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SOIL, DUST, LIFE: DINEO SESHEE BOPAPE ON HER EARTHY, SEARCHING ART

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Dineo Seshee Bopape, *sa ___ ke lerole, (sa lerole ke ___)*, 2016, installation view.

CHARLES BENTON/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ART IN GENERAL

Dineo Seshee Bopape's first solo exhibition in the United States—"sa ____ ke lerole, (se lerole ke ____)," at Art in General through January 14—considers history, gender, politics, and memory contained within land itself. Bopape has used actions and symbols to explore sovereignty and language in large masses of soil. On the soil's surface, holes are filled with shells and rocks; from inside, a candle emerges and gold leaf sinks into the depths. A bundle of sage is poised at the edge of a shallow cavity. Rose petals are scattered beneath a bird-like form. It is tempting to seek out patterns, to solve the puzzle, but it proves futile—these questions remain open-ended.

Born in Polokwane, South Africa, Bopape now lives and works in Johannesburg. Her work explores the ambiguous realm between the natural and the artificial, combining analog and digital techniques to produce environments that bring forth a range of associations. In her exhibition, meanings oscillate—they are never definite and never linear. Here, Bopape responds to a few questions about the exhibition.

Your exhibition is inspired by the site-specific installation you made for the São Paulo Biennial. How is the work different? To what extent do you consider location—and audience—for your work?

The work is similar, with the same ground and base ideas or starting point. The soil is different. The soil treatment is different. The space is different. The team is different. The place is similar but different. People's relationship to land and soil, and to Afro-diasporic aesthetics, and the angle through which one perceives Land art... In New York, there is [Walter De Maria's] *The New York Earth Room*; in São Paulo, there are Mayan temples. When first conceiving the work, I was thinking of the South/Southern African context in particular: the histories of indigenous African women's bodies, African spiritual and cultural practices, particular rituals and games. I was not thinking much of the audience, but more of the asymmetries of context.

I saw the exhibition on a snowy day, so it gave me the feeling of having entered a different zone—like a desert or beach surrounded by snow. Is the soil from anywhere specific?

That sounds wonderful. I wish to see it like that too. I will have to ask the gallery to send pictures. The soil was found in Connecticut, from a vendor who was willing to mix the soil to our specifications.

I could not help thinking of death rituals as I noticed objects like rose petals, a candle, sheepskin, and shells. Do you think of it as a sort of memorial site?



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I am open to that interpretation.

On your website, in lieu of straightforward descriptions of your work, you offer open questions, drifting thoughts, and free associations. Does this happen before, after, or alongside the materialization of the work?

All the way through. In thinking of and through ideas, doing research, communicating with others—language becomes a huge part, shaping it to accommodate thoughts/presences that feel outside of English, sePedi, or other languages I speak (or speak me).

The exhibition deals with the filling and emptying of voids. How did you first become interested in this?

It was after I had gone to a herbal doctor in 2005. I had boils on the bottom of my feet. The doctor told me that I needed to off-load some emotional stuff. I became completely fascinated about how the body carries with it memories that manifest into forms and things

on and in the body. I was fascinated with both a personal narrative as well as the sociopolitical and historical baggage, but those became too heavy to carry, so they became ghosts of sorts.

How do you describe the performative aspects of your work: grabbing clay, digging, filling. Are these actions personal, political? How do they relate to the reclamation of land and self?

The immediately present and the almost absent, the personal and the political, self-sovereignty and sovereignty for the land—this is what I think about. Also the metaphysical, spiritual, and cultural aspects of earth (soil, clay, dust) that several creation stories claim as the origin of life.

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