below), in which earthworms turn a book by 20th-century political philosopher Frantz Fanon into soil. Photos: Anthea Pokroy

The garden that eats Frantz Fanon

Artist Nolan Oswald Dennis's installation turns theory into soil, questioning who gets to decide what's important — and why

Thembeke Heidi Sincuba

Ferreirasdorp, in the Joburg inner city, is not for the faint hearted, but approaching Nolan Oswald Dennis's studio, the chaos peeled away. The security guard offered a subtle smile as he swung the gate open, gesturing towards the central block.

As I entered the large sunlit space, eyes flickered up from slick screens, which, like the walls, were neatly scattered with works in progress or works that might have been. Dennis led me into a separate studio with even more stillness and even more light, where I had to lean in just to catch his words with my well-worn ears.

Nolan Oswald Dennis began his career as a student of architecture at the University of the Witwatersrand but grew critical of its narrow focus on fixed structures. "I became an artist through working with other people," he says, finding the art world offered "more space to think and to work in meaningful ways".

Puncturing the art space were makers such as Rangoato Hlasane of Keleketla! Library and Jamal Nxedlana of CUSS Group.

"There was a sense of urgency," he says as he recalls Johannesburg's interdisciplinary hive between 2010 and 2016.

Dennis's trajectory was shaped by his 2012–13 collaboration *Social Landscape Project: Transition and Show Us Our Land* with Molemo Moiloa at Market Photo Workshop.

In 2015, he co-founded the creative agency NTU with Bogosi Sekhukhuni and Tabita Rezaire and, early on, Dennis began to learn about the art



world's flawed value systems.

He recalls Sekhukhuni's words, "He said, 'These people don't understand how important what I'm doing is.' And I couldn't understand at first — he didn't say 'good' or 'impressive', he said 'important'."

In 2016, Dennis had a solo exhibition at Goodman Gallery, which earned him the FNB Art Prize.

After studying at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the US from 2018 to 2020, he returned to Joburg. By then, his work was inter-

nationally renowned, appearing in major biennales, including Berlin, Dakar, Liverpool and Shanghai, plus the Front International Cleveland Triennial in the US.

Now represented by Goodman, he's also exhibited at the Swiss Institute (New York) and Gasworks (London), won the 2023 Sesc Videobrasil Jury Prize and had a monograph published with Zeitz MOCAA and Koenig.

I returned to the question of importance, asking Dennis about what mattered during those early "Joburg



Conditions: Award-winning South African artist Nolan Oswald Dennis. Photo: Jesse Barnes

hustle days", compared to now, when he is ostensibly the golden boy of the art world. I mention the recent FNB Art Prize ceremony, where Thato Toebea was crowned artist of the year and Dennis's name was dropped in multiple speeches.

"Importance on its own terms is not necessarily the measure because, sometimes, being important or valued in institutional spaces can mean you're useful to them, which isn't necessarily where you want to find your value."

Herein lies my fascination with this artist's radical unravelling of what's important. Dennis's *garden for fanon*, first shown in *conditions* (2021) at Goodman Gallery, animates the very notion of importance.

Glass globes are filled with soil and earthworms that slowly consume Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, transforming its pages into nutrient-rich earth.

The installation balances scientific precision with organic chaos as shifting light bathes the piece in a ritual glow — an unlikely alchemy that breathes and grows.

While it began in 2021, which marked 60 years since *The Wretched of the Earth* was written, Dennis's *garden for fanon* has been exhibited numerous times, now part of the *Re:Fuse-Ability* exhibition at University of Johannesburg's FADA Gallery, until 6 September.

Dennis admits the limitations, noting how his own relationship with Fanon was far from academic. While he acknowledges the show as "a place where people can meet with the work", he critiques how institutions "tend to prioritise objects", when "it should be about engagement, not just display".

According to him, the institutional treatment of Fanon is "so analytical, so academic", while his own intervention asks: "Where's the earth in this text?"

His piece clocks the gap between academic and organic knowledge systems as he insists, "I learned Fanon through other people. For me, it was never about the text itself, it was about what the text does."

"The first time I encountered Fanon was in a collection of books my grandmother gave me. I had to ask people, talk to people to understand the book. It was never just about sitting with the text."

I resist collapsing too neatly into

Dennis's critique of the art world, an institution that, for better or worse, has held space for us both. Instead, I follow what he calls a "game of meaning", where play and precision hold equal weight. His work dances between legibility and refusal, spectacle and sincerity.

"The art world thrives on making people conventional, legible," he warns, "but for me, everything, to some extent, arrives with humour."

Beneath the wit is intention: "two material languages" — clinical glass and homely clay — never reconciled, always in tension.

Dennis recalls familiar critiques: "Why is your work so white? Why is it so cold? Why are you trying to be a scientist?" These reveal discomfort with hybridity. He admits, "It's a colonial form, that laboratory aesthetic ... These questions are a bit cringe but I get where they're coming from."

When he brings in "African" aesthetics, some see tradition or tourism, others ritual or spirituality. For Dennis, these aren't fixed but overlapping "libraries" of meaning. He embraces this friction as generative: "That tension is a hypothesis ... I'm interested in those intersections."

Dennis' invocation of Fanon is neither nostalgic nor critical: "We want to love Fanon by resisting all the shit done to his legacy." I press him about exactly how he resists and he answers, "Taking seriously the things that I love ... and trying to align my work with those things."

I probed further, asking specifically about love, a question that appeared to produce a degree of reciprocal pleasure. His current literary love, a sci-fi series by Jeff VanderMeer, starting with *Annihilation* (2014), now followed by *Absolution* (2025), the fourth book in the "trilogy".

As our chat came to its natural end, we lingered on love, geeking out about having been brought up in KwaZulu-Natal. "It's crazy, so much weird stuff comes out of that space," he says with a hearty grin.

We bonded over our somewhat predictable predilection towards the gqom genre, and with a balmic bible, he accurately professed, "It's good stuff."

Just before he was whisked away, I pried out one last tidbit: Lately, he's been interested in rocks, recently touring the UJ Mining Simulation, haunted by its humidity, heat and hammering. Hold onto your helmets.