EXHIBITION

HISTORY DOESN'T REPEAT ITSELF, BUT IT DOES RHYME. DUMILE FENI: AFRICAN GUERNICA

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History Doesn't Repeat Itself, But It Does Rhyme is a series of interventions in the Museo Reina Sofía's collection that consists of juxtaposing a counterpart work to *Guernica* from another geopolitical time or space, which is then contextualized by an art-historical study serving as an interpretive framework. The series title is a phrase commonly attributed to the writer Mark Twain, but it is apocryphal, not in fact written by the author.

AFRICAN GUERNICA: VIEWING PICASSO FROM THE SOUTH

Tamar Garb

the child who became a man
treks through all of Africa
the child who became a giant
travels through the whole world
Without a pass
—Ingrid Jonker, 1960*

Dumile Feni first exhibited his monumental drawing *African Guernica* in Johannesburg in 1967 at Gallery 101, one of the select public spaces in the racially segregated city where the work of Black artists was shown.[1] The scale and ambition of the work constituted an act of transgression, defying conventional delimitations of the medium as well as the craft-orientated bias and parochialism then expected of artists of color.[2] For *African Guernica* is

* These are the last lines of the poem "Die kind wat dood geskiet is deur soldate by Nyanga" ("The Child Was Shot Dead by Soldiers at Nyanga") written by Afrikaans poet Ingrid Jonker, translated by André Brink and Antje Krog (2007). It was written in the wake of the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960 (a violent assault by police on innocent protesters) and read by Nelson Mandela at his inaugural address to the first democratically elected Parliament in South Africa in 1994.

1 For a discussion of the anomalous promotion of "African Art" by a few galleries in the context of increasingly draconian apartheid legislation, see Anitra Nettleton, "Promoting 'African Art' and African Modernisms in Johannesburg in the 1960s," *De Arte* 55, no. 1 (2020): 5–30.

2 The Bantu Education Act (1953) restricted the range of intellectual and cultural ambition for Black students and was accompanied by a program to teach crafts and artisanal skills in rural

a figural fantasy executed on newsprint, pasted together in two equal horizontal parts and measuring close to three meters square. The scale of the drawing alone—epic, ambitious, and unprecedented as a finished piece on paper that is neither preparatory nor provisional—proclaims its authority and assertiveness as a graphic artwork, executed in the vein of history painting or a massive mural, fresco, or cave painting, while revealing its identity as something that comes directly from the wrist: immediate, tactile, and handmade.

It is unclear how *African Guernica* got its name. That it was exhibited as such in Johannesburg is a fact and one which Dumile both allowed and endorsed, thereby owning the title and its points of reference as his own. The provocation to think with and alongside Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* is therefore already embedded in the drawing's known name and arguably in its imagery and form. That Picasso's *Guernica* circulated, during the 1960s, in the studios and galleries of Johannesburg, via postcards, magazines, and books, is certain. While the original was inaccessible for most, the mythic status of the Picasso, alongside his famous *Dove of Peace* (1949) and post-Cubist experimentation in form, became part of the visual culture to which artists, collectors, and connoisseurs in the city were routinely

schools and further education environments. Urban art schools and universities excluded Black students whose only access to art education were the workshops and non-credited private art schools formed under the patronage of white liberals. See *Visual Century: South African Art in Context*, vol. 2: *1945–1976*, ed. Lize van Robbroeck (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2011). See also Daniel Magaziner, *The Art of Life in South Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016).

exposed.[3] But there has never been an opportunity to view the two artworks together. *African Guernica*, while exhibited often in South Africa, has never traveled abroad. And if the juxtaposition of the works has stimulated a substantial (and contested) literature in South African art-historical discourse (centering on questions of "influence," derivativeness, and divergence), it has never penetrated Eurocentric art histories and narratives.[4] The physical encounter between the two works

3 I am grateful for extended conversations with people who knew him and the Ainslie studio: Albie Sachs (December 2024), Michael Gardner (July/August 2025), Sholto Ainslie (September 2025), Jill Trappler (August 2025), Steven Sack (July/August 2025), and William Kentridge (December 2024). Personal recollections of Dumile's associates are collected in Chabani Manganyi, *The Beauty of the Line: Life and Times of Dumile Feni* (Johannesburg: KMM Review, 2012), 69–144. Dumile's exhibition at Gallery 101 in 1967 was opened by the art collector Mary Harari, his close friend. Dumile would have had access to her formidable collection of contemporary art and books. See Warren Siebrits, "Mary Harari, Dumile Feni and Andy Warhol—Dertig is Beter as Een (Thirty is Better Than One)," *Warren Siebrits & the Art of Collecting* (newsletter), June 4, 2017.

4 The literature on *African Guernica* in South African scholarship is extensive. See, for example, Hazel Friedman, "Beauty, Duty and Dissidence: Ideology and Art in the Heyday of Apartheid," in *Visual Century*, vol. 2: *1945–1976*, ed. Van Robbroeck, 26–51; Manganyi, *The Beauty of the Line*; Prince Mbusi Dube, ed., *Dumile Feni Retrospective*, exh. cat. Johannesburg Art Gallery (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2006). Ruth Sack, *The Imbali Artbooks: Adventuring into Art*, vol. 6: *Warzones* (Johannesburg: Imbali Visual Literacy Project, 2018), 14–17. The drawing formed the subject of one of Chika Okeke-Agulu's Slade Lectures at the University of Cambridge, 2023: "African Artists in the Age of the Big Man," available online at https://www.history.ox.ac.uk/slade-lecture-series-2023-african-artists-age-big-man-professor-chika-okeke-agulu. He discusses it in relation to apartheid history and legislation.

is therefore potentially both provocative and revealing. For it juxtaposes a Spanish painting, made in 1937 as an anti-fascist/anti-war cri de coeur, with a South African drawing, produced thirty years later in the context of the apartheid state's violence and institutionalized racial oppression, uniting the works as canonical anti-totalitarian totems, but ones that reference disparate geographies and temporalities. Seeing them together invites us to think about their points of shared reference and resource, their similarities and synergies. But it also points to their differences, which are situational, formal, and figural.

Executed in 1966–67 while Dumile (as he signed himself) was living and working in the home of South African artist/educator Bill Ainslie, *African Guernica* is one of a number of large-scale figurative drawings on paper that he made during this period. Dumile had no formal art education but had been drawing compulsively since his youth.[5] Having moved from his place of birth in the Western Cape to Johannesburg as a boy to live with an uncle, he became apprenticed, in 1959, as a seventeen-year-old at a sculpture and pottery foundry where he was encouraged to produce "native scenes" (small romantic landscapes and pastorales peopled with rural types) on pots for commercial use. In the years to follow, he would develop a sustained interest

5 For an account of Dumile's compulsion to draw as well as a biographical sketch of the artist, see Barney Simon, "Dumile," *The Classic* 2, no. 4 (1968): 40–43. Contemporary press coverage made a great deal of his "intuitive" talent and lack of art education, seeing these as proof of his "authenticity" as an Indigenous voice. See, for example, J. D., "Untutored, This African Depicts the Elemental," *The Star*, January 18, 1966, n.p.

in sculpture, carving in soapstone and wood as well as modeling in clay while continuing to develop a unique approach and attachment to drawing. After a protracted illness from tuberculosis in 1963, during which time he painted murals and began to think in large scale, alongside the sculptor Ephraim Ngatane, Dumile began frequenting exhibitions, getting to know the gallerist Madame Haenggi of Gallery 101 as well as other Johannesburg-based artists, photographers, and writers. These included sculptors Sydney Kumalo and Ezrom Legae, painter Louis Maqhubela, and the photographers Peter Magubane and Ernest Cole who worked for *Drum* magazine. A keen jazz enthusiast, Dumile hung out at Dorkay House, the headquarters of the Union of South African Artists where musicians including Hugh Masekela and Miriam Makeba appeared, and which was a hub for Black actors, writers, and performers. Already early in the decade, he had started showing his own work publicly and was taken on under contract by Gallery 101, garnering extraordinary success.[6]

Refusing to be circumscribed by the reigning labels of "Township" or "Bantu" art, which relegated Black artists to what was seen as an unschooled and "native" authenticity as well as to the local and the parochial, identifying them with a sentimental and picturesque "African" sensibility, palatable to the art and tourist

6 See Christine Eyene, "Yearning for Art, Exile, Aesthetics and Cultural Legacy," in *Visual Century*, vol. 2: *1945–1976*, ed. Van Robbroeck, 96–119, for details of his early formation. For his visibility and public success, see press coverage, for example: "The Name's Dumile," *Sunday Tribune*, August 21, 1966, n.p.; E. King, "Dumile," *Artlook* 1, no. 7 (June 1967): 7; R. A. C., "Top Artists Flock to Shake His Hand," *Sunday Tribune*, June 18, 1967, n.p.

markets, Dumile experimented with line and dramatic tonal contrast to create enormous pictorial statements that defied easy categorization or classification. These earned him the moniker "the Goya of the Townships," a designation he never embraced.[7] While Dumile had habitually used drawing as a tool for thinking, persistently sketching and doodling and working out how he saw the world by translating it into his signatory agitated figures and apocalyptic scenes based on daily life (using pencil, pen, charcoal, or conté crayon), he accompanied this diaristic drawing with his epic centrifugal compositions that feel more mediated and composed. Borrowing from biblical, ancestral, folk, and urban scenarios and narratives, he repurposed myth and fable alongside personal experience and observation, all the while looking to pictorial precedents and poetic languages to invent a new graphic vocabulary: both linear and tonal, including massed shapes and shadows arranged on the outsized page as a palimpsest/platform for dramatic, sometimes surreal scenarios that are both quotidian and otherworldly at once. Destined to be exhibited in a gallery, Dumile's large-scale drawings—unlike any graphic work produced in South Africa before him and anomalous also in an international frame in which drawing on paper remained largely preparatory or more modest in scope and scale—operate overtly in the sphere of fine art and beyond the intimate ruminations on the page to which he was deeply attached. In this sense, Dumile was committed to Art with a capital *A*, and, despite his lack of conventional education or training, to the aesthetic

7 See, for example, E. King, "… a Goya of the Townships?," *Artlook* 1, no. 1 (November 1966): 5–6.

as a material, quasi-philosophical practice through which he could posit the most profound and existential questions he faced.

In the Ainslie household Dumile kept himself apart from the students, working alone on his sculptures and drawings while dialoguing as an equal not an acolyte with Ainslie and his various associates.[8] The Ainslie studio functioned as a mixed creative community, routinely surveilled by state security forces and Special Branch agents, who suspected it of being an anti-apartheid sanctuary and site of resistance.[9] Here art-history slideshows at lunchtime coexisted with poetry readings and conversation, while the in-house "library" offered a free and open-access resource of books and magazines for all who frequented the space. While Dumile, an autodidact, had long been interested in art (from the Indigenous rock painting that he associated with his family's ancestry to the local pottery, carving, and modeling that surrounded him), he resisted formal teaching, despising the constraints of the life class or the academic posturing of the art historian seeking to find the "key" or the meaning of his art.[10] It was rather the words of poets (he kept a copy

8 Dumile's workspace/room is described by M. Wally Serote in "When Rebecca Fell," *The Classic* 3, no. 4 (1971): 5–7.

9 Sholto Ainslie told me how state security agents parked outside their house, watching over the comings and goings of its occupants, as well as how his mother, Fieke Ainslie, interceded to help people arrested for being illegally in the city and having no pass. Sholto Ainslie, in telephone conversation with the author, September 2025.

10 Dumile's antipathy to the life class is recorded by Michael Gardner: watching life-drawing classes at Bill Ainslie's teaching studio, Dumile declared that they should be stopped because this kind

of Ingrid Jonker's poetry in his back pocket and was close to Wally Serote), the music of Gideon Nxumalo and John Coltrane, as well as reproductions of canonical artworks (from Hieronymus Bosch to Kathe Kollwitz) that provided models of artistic invention, however consciously or unconsciously imbibed. Among these Picasso must have taken his place, although he never provided a direct "influence" or source. Dumile was too much of an independent and idiosyncratic maker for that. At the same time, his recourse in *African Guernica* to facial masking and bodily simplification, to monochromatic tone and dramatic lighting, to exaggerated gestures, figural distortion and doubling, to animal/human conjunctions, bovine presence and quasi-surreal visions and ghosts, produced at a monumental scale, cannot help but bring Picasso's *Guernica* to mind, not least because of its titular prompt.

Picasso's epic anti-war mural was widely known in reproduction almost as soon as it was produced. An issue of *Cahiers d'art* from 1937, the same year that the painting was made, included an article by Christian Zervos on *Guernica*, photographs of its development by

of exercise "took the madness away." Michael Gardner, in telephone conversation with the author, July/August 2025. Dumile's antipathy to art historians is recorded by Barney Simon: "Art historians are like preachers. They say this happened then and that happened then and this is what people say and that is what people say. And then you go along after church and you say, 'What do you, yourself, think?' And he says, 'Get out of here you ruffian! And he would like to have you locked away, but really it is he who should be locked away. They can't tell you the truth—art historians or preachers.'" Simon, "Dumile," 42–43. Dumile's longstanding debt to indigenous Khoisan "rock art" is inscribed, in words, into his fifty-three-meter scroll made in the 1970s.

Dora Maar, as well as reproductions of Picasso's preparatory sketches, opening up its evolution and layered formal effects to scrutiny for publics spread far and wide.[11] By the early 1960s, reproductions included foldouts and replicas, posters and pamphlets, fully revealing the work's post-Cubist vocabulary, its tones of gray and black and white, its bestiary of tortured animals and suffering souls: their gestures, their fragmented bodies, their frozen grimaces and cries conceived as a collection of overlapping and pale vignettes montaged across the dark and stagelike canvas as so many characters in a classical tragedy.[12] Accessible, too, from its earliest reproduction was awareness of the circumstances of *Guernica*'s making. Named for the Basque town that was bombed in 1937 by the German and Italian air forces during the Spanish Civil War at the behest of General Franco, the painting has long raised the question of the relationship between aesthetics and politics, art and propaganda, and the instrumentalization of the image in the face of political tyranny or oppression. Its own history as a weaponized, contested, and controversial object is well known. It has probably been banned, removed, repatriated, appropriated, and reproduced more than any other European artwork.[13] Even in the 1960s in Johannesburg, it tapped

11 See *Cahiers d'art* 12, nos. 4–5 (1937).

12 The literature on the painting is too vast to list here. A useful summary of related debates and reception is included in the exhibition catalogue for *Pity and Terror: Picasso's Path to Guernica*, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia (Madrid: MNCARS, 2017), including key essays by T. J. Clark and Anne M. Wagner.

13 For essays on its worldwide circulation as object and icon, see *The Travels of Guernica* (Madrid: MNCARS, 2019).

into current discussions about aesthetics and resistance, art's relative autonomy or power to affect political change, its vulnerability to censorship, and the role or responsibility of the artist in the face of oppression and discrimination. In the reigning culture of control, in which Black writers and artists were particularly vulnerable and policed, such issues were widely debated within the circles to which Dumile was exposed.[14] So too were competing claims for "realism" and "abstraction," not least in the Ainslie household where Bill Ainslie himself was grappling with the demands of Abstract Expressionism and American Color Field painting while looking on admiringly at Dumile's expressive line and deferring to the "humanism" of Joseph Beuys whom he had recently visited in Germany. Whether "realism" was more suited to an art of social commentary and critique than "expressionism" or "abstraction" was hotly debated in Johannesburg at the time, not least in the context of the prevailing documentary aesthetic, so manifest in contemporary photojournalism and increasingly harnessed to the anti-apartheid struggle.

In the midst of this maelstrom of debates is the issue of "Africa" and the "African," not only as the epithet in Dumile's compound title but as a question and provocation that sits at the heart of European modernism.

14 For a discussion on censorship laws and the erasure of Black writers at the time, see the speech delivered at the University of Witwatersrand by Nadine Gordimer, "South Africa: Towards a Desk Drawer Literature," *The Classic* 2, no. 4 (1968): 64–74. For the harassment of Black and dissident artists and writers, see the special issue of *The Classic* devoted to writer/journalist Nat Nakasa, published after his suicide in exile in New York: *The Classic* 2, no. 1 (1966).

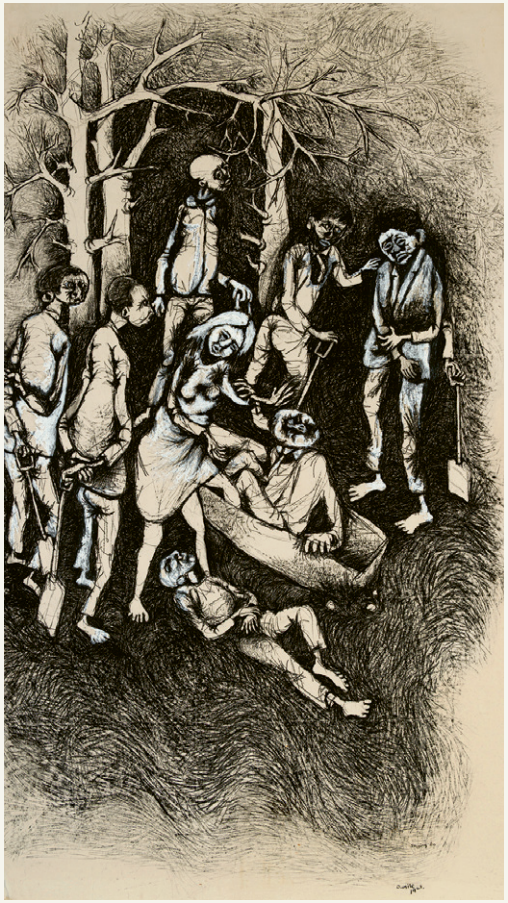
1967
Charcoal and pencil on paper
218 × 226 cm

WOMAN AND BOY

S.D.
Charcoal and pencil on paper
138.5 × 97.5 cm

THE CLASSROOM

1965
Charcoal and conté
229 × 96.5 cm



1967
Charcoal on paper
180 × 101 cm

1987
Charcoal on paper
226 × 127.4 cm

1975
Drawing. Paper, wood, ink, pencil, crayon, plastic laminate
26 × 5.300 cm

Picasso's engagement with African sculpture and artifacts from around 1907 is a topic of extensive debate for art historians.[15] Whether as a formal catalyst for the development of abstraction and the dislodging of perspectival vision, or as a signifier of a magical and spiritual power that defies the logic of Western reason and thought, "African art" has, for the European eye, signified everything from the "primitive" to the "sacred," from the product of a "childlike savagery" to the manifestation of sophisticated abstract design, and from the status of anthropological artifact to that of fetish or totem or work of art. The stakes in any of these characterizations is high, not least because of the racialized and evolutionary thinking that underpins the inevitable hierarchies and standards in place. A racist art history has historically demeaned the artworks of Africans, while a revolutionary avant-garde has appropriated and repurposed the continent's cultural production. This much is now widely acknowledged. But it does not account for the fruitful use of "African art" by artists of African origin for whom European mediations of "Africa" (despite racialized and even racist assumptions) have been productively encountered and reworked.[16] What is important

15 For an African-based discussion of the issues, see *Picasso and Africa*, ed. Laurence Madeline and Marilyn Martin, exh. cat. Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg; Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town (Cape Town: Bell-Roberts Publishing, 2006). See also Simon Gikandi, "Picasso, Africa, and the Schemata of Difference," *Modernism/modernity* 10, no. 3 (September 2003): 455–80; and Joshua I. Cohen, *The Black Art Renaissance: African Sculpture and Modernism Across Continents* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020).

16 See, for example, the work of Mozambican painter Malangatana Ngwenya and the complex navigation of African fetish objects and

for our discussion is the understanding that a version of "Africa" was already encrypted into Picasso's *Guernica* via its Cubist-derived faceting and simplification of form, its stylized inscriptions and delineations, not to mention its capacity to invoke the supernatural power and the magic of the image.[17] For artists like Dumile, a familiarity with African carving and painting, pottery and printmaking, was firsthand. They did not need Picasso or Henri Matisse to prove their value or worth. But as artists they participated in a form of artistic exchange that allowed for nonverbal translations and borrowings, connections and quotations, ones that exceed the politics of precedence and deference. To witness the remediation of African aesthetics by European artists was to see it anew and afresh. And to lay claim to a planetary and nonpartisan shared treasure house of imagery, formal experimentation, and poetic possibility, was to refuse to be delimited by the ethnic essentialism, the patronizing paternalism, and the racialized prohibitions of "home."[18] There was a politics in that which spoke to

cosmologies in the work of Ernest Mancoba. Picasso's sympathy for the politics and aesthetics of Négritude, exemplified in his illustrations for Aimé Cesaire's *Corps perdu* (1949) and his friendship with Leopold Senghor, as well as his relative visibility on the continent is well documented. See, for example, Hélène Ivanoff, "African Views on Modern Art: Picasso and Senghor," *Transition*, no. 132 (2021): 270–86.

17 For Picasso's relationship to "magic" and his association of African artifacts with supernatural powers, see Richard Shiff, "Magic," in *Picasso – El Greco*, ed. Carmen Giménez and Josef Helfenstein, exh. cat. Kunstmuseum Basel (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2022), 59–77.

18 One outraged critic of Dumile's expressive style lambasted him for subservience to a European- and American-based aesthetic, anathema to the "beauty" and "purity" of "Africa," which needed

the shared humanist agenda to which Dumile was especially sympathetic.[19]

When Dumile set out to create his epic drawing, all of this was at stake. His work is undeniably rooted in his situation as a Black South African. For many it speaks to the brutalization and grotesquerie of a racist and violent world, imagined as a place in which skeleton heads pivot, masklike on deformed bodies, and double-headed swollen cows cavort in the nightmarish gloom.[20] Here a pot-bellied baby is suckled by the outsized teat of a cow whose hoof threatens to trample it to death while a three-legged ghoul wields a knobkerrie as if readying itself for battle alongside a naked rider on a bull. Faces are distorted into gap-toothed grimaces; limbs stretch out in horror or pain. Behind and between the carnival of kraal and farmyard (geese are paired with a menacing cat, cows appear both fecund and huge) and the enigmatic pivot of a preacher (seated with a book and a bowl of flowers), various specters emerge and

to be protected from such influences. See "This is Not Our Art," *The World*, October 28, 1966. I am grateful to Warren Siebrits for bringing this to my attention. See Siebrits's "A Record of the Hidden History of Dumile Feni's Era-Defining Drawing 'Mother and Child' (1966)," essay privately published by Warren Siebrits, Johannesburg, February 28, 2020.

19 In an interview quoted in 1966, Dumile is reported to have said, "My subjects are Africans because they are my people, but my message, the idea I am trying to put across, is nothing to do with racialism—I am not interested in politics. My situations are human ones, that is all." "The Name's Dumile," *Sunday Tribune*, August 21, 1966, n.p.

20 For a comprehensive discussion of *African Guernica* in relation to these issues, see Anitra Nettleton, "Writing Artists into History: Dumile Feni and the South African Canon," *African Arts* 44, no. 1 (March 2021): 8–25.

recede in the gloom. The composition is circular, the scene spatially ambiguous and somber, reverberating with the sound of a ghostly saxophonist who seems to hover discreetly at its heart. It's a dreamworld without obvious reason or rhyme, and yet it invokes the cattle-rich cosmology and customary rituals of Xhosa history, culture, and trade. Provider of food, material wealth, and symbolic power, the cow for Nguni peoples is more than just a conduit to physical nourishment. Its hide and flesh, its body and horns, its secretions and cries, function as units of exchange, as material and spiritual resource, as link between generations and kin.[21] But even here there is nothing comforting or pastoral about Dumile's synthetic arrangement. It is too dark and mysterious for that. Not to mention the fact that its ensemble of figural fictions appears to look back at the viewer, whether through a misplaced pupil that stares ominously from beneath a cow's tail—an arsehole turned eyeball for sure—or from the accretion of orifices that populate the picture: distended nostrils and navels, sockets and hollows that puncture the whiteness of the paper like surrogate peepholes and eyes. Much as in Picasso's magnum opus, with its floating eyes and gaping mouths, its spread-fingered hands and broken bodies, the effect is shocking and stark. White over black, light over dark: we are challenged and accosted by the scene.

21 I am grateful to Dr. Lwando Scott for leading me through some of the debates on the significance of cows in Xhosa culture. Thanks also to professors Luvuyo Wotshela and Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela for conversations on this topic. See also Ivor Powell, "Dumile: Struggle for Identity," *Art South Africa* 3, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 30–37.

At the same time, the dexterity and artistry which is at the heart of Dumile's drawing is visibly, if subtly, thematized within the work itself: at the apex of its pyramidal composition appears a clothed couple. In this vignette, surrounded (almost entirely) by impenetrable blackness, a headscarved mother embraces an overgrown but weightless man/child, pietà-like, in her arms. He hangs precariously in her embrace, his oversized left hand splayed haptically over her body while his right arm encircles her frame, only to appear at her shoulder holding what looks like a pencil or crayon, discreetly but visibly in its grip. It is this vaguely sketched tool, held between thumb and forefinger, that points to the manual graft of the work, its handmade materiality and laborious gestation as "art." Is this an encrypted signifier of the artist himself, dissident draftsman and prodigal son, emplaced pictorially among a compendium of both familiar and imaginary creatures? Ingrid Jonker's "child grown into a giant"—forever a "boy" in the eyes of the law and the state, his movement curtailed, his passage frustrated—allows his imagination to raid the pictorial and material riches of the world, both ancestral and immediate, local and universal, in an epic, ambitious undertaking that simultaneously thematizes his situation and surpasses its restrictions and prohibitions. Like a grotesque pageant or carnivalesque parade, the madness of the world is unleashed, turning the order and logic of history painting on its head while purloining its grandeur and scope.

In this, Dumile's drawing is not unlike the Picasso painting itself. Referencing a litany of anti-war pageantry in paint and print that turns the lionizing and propagandistic rhetoric of official art into parody

or tragic inversion, Picasso famously drew on Goya's *El 3 de mayo en Madrid* (The Third of May 1808 in Madrid) and populated his brutalized bestiary with figures of lamentation and suffering, from the Mater Dolorosa to the Deposition, from the naked flight of the dispossessed to the dismembered corpses and limp bodies of *Los desastres de la guerra* (The Disasters of War).[22] In confronting the horror of Nazi aggression, Picasso repurposed his Spanish heritage via the aesthetics of newsprint, the abstractions of Cubist fragmentation (itself indebted to African sculpture), and the mediations of black-and-white photography and print. These, inevitably, form part of the toolkit from which Dumile also fashioned his art.

In 1968 Dumile was to leave South Africa, never to return. He would live an increasingly precarious life as an exile, in London and New York, during which time he would return repeatedly to the archives and memories of "home," until his death in 1991. "Apartheid" becomes encrypted in his later work as text and image, encapsulated, for example, in a posterlike drawing of 1987, based on the iconic photograph by Sam Nzima of Hector Pieterson, a twelve-year-old boy who was shot by police during the Soweto uprisings of 1976. In Dumile's drawing, the fragmented figure of the child, cipher of innocence and "universal consciousness," is gripped by the stylized digits of a statuesque figure, culled from the shared "African" origins of modernism. Many of the characteristics of Dumile's early work (from

22 For a comprehensive account and reproduction of the prints, see *The Disasters of War by Francisco Goya y Lucientes*, intro. Philip Hofer (New York: Dover, 1967).

the masked faces and human/animal interactions of his compositions, the centrality of the maternal figure, and the vulnerability of the child, to the linear complexity and dexterity of his touch) persist in the later work. But the drawings become increasingly stylized and sculptural while the agitated and expressive quality of his mark-making becomes displaced by a more mellifluous curvilinearity and flow. As "South Africa" recedes into memory, it becomes a repository of loss, at the same time recurring as a locus of ongoing political and iconic engagement.

What provides a key to his visual inventory in exile is a scroll that Dumile made over an extended period while in London during the 1970s. Probably not intended for public display, the fifty-three-meter-long diaristic document contains a personal panoply of characters and fantasy creatures, arranged like a sequential procession, spaced out or overlapping on the page. Bare-toothed beasts and multiheaded cows, saxophonists, bass players, and flautists, wild cats and simian hybrids join splayed-legged demoiselles and madonnas in a multispecies parade of types. These reference post-Cubist faceting of bodies and modernist fragmentation of form as much as they invoke a personal collection of urban Black subjects and themes (musicians and poets, prophets and preachers) as well as Christian tropes combined with African indigenous cosmologies centering on animist and anthropomorphic beliefs. In the scroll, formal sources veer from abstracted crucifixions and fetishes to priapic curios and stylized masks, allowing an erotics of abundance to cohabit with formal restraint. Empty spaces and gaps show pentimenti and traces but also leave room for text: sometimes words are

repeated (“Exile, Exile, Exile”), sometimes enigmatic phrases (“the universal consciousness of the child”) or proper names (Nina Simone, Stevie Wonder) appear. Political slogans and meditations on art, music, or song are scrawled or scribbled onto the unwinding page like a personalized holy book or journal. The logic is paratactic not sequential; the handwritten words perform like quotations and citations alongside gestures and cries from the heart or personalized statements of faith.

Which takes us back to *African Guernica*, executed in the midst not the memory of apartheid’s racialized tyranny, but with the bombast and the confidence of youth. Refusing to be relocated to the “Bantustan” to which the South African authorities wished to expel him, because he was without the necessary “pass” that would allow him to stay in Johannesburg, Dumile was soon to exile himself from his homeland forever. But he was already, in his mid-twenties, an artist, prepared to “travel through the whole world” without asking for anyone’s permission. *African Guernica* brings together multiple sources and references. Picasso’s *Guernica*, itself profoundly dependent on “African art” and its offshoots, provided some of the ammunition Dumile claimed. Looking back at *Guernica* via Dumile’s hand is to recognize this more starkly than ever.

EXHIBITION

This is a project of the Collections Department, with support from the Office of the Registrar and the Conservation-Restoration Department.

Curatorship
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MUSEO NACIONAL
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OPENING TIMES

Monday to Saturday: 10 a.m. – 9 p.m.
Free: 7 – 9 p.m.

Sunday: 10 a.m. – 2:30 p.m.
Free: 12:30 – 2:30 p.m.

Tuesday: closed

Last admission:
30 minutes before closing time

Clearance:
15 minutes before closing time

EDUCATION/MEDIATION

Guided tours

ACCESSIBILITY

At the Assistance/Information Desks (Floors 1 and 2):

- Wheelchairs
- Folding cane seats (also on Floor 4)

At the Audio Guide Desks (Floor 1):

- Audio guides
- Audio guides (audio descriptions / Spanish Sign Language)
- Magnetic induction loops
- Radio guides

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