

TRANSLATION OF NOTES FOR TALK FROM KREOL INTO ENGLISH  
Talk on MATERIAL MATTERS: NEW ART FROM AFRICA for ICAIO and MGI  
19 October, 2015

Lindsey Collen was invited by the MAHATMA GANDHI INSTITUTE (MGI) and the INSTITUTE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART INDIAN OCEAN (ICAIO) to give an illustrated talk on the exhibition “*Material Matters: New Art from Africa*”, which included reference to the relationship between literature and the visual arts. Here is the amalgamation of her talk and the slides she projected on Powerpoint.

Two short poems to kick off with: *Poems about paintings*. Literature about visual arts. Found poems. From phrases used by adult literacy students.

First: one of the best known paintings in the world, in fact a huge mural: (SLIDE ONE: Picasso’s Guernica)



Here is the found poem based on the reaction (translated from the Kreol) of a group of 18 women in a literacy class, 2006:

### Bombing of Afghanistan

- there is war  
and disorder,  
- there is a cry

- it's like a cyclone, - and here  
a man lies  
slain, he's dead

- even the cow, the cow's eyes  
look sideways and forwards  
at the same time, why?

*you chose it on purpose, this one,  
because of Gaza, didn't you?*

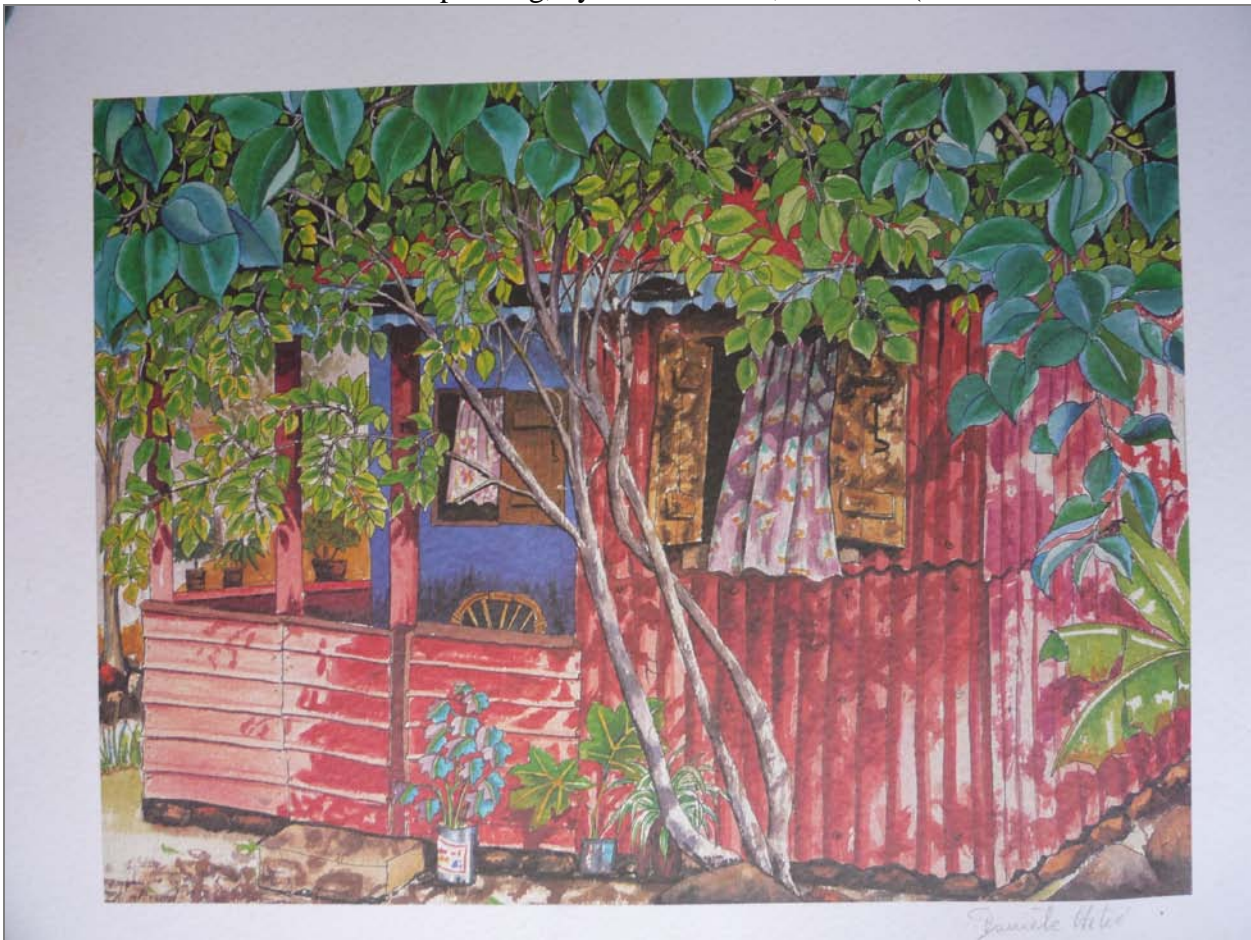
- Picasso is sad  
- oh, makes me feel hollow  
- he is showing  
us we live in

the dark,  
 a dark so thick lamps can't shed light on it,  
 all  
 because  
 of war  
 and disorder  
 - and the horse  
 they torture  
 the horse, - and the slain man, look  
 his eyes wander round his skull, - and the mother cries  
 as her child dies in her arms,  
 - look  
 the oxtail  
 a swirl  
 of smoke  
 - phantoms of the dead  
 and dying float over crying dark disorder  
 and war

“The Thursday Women’s Literacy Class looks at Picasso’s Guernica during the bombing of Afghanistan”,

A found poem by Lindsey Collen based on her found poem in Kreol.

Second: A well-known Mauritian painting, by Daniele Hitie, “Lakaz”. (Slide TWO: Daniele Hitie’s tablo”.



Tuesday literacy class at GRNW now, 2015. (Not yet translated into English. See Kreol original Kreol version of talk.)

You can pick up copies of the poems on our way out at the door.

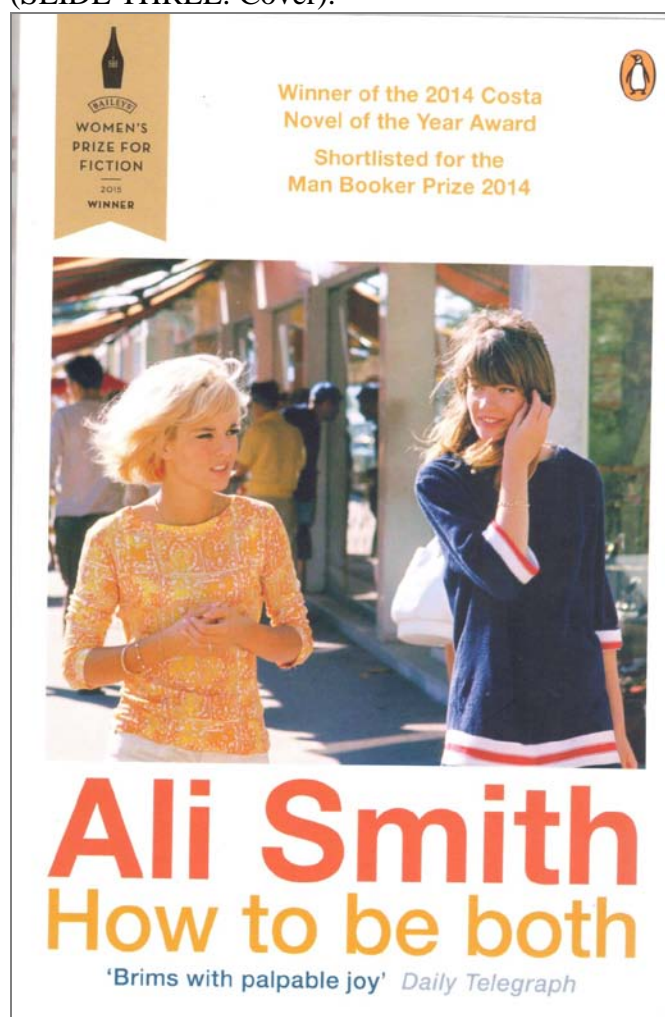
How wonderful to be here! At the MGI and speaking at their invitation and at the invitation of the Institute for Contemporary Art Indian Ocean. And particularly wonderful to be able to, to be honoured to, speak on the best exhibition I've seen in Mauritius. The best. So, thanks to Salim Currimjee for the exquisite part of his collection now being shown in Desforges Street in the new Gallery. And also, the best curated exhibition I've seen in Mauritius. As you will see. So, thanks to Sally Couacaud. Hope you'll all enjoy the talk.

I'm speaking as a writer today. Which is why I started with poems on art. In fact, I knew NONE of the artists I'm going to speak about. I'm speaking as a person who knows nothing about the visual Art -- that is the brilliant idea that Salim and Sally had -- so this puts me at ease. Instead, I'm speaking *as a writer*. Though of course, a person is a whole person, so I'm also speaking naturally as a political activist, a LALIT person. And of course, I'm an African. An Afro-Mauritian, to be precise. And speaking with all these personas at once happens to be easy to do here today -- simply because the exhibition, its individual contents and it, as a whole, allow me to be a whole person while speaking.

So, here goes.

The visual art and literature sometimes overlap in amazing ways, and since we're speaking about an exhibition of contemporary art, I'll give some contemporary examples.

There's the 2014 novel by Ali Smith called HOW TO BE BOTH (a British publication). Here's its cover. (SLIDE THREE: Cover).



*En passant*, would anyone like to try to date the cover photo? I ask because it looks as though it could have been taken in 2014. In fact it is in the 1960s. It's Sylvie Vartan and Francoise Hardy, for those present who might recognize one or both of the singers.

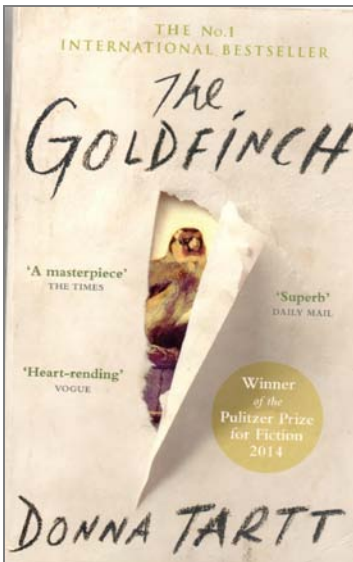


Anyway, the story involves a painting. Well, two, but I'll treat you to just the one for reasons of time. It's from Palazzo Ferraro in Italy. Here it is (SLIDE FOUR):



The glorious working man, tall dark and handsome. Anyone care to date it? 1460 or so. Over 500 years ago. It – I mean the painting – is perhaps the main character of the novel, a novel set in 2014, and referring to the 1960's and the 1460's. The colours, the body bursting out of the clothing like the Incredible Hulk. And the unclear sex of the man. A clear symbol of woman, the diamond, first used in Mauritius in 1977 for Solidarité Fam, and still used. And of course the rope being an erect and non-erect you know what. I'm just saying enough to interest you in both the novel and in the art in it. The young girl, 16 or so, our heroine in the novel has a batty mother, who has just died. And a few months before dying, she announced that she absolutely *had* to go to Italy because she'd seen a photo of this painting. So, she and her Mom set off at once. So, that's how the novel starts .....

Second, another novel called THE GOLDFINCH 2013 by Donna Tartt (American), (SLIDE FIVE: Cover):



It is about the Dutch masterpiece dating from 1654, two hundred years later by Fabritius housed in the Mauritshuis (named after the prince of the Netherlands whose name is in Mauritius, as well) in The Hague where I saw it.

(SLIDE SIX: *The Goldfinch itself*) Oil on canvas:



Now, this painting goes missing after a terrorist attack in a gallery in New York that borrowed it – in the novel I mean. And it is a child, a very young child, who was in the art gallery at the time, but survived and through a misunderstanding with a dying man (all this is fiction), takes the painting. And then .... well that's the novel's beginning. 850 pages later you know a lot about art, and have had a very good read.

So, that was to say that it's bizarre for me, a writer, to be speaking about art. But then, it's not so bizarre when you consider those two poems and those two novels. The huge overlap in the two art forms.

And now let's go to the ICAIO Gallery exhibition.: *Material Matters: New Art from Africa*.

Before we look at the gallery a word on the title: Notice how I stick to the “words” part, as long as possible:

Clearly the title has a double meaning of the finest quality. Positively Shakespearian:

Material (as an adjective) means important, vital, relevant, key.

Matters as the noun, therefore, means “issues”.

So the exhibition is first and foremost about vitally important matters. It is also (and this is a third meaning) about the tangible (in that sense material) matters, not just ideas, forms, colours. That, too, of course. But the title points us to *reality*.

And the other meaning is that the materials you use (“material”, in that sense, and a noun) matters (now a verb), or “is important”. Isn't that fantastic? All those meanings.

And yet another one, there is one painting I'll show as *a soft landing into the show* – it's by two Egyptian artists – one who works on pornographic images of women, and the other on cloth – that sense of material. (SLIDE No. 7)



Many societies project women in terribly sexualized, repetitive, pathological imagery and at the same time make women cover themselves up with material, or cloth.

And new art from Africa. New – only one from 2003, one 2007, the rest are in the past 5 years, if I'm not mistaken. From Africa? Well, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye is born in London – of Ghanaian parents – so she's from Africa.

Let's look at part of the exhibition now. Goody!

First, just look at this:

SLIDE 8: Three works in one view:





On the left a painting with script (you see I'm sticking to the words, still, where I am more comfortable!) Can someone read it out?

It is obviously made difficult to get at, being upside-down. "Corrective Rape is Male Power". Now, that sets the scene for the exhibition, in a way. Written in blood. Perhaps menstrual blood. And we are appalled. More by a painting, by the materials used, than by the horror of rape, and not only rape, but "corrective rape", a bizarre example of male power, if ever there was one, where macho men take it upon themselves to rape women with the intention of correcting her, so that she is no longer a lesbian. To paint *that*, to look at that *painting* – is not easy. This is a material matter in today's society. In South Africa, it is the expression for this absurd "cure" for not being a supposedly real woman. As indeed in other African countries, and in India, too. So, it is a "material" issue. And it is our body, itself. It is that material. So, the artist writes with her own body fluid. That is the material she uses – and it matters. Strangely homophobia is something that came with colonialism, and while the colonizing countries have gone some way to taming the hatred that is a relic of some forms of Christianity – even the Pope and the Bishops now speak of and to homosexual people with common decency, instead of hatred – but in the ex-colonies the legacy of the attitude and of over-developed state apparati took a hold that is harder to shake off. The painting is by Zanele Muholi (who also did the photograph on the right).

In the centre, a statue. It looks like marble, so is a comment, no doubt on the colonial legacy in plastic arts. It is a woman without a head to think with nor arms to act with. This is our standard Western-inheritance statue, that we take as normal. The 1500 to 2000 years since classical times has chopped off women's heads and arms, and we look at the statues as though it is normal. But this one is new. Now, that's a material comment. Women today are often made headless and hand-less. *De source*. Statues of men, too, for that matter. We'll come back to this statue later, to look at its material. You'll all be so enchanted. It's by Nandipha Mntambo.

On the right, A photograph of a woman clearly exhausted and glaring at the world with an accusing stare. She – although her sex, in the sense of male or female, is not 100% certain, but English grammar is limitative and makes me choose a sex, which Kreol does not force me to do – let's call her what she clearly intends us to call her, "she" is a prostitute between two calls. Accusing us. Not us accusing her, as is usually the case. She is accusing society. And with some reason. We veer away from her stare. Later we will look at her more closely.

Slide 9:



Now we see the second two works we've just seen, and this absolutely striking portrait, in the style of the great Western European paintings of the grand, rich, important, noble people. Oils on a big canvas. Dark shades. And here, a rivetting woman. Shy, gauche, timid, very dark brown skin. Her hand tantalizingly masking her expression. Ah, that expression! Perhaps she feels too big for what a woman is supposed to be? Perhaps she feels too bony, and pointed? We don't know what she is thinking. But, I can tell you, once you've seen this painting, like the Mona Lisa, you'll never forget it. And it is probably a person from Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's imagination. Yet, it has captured something so individual, so material, so mattering, about the woman. Titled: "La Cloche", which might mean down-and-out, or it might mean she rings a bell. Who knows? Utterly bewitching. Figurative, but unclear.

And now, let's move to some itineraries. Slide NUMBER 10:





Well, I think they are. Nicholas Hlobo work Balindile IV the black hose-pipe and tubing one is one of a series – there's another in the Tate Modern – there's a connection here, the Tate and Lyle fortune that set up the gallery, was made from sugar, and I mean Mauritian sugar – and it, like the apparent painting behind it seems like voyage, or maybe the voyage of life, who knows? Or of a whole society? So, start with a wound up hose-pipe, like one in any big garden, and with the odd bulge outwards, and split and pouring out – an accident, an illness, events like colonization, and then death at the end, covered, as in Xhosa tradition in a blanket. And the other one, in the frame, is in face cut cloth. Cloth (canvas) ripped open, and then sewn together, stitched up, with parts that couldn't be done too well, the accidents, illnesses, or events that near-ruined the voyage through time, so they bulge out in other substances like rubber, and then meander on. The strange mixture of apparent aimlessness, wandering any old where, and then the inevitability, the utter inexorability of the uni-directional of the passing of time. Maybe. I don't know.

SLIDE NUMBER 11: The Mythology of the Rape and Igqobhaka by Mawande Ka Zenzile.



Let's look at the painting, and what it makes the head thinking about it think. The woman has her eyes and her mouth taped or stitched closed. Like a mute torture victim. She must not see who it is that perpetrated the rape, nor say who it is. Nor even say that the rape happened. And note the intentional complete absence of sexuality. There is no sex in rape, the painting says. There is only violence, often denied, often hidden. The man's face is hooded. Like a Klu-Klux-Klan man's is, or like the victims of torture are. Late Mr. Raddhoa's team used to get a hood sewn out of the leg of a pair of jeans before beating the victim. And behind them, the painting is made of cow dung and earth. Buttons are used, a strange relic from the factory "things", the trinkets, that colonization brought to the societies using existing earthy materials for background surfaces. And the very shape of the painting. The western idea of a painting, a quadrangle. And the painting shows the beginnings of the man's feet, whereas the woman is standing on a surface that is much lower. Could one represent this aspect of patriarchy any more clearly than by this simple difference of the height you stand on?

And the head is broken and sewn up, a scarecrow or the reminder of the violence that has been wrought that is being wrought on people, up until the noose around the neck? And the quizzical angle of the head, meaning perhaps our inability to understand what's happening to us, what happened to us, what brought us here? To a place where *the mythology of rape*, for example, is so widely accepted.

So, that was to give an idea of the layout of the paintings. Of the wonderful curating in this Exhibition.

Let's look at one or two of the paintings in detail now:

But before coming to the first one, let's look at images of women in the daily papers here and world-wide.

Quickly go through, SLIDES 12, 13 and 14, of WOMEN crouching, squatting in sexually "come-on" fashion). The photographs are for a male audience. They make women think we exist so as to interest male eyes – and other things male.



Now, let us look at the Zenele Muholi photograph (Slide Number 15) .



The artist is an activist for gay rights, LGTB activist. Do you see how the woman in her photograph is not interested in who is looking at her, particularly men. She is accusing us. She is exhausted. She is vulnerable. She is suffering. And she is very, very angry. She is fighting back. So, the photograph is about life, and also a reply to visual representations in advertisement and in film ads and so on.

Let's quickly go through three slides of headless, armless classical statues (Slides 16, 17, 18):





And now at the statue: Slide number 19:  
How's that? For a comparison?



Nandipha Mntambo

And what is it made of, the statue? What material? This absolutely beautiful work is made of the hide of a white ox, cowhide. And the frill at the bottom? It's made from ox hooves. Utterly beautiful. But a criticism not just of women's disempowerment, but also of the classical tradition left over from colonization, so far not yet attended to – in our minds, and in reality.

Now, let's look at two we haven't seen yet, by Zander Blom. (Slide Number 20)



This one is the only real “oil on linen”, mocking “oil on canvas” in the history of western painting. And it is making such a beautiful, gentle mockery of the painting tradition. And making the profound statement of the flimsiness of the materials, relative to the subjects they are expected to, and do, at their best, encapsulate. And this one (Slide number 20), his own personal shrine: where he works. A comment on how, to him, his making of art is a religion. Maybe.





And this. also a comment on materials: (Slide number 21) another work, like a Rodin in marble, but it's carefully carved out of polystyrene, by Wim Botha. Absolutely pristine, cuts, sudden appearance in polystyrene.



And just to round up the show:

Two last masterpieces:

But for the first of the last two, let's look at how art has seen women taking a bath. Here are two examples:



Zanele Muholi's Ordeal (Slide Number 22). This next photograph, from the exhibition, brings up images of rape, prostitution, all the suffering in silence of abused women. Not the woman washing themselves of the western tradition; whimsical and as seen by male the artist. How do we sense the difference. Is it in the harsh black-and white, or in the hands wrenching the soap, the tenseness of the arms? The utterly *alone* feeling?





And this last slide, below, one by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. (Slide number 23) Just study the intense expression, the accusation on the face of this man. It is a small etching. Much less than a foot wide, when you include only the etching itself, not its parchment. The dignity, a kind of controlled anger and determination to survive. A deeply felt something, that by looking so hard at the past -- he is looking at the past, perhaps -- somehow leaves one with a feeling of hope for the future. But it depends on looking harshly at our collective pasts. The etching is called *Siskin*, which is a kind of Goldfinch -- which brings us back to the very beginning when I was showing you the books that link to art. As Salim and Sally asked me to do.



I hope you have enjoyed the talk. Now, it's time for your comments and questions.