

Donna Kukama



The Quiet Body of Donna Kukama

When Donna Kukama talks about her performance piece *Silang Mabele* ("grind the mielies"), devised at an artists' workshop in Serbia in 2004, she reveals that in performing the work at the Gallery 25 May in Belgrade she discovered that it contained a ritualism she had not foreseen. To create the work, Kukama collected, over the course of the workshop, all of the MacDonalds cartons that had contained the meals fed to the artists. She stacked the cartons on her head in the manner of rural women carrying water and then cast them down like a sangoma casting bones. She clipped her own fingernails and placed one clipping in each box. The boxes were then arranged to resemble a cityscape or perhaps a graveyard that Kukama circled in a trance-like state. She then cut her own hair, washed herself with water from a small bottle, and swept the floor clean with her hair.

The emergence of ritual in this performance exposed an element of Kukama's work that seems to have been present all along. Her subsequent performance pieces have begun to translate into ritual what, in earlier works, were simple repetitive actions focused on her own body. This element of the work gives her audiences a way into what otherwise would have remained an intensely private corporeal language.

Most of Kukama's work of the last year is the result of an extended process of collecting and documenting, through video, writing, photography, and digital scanning, those parts of the body that seem always to be dying: hair, skin, and fingernails. She has also recorded minute movements of the body such as breathing, blinking, and swallowing, working these into video loops with which she interacts during live performances.

All of these acts of collecting and recording accord a sacred place to the mundane and intimate daily tasks associated with personal hygiene, such as clipping one's nails or bathing. They also bring to mind the rituals undertaken in various cultures before religious ceremonies, community gatherings, or burials. Hair and nails are distinguished by their ability to continue growing after the body has died and thus, in their quiet stubbornness, draw attention to the most fundamental biological facts of human existence. More than copulation or defecation, the simple act of cutting one's fingernails connects us to the cycles of birth and decay. It is perhaps the last remaining private act in a world in which everything about our lives has been exposed through film and photography to public scrutiny.

But where other performance artists have brought bodily intimacy into the public realm (one thinks of Vito Acconci masturbating under a ramp during an exhibition of his work, or of Yoko Ono inviting onlookers to cut pieces of her clothing off her body, or, closer to home, of Leora Farber seeming to stitch herself together in public view), Kukama draws the tight circle of the private closer to her body. We witness her acts as public performances, but the effect of these is, paradoxically, to reiterate or re-invalidate the private. This aspect of her work invites associations to the oeuvre of Ana Mendieta, whose performances seemed to be repeated acts of burial and ascension, of emergence from and retreat into the self.

Kukama's work is saved from maudlin self-scrutiny by a lightness and sense of humour at work in several of her photographic prints and in her paintings. In *All Nails Go to Heaven and Left Wing Toes, Right Wing Toes* she pokes gentle fun at her own obsessions. The images appear, at first glance, to be shots of birds on the wing, or objects blown across a surface or photographed against the sky. They are far more mundane: her toe nails arranged on sheets of paper and photographed in a series.

Images: (detail) 9 to 12
Medium: Inkjet Print on Hannemule
Dimensions: 45mm x 35.5mm
Edition: 1/5 (Series of 6)
2004





The painting Moriri Setso displays a similar sense of humour even as it reflects on memory and loss . It is the culmination of a work that began with a painting that incorporated human hair collected over the course of a year. This first painting was called Uneeq Weev, 100% Human Hair and was shown at the Gerard Sekoto Gallery in 2004. After the exhibition, Kukama removed all of the hair that was not her own from the painting and applied white acrylic paint and saliva to the sixteen small canvases. The result was a second work, Moriro Setso ("hair tradition" in se-Tswana) that Kukama refers to as a memoir. Where the title of the first painting poked fun at the use of hair extensions ("Uniiq Wiiiv" is a popular brand) to give length and volume to hair, the title of the second work suggests something that will outlive fashion. Ironically, the expression "moriro setso" is not comprehensible in se-Tswana: the two words require a third word between them in order to be made sense of. With tongue in cheek then, Kukama transforms the public performance of self-adornment into a private ritual. At the same time she sets the notion of tradition alongside the fickleness of fashion, the ephemerality of hair.

Image: (Installation view) Moriri Setso
Medium: Hair, acrylic & saliva on canvas.
2004

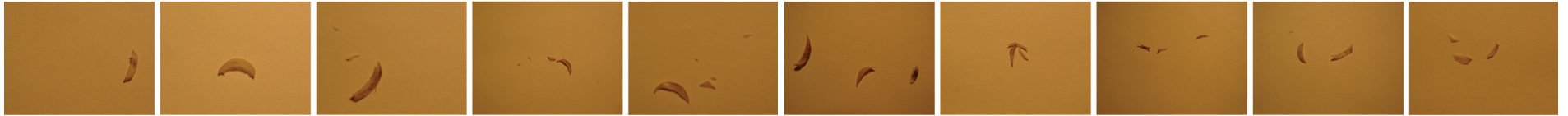


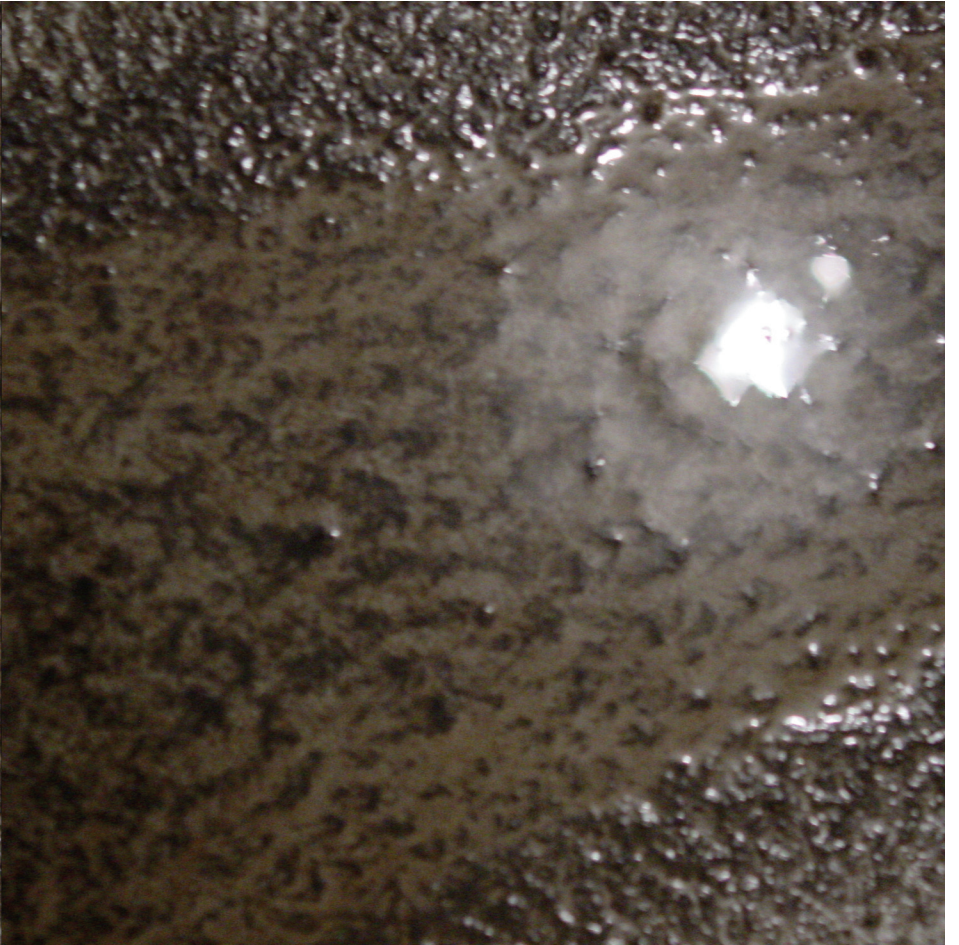
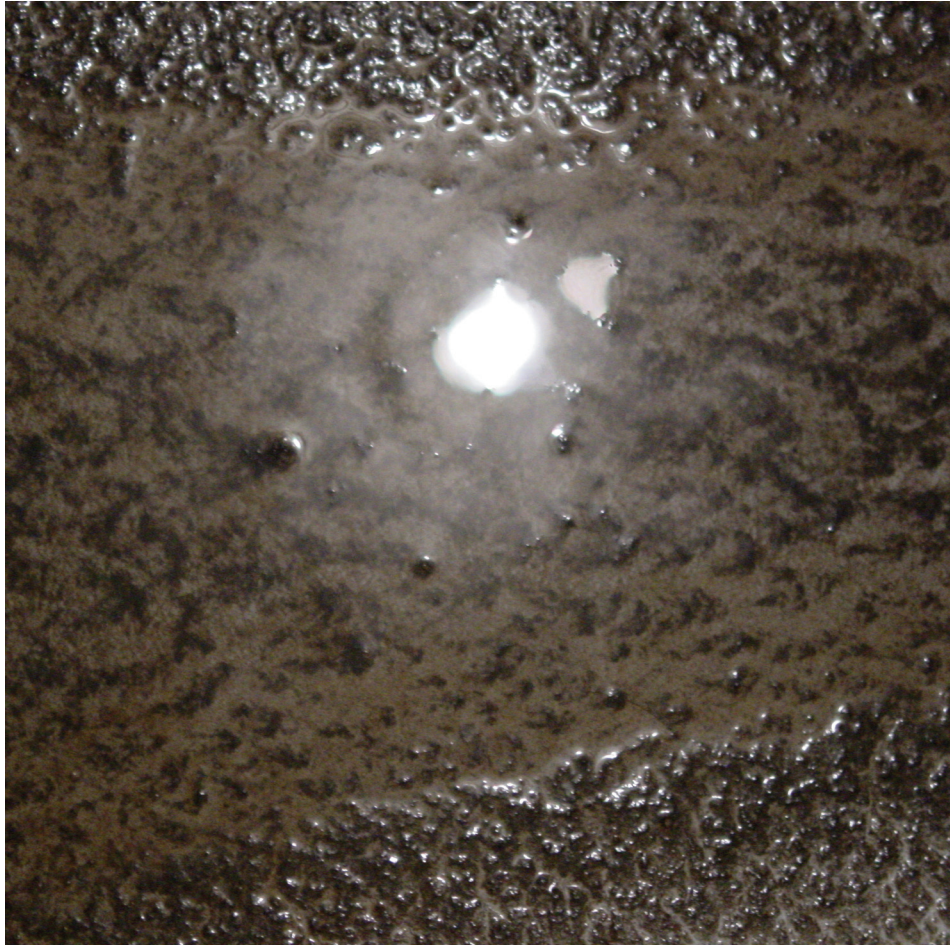
Images: (detail)
Left Wing Toes, Right Wing Toes
Medium: Inkjet print on Hannemule
Dimensions: 58mm x 29mm
2004

Any artist working in South Africa in the last decade and interested in representations of self has had to struggle through the awful quagmire of identity politics (an even filthier quagmire it is if you are a female artist). Emerging quietly from the noise and discussion surrounding the likes of Kathryn Smith, Minette Vári, Tracey Rose, Bernie Searle, and their elder stateswoman Penny Siopis, grateful perhaps that they have tackled the big issues – self-representation, racial and sexual identity, body politics – Donna Kukama investigates her own identity. She has, almost uncannily, sidestepped some of the big questions – though for South African viewers these are never too far from the surface – to return to the kind of self-analysis undertaken by some of the earliest performance artists, though with none of their interest in such questions as what constitutes art or what is the artist's relationship to the institutions of art.

If it were not for the fact that Kukama has chosen performance art as a medium of expression, her work might remain an intensely private exploration of her own body. Through performance, however, she brings her self-documentation into the public arena, all the while preserving, within that arena, a space for herself. The result is an almost painful self-exposure that can endure scrutiny and sustain itself only through the intervention of ritual. Her photographs and paintings are an attempt not only to inscribe the telltale signatures of her flesh onto the surface of the canvas or paper but also to give the ephemeral qualities of ritual a concrete form.

Image: (detail) All nails go to heaven
Medium: Inkjet print on Hannemule
Dimensions: 59 x 12
Edition: 1/5
2004







Overleaf images: (detail) Mud Slut
Medium: Digital Print on Hannemuhle
Edition: 1/3 (set of 6 prints)
2004

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- ⊕ - Graskop
- ⊕ - Dullstroom
- ⊕ - Pretoria - Tshwane
- ⊕ - Irene - Tshwane
- ⊕ - Richmond
- ⊕ - Cape Town