



Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum

A couple of facts and some fiction



by Valentine Umansky



At angles

Tectonic movements teach us that angular unconformity causes geologic tilting. Angular unconformity occurs when parallel strata of sedimentary rocks are deposited on layers that are tilted, perhaps as a result of erosion.

It is also often said that Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum layered works are multi-faceted.

An attitude of rock turning

On June 24, 2019, curator Jessica Bell Brown, when asked to talk about versatility and benevolence, used the expression “an attitude of rock turning.”

Appearances and avatars

Reality is nevermore. Reality was always a site of contestation. A place to contradict. An existence to deny. Avatars act as a response. As digital beings emerged from our imagination, they add layers of simulation to what we perceive as reality. Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum calls hers ‘Asme.’ If one cuts the word down its middle, the two truncated segments read: “as me” — the similar other.

In French, to say a story is credible, one uses the term “vrai-semblable.” Semantically, though, the expression should be translated “similar to the truth.”

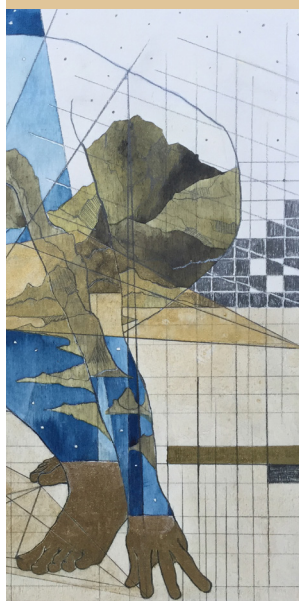
I guess everything is an affair of appearances?



Quadra I; 2016; Pencil and watercolor on

Being and Becoming

When interviewed about his practice in *Nine Weeks*, a publication compendium of nine conversations held over nine weeks, South African artist Simphiwe Ndzube said: “I seem to be obsessed with things transitioning and inhabiting multiple dimensions of being and becoming,” a statement equally fitting for other artists.



wood panel; Private collection, Spain

Blobs

Blobs' generic name is said to have found roots in a science fiction movie introducing alien life forms to a 1950s American nondescript town. Like aliens, blobs are 'non-shape-ical.' Their boundaries fluid, they evoke indeterminacy and continual flux. To Italian Renaissance artist Leonardo Da Vinci, blobs were means to analyze the world. He saw in those drawn-out masses of turbulent water and swirling storms hypothetical worlds, which revealed before his eyes some of nature's hidden structures.

Turbulence in a smoothly flowing stream of water is caused by the insertion into the stream of an obstacle. In fluid dynamics, turbulent flow is characterized by chaotic changes in fluid motion's pressure. A different form of turbulence is caused by a flowing stream pouring into—and colliding with—a still fluid body.

Leonardo made dozens of blob studies, researching the effect of geometric obstacles intersecting with natural elements. Incidentally, Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum's earlier set of drawings are similarly based on geometry and quantum physics. Her series *Quadra* hence refers to both art and mathematics; “quadra” is used to describe a pedestal's plinth and a square shaped frame.

Codices

One day, as we were talking on the phone, Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum said: “you know, the work is a codex.”

The Latin *caudex* referred to tree “trunks”, and, by extension, to “books,” either made of paper, vellum or papyrus. In the West, the only historical alternative to codices was scrolls, later replaced by wax tablets. Recently, it seemed like humanity has returned to tablets, though digital and... Well, we are certainly back to the scroll.

As codices radically transformed book production, pages shaped the future of an object, which has remained similar in shape to what it was thousands of years ago.

Sunstrum’s works, nested in science fiction, hero’s quest novels and *Bildungsroman*, heavily rely on books. *And, in many ways, I have come to understand hers and all readers desire to turn pages as akin to a process of revelation.*



Dévoilement progressif

In 1973, French literary theorist Roland Barthes, in his seminal essay *The Pleasure of the Text*, spoke of the novel’s “dévoilement progressif;” its gradual unveiling. That idea of “unveiling,” developed further in the essay, is essential to both literature and narratology. Further, Barthes confirms: “[novels are built on a] gradual strip-tease; our excitement entirely reliant on the hope of seeing the sex or, in other terms, of discovering the end of the story.”

On March 18, 2019, the artist, discussing the presence of pencil under layers in her drawings, was quoted saying: “thus, the paint becomes a veil.”



Hollar; 2009; Collage;
Courtesy of the artist and
Marcia Wood Gallery,
Atlanta

Earth and Everything

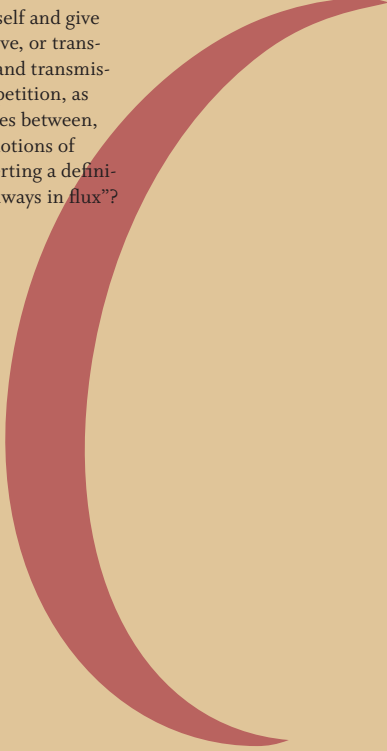
Motswana author Bessie Head's short story, *Earth and Everything*, published in 1964 or 1965—exact date unconfirmed at the time of printing—, starts and ends as such: “All my seven faces of deceit and pretense I had put down. Only my nameless face was there because the earth was breathing, and the air was still and quiet. Then I was trapped too, like the rain clouds. I had no time to find my seven faces, for you came to me silently, and when I looked up you were there; also with your nameless face. Everything carried my decision away, left me with no choice but this mute agreement of nameless face to nameless face. Life is full of talk, and I, more than any other, talk and talk and talk. A thousand differing contradictions pour out to conceal the underground stream that is the same always, flowing, continuous. Now I am plunged in head-to-toe; amazed that my whole self flows outward into you, yet back to me again in a current of deep peace without beginning or ending. (...) I own your nameless face. We will meet again. Always. The pattern always repeats, repeats itself. Always. Who knows when it will end — when nameless face and nameless face are one whole thing?”

Meanwhile, *she* wrapped herself in earth.



Fictive flux...

Memory is treacherous. Can one confirm that the artist really said: "In my work I respond to these moments by replicating myself—creating simultaneous selves and simultaneous worlds in order to gaze at myself, to meet myself and give myself things to keep or carry, receive, or transmit. These notions of simultaneity and transmission often surface in my work as repetition, as play, and as ritual. My work navigates between, and negotiates with, essentialized notions of blackness and Africanity, while asserting a definition of self that is always unfixed, always in flux"?



...vs. Facts

Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum was *definitely* born in Mochudi, Botswana and grew up living in different parts of Africa, and Asia. She came to the United States in 1998 and received a BA with Highest Honors in International Studies with a concentration in Trans-National Cultures from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Sunstrum received her MFA from the Mt. Royal School of Multidisciplinary Art at the Maryland Institute College of Art. She lives between Toronto, Canada and Johannesburg, South Africa and has exhibited around the world. In 2019, exhibitions of her works were held in London, U.K.; The Hague, The Netherlands; ZEITZ MOCAA, South Africa; in The Democratic Republic of Congo, and at The Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati.

Four first lines of a poem yet to be written

If a portal to parallel universes existed, Sunstrum's *Sleeper* would surely be it / While in the regions of the brain, like in the regions of space, we wonder how else we'd spot it / Her cosmogonies and avatars, like the rabbit through the hole, act as pointed fingers, / Directing our gazes towards other, further, and possibly darker, matters.



Sleeper; 2018; Pencil and acrylic on wood panel; Private collection

Obsidians and mirrors

The Keeper met its New York public in 2016, when installed at the New Museum. A reflection on the impulse to save both the most precious and the apparently valueless, the exhibition brought together a variety of imaginary museums, personal collections, and unusual assemblages. In one of the show's vitrines, a small fragment of the scopic stone collection of idiosyncratic and polymath poet Roger Caillois was displayed.

Caillois's long-lasting commitment to the study of stones was not strictly scientific, despite the obvious knowledge he developed over the years. Instead, from an obsessive passion for both geology and gemology spun a proper philosophy. In one of his poems, he wrote: "The obsidian stone is black, transparent and matte. Mirrors are made out of it. They reflect shadows rather than people and objects." — *Can we then read in Asme, Sunstrum's avatar, the shadow figure of the artist herself?*

Of Stones in the Classical Age

Roger Caillouis's *Pierres* was recently translated into English by Valentine Umansky, also the curator of Sunstrum's CAC exhibition. One of the excerpts included in the book describes one stone as hermaphroditic. *Asme too, raises questions about gender.*

The excerpt reads: "The runaway stone that Argonauts used as an anchor was kept in the military academy of Cyzicus. It escaped so often that they had to seal it with lead. Millstones are found in Volsinies: some say they move freely. In Asia Minor, there is a foliated stone from Assos that is carnivorous. The cadavers stuck in this sarcophagus stone are eaten in less than forty days, with the exception of the teeth. The stone also petrifies mirrors, brushes, clothes and shoes buried with the deceased. The strength of the Troade magnet is almost non-existent, as they are black and female. Those of the Asian Magnesia are the worst of all. They are white and barely attract iron. The best are blue and male. They come from Ethiopia and people are willing to pay their value in silver. It is also in Ethiopia, close to the place where magnets are found, that lies the théamède stone which repels and diverts all types of iron. The diphye is hermaphroditic, white and black, and separated in the middle by a strip that divides it into two colors and two genders."

Palimpsest and phantom quartz

Phantom quartzes are a variety of "rock crystals" that form over pre-existing ones. In each, an included crystal, its composition different than that of the exterior one, can be discerned from an outside, angular quartz. Some of those crystals display the outlines of numerous smaller ones. They are named phantoms.

In literature, the term palimpsest is used for diverse layers or aspects apparent beneath a surface. *As days go by, I wonder if I should call Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum a gem in hiding. And whether phantom quartz wouldn't better apply to her multi-faceted self?*



Port Watson

A quaint city, Port Watson sits on the small, semi-deserted, Pacific island of Sonsorol. With its extinct volcano surrounded by coral reefs, Sonsorol shows its desolate face to the world. Its closest neighbors stand some 400 miles off the Philippines, on one side, and New Guinea, on the other. With a population of barely 2000 people and an area of about 90 square miles, Sonsorol is unique in that the island is devoid of currency, military and police force, or violence.

On Sonsorol, land is said to be 'owned' only when it is used by its inhabitants. Historians affirm that the island's "aboriginal" population, of mixed Malay and Polynesian ancestry, arrived around the 14th century, although that fact remains controversial and sources differ on the matter.

As no real Customs & Immigration Authority exists on the islet, Port Watson remains the sole port of entry into Sonsorol. This explains why many consider it a modern-day utopia. Like the sky, Sonsorol is borderless and indivisible. *Although one can but only remark that, in recent years, airspace has been the subject of much regulating. It may very well be that 'The Idea of a Borderless World' exists only in Achille Mbembe's writings, unfortunately.*

Should you wish to visit Sonsorol, you would be able to do so by way of Hakim Bey.

Please bear in mind that, for purchases on the island, any foreign currency may be used as no law is really set in stone, there.

Please also be aware that frustration may arise as Hakim Bey responds to most inquiries as such: 'Welcome to Port Watson! You have now landed into that very place that can only exist if you believe it does.'

My question to you is: 'were that really the case, would it matter to you if Sonsorol did not really exist?'

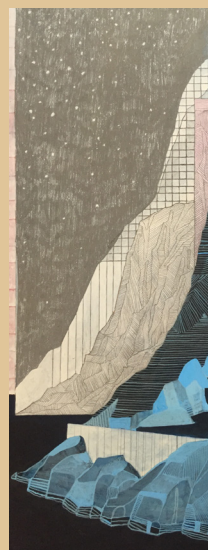
Radical alterity

In his 2005 essay 'After Colonialism: African Postmodernism and Magical Realism,' literary scholar Gerald Gaylard posits the radical role of imagination in creative praxis. As explained in the text, Gaylard assumes that if "we view the imagination as a more radical reaction against or difference from reality," imagination will be "less an already known than an irruption of a radical newness or alterity." *I am always struck by Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum's unique technique in painting. Whether reliant on tempera, pencil or chalk, her work always alludes to the passing of time: the past remaining visible under a thin coat of present.*

Strike and dip

The expression strike and dip refers to the orientation or attitude of a geologic feature. The *strike line* of a bed, fault, or other planar feature, is a line representing the intersection of that feature with a horizontal plane. On a geologic map, this is represented with a short straight segment oriented parallel to the strike line. Strike can be given as either a quadrant compass bearing of the strike line (N25°E for example) or in terms of east or west of true north or south, a single three digit number representing the azimuth (N25°E would simply be 025.) The *dip* gives the steepest angle of descent of a tilted bed relative to a horizontal plane, and is given by the number (0°-90°) as well as a letter (N, S, E, W) with rough direction in which the bed is dipping downwards.

Strangely, Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum's most recent and elaborate painting to date is titled *M.D.K.S.GM.Z.* The initials refer to those of each city crossed on the path from Gaborone in Botswana to Johannesburg in South Africa; the artist's way of situating herself along the coordinates of an internal/external horizon.



The Incense Burner; 2017; Painted on wood panel; Private collection

Titles

When researching titles for Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum's exhibition, the curator listed the following in her notebook:

- Alterscapes
- Not Quite
- An Expansive Sense of Self
- Voyage vers le Centre de la Terre
- From Moon to Earth
- Somewhere near the Center of the Earth
- Tumbling down / The Steps of Time



pencil, gouache and watercolor-
collection, Spain

Utopia vs. Utopianism

In 'The Ambiguous Necessity of Utopia: Post-Colonial Literatures and the Persistence of Hope', published in 2009, theorist Bill Ashcroft insists on the significant difference between utopias and utopianism. While "utopias exist in the future, utopianism, anticipatory consciousness, is heavily invested in the present." This, he explains, is because the utopian function in post-colonial is "located in its practice as well as its vision" – its practice of confronting and transforming coercive power in order to enable and produce visions of an imagined future. To this, Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum responds with an additional layer, considering "African Futurism as distinct from Afro-Futurism because, whereas the latter is formulated from a Diasporic position, representing an idealized Africa outside the experience of contemporary Africans, the former is a formulation that is derived from contemporary Africans based on conditions on the continent." This is why, if one had to remember a single thing, it should be that Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum's work uniquely enstates imagination as a radical, contemporary praxis; one which renders possible a fluid version of the self and alterity as embedded in a reality we often perceive as univocal.



Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum

All my seven faces

July 12 through October 27, 2019

Curated by Valentine Umansky

Generously supported by

Linda F. and James L. Miller; Rosemary and Mark Schlachter, Emersion Design & Jim Cheng and York University (Canada).

The associated publication is generously supported by Radius Books and the Contemporary Arts Center, and has received additional support from Charlotte L. Newman; Harry David; Theo Erasmus; Jennifer Fair-Cohen; Pam Allara; Serge Tiroche; Tiwani Contemporary (UK) and Goodman Gallery (South Africa).

C/AC