



Under Covers, Out in the Open:  
Nicholas Hlobo and Umtshotsho

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Studio photographs by Sabelo Mlangeni

When I went to visit Nicholas Hlobo in his downtown Johannesburg studio in April 2009, I was struck by a quick but elegant sketch in a corner of the vast “visual diary” tacked onto the walls of the loft-like space. In contrast to Hlobo’s associative, metaphorical and often elusive style, the sketch was startlingly direct: it represented one figure mounting another from behind.

The artist had written two words above the drawing: “the soma”. *Ukusoma* is the traditional Xhosa practice whereby adolescents are permitted – in fact, encouraged – to have non-penetrative thigh-sex as part of the *umtshotsho* rituals which channel their libidos in the years before the boys go off to be initiated and circumcised. An *umtshotsho* is actually a peer-regulated youth organisation of adolescents, which holds parties where mock-fighting, dancing and dating take place; a dry run, as it were, for lives of war and procreation.<sup>1</sup>

One obvious feature of *ukusoma* is that it is a crash course in traditional Xhosa gender relations: the active party gets all the gratification, while the passive party learns to serve. Another more radical feature, however, is that the passive party is not necessarily female: “In Xhosa culture,” Hlobo tells me, “it’s well understood that when boys are in the fields, that’s what they would do – because one was not allowed to have penetrative sex with girls.” But so long as you practise *ukusoma*, “what you can do with girls, you can do with boys”.

And so the figures in Hlobo’s sketch are in fact more elusive than they might originally seem: are they a boy and a girl, or are they two boys? And the artist intends his work to be allusive too: “This sketch is just for me to understand the bodies

<sup>1</sup> In their benchmark anthropological study of traditional Xhosa youth organisations, Philip and Iona Mayer wrote in 1970 that “sexual gratification” is “valued positively at all ages” in the culture, and that “adolescence is seen as a time when both sex and fighting should be practised vigorously. As in any society, however, practising by adolescents carries new risks in that this age is newly potent in both respects – is fertile and also able to inflict death.” In this context, the *umtshotsho* rituals both “encourage sexual and fighting behaviour and channel them into desired directions”. Philip and Iona Mayer, ‘Socialization by Peers: The Youth Organization of the Red Xhosa’, in Philip Mayer (ed), *Socialization: The Approach from Social Anthropology*, London: Tavistock, 1970: 159, 163.





underneath,” he told me. “When the work is finished, all you’ll see is the blanket covering them, and just the suggestion of bodies. In my head, the bodies are there, but to the viewer, they are not ...”

Hlobo did not, in the end, make this particular piece for his *Umtshotsho* exhibition. But the dynamic he describes above offers a key to understanding his work, and in particular *Izithunzi*, the eight figures which form the largest part of the exhibition and his most complex and developed single installation yet. In *Umtshotsho*, as in so much of his work, Hlobo explores his identity and his sexuality, and the way these connect to his inner world and his biography. Here, more than ever, he expresses the paradox of being both out in the open and under the covers – an insider and outsider – in all the worlds he inhabits: Xhosa son, Eastern Cape homeboy, gay cosmopolitan, artworld rising star. Certainly, as is evidenced in his past shows, Hlobo can be sexually provocative. But he cannot be literal; has become increasingly unwilling to lay things bare. His genius, in *Umtshotsho*, lies in the way he has stitched together “blankets” from rubber and ribbon, leaving it to us to imagine what desires and dramas – what flesh and blood – might lurk beneath (and among) the multivalent, amoebic, hermaphroditic figures populating his *Umtshotsho* dance.

The work is bold (what materials! what singular vision!) and convivial (welcome to the party!); humorous and playful. Yet the features on his characters’ often-ghoulish mask-like faces derive from traditional practices of scarification: they bring blood to the surface in an expression of pain and vulnerability. You might, like any kid at a party, sometimes feel lost or panicky rather than welcomed and affirmed at this *umtshotsho*. “There’s a lot of covering, as opposed to revealing,” Hlobo said to me, as we examined the two completed figures in early May 2009. “The heads are closed.”

The artist’s obsession with what is concealed and what is revealed extends to language. He loves the way that in both *isiXhosa* and the gay vernacular there is a tendency to signify rather than to say outright; to use codes which will be heard in one way by the members of your clan, and entirely differently by outsiders. This means, of course, that others are speaking, too, in ways you might not fully comprehend.

Such multivalence opens up paradoxes, arising from his own biography, which he



2 Nicholas Hlobo: *Kwatsityw’iziko*. Cape Town: Michael Stevenson. Catalogue 34 (April 2008).

embraces, and which give his work its unique energy. On the one hand, he wishes to celebrate and reclaim the openness of traditional Xhosa culture – particularly its freedom about the body and desire: “It is thanks to Christianity that nakedness is an offence and that one has to cover up; even as a man you can’t show off your arms. And I think to myself this is not part of us: if you look at photos from the early 1900s, the flesh is there.” And yet on the other hand, he is the son of an upright *gqoboka* (or “School”) family – Christians who have forsaken the old ways – and thus the self-conscious beneficiary of all that accrues from that.

His family, of course, covered themselves in western clothing and learning, and disparaged everything to do with the “Red” people, the illiterate *amaqaba*, who smeared themselves with clay and went about naked. What this means is that Hlobo never, in fact, went anywhere near an *umtshotsho* party, although as a boy he often heard the singing taking place and fantasised about joining them: “These kids go there to experience life,” he told me, “they get to learn something. Unfortunately, I never did. I know very little about *umtshotsho*, because I never went to one.” The *umtshotsho* he has created here, then, is in part a fantasy, a willed reconstruction of a world Hlobo was denied; one in which he imagines he might have had the opportunity to channel his own illicit desires.

All Hlobo’s work, to date, has been threaded thematically along the procreative cycle. His first exhibition was titled *Izele*, which means giving birth. His second was *Kwatsityw’iziko*, or “crossing the hearth”, a metaphor for sex: “If *Izele* spoke of birth,” Hlobo wrote in the catalogue, “this show speaks of what happens before the birth, what causes the birth.”<sup>2</sup> Now, in *Umtshotsho*, the artist spools backwards even further to that moment of socialisation that initiates the whole process. It is as if he is driven by trying to insert himself, as a gay man and a *gqoboka* son, into the cycle; to imagine his own *umtshotsho* to compensate for the one he was denied as a teenager.

When I suggested this to him, he responded animatedly that he felt “very lucky” to have come of age – unlike gay men of earlier generations – in an era of liberation, one which validated that “the choice lies within you, not what other people tell you, not even your parents”. His own parents were accepting and welcoming when he told them he was gay; “perhaps if I was born in the Fifties or Sixties I’d have kids and one



<sup>3</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York*, London: Flamingo, 1995

or two wives to fit in, and carry on doing my private stuff on the side. But the times are different; I have got this liberty which I am taking advantage of. I feel it would be very stupid of me to not to take advantage of the sort of liberties we are given.”

Nonetheless, he grew up in the village of Newtown outside Idutywa – a stone’s throw from the home of Thabo Mbeki’s mother, Epainette, who ran the local store – feeling that there was no one in the world like him. His maternal grandmother, who raised him, was a stern disciplinarian, a traditional butcher and a taverner. While she would not let him stray anywhere near the *umtshotsho* parties of the *amaqaba*, she permitted him to hang around the tavern, listening to the elders gossip. Here he heard much talk about lesbians, but nothing ever about men who slept with men; lesbianism, he thinks, was tolerated because being a healer – or being bewitched – gave some women the licence to live independently of men, while the very thought of men not procreating was simply too challenging to the patriarchy even to be contemplated.

Although he had a lover while at school in Mthatha, it was only when he came to Johannesburg in 1994 to work that he found his own *umtshotsho*. He had actually lived in Johannesburg before, with his parents in Tokoza, but they had been forced to return to the Eastern Cape because they found themselves in the middle of the sectarian violence that ripped the township apart in 1990. Now he was back in the city, alone, lodging with an aunt in Tembisa and coming into town to work every day.

Thoroughly bored with his job – he had graduated from being a door-to-door pop-up-book salesman to measuring cement bags at PPC – he had taken to wandering the city; creating his own coordinates by discovering and mapping the urban environment around him. He was, as the historian George Chauncey has written about gay men in New York during the early 20th century, discovering his “personal autonomy” within the titillating anonymity of the city.<sup>3</sup>

It was this way that he stumbled into the Artist Proof Studio in Newtown and eventually found his way to the fine arts programme at the Technikon Witwatersrand (now University of Johannesburg); it was this way, too, that he found himself at the magazine rack in CNA on Commissioner Street, looking surreptitiously at an edition of *Exit*, the gay magazine, and – too nervous to actually buy the magazine – scribbling





down the address for the Skyline, Jo'burg's iconic gay bar at the Harrison Reef Hotel on the corner of Pretoria and Twist Streets in Hillbrow.

"It was very difficult to find, no signs, it was like you needed a password," Hlobo remembered. "It was inside, next to the bakery, a little confectionary, and a shoe repair place. There are these steps but you do not know where they lead to, so I walked up and down." He asked, but no one seemed to know of the place; "then I came across these drag queens and I thought, 'Aha! These are the people I should ask!' 'Oh come with us darling, we going there,' they said, and I followed them. I was so nervous I tripped on the stairs."

Thus did the Skyline Bar – around since the Sixties and now, like the neighbourhood around it, almost exclusively black – become Nicholas Hlobo's *umtshotsho*. He would be there every day, rushing to get the train back to Tembisa in time for dinner. It clarified his thinking about concealment, and the underground: "I think gay life in the old days, everyone was underground. You had to be a real freak to be overground. And most establishments were unmarked, literally underground. People just go past. This makes me think about what is hidden and what is open; with revealing some things and hiding others; holding back. You're never clear about what's happening. You get to understand little by little."

Hlobo has an ambivalence – reflected in his work – about the contemporary *umtshotsho* of the kind he experienced as opposed to the *qaba* one of his imagination: the traditional ritual was "good for your growth and your maturity, even if it was disparaged by the *amagqoboka*. Now the tradition has fallen away, you are allowed to do as you please, you take drugs, you indulge with sex, you really put yourself at risk. At times it really helps you, you learn to be careful and it helps you grow as well, you get to learn many things and become careful. Sometimes you get beaten but you say, 'next time I am not going there, I am not doing that'."

His experience of the Skyline-*umtshotsho* was not altogether easy. Certainly, there was a wonder and a thrill in being "part of a community, one of hundreds of people rather than an odd person who thinks he's cuckoo". But from the moment a man offered him a drink on that first day, he was on guard, and aware of how he was both similar



and different to the men he met there: "Getting to see your peers, your community, meeting other gay people, it's scary. You see all sorts of subcultures, like cross-dressers. If you are a country boy, you've never seen anyone dress like that. Some people are really confusing. Some people are just different!"

Hlobo does think of gay people as "tribal" not unlike Xhosas; he came to see how he defined himself individually, uniquely, even if he was part of both these tribes: "Going to my *umtshotsho* as a gay man, I got to realise that while there were certain things we had in common – the love and desire for other men – I was having some different views on life as a gay person to the others, and there were things I did not agree with." When I pushed him to elaborate, he said: "For example, I was feeling that it was not necessary for a man to be like a woman. You could be a gay man and be a *man*. And I attribute that to my being a Xhosa man. I think I have great joy of manhood; I enjoy manhood."

His *umtshotsho* was "self-guided", rather than under the watchful eye of the elders. "Yes, I *am* inserting myself," he responded to my question about whether he was trying to find a place within a culture (or cultures) in which he did not quite belong. "But I am also developing my own 'door policy' – just like they had rules at the Skyline or at an *umtshotsho* in the Eastern Cape. At the Skyline, I finally got to rub shoulders with many people who are similar to me. But at the same time I needed to stand out, be different, be myself; make my own rules." Thus is his *umtshotsho*, ultimately, something internal: an ongoing act of self-regulation that he applies as his world expands vertiginously due to his increasing celebrity.

I told Hlobo that I thought my own *umtshotsho* parties were those painful Saturday nights in the Johannesburg northern suburbs I endured throughout my teenage years, where you'd look for a dark space – an interstice – amongst all that rampant heterosexual activity from which you might ogle the male object of your desire, or even pull him in for a quick and surreptitious encounter. Did he imagine that such a space existed in the traditional *umtshotsho*, and does it exist in the world of his exhibition?

He laughed, and told me that "perhaps the darkened corners are within the robes of the characters themselves. There is very little sense of a body, no limbs, but the body



is there. The idea of going to a dark space where you can hide exists, but it is within each character ...”

“So the body itself is mysterious?”

“It’s more of a curiosity of what happens in the head.” As he often does in conversation, the artist began to roam, freely: “You know, the Skyline never had a dark corner. There was another place down the road, Fifty-Eight, that did. I went there twice and I got scared. I preferred the light-hearted people at the Skyline. It’s the fear of what happens in the dark. I’m quite naïve, you know. A while back I was on a mission to find rubber tubes, down in Doornfontein, and I bumped into the Factory [Johannesburg’s famous gay sex club]. I didn’t even know it existed. I told Jim, and he said, ‘You’re such a fool!’”

Jim is Hlobo’s partner. They share a home in Berea: “family; where my heart is”. He has a bed in his studio, too, though: “Sometimes Jim complains he’s losing me to my art!” As we wandered around the huge room, he heaved his favourite character off the floor to show me what it would look like suspended, swaying in the wind as if dancing at an *umtshotsho* – or to the Skyline’s tacky Eighties disco: “The dance really helps you understand your culture. It is how we get to exhibit or celebrate who we are. It is very animated; a performance, a competition. I am sure if you go to *umtshotsho* for the first time it is as if you are going to a club for the first time. The chaperone, he greets you and offers you a glass of drink. Then you see people dancing. You get to learn new movements. And I think those movements are really important for one’s growth.”

Still, there is a reason why this installation includes a red light in a leather lampshade, a work titled *Kubomvu* (“Beware”); a reason too why Hlobo has called his figures *Izithunzi*: “Shadows” ...

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