

# BODY AS ARCHIVE: RE-IMAGINATION OF IDENTITIES WITHIN CONTEMPORARY PRACTICES THROUGH THE LENS OF THE PERFORMING (BLACK) AFRICAN FEMALE BODY

Fungai Marima

## ABSTRACT

This paper explores themes around the performing body in terms of how it relates and responds to physical and emotional landscapes. It analyses key themes on identity, trauma, and the body as archive, while also looking at ways in which contemporary practices of using the body as a material can be understood as a gestural language to assist in the re-imagination of identities, through the act of imprinting, marking, and performing.

## INTRODUCTION

Through the exploration of contemporary practices within printmaking processes, the paper focuses on ideas and methods of approaching the body as an archive – utilising the lens of a performing (black) African female body to assist in the re-imagination of identities. In this paper, the artist, Fungai Marima, reflects on four major aspects of her work: her themes, her process (while referencing the works of Denise Hawrycio), and her two works, *Untitled II (Stay At Home, Save Lives)* and *Passage*. Key texts from psychoanalyst Bessel van der Kolk's *Body Keeps the Score* and Susie Orbach's *Bodies* will assist in expanding the exploration of the key themes of identity, trauma, and the body as archive. The artist's interests lie in the materiality of the body as a tool that engages – a body that can be manipulated and understood through an investigation of the marks it leaves on tangible and intangible material. Her enquiry will focus on the relationship between the corporeal body and its environment and how the body communicates through actions and gestural language, and will explore how the performing black body continues to extend itself into a non-living archive – as evidence of survival – utilising the art of print-making and the printed object.

## THEME: BODY AS ARCHIVE

The body stores memories and information and it understands the world through the senses – touch, sound, taste, sight, and smell. A child learns

how to navigate space, accept love, and learn through gestures of the body. In Henri Focillon's critical essay 'In Praise of Hands' (1989, p.163), he states that 'language, first experienced by the whole body and mimed in the dance, was also formed by hands'. This expresses the core ideas of Marima's exploration of notions of the body as a tool that communicates and stores knowledge.

In an attempt to understand and decipher language, Marima had to relearn what language meant to her, which meant going back to



Figure 1

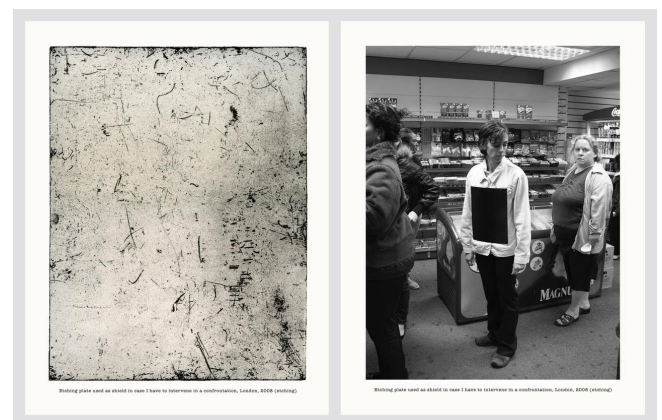


Figure 2

### Figure Titles and Information

Figure1: *Untitled II* by Fungai Marima: Body impressions on glass doors, digital prints on Kodak metallic paper  
 Figure2: *Etching Plate as Shield (Intervene)* by Denise Hawrycio, 28 x 32 cm Hand printed on Magnani Pescia and Digital Papers, 2009.

'primitive' modes of communication by exploring gesture and movement as a process of enquiry and investigation. This relearning involved revealing these movements through body impressions on doors, zinc plates for etching, and using photography as a process of documenting a moment in time. The artist was interested in visualising a gestural language that revealed often silenced or ignored issues within contemporary culture and practices: issues around the identity, trauma, visibility, and invisibility of the black (African) female body. Marima, therefore, began investigating these themes through the manipulation of the body as a material.

By focusing on the materiality of the body, a distance was created that allowed her to zoom in on her own body (skin) to reveal her own marks and experiences as a girl who was born in Zimbabwe and became a woman in the Western landscape. She often thought about her displacement, finding a home in a foreign land, and the effects of realising the meaning of one's blackness in a Western society. She was interested in exploring these experiences and how the body remembered aspects of her childhood, loss of memory, and societal pressures that were thrust onto her body as a black woman. 'Knowing from the inside', a term coined by anthropologist Tim Ingold, investigates the process of understanding as a process that can be accessed if 'experienced'. Marima decided to push the boundaries of printmaking by imprinting her own body onto various materials, to understand, re-experience, reveal, and expose the hidden vestiges of the body's archive. This is achieved not by a passive body, but rather by a body that is understood through 'activity'. Pathisa Nyathi, a Zimbabwean writer, states that African language and culture are understood and produced through 'activities' and actions, and people's thoughts, ideas, and worldview are formed by understanding the actions of the body.

## PROCESS PRINT AND PERFORMANCE

By turning action into material, Marima began exploring her themes by investigating the parallel relationship between performance and printmaking. The performing body imprints itself in a tangible and intangible way. Printmaking relies on the imprint of an image or material, and it engages the artist in the process of image-making and the audience with the printed object. In exploring performance in printmaking, Marima was also interested in visualising these imprints as a documentation of the process and as evidence of a moment in time.

In *Stay at Home, Save Lives*, Marima revealed the repetitive engagement of the body with its domestic environment, and the rise in cases of domestic violence and abuse during the first lockdown. The artist's focus was on the relationship between the body and its domestic environment, especially at a time when we had no choice



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

### Figure Titles and Information

- Figure 3: *Etching Plate as Shield (Walking)* by Denise Hawrycio, 28 x 32 cm Hand printed on Magnani Pescia and Digital Papers, 2009.  
 Figure 4: *Etching Plate as Shield (Stepping)* by Denise Hawrycio, 28 x 32 cm Hand printed on Magnani Pescia and Digital Papers, 2009.  
 Figure 5: *Passage* by Fungai Marima (2022) Etching 194 x 69cm.

but to live and work in these spaces. The issues that arose during this time, to Marima, felt untraceable – as if they would get lost in materials that were less tactile and visceral; we had been reduced to relying on digital information, without physical communication with each other. Henri Focillon highlights this void in 'In Praise of Hands', where he states, 'Knowledge of the world demands a kind of tactile flair... where neither sight nor mind can conduct alone'.

To find new ways of communicating and to visualise the effects of violence physically and emotionally, Marima made body impressions on glass doors. Interested in exploring the relationship between the threshold of the body (skin) and the threshold of a home (door), she applied Vaseline on her body and made repetitive marks on these doors, in a dark quiet room, through which traces of the body were revealed using talcum powder. The results of these actions were documented through film and photography that was inspired by Ana Mendieta's 'Silueta Series', to reveal the vestiges of what could be a gestural language of protest and violence.

Through the process of making and thinking about the body as a material that engages and stores information, Marima was influenced by how the lockdown heightened the visibility and invisibility of black bodies through international and domestic violence and abuse, and how this impacted personal and collective narratives and identities.

In a similar vein, Marima's practice was inspired by *Etching Plate as Shield*, a series of etchings and photographs by Canadian/British artist Denise Hawrysió. Hawrysió's work contributes to a re-imagination of printmaking methods, participates in a social engagement with its environment, and highlights themes of displacement, identity, and the female body while making the invisible visible.

The artworks referenced the 'indexical present' in the location of killings of young people in South London in 2009 and reveal a clear juxtaposition between how people in positions of power responded to these killings and the everyday reality for the people who live in this environment.

In an interview with Marima, Denise Hawrysió mentioned the term 'lay bare the signifier' (Marima, interview with Hawrysió, 2022, the signifier being the body and the etching plate a catalyst to expose the invisible through engagement. Documentation of the engagement allows the viewer to access a moment in time. *Etching Plate as Shield* touches on these ideas of action and engagement, exploring innovative ways of making, and highlighting contemporary issues through what Gary Michael Dault calls 'social printmaking' – how the body interacts or engages with its environment, in terms of which Hawrysió's works are not nouns 'but verbs' (Dault, 2012, p.4). Hawrysió's series of works respond to events that happen in space; she classifies a moment through text and creates an

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abstract language that proposes another way of understanding and contemplating matters of society through the printed object. Hawrysiw gives room for the viewer to respond instinctively to the printed object through her use of text to locate the work.

The process of making, the subject, context, and printed object are all equally important. Ian Wallace, when discussing Denise Hawrysiw's work in his article, 'Imprint of Engagement and Indifference', also highlights that 'the imagery is not independent of the method by which it was generated. In fact, it clings to it.'

*Stay Home, Save Lives* and *Etching Plate as Shield* are both works that focus heavily on the process of making and the engagement of the body with various materials. Additionally, the works also focus on the documentation of the production of the work to create an archive that could potentially live beyond the corporeal body. They create spaces where the body can extend itself as a representation of a moment in time, a strand that Marima has continued in her later work.

## **PASSAGE**

*Passage* represents the passing of age and time, a ritual, a journey made by those who came before the artist, and journeying into the unknown alone. *Passage* is made from a large zinc plate the size of the artist, coated with an acid resist soft ground, on which the artist lies and makes impressions of her full-length body – including her hair, lightly dusted in chalk that was applied by hands in black gloves. The artist's hair is rolled through large etching press rollers that apply pressure to make an impression of the hair onto the plate. As the process is documented through film, the artist's eyes are fixed into the aperture of the camera, staring while the press moves. The plate is then submerged in an acid bath that bites into the plate and reveals the marks of the body. The large plate is then inked and wiped, almost as a ritual of preparing, performing, and cleansing. The printed image acts as evidence, as an 'indexical mark' of a moment in time.

*Passage*, a body of work in printed form of an etching and a video piece, was the artist's attempt to see herself represented in contemporary printmaking. The African body has for many centuries been observed under the Western gaze; it has been over-identified and over-analysed, from Sarah Baartman to George Floyd. Koyo Kouoh states in *Body Talk* that the black body 'carries a long history of multiple projections'<sup>5</sup>. As such, Marima wanted to see herself on her own terms, influenced though not defined by these traumatic events, exploring notions of choice while creating a healing space for herself.

*Passage* addresses many themes of identity with a focus on finding self in the oversaturated plain in which the body is visible yet invisible – a focus on a body that recognises its past and present but is hopefully journeying into the unknown and has learnt to adapt to the landscape in which it finds itself.

This process of making has been a profound experience for Marima:

This work does not only live in the documentation, as a film or as evidence of the moment in printed form, but it is a work that was prepared for physically and spiritually. I permitted myself to be a tool that I have resisted being, based on cultural perceptions of the black African female body. To then adapt and use that same body as a place that allowed me to heal from these perceptions, was liberating. (Marima, 2022)

I was interested in the dialogue I was to have with myself while the camera was documenting these moments. I had not made any rules for myself apart from preparing the materials that were needed for the work, and I gave myself up as much as I possibly could to the making, to the collaboration of multiple hands and eyes that were going to encounter my body. I was completely taken over by the process of becoming a tool that 'inscribes' itself onto a cold, gold-like material, letting myself go to other people in the studio to roll me through a press, documenting the process – I was taken aback by the stillness of the print studio, the moment I placed myself onto the plate.

Marima relates her process of making to something Orbach described: 'Individuals, wherever they are from, inscribe their corporeality to express the cultural moment. The way they personally enact this through their body, their hair, their walk.... signals the way they wish to be seen and (re) designated' .

Following this analysis by Orbach, Passage proposes a (re)designation, a (re)imagination of self to understand and propose questions to the cultural moment on how the black African body is perceived and understood, as it 'inscribes' itself as both an archive and an archival material. The film documents a moment in time as the body imprints itself onto a surface that responds and reacts to this interaction, to then create a printed object which acts as evidence of survival, as well as a map of journeying through fears driven by past traumas – while simultaneously releasing them in an act of ritual.

As mentioned in *Body Talk*, the printed object represents 'marks of beauty, identity, or rites of passage on the bodies of African women' (Kouoh, 2015, p.16).

The printmaking process enabled Marima to explore these ideas of ritual in her approach to making, preparing, and accessing a visual representation of her interests and themes.

## CONCLUSION

The artist's exploration of process, impressions, and the engagement of the body is an attempt not to resist, but to provide a space in which contemplation and conversations about identity and personal and collective trauma can be addressed and visualised. The last few years since the first lockdown have highlighted several cultural,

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racial, and gendered injustices through issues such as domestic violence and abuse and the Black Lives Matter movement. Mental health issues increased during lockdown and the 'new' normal was not built for the ordinary person as our lives, which once had a focus on community, sharing, and physical interaction, were reduced to remote learning, working, and socialising. The human being – a social creature – had to learn and forcefully adapt to isolation. In this paper, Marima attempted to listen to the body's needs, to distract the mind – just for a short while – and experience the world in a more visceral and tactile manner. In this way, we are given a moment to pause and allow ourselves to be vulnerable, push the boundaries of the body, and challenge and question societal norms that restrict and confine us. The artist's personal experiences have influenced these ideas, in which her own lack of pause meant that she was not fully experiencing the world on her terms, as she lived in a world where flashbacks of abuse lingered in her body and mind and words were a trigger. She did not quite know how to deal with these issues until she decided to face the memories head on and that meant looking into herself. Her works were therapy. They involved engagement; they involved pushing through fears and judgement, and they allowed her to journey into the unknown. The performing (black) African body in this case has gone back to accessing its 'worn-out knowledge' for answers, with a final statement that resonates with Marima: "Your body has things to say," I said back to myself. "I will try to listen" (Kolk, 2014, p.271).

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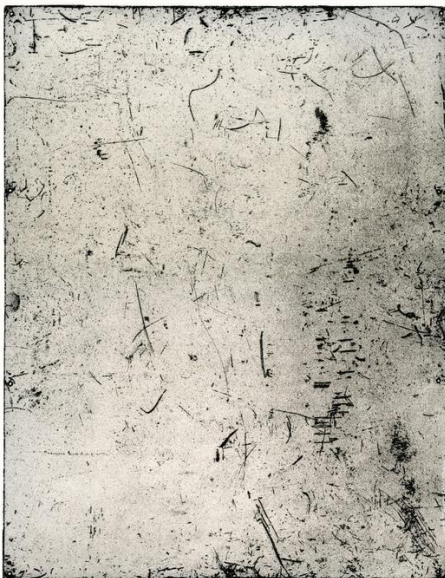
## **AUTHOR**

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Fungai Marima is a multi-media artist who was born in Zimbabwe and currently is based in London. Often self-reflective her work investigates themes of displacement, memory, trauma and the female body, highlighting her Zimbabwean heritage and personal experiences. Fungai has a BA in Fine Art from Havering College and graduated in 2020 with a MA in Printmaking from Camberwell College of Art, UAL. She was selected to be part of the prestigious London Grads Now 2020 exhibition at Saatchi Gallery, London. Also, exhibited works in galleries and fairs nationally including Kings Place, Winns Gallery and Woolwich Contemporary Print Fair. Fungai's work is in private collections across the UK.

IMAGE GALLERY



Etching plate used as shield in case I have to intervene in a confrontation, London, 2008 (etching)

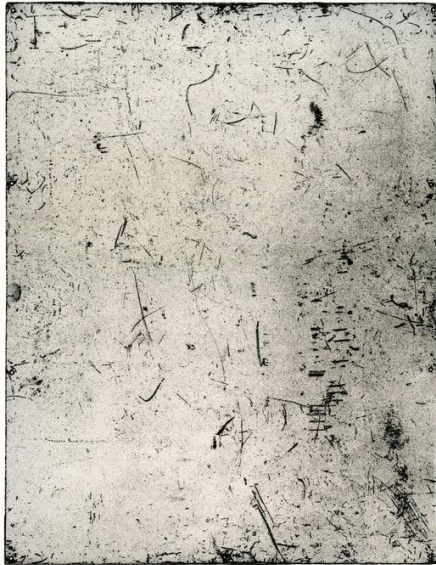


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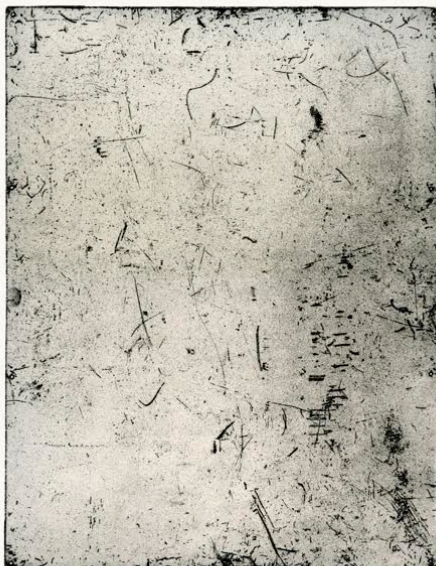




Etching plate used as shield as I walk through Peckham, London, 2008 (photograph)



Etching plate used as shield as I walk through Peckham, London, 2008 (photograph)



Etching plate used as shield in case I accidentally step into rival territory, London, 2008 (photograph)



Etching plate used as shield in case I accidentally step into rival territory, London, 2008 (photograph)

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