

Native Work: An Artwork by Andrew Putter consisting of 38 Portrait Photographs

(With Photography by Hylton Boucher, Kyle Weeks and Andrew Putter)

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'Native work' is an artistic response to Alfred Martin Duggan-Cronin's life-long project to photograph black southern Africans. Cognizant of the dangers inherent in Duggan-Cronin's colonial ethnographic approach, 'Native work' nevertheless recognizes an impulse of tenderness running through his project. By trusting this impulse in Duggan-Cronin's photographs, 'Native life' attempts to provoke another way of reading these images, using them as the basis for making new work motivated by the desire for social connection, a desire which emerges as a particular kind of historical possibility in the aftermath of apartheid.

Native work is based on my encounter with the archive of Alfred Martin Duggan-Cronin's photographs of southern Africans taken between 1919 and 1939.¹ It recognizes an impulse of tenderness in Duggan-Cronin's project – what appears to me as a counter-cultural interest in the aesthetic lives of 'native' South Africans in the first half of the twentieth century.

Native work is an artwork-installation consisting of thirty-eight photographic portraits. These portraits are divided into two complementary series with each series portraying the same seventeen sitters. The black-and-white series shows the sitters in costume loosely – though carefully – derived from the ethnographic archive of photographs and material objects relating to early twentieth century Xhosa 'traditional' costume, and was determined largely by myself, the artist. There are twenty-one photographs in this series, as four of the sitters appear twice, in different costume. The colour series portrays sitters in costume of their own choosing, the clothing chosen as a consequence of the opportunity to own a formal ('smart') colour portrait – something which many of the sitters did not possess prior to the making of *Native work*.

Between 1924 and 1954 a fraction of Duggan-Cronin's huge body of photographic work was published by Oxford University Press in a series of eleven monographs entitled *The Bantu Tribes of South Africa*. They were located, in part, within an anthropological discourse and have usually been seen to have contributed to a view of 'black' southern Africans as primitive, unchanging, tribal. Michael Godby has written about the effects of this 'anthropologization' in Duggan-Cronin's work, the assimilation of Duggan-Cronin's pictures to the brutal racism and paternalism

1 This project was made under the auspices of – and with funding from – ARC: *The Visual University and its Columbarium* at the University of Cape Town. I would like to thank my supervisors Pippa Skotnes and Carolyn Hamilton for their generous help, Mhlanguli George for his wide-ranging assistance, the members of the workshop of the Archive and Public Culture for their enabling criticism, Robert Hart – curator of the Duggan-Cronin Gallery – for his long-term support and Andrew Barker for everything that he has taught me about old photographs.

inherent in much of the anthropology of the day. For a certain kind of academic audience, Duggan-Cronin's photographs could be used to justify beliefs in the spurious existence of objective human types, categories and hierarchies, especially given that each set of images was presented within a volume on a specific South African 'tribe'. But cultural artefacts like photographs are open to multiple – even contradictory – interpretations. Seeing Duggan-Cronin's work for the first time three years ago had the opposite effect to that usually associated with his photographs: it made me *less* inclined to typologize, *less* inclined to view his subjects as members of just so many generic racialized categories. I found in them a rich evocation of the singularity of the sitters, a quiet sense of empathetic intimacy. To give you an indication of why his work might have affected me in this way, I had best begin by introducing myself...

Hi. I'm Andrew. I'm a white, gay, racist South African who was born at the height of apartheid (in 1965), and grew up in Pinelands, a middle-class, racially segregated suburb of Cape Town. It is virtually impossible for apartheid-era South Africans like myself not to have been deeply affected by racism. Apartheid assimilated *everything* to 'racial difference': how people spoke, how they moved, their gestures, what their bodies looked like. One of apartheid's great successes was how it functioned by exerting obsessive control over the realm of human sensory – or aesthetic – experience.

Now if there's one thing that a certain stratum of white, middle-class, gay apartheid-era men have in common, it's an interest in aesthetic experience. Many of 'us' (I like to think) are predisposed to an interest in questions of style and beauty. But for many (most?) of 'us', our ideas of style, beauty, art – and 'culture' generally – have also been deeply determined by centuries of (first) colonial, and (then) apartheid 'cultural' racism.

While I was morally appalled by what I understood of apartheid, I was also deeply conditioned as an apartheid subject to assume that 'native' (or 'black' or 'African') South African 'cultural history' was really just a polite – though empty – appellation.

Seeing a couple of Duggan-Cronin's portrait photographs hanging on a wall in the quiet space of the UCT African Studies Library made quite an impact on me. Something in these photographs made me take the 'black', 'tribal', 'primitive', 'African', 'native' sitters in them *seriously*. There was something dignified about them, a bearing and a styling of costume which ran at puzzling odds to my received ideas about what to recognize as 'culture' and 'history'. Most importantly, these works appeared as cyphers to me, as metonyms for forms of local life and history of which I suddenly realized I was completely ignorant. It was as though a whole hidden constellation of universes of local meaning and secret life suddenly opened up before me. I was shocked. A compulsion to start learning was born from this encounter with his portraits.

The more I looked at Duggan-Cronin's work, the more interested I became in a thread that might be said to run through his portraits. It appears to me as an impulse of tenderness, a desire to show each of his sitters in what he considered to be the most flattering light possible. Duggan-Cronin made photographs which he seemed to hope others would find beautiful. And perhaps crucially these 'others' *are not necessarily his sitters*: he laboured to make 'native' South Africans beautiful to those very colonial viewers who would normally consider the subjects of these works as being unworthy of attention by artists. He brought all the devices of the long tradition of the Western European honorific portrait to bear on his sitters: a slightly lowered point of view in relation to the sitter's face, connoting importance; lighting from the top left

or right – a device used in a wide range of Western European art historical practices to convey a sense of being singled out, favoured, illuminated; a pyramidal, head-and-shoulders composition, communicating a quiet stability and monumentality – even a sense of ‘timelessness’. In short, Duggan-Cronin was classicizing and humanizing subjects who were typically viewed as wild, subhuman, primitive.

After getting to know more about Duggan-Cronin’s oeuvre, there seemed to me to be something important in affirming ‘traditional’ inheritances in South African cultural history *now*. It was this impulse which underlay my making the series of twenty-one black-and-white portraits of contemporary black South Africans wearing ‘traditional’ costume: one half of the series *Native work* under discussion in this essay. Most of these models would not normally wear costume² of this kind: it’s old-fashioned, archival, from a time past. This series is thus the result of a resourced, white, gay, apartheid-era subject revelling in the stylistics that emerged in the early-mid twentieth century intersection of ‘native’ cultural production (costume, adornment, etc.), phenotypic, bodily features typically inferiorized by the colonial-and-apartheid-machine, and the beautifying, ennobling effects of Duggan-Cronin’s use of photography. I conceive of this series as a kind of *homage* to Duggan-Cronin, an affirmation of what appears to be his unusual passion for the beauty of what he records/constructs, a shout-out to what I read as his complicated commitment to ‘Africa’ in the face of what so many of his set would have seen as the superiority of ‘European’ culture.

All this is not to say that these ‘traditional’ portraits are simple impositions on the sitters who model in them. For example, three of the sitters (Notyatyambo Madiglana, Linda Mhlawuli and Sisipho Matho) are young teenagers who spend most of their spare time in a large ‘traditional’ dance group, dancing in costume inflected by the archive. Another two (Sihle Mnqwazana and Given Mkhondo) are young actors, studying drama at the University of Cape Town. Both have chosen a stream in the curriculum in which isiXhosa is the principal language of dramatic expression. Part of this course has seen their amaXhosa lecturer – Mfundu Tshazibane – helping his students explore historical Xhosa cultural forms in their work. For these sitters then, African ‘tradition’ is an on-going dimension of their day-to-day life, a complex modulation of the present in terms of the past – part invention, part memory. In keeping with the continuing variation of tradition – as something always changing, never fixed – my approach to the costuming of models was ‘in the spirit of’, rather than a rigid adherence to ‘tradition’.

I continually kept sitters in touch with how the project was unfolding, visiting them with new portraits as they were being made, checking that each person was still comfortable with potentially being seen publicly as a face in amongst all of the other portraits. I also constantly negotiated and renegotiated the ways in which I had clad them (or they were choosing to clad themselves). I was pleased to hear from the oldest sitter, the person with the longest experience of the ‘traditional’ past (Nofekile Sibenga), that my syncretic, invented image of the ‘girl initiate’ (Notyatyambo Madiglana) with a curtain of beads hiding her eyes aroused a strong sense of the appropriateness of such images in the contemporary world as reminders

² Since becoming interested in the cultural history of clothing, I have gotten into the habit of sometimes using the word ‘costume’ to also describe what others might call ‘everyday clothing’.

of the ‘traditional’ Xhosa value of *hlonipha* (a complex notion roughly translatable as ‘respect’).

In order to use the making of *Native work* as an opportunity to challenge some of the racial constraints of my upbringing, I decided to work as much as possible with models from those racially segregated parts of the broader city that I would never normally have an opportunity to visit. To achieve this I employed an amaXhosa intermediary – Mhlanguli George – a young theatre-maker from King William’s Town who had recently moved to New Crossroads about twenty kilometres from the centre of Cape Town. My intention was to find a series of models ranging from about seven to about seventy years of age whose faces appeared beautiful to me – an idea of beauty I derived largely from my three-year immersion in Duggan-Cronin’s oeuvre. In a way then, I was selecting features which reinforced my conception of ‘native’ beauty – a conception I found in Duggan-Cronin. Interestingly, one of my early informants – the television celebrity Thokozile Ntshinga – pointed out that if I was looking for faces which weren’t ‘fat’ and that looked as though they were from the ‘rural’ past, I would do better to look in those parts of the ‘townships’ which were furthest away from Cape Town. These areas – like Makhaza, Kuyasa and Site B – are the least resourced, furthest away from the treasures of the city centre. It is in these areas that migrants from ‘the countryside’, or from the smaller South African cities, usually first find shelter.

Mhlanguli and I visited schools, gyms, senior clubs, clinics, dance groups and drama groups, visiting suburbs like Makhaza, Khayelitsha, Gugulethu, Samora Machel, Kuyasa and New Crossroads. In each case, through Mhlanguli, I would explain my project, saying I was interested in making ‘photographs which dignify the “traditional” past’, showing large groups of people copies of Duggan-Cronin’s work, and then taking head-and-shoulder snapshots of whoever would allow me to do so. In my studio I selected faces that would produce a series that allowed me to explore some of the richness of ‘traditional’ southern African costume, symbolic of differences in age, gender, status and role. I went back to those models I had selected and began planning with them trips to my studio where my assistants, Kyle Weeks and Hylton Boucher, could photograph them. The ‘traditional’ costume elements I worked with came from all over the place, but centred on a mid-twentieth century collection of Thembu (Xhosa) beadwork and other items lent to me by beadwork expert Stephen Long. I was also given a lot of help by Vuyukazi Sihele – a dance teacher – who works on a daily basis in Makhaza with about forty children of all ages.

In the process of getting to know the people who modelled for me, it struck me that the beauty I had seen in them as a consequence of my seduction by Duggan-Cronin’s archive was paralleled by a growing sense of their beauty as *contemporaries of mine*. This may seem obvious, even overly romantic, but remember that my ideas about all these things were changing rapidly. So intense were these changes that even my dreams began to change: one night I dreamt that I was black.

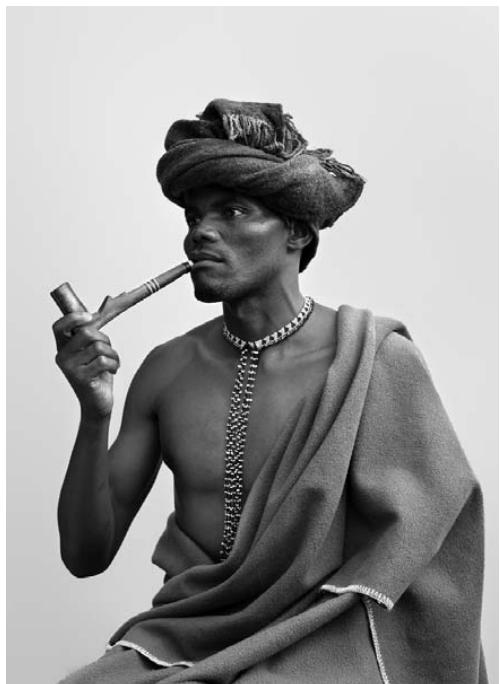
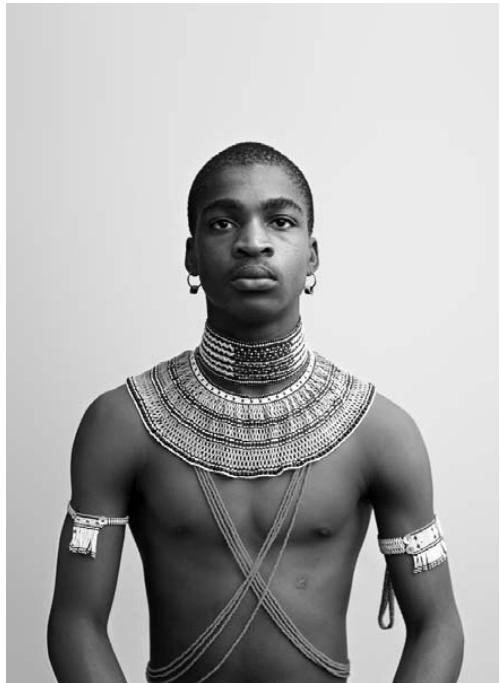
I felt at this stage that emphasizing the beauty of ‘tribal’ or ‘traditional’ costume was in order as long as it was also clear that the sitters in these portraits could not be reduced to this presentation. I needed to have some way to unsettle the possibility that viewers might erroneously believe that this was how the sitters looked in their everyday lives – a potentially dangerous assumption given the still demeaning associations many people continue to have in relation to the ‘tribal’ or ‘traditional’. I asked sitters if they wished to choose how to dress themselves for a formal colour

portrait: all of them did. This second, colour series moved somewhat in the direction of representing sitters as they see themselves. More importantly, seen in relation to the black-and-white, 'ethnographic' portraits, they have the effect of complicating the assumptions that a viewer might make about the sitters, the place of costume in the portraits, the role of the photographer, etc.

All of the people who modelled in my pictures were paid every time they were photographed, and were also transported the long distance from their homes to my studio at the university. They were given lunch and tea. Once all of the photographs had been taken, all models and their families and friends were invited to an event close to their homes to each receive a framed colour and black-and-white portrait. It was a good day. People were happy with their portraits.

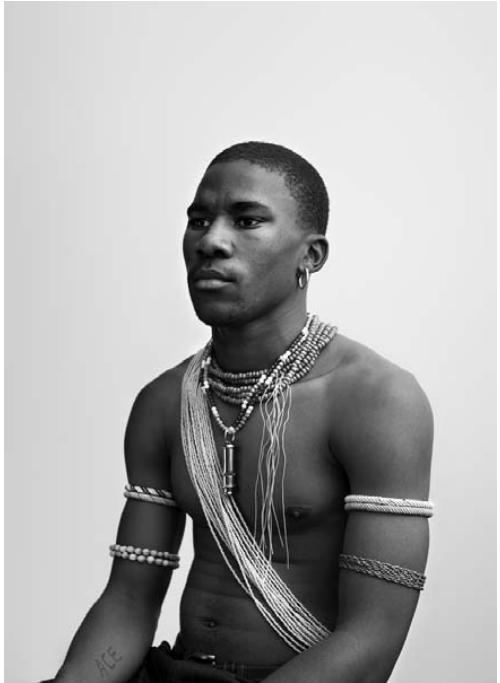
Why the title *Native work*? A primary concern of mine over the last twenty-five years of working as an artist and teacher in Cape Town has been to explore and make use of 'the local'. It is my experience that there is a depth of source material available for creative, socially – and environmentally – conscious work in those territories close to – and *in* – what each of us call 'home', but of which we are unaware. As a native Capetonian (I have never lived more than half an hour's walk away from where I was born), the project being described here constitutes a labour – as a native of this place – to make sense of myself and the world I find myself in every day.

This body of work – not quite finished at the time of this publication – will be submitted for a Masters degree in Fine Art at the University of Cape Town. I also hope to exhibit it publicly and commercially. To prevent the 'ethnographic' portraits being seen alone – without the contextualizing, unsettling influence of the colour photographs – the work will only be available for acquisition as an entire series, with the stipulation that the thirty-eight portraits must always be seen together (or possibly in part, but only if a model is represented in *both* a colour *and* a black-and-white portrait). I envisage the black-and-white portraits perhaps being hung in a grid – three rows of seven images – and the colour images perhaps being hung in a long line. The colour portraits are each titled with the name of the sitter; the black-and-white portraits are titled with the name of the sitter and the 'traditional,' 'ethnographic' role they are performing in the photograph.



*Sakhiwo Ndubata as 'A Chief'
Khubekile Dayi as 'A Councillor'*

*Athenkosi Mfamela as 'A Young Man Dressed
for the Dance'
Jackson Mabena as 'A Married Man'*



Nofikile Sibenga as 'A Married Woman'

Sihle Mnqwazana as 'An Initiate'

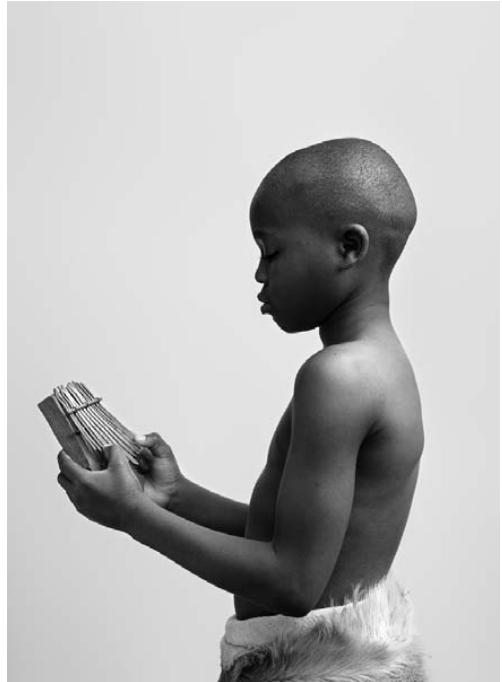
Anele Mbali as 'A Native Youth'

Given Mkhondo as 'A Young Man Dressed for the Dance'



*Nopumzile Msengezi as 'A Traditional Healer'
Nomboniso Runqa as 'A Native Maiden'*

*Anita Mbanyaru as 'A Young Married Woman'
Sisipho Matho as 'A Native Maiden'*



*Thandokazi Mbane as 'A Native Girl'
Nokilunga Memeza and Endinalo Memeza
as 'Native Mother and Child'*

*Siyasanga Bushula as 'An Mbira Player'
Notyatyambo Madiglana as 'An Initiate'*



*Athenkosi Mfamela
Khubekile Dayi*

*Nofikile Sibenga
Nopumzile Msengezi*



Jackson Mabena
Sisipho Matho

Sakhwiwo Ndubata
Siyasanga Bushula



Sihle Mnqwazana

Anita Mbanyaru

Nokilunga Memeza

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