



# domestified angst : second recording

projects by chido johnson

Oakland University Art Gallery

Curated by Dick Goody



### **me me me**

carved ebony tourist object, collection of tourist objects, ikea shelf, 2008

The piece was carved from an original tourist object and transformed to “me” the artist. Surrounding the piece are other tourist artifacts.

**Dick Goody:** *How do your surroundings influence your work; for example if you were making sculpture in a village in Zimbabwe, immediately, how would your concerns change?*

**Chido Johnson:** Well naturally the availability of materials makes an impact. Though I was raised in the rural area in Zimbabwe and my initial stages of making art were in that environment, I think it would be more challenging for me now at this point in my life after becoming so used to the accessibility of limitless materials in the western consumer world. So going back to an environment that I would be limited with natural raw materials like stone and wood, actually would be challenging. I am saying this where the conversations in my work are predominantly within the choices of materials. Otherwise my change of environment from teaching in Dallas, Texas, then moving to Detroit, Michigan, definitely influenced my work conceptually and aesthetically. In Texas I was heavily influenced by “neo-conceptual minimalism” (as it was punned), which led my work to a quieter, more ephemeral space, which was also less immediate. Having lived in Detroit for a few years, my work suddenly began to yearn for humor. I owe this to living in a wounded city, trying to heal its self. Humor was needed and suffering was understood.

*You've worked very hard to build a viable sculpture department at the College for Creative Studies, so hard in fact that several years ago there was a feeling that it was affecting your output, but in the last couple of years you've been producing a prodigious amount of work. What changed?*

Two things changed. The first was feeling comfortable that the sculpture section had matured to a certain level. The second is a sentiment shared among many artists who get involved administratively in academia when they realize they begin to sacrifice their studio practice. I was spending less time in the studio, and like any relationship, I feared the distance from when we, my art and I, used to spend a lot of quality time together. I needed the passion back. As sentimental as it may sound, I needed to rekindle my love affair with my work. This fueled the urgency. It is my life and fate; I never would question it before. But if I was to constantly encourage my students to re-invent themselves, I needed to do the same. I started feeling like a preacher: do what I say, not what I do. So I challenged myself.

*You are something of a contradiction. On the one hand you will make elegant stone sculptures which require considerable craftsmanship. On the other hand you will take found objects and integrate them in often absurdist but surprising ways. How do manage to work traditionally and yet keep your streak of unconventionality?*

My own life is a contradiction. I am not claiming it is unique; besides my own siblings, I have a lot of friends who have had similar contradictory lives. I am referring to the context of identity and thus perception. The contradiction in my work is an attempt to expose those psychological tensions in my own life and hopefully others.

*Are there any limitations, apart from financial ones, on the kinds of materials you will consider using – are there processes and materials you simply refuse to work with?*

Not at all. I would rather say my boundaries might exist within my own interests in the “bodily-ness” of the figure (identity), and its narrative. So, if the work

demands a certain material and process that I am not familiar with, I initially would enjoy the pleasure of learning it, or if necessary would have no hesitation of outsourcing its fabrication to someone more familiar with it. I do have a crutch, which is my pleasure of processes. So I always need my hands in the work. However, if I felt that somebody else could better fabricate certain elements, I would have no hesitation about outsourcing the work.

*Initially you were going to be a painter. What shifted and led to you working with objects – what did you feel were the inherent limitations in painting?*

Yes, I do have a BFA in Painting and initially was a painter. But I think a lot of sculptors started out as painters. There was always a hierarchy towards painting over other mediums. Even Leonardo Da Vinci used to mock Michelangelo as being merely a baker covered in white powder. I do love painting and its virtuality but what made me fall in love with sculpture happened when I was nineteen. I was not in school at the time but under an apprenticeship of an internationally recognized sculptor, Tapfuma Gutsa, in Zimbabwe. I remember one day taking a break from this large serpentine stone I was carving, relaxing in the shade of a tree watching kids from the neighborhood ask me what I was doing with the piece. They unhesitatingly climbed on the stone and played around it. I loved that ability sculpture had. Its physical presence embodied a reality. Also, having been raised in rural and working class communities, I was proud of getting my hands dirty.

*Having just referred to you working with objects, do you see sculpture as a collection of things or do you see it as metonymic and monolithic?*

I definitely see it as metonymic and monolithic. For example, I am struggling right now to get rid of my possessions. I am just sick of owning “stuff.” Now I do not mean I want to get rid of everything – all I want is the necessities. For it is true that possessions are just a “collection of things,” but the difficulty of these “things” is that they embody so much meaning to me. For example, I have this old notebook from Zambia. It was a very common everyday thing at the time – a primary school notebook. The only special element was that a very



# **Smile**

detail from video

close friend gave it me. I wrote nothing in it, I would not dare, for even the blank pages could not be desecrated. Of course there are symbolic objects like the adze [a cutting tool with a thin arched blade set at right angles to the handle used for shaping wood] I was given at birth by a village artist. In away it was an object of prophecy, for I never imagined myself a sculptor until I was nineteen. So the battle I have with my collection of things is similar to how I see art because it is about the stories in the objects – which are the stories told of the pleasures and pain of being human. Some objects are ephemeral, for example, besides the adze I was given at birth, I was also given thirty chickens. My parents told me about this later because I was a baby, so I have no recollection of it. But the story lingers. In contrast to the adze, the chickens may not have a physical presence, but they do have a narrative presence, and thus exist.

*You have made some objects which use traditional African carvings. Has this always been the case, and, if not, how have you integrated it into your vision?*

Well, as I had mentioned earlier, I started out carving in Africa. My first experience was when I was twelve, it was not sculpture, it was for puppetry. My father is an artist. His MFA was in Painting, though he loved puppetry. So that was my early experience. Then when I was nineteen I did an apprenticeship with the Zimbabwean sculptor, Tapfuma Gutsa, hence I was introduced to sculpture. My background sculpturally was in carving. Back then, everything was done by hand with handmade tools, but when I started my education in the USA everyone predominantly used power tools. One could argue that traditional processes used in Italy utilizing hand tools were not that different to what I learned in Zimbabwe.

But coming back to your question on how I integrate process into my vision, initially I was seduced by carving for several reasons. What really drew me in besides its physical romance was its connectedness with time and place. What I mean by that is the history of it. When I hold a chisel and a mallet and remove material off the surface of a sculpture, I mimic one of the oldest forms of making form in space and I become connected to my ancestors. Carving was

utilized globally in many cultures and through it I feel connected to both my European and African heritage. More recently I have been using carving as a form of cultural signification. This is how Western culture would define it. For example, if I carve something in marble the audience generally links it with one's European heritage. Conversely, if I carve mahogany or ebony it is generally assumed to be part of my African heritage. In the pieces *me me me* and *smile*, I am also using the act of carving as a process of erasure and violation. In *me me me*, I utilized the sculpture's previous embedded identity as a tourist object. A tourist object is imbued with consumerism, otherness, and displacement. I carved into the figure and transformed the whole body into me. In *smile*, the act of erasure is more palpably violent, aided by the video projection of it being made. Referencing the other-worldliness of (African) Baule sculpture, I carved the body using traditional hand tools, and then at the end documented myself carving the face with a Dremel tool. My latex gloves made the Dremel mimic a dentist's tool, clinically distancing the maker; it could be construed as a humorous critique on Freud.

*Would you say you are a global artist or do such concerns not interest you?*

I would rather separate this into two questions. First, would I call myself a global artist? Second, do global concerns interest me? The first is no. I have never called myself that. It is too heavy of a title, with too generalized of an identity that has become an empty buzzword. I do not hang out in my studio wondering how my work addresses global issues. I believe in specifics, starting from a center and then spreading outward. My specifics are my immediate human experiences, which does include global spaces, specific to cultural perspectives and the tension that exist between them. So to answer the second paraphrased question, yes, global concerns do interest me. For example, in *I want to be a cowboy*, the reference to the early spaghetti western movies comes from childhood experiences. I grew up watching spaghetti westerns and kung fu movies in Zambia. These two genres were very popular. One did not have to understand English or follow the storyline; the movies were predominantly action based. No English, no problem. What I find interesting is the simulacrum of the western identity portrayed to the non-west. Friends of

mine who grew up in the 70's and early 80's from other non-Western continents watched the same movies.

*Your work seems to mock conventions and visit large issues through the lens of small conundrums. Is this a political choice, meaning do you want to influence the social consciousness of the onlooker?*

Yes, I admit I do. The word "influence" sounds almost like propaganda. I would rather say that I want to bring ideas into the conversation, for what inspires me to make art are the uncertainties, the grey areas. I hope I can stir conversations and question perspectives.

*When we began talking about this exhibition it became clear that you wouldn't be in the country during the installation. Talk about ways this has influenced the way you've had to think conceptually about this show?*

Wow, this was hard. I am very particular about nuances in my work. So yes this was very challenging. I would not have been able to do it if I did not have Nate Morgan and Vince Troia working for me. Since they were former students of mine, at least I knew they would understand aspects of my artistic sensitivities. Inherently, they are both artists to be reckoned with. So I knew they would get the work done. I actually have another student, Kurt Greene, who is casting my *I believe I can fly* in cement. He was given the responsibility for that project. There are more people involved, like Brad Lawrence who will be organizing a group to play soccer with one of the heads for *playball*. In a related project, Rumbidzai Katedza, a friend in the film industry in Zimbabwe is going to film kids in a township kicking a similar head. If I were to name the people who have helped in my projects, it would definitely be a long list. The effect of coordinating this exhibition has meant that conceptually I had to visualize it as a whole at an early stage. This is a bit hard to do when not all the work has been fabricated. Artists who are craftsmen well know that much unpredictability occurs through process that cannot be pre-thought – especially if one allows those liberties to occur, which I certainly do. So trying to orchestrate unfinished work is difficult. It is similar to writing an artist statement for an exhibit when

the work has yet to be fabricated. These circumstances made me constantly think of the exhibition as a whole unit simultaneously as I worked on individual pieces. The project *I believe I can fly* is definitely an outcome of this. It exists with the compositional need to have a third stage of presentation. I have death with *playball*, the rest of the works are living, and realized I needed birth. I am not talking of immediate interpretation of the individual work, but rather the different presentations of the body of work together.

*Working to put together an exhibition that will be installed from a series of instructions is a bit like creating a musical score, which is interesting because you do tend to work in this way. You make work that may suggest spontaneity but the work is constructed over time using hi-tech processes. How do you reconcile making concrete conceptually resolved sculpture in the face of having the sort of spontaneous personality which you seem to project – we do see this impulsive side of you in your drawings, so how do you maintain equilibrium and spontaneity?*

I think the spontaneity is more of a conceptual deliberation rather than a visceral impulse. My attempt is to bring tension from these seemingly instantaneous vs. concrete decisions to reflect a conflicting sense of realities. I see that similar tension in the sculptures. For example in *buck.it* is a very thought out form due to its time-consuming process of carving and it is in contrast to seemingly quick act of placing five gallon buckets on top of it. I hope these differences produce tension and can be similarly read.

*Continuing with the question of temperament, at the top of the list of markers that describe a person's character is one's identity. What kind of identity issues do you have being a white African whose first language is Shona and how has it impacted your work?*

Interesting question. For I am going take it literally and not talk about postcolonial identity and the tension of living between that identity of power relationships, but rather directly on the impact of speaking Shona and English. At one point when I was living in Zambia for six years, I also spoke Nyanja,

Tonga and Bemba. Theoretically, we could go through the argument between Chinua Achebe and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o on whether one could claim it is African English, or is it purely rooted in the colonizer's culture. An example is what is called pigeon English; a slang greeting I grew up with was, "urishapi here?" The response would be "ndiri bho." The direct translation into English is "are you sharp?" meaning are you alert or feeling your best. So "shapi" is a pigeon of the English word "sharp." In the response, "indiri" in Shona means "I am" while "bho" is a pigeon of the English word "boring." So the direct translation of the response to the greeting is "I am bored." But really the word "bored" is being used to mean, "ok." So as much as I adore Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, I would personally agree with Chinua Achebe on the theory of African English. The creolized English is not simply an English culturally rooted perspective, but rather specific to the historical narrative of a postcolonial identity. So this definitely charged my work aesthetically in producing hybrid images, even in the relation to the figurative bodies I produce which seem to be stuck in a latency stage of a man-child. On the other hand, and others could attest to this, having predominantly spoken Shona until I was 17, when I moved to the United States for higher education, I would mostly dream in Shona. I started noticing a transition in my twenties when I started dreaming in English. Now I hardly dream in Shona. My own childhood has been "othered" in a way. These cultural perspectives and their assimilation have impacted my work. As the primatologist, Donna Haraway put it, "it is not 'what is it?' but rather 'who is looking at it and from where?'" My earlier work directly reflected my disconnect with the West. Hell, I came to the US when I was 17 having never really had a "white" friend, and imagined the nation was unified in Reaganomic perspectives! So through the assimilation of the United States English with its cultural nuances rooted in popular culture, how could I truly enter into a critique?

*Last year you were robbed and beaten at a gas station near your studio. What impact has it had on your life and work?*

Not really any, except autobiographically I made *squashed bob*. But the image had existed in my head before I got jumped. Yes I was victimized and

psychologically it fucked me up for awhile. The argument that I was singled out as being the only white person is not something I see as racial but rather I seemed to not belong, and thus I was an easier victim. Also I have had more dramatic life experiences than that. Hell, to be honest, I think I have been wounded more from emotional heartbreaks than impersonal physical violations. Detroit is a big city; it's the first time I got jumped. Hopefully my last! But if you live in the inner city, and roam around in warehouse-ridden industrial low-income areas, which are less trafficked, things like that occur. I have friends who have had way worse experiences than I. As horrible as the experience was, hypothetically if I was a desperate black man in the United States and I had a violent streak, I would victimize a white guy too by taking advantage of the perpetuated racial stereotype in the media of the white man's fear of the black man. Though I probably would find one who looked like they had more money – I was in my work clothes.

*You've often used yourself as a model for your work. Is Chido Johnson merely his own easily available artist's model or does your likeness in the work project something more identifiable, conceptual and concrete than a mere likeness?*

I use myself for two reasons. One is as the only source of authenticity I have. Even that can be questioned... ha ha! I have worked with more ambiguous identities, but when I get more specific to an individual identity rather than a general mass of people, I use the only real source I know: me. For I could never claim to truly understand someone else's "self." The second is in a similar vein to William Kentridge, an artist hero of mine. It is going back to what I mentioned earlier in context to the specifics of perceptual point of views. I strongly feel that when someone addresses their seemingly internalized difference (I am talking of those things we are afraid to tell others for fear of being looked upon as different and strange) they will connect more strongly to an externalized similarity. This is similar to the theory of centrifuge, or working from the local to the global, the self to the other, etc. This is contrast to entering a conversation with a stranger by asking, "How is the weather?"



*Some of your work is super-successful. I say this because we see that it does what it's supposed to do and we feel its sense of accomplishment. But sometimes you make things that you yourself say don't quite work and you talk about it deliberately without rancor. These so called flawed pieces are still part of your oeuvre. They are very illuminating because they speak of unfulfilled possibilities. Do they exist on par with the other work?*

Thank you for the compliment. Yes, I do feel either disturbed or intrigued by the works that I feel are flawed. But that could be my trained eye and not my explorative eye. For are they really flawed? Or are they even stronger than what I may consider resolved? As artists, we are constantly trying to re-invent ourselves and expose ourselves to new visual vocabularies and conceptual methodologies. We have to let go of those systems we have built in ourselves in order to see, learn, and to better understand the new and the old. It is like attempting to peel away a perceptual veil.



*You had a piece of work in your exhibition this summer at the MassIV Gallery, "knock knock," that involved looking through a spy-hole in a locked door. Through the hole, tiny figures appeared to float on a cloud. The curious aspect of this piece was that it was an illusion that occurred remotely through a lens beyond the audience's complete perception. However, when I saw the exhibition you opened the door so I could see the installation inside, which would not normally happen. The view through the spy-hole was ethereal, very small and almost unbearably bright, but after you unlocked the door I saw the closet space and diorama/landscape inside and was utterly surprised and enchanted by the revelation of seeing it. Figures or busts were placed on the floor and the floor was covered with lime – which can be rather caustic – so I can understand why it was closeted – but this piece raises really interesting questions – apart from those about relational aesthetics – about different versions and perceptions of one particular work. Can you speak to this?*

I do intentionally want to question perceptions. As I had just mentioned earlier about peeling away perceptual veils, I was referring to both physical and psychological as well. I am talking of culturally constructed definitions of morals and values, narratives and beauty. That particular piece does raise similar questions to me. But I feel I still have more to learn from it. I love the fact that it is really read as two pieces. Part of that is because I re-used pieces from a previous installation. That has opened up new possibilities for me: presenting the work so one may perceive the piece physically in two very different ways.

*Visiting your website recently (chidox.com), I saw two pictures of you dressing up. One was when you were a child dressed as a clown, the other in gorilla attire. How does dressing up relate to your work? I understand that on the website these provide context and are not necessarily part of your oeuvre. Is it an example of you (again) using your body as a source – is this something that could be developed in a performance or other form of sculpture?*

Maybe. I would never rule something out. As a child I definitely was more performative. I used to get all my friends to perform. I used to claim I wanted to be a clown, a gorilla or a priest, so naturally the only profession that would celebrate those different roles was an artist. I put those images in my website to reference this. It also illustrates my philosophy on how to handle life. As serious as life may be, one has to always find humor in it. I definitely do.

*Going back to your absence during the installation of this exhibition, curatorially it will present some challenges, but it has great potential to loosen up your process. If you cede a little control and make some work that can exist in a number of different permutations and possibilities, how would that affect your process?*

I honestly cannot answer this right now. I would really need to experience the outcome of the exhibition, to learn from it, to have any kind of understanding.

*Let me ask you about how you perceive your sculpture when you're working on a new project. For example, a painter might start with form or a collection of ideas that will somehow be constructed together. Do you start with an idea or is it less specific than that?*

Having had a painting background, I may be rooted in the tradition of the history of paintings. I am referring to the need for the narrative. But this possibly came from my puppetry background as well. Hell, it could be for several reasons like being raised in a narrative culture, or even a post revolutionary era with the urgency to voice an opinion. Yet though I may have strong intentions, I definitely love the process, and the more time I spend with a question, the more it either expands, and/or becomes more specific. While I am open to the changes, challenging my vocabularies, wanting to explore new spaces, I still have to bring the chapters together to flow well as a solid book - talking metaphorically of course. But presently I could not claim a methodology. I could in the past. But I am now attempting to be strongly connected to an honesty derived from my impulse.



Chido at the age of four watching a puppet show organized by his father in Nyadiri, Mutoko, in Zimbabwe.

Issues of identity are invariably race related. While the identity of Chido Johnson might be neatly summarized by the words “white Zimbabwean,” the truth behind his so called identity is far from simple. In recent years Robert Mugabe’s regime has made Zimbabwe an inhospitable place for whites. Most white Zimbabweans, being originally from the British Isles, are Anglo-inflected, but Johnson’s parents were American missionaries. Whereas most white Zimbabwean children would have attended white’s only schools, until age seventeen Johnson went to schools with indigenous African children where exclusively or primarily Shona was spoken; it is his first language. By the time he was in high school, despite the fact the classes were taught in English, the pupils, being native Zimbabweans, socialized in Shona. The assumption of English speakers upon meeting Johnson is that he is perhaps European because of his lack of an American accent. Not only does he possess no real connection to a European identity, his links to his “American” identity, i.e. through his American parents, are at best tenuous. In fact he did not meet his first white friend until he was a freshman in college.

A brief biography of his early years sheds light on the complexity of the formation of his identity (issues). Born in 1969, in Nyadiri, in what was then

Rhodesia, he was initially raised amid the oppressive backdrop of the Ian Smith regime, which carried with it the same malignant apartheid policies that were practiced in South Africa. This ultimately forced Johnson's paradoxically dissident parents to encamp briefly in America when he was five. Back in the States, going to school, he could not speak English. The following year the family moved back to Africa, but across the border from Zimbabwe in Zambia. He calls this time his formative years. In a Zambian township school he learned Tonga and Nyanja. During his last three years in Kitwe, Zambia, yet another language was learned and assimilated; Bemba was the language of the local children whose fathers were laborers in the copper mines there. By 1983, with Smith's government toppled by Robert Mugabe, Johnson was back in Zimbabwe attending high school. After graduating he went to a technical college in Harare and thence back to America to earn a degree in painting and another in sculpture from the University of Georgia.

To say that Johnson's identity is wrapped up in himself, that is, in his image, is an idiotic aphorism. Yet, the image of his face is often present in his work. His self-depictions channel the simulacra of a saccharine TV announcer. The face becomes a target at which to aim scorn. If it is self-flagellation, it also serves as a signifier of Johnson's tortured layered identities. However, at the same time, it is symbolic of his personal thick-skinned resilience, survival and scorn: the distorted idiotic face and taunts as if the artist is mocking his personal anxieties stirred up by concerns over the authenticity of his own warped identity. Mockery has never been a particularly American trait, not in white culture anyway, but it remains a central theme in Johnson's hybrid-identity driven work. Concurrently, the artist is a product of the academy – that is to say the American system of training artists within university Bachelors and M.F.A. programs. The regime of conceptuality inscribed by universities adds another layer of complexity to Johnson's work, which tends to veil rather than elucidate his identity inflected anxieties. He states, nonetheless, that the conceptuality in his work finds its authentic roots in Africa, fashioned by the oral culture with its mythical ethos which, in turn, has been inflected with and politicized by the backdrop of war and civil unrest. Furthermore he intones that

his thought process is heavily embedded in traditional African art and dismisses colonial notions of primitivism: "Even bloody Hegel, the great German philosopher denied conceptualism in African art," he says reprimanding.

Johnson's work, until relatively recently, was somewhat burdened by the weight of his classical training, with its subsequent encumbering provision of requiring the manufacture of monolithic metonymic sculpture, where the object is neither symbolic nor literal, rather where it stands only for its own ambiguous conceptuality. This was partially the case with *Trail* which he showed in the *Windsor Biennial 2007* at the Art Gallery of Windsor, Ontario.



*trail*

*Trail* is a sequence of casted sand 3D rectangles which, when placed end-on-end, form a mausoleum-like line. On each segment, in relief, are entwined figures apparently on a journey, yet frozen as if in rapture (or torture), for their pilgrimage has been curtailed. They lie ravaged, stampeded, as if their lime-like covered bodies are yet to be bulldozed and interred. The seriousness of this piece is challenged (by the artist) by the fact that it lies on the floor. In essence it is a classical frieze which Johnson, even while creating a memorial (to something unknown), placed sardonically on the ground. An unwitting spectator even trampled it revealing the fact that it was made of ephemeral sand rather than eternal stone.

Significantly, it is a work that provides a key to Johnson's nature, which is at once earnest and yet at the same time contradictorily arch. In his work he weighs his arsenal of high art discourse against utterances of a biting, more

satirical form of expression. His output is a controlled amalgam of high art effiteness, quasi-autobiography, and low art travesty.



*me me me* detail

Issues of authenticity have a powerful presence in Johnson's work as can be seen in *me me me*. He actually carved it into an extant piece of ebony airport art, removing any trace of the original body. In an act of assimilation and iconoclasm, the work transforms an already assimilated art form into yet another kind of object, and the act of transformation is a key through which to begin to understand Johnson's work. He is well familiar with "airport art" – wooden sculpture made by craftsman reproducing traditional African forms to be sold to tourists. Such work has no particular value being often dismissed as merely a simulacrum of traditional tribal art forms. Conversely, a work made by an African villager for religious rituals has value precisely because

of its spiritual utility, which in turn gives it cultural and historical context. Souvenirs seldom rise to have any such equivalent value. Johnson, however, appreciates airport art for its hybridism, melding as it does the traditional with the commercial. Unlike a mass-produced plastic toy, being handmade, a wooden tourist carving still possesses a direct line to the "authenticity" of its maker. Seen in this light when he "alters" a piece of such art it is transformative, yet *me me me* also enters into the realm of (re)possession.

In *smile*, he took a piece of ebony and carved a self-portrait mimicking the style of a traditional Baule figurine. In the video which accompanies this piece, the artist routs out the image of his leering face with a Dremel tool amid the persistent soundtrack shrill of an excruciating dental drill. The artist's latex gloved hands assist in the dental nightmare which he associates and attributes to Freud's sexualized interpretations of dentist's dreams.

Johnson's image appears as a cipher or stand-in in other works too, such as the face of the bobbing figure in the *t.b.o.b.* (the birth of bob). Curiously the

background to this piece is a whited-out version of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* where all that remains is landscape. By removing the figures so central to the work, especially Venus, he is negating the existence of the Western concept of beauty so embedded in the human form, particularly the traditional euro-centric female paradigm of beauty.

This exhibition: *domesticated angst : second recording* stands alone, but can also be seen as a rethinking of *domesticated angst : first recording*. The latter was mounted at the Contemporary Art Institute of Detroit in May 2008. Unlike *first recording*, *second recording* is very much an exhibition under construction. In a practical sense, students of art will be able to see something intrinsic and fundamental to art making – that is how an artist melds form and concept with process.

Curatorially, this project was taken on with the full knowledge that the artist would not be present for the installation. He is working on a project at Umea University in Sweden, researching a site specific work in Kiruna near the Arctic Circle which utilizes magnetite, the mineral mined there from which magnets are made. Hence this exhibition will be assembled from Johnson's instructions communicated via drawings, photographs and the internet. Early curatorial discussions focused on how such an exhibition might be undertaken. These frank exchanges began to take on a cascade effect offering unexpectedly cryptic possibilities. This was not the case initially. The first time we talked about this project the supposition was that it might be based on four or five monolithic finished projects, delivered and installed by the artist's assistants.

The idea of an installed exhibition was demolished quickly when Johnson described certain works that appeared in *first recording* as "successful" and others, less so. The "less successful" were nonetheless not demoted and were fascinating because of the specific things Johnson claimed they were not accomplishing. For example, some were not obtuse enough, gave too much away, or presented a disconnect between what they were supposed to achieve and their unexpected outcomes. One such work is *I swallowed two seeds*, which

in its primal stages, was going through unexpected transformations and ultimately rejected its own *raison d'être*. It was to have been a framed mirror etched with Johnson's crazed leering face. Eventually the work evolved into merely a frame still (in Johnson's mind) with the memory of his image, but transformed in to an object embodying childhood anxieties. He states: "The shape of the frame already speaks mirror without the mirror. The piece plays on the childhood threat that if you swallow seeds a plant will grow out of your ears. I swallow two nationalistic seeds: that of the flame lily, the Zimbabwean national flower, and the yellow rose, the American flower." In this work the flowers are made of plastic, mocking both authenticity and patriotic symbolism as if the only thing that is true and has value is the indelibility of childhood.

At first though, Johnson came across as a practical artist anchored to a sculptural tradition where deadlines must be met and work completed to stand on its own merit – which is after all, the case with all completed art. This institutional condition of monolithic *final* perfected works rapidly devolved as our dialogue advanced. The discovery process has not been without anxiety for the artist, but he insisted that the project would be more effective and informing if he ceded perfectionism to experimentalism to underline the exhibition's unique mission. Further meetings revealed that this mission must remain secretive. Without giving anything away here, the mission became rooted in discovering more urgent hybrid ways of demonstrating how an artist explores and deconstructs ongoing transitional themes. Johnson has always insisted there must be tension between what is signified and what is non-identifiable or what will be transformed - in the sense that certain elements are embedded in a realm where discomfort, irony, change of meaning and uncertainty intercept. Indeed, with exhibition even the catalogue is an ongoing work and will not be completely designed until after the exhibition opens and is photographed.

The installation of this exhibition has been made possible by two of Johnson's former students: Nate Morgan and Vince Troia. In Sweden, via Skype (the web based video/phone conferencing service), Johnson has orchestrated the installation, directing from the computer screen like Big Brother. His ubiquitous

face, so reminiscent of his self-portrait heads/simulacra/signifiers is a mocking chilling reminder from the other side of the world that this exhibition must move forward. During the run of the exhibition, university students will maintain this sense of urgency as they assemble ongoing work, in turn, taking their instructions from the omnipresent artist via Morgan & Troia.

If this exhibition was planned to permit Johnson greater license to experiment, it should not in any way detract from the exacting craft in Johnson's work. He is a skilled practitioner, equally adroit with stone carving, mold making, clay and plaster work and vacuum mold fabrication. However, his critical ruminations will focus not on craft, but will be oriented towards the secrecy of his theoretical issues. Still, much is revealed in the processes employed, which is why it is particularly germane to those eager to learn how an artist works and how process and conceptuality are inextricably linked.

The result is that Johnson is taking on work that more openly confronts issues of what he calls "his own state of cultural negotiations." He wants to construct a "newly defined space and sense of identity."

*"This feeling of emptiness and longing for authenticity emerges and leads to a state of being rooted away from a sense of belonging."*

– Chido Johnson

Johnson is no longer looking to belong in a particular place. Living a hybrid existence makes establishing permanency impossible. Rather, through his work, he constructs ideological, often elliptical (cryptic) constructions, which explore the state of being (identity) and its accompanying sense of authenticity (uniqueness). Staying in one place all one's life one doesn't notice changes. Separate oneself from one's locale of origin for any length of time and one only sees the amendments of transformation. One ceases to belong to that place. The Zimbabwe of Johnson's childhood no longer exists and can never exist again.

– Dick Goody, 2008





*i swallowed two seeds*

plastic flowers (flame lily and yellow rose),  
wooden oval mirror frame, 2008






didn't your  
mama  
tell  
you not to  
do that!



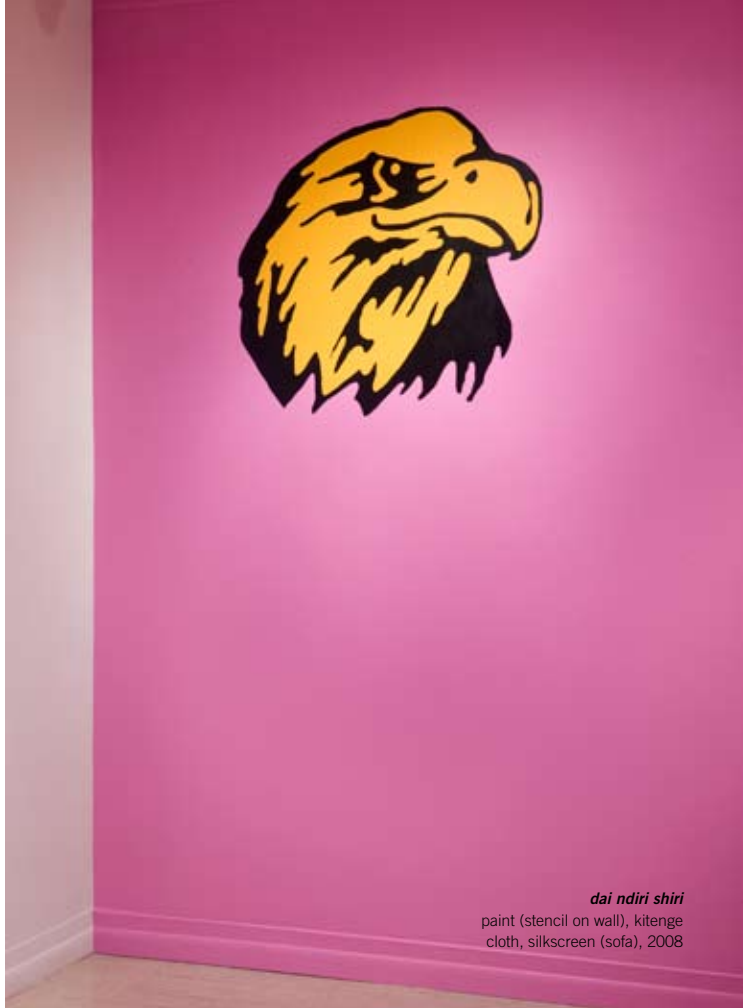
The Flame Lily is the national flower of Zimbabwe and the Rose is the official floral emblem of the United States of America. The "pepto bismol" pink painted walls reference the domestic interior while making a pun of "stomaching" the sentiments.







***buck.it***  
carved mahogany,  
home depot buckets,  
wire and beads, 2008



***dai ndiri shiri***  
paint (stencil on wall), kitenge  
cloth, silkscreen (sofa), 2008



***Dai ndiri shiri*** is taken from a song by Patrick Mkwamba featured with the The Four Brothers, from the 1983 recorded album *Viva! Zimbabwe*.

The Shona lyrics “Dai ndiri shiri ndaenda kunamai wangu,” translates into English as “if i was a bird i would fly back to my mother.”

Eagle in flight taken in Zambia.



Zimbabwean President Mugabe wearing a chitenge (more commonly known as “kitenge” in Swahili) shirt with prints of his portrait during the 2008 presidential elections.



On the left, Kitenge cloth with portrait prints of U.S.A. President Bush from his Dar Ras Salaam vist in Tanzania in 2008.



*dai ndiri shiri*  
paint (stencil on wall), kitenge cloth,  
silkscreen (sofa), 2008



***playball***  
cast foam, gymn ball net, hook, sound, dirt, 2008





Sound recording for  
*playball* of one of the  
heads being kicked in  
the room.

***smile***

carved ebony, ikea table,  
video, 2008

Video of dremel carving  
face into figure while  
wearing surgical gloves  
imposing a happy face.





**t.b.o.b.** (the birth of bob)

cast plastic, bowls, water, paint, digital painting on canvas, 2008

In the foreground the digital painting on Canvas is a copy of Botticelli's *The Birth of the Venus*, which all the subjects are gessoed over and the landscape is diagrammatically outlined to assume the rest of the landscape. Thus emphasizing the political space.



***i want to be a cowboy***

carved greek marble, faux fur,  
felt hat, 2008

The faux fur is cut to mimic the outline of the map of the city of Almeria, Spain, where the first "spaghetti western" movies with Clint Eastwood were filmed. It also is to reference a "shag carpet" in a cheap motel with a bedside table, while being the cowboy as well, on the mountain range peering down to the prairie.







*i want to be a cowboy* (detail)

*i believe I can fly*  
cast cement and mixed medium  
installation, 2008





***I believe I can fly*** installed in random locations in Detroit, outside the gallery space.



***I believe I can fly***  
detail of installation in gallery.

**hembe**

kitenge cloth, silkscreen, 2008

"hembe" in Shona means shirt. This piece is an extension from *dai ndiri shiri*, influenced by nationalistic shirts normally worn on political events.



I would like to acknowledge my friends and family for their continued support in my research and my work. Thank you to Kurt Greene and Kevin Beasley for their assistance in casting, recording, and installing many of the works. And most importantly, the completion of works and their installation would not have been accomplished in time for this exhibition without the tireless and dedicated efforts of Nate Morgan and Vince Traio. My sincere and humble gratitude to them.



Last night with Nate and Vince before leaving for Europe.

# domestified angst : second recording

## projects by chido johnson

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Oakland University Art Gallery apologizes for any inaccuracies or omissions.



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