

Thembinkosi Hlatshwayo
Song 1: To be left behind
28 May - 4 July 2026

blank is pleased to present *Song 1: To be left behind*, a solo exhibition by Thembinkosi Hlatshwayo (b. 1993, Johannesburg).

The exhibition takes its title from the idea of a background song: something carried through different phases of life, accompanying moments of change, grief, inheritance and return. For Hlatshwayo, 'Song 1' suggests the beginning of an ongoing sequence, shaped by the anxiety of being left behind, but also by what continues to reverberate through our encounters with people, spaces and surfaces. Following the passing of his father, the artist began to reflect on forms of inheritance that extend beyond memory: how a body might carry another's gestures, histories or unresolved experiences, and how these can return through repetition. In this context, the surface of the photograph becomes a place of shedding and release where loss, absence and recollection remain unstable.

These reverberations take form through ghosted, obscured or materially distressed figures who appear suspended between presence and disappearance. At times, the artist's own body enters the image, not as a fixed subject, but as a guide or engaged presence moving through the image's fractures. Self-portraiture, here, becomes less a declaration of identity than a way of entering the image from within, working through what cannot be easily held, remembered or represented.

This instability is heightened through Hlatshwayo's tactile interventions. Scratching, layering, tearing, staining and rephotographing disrupt the surface of the photograph, foregrounding it not only as an image, but as a material object in the world: something handled, marked, exposed and revisited. Rather than presenting the photographic object as whole, resolved or contained, Hlatshwayo allows rupture, loss and vulnerability to register as material presence. The distortions in the work become crucial: they mark the limits of representation while resisting the expectation that lived experience should be made available as explanation, evidence or spectacle.

In this sense, Hlatshwayo's images work at the edge of description. They do not seek to resolve memory into testimony, or to make experience available as a fixed account. Instead, they remain with what is removed, concealed, shed, remade or returned to the surface in altered form. In *Song 1: To be left behind*, the photograph becomes a charged material surface, where memory, absence and the possibility of healing remain unsettled, yet deeply present.

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Song 1: To be left behind is Hlatshwayo's first solo exhibition with the gallery. Bringing together works developed during recent residencies at El Espacio 23 in Miami and the Akademie der Künste in Berlin, the exhibition coincides with the inclusion of Hlatshwayo's work in *1, 2, 3: Between the motion and the act*, part of a constellation of group presentations opening at A4 Arts Foundation in Cape Town. Hlatshwayo lives and works in Johannesburg