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Image:	Yee I-Lann, 2021, <i>Pangkis</i> , a single channel video of performers from the Tagaps Dance Theatre wearing the woven sculpture, '7 Headed Lalandau Hat'. All images courtesy of John Curtin Gallery. Photography by Hunttwo Studio.

About Meniscus

Meniscus is a literary journal, published and supported by the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) with editors from the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand.

The title of the journal was the result of a visit made by two of the editors to the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, where James Turrell's extraordinary installation, 'Within without' (2010), led them to think about how surfaces, curves, tension and openness interact. In particular, they were struck by the way in which the surface of the water features, and the uncertainty of the water's containment, seems to analogise the excitement and anxiety inherent in creative practice, and the delicate balance between possibility and impossibility that is found in much good writing.

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DUE TO INTERNATIONAL SHIPPING DELAYS

Rachel Robertson

First, there are yawning gaps, great slices of a tree trunk as empty pedestals. *iZilo* or *Clan Totem* is the name of the missing exhibition—stuck on route, delayed or lost due to the pandemic. I stand here, a white woman, an immigrant, a person without a clan, staring at the white spaces in a university art gallery. Waiting, as if emptiness itself has a message for me.

Why, of all things, am I back to the blank? The tyranny of the white page, of writing that is not enough. (And the blank look, of loving that is not enough.)

I don't know what sort of objects should be on the empty wooden bases but I do know they form a collaborative work by Andile Dyalvane and Zizipho Poswa, drawing on their 'personal totems'. This I garnered from an advance copy of the catalogue essay. Poswa's work explores memories of the everyday rural village life of the Xhosa people of South Africa: of matriarchs, of women carrying wood or water on their heads, and of their totems. This is what the installation is about, but what it will look like, I have no idea. I don't even know if it will arrive before the exhibition closes.

If I had a totem animal, I think it would be mouse or squirrel, something small and unimpressive but reliable. If I could choose a totem animal, it would be the elephant, an animal I have loved since I was a young child. Everything about an elephant is wondrous (size, intelligence, emotional life, memory), but it is the folded skin on their trunk and legs that I find so deeply moving. Once, when I visited the Perth zoo with my son, Tricia the elephant was taking her walk and passed within a metre of us. I was thrilled to be so close to her while at the same time saddened at the life she has. Of course, I couldn't have an elephant totem because

my ancestors are Celtic on one side and European Jews on the other, so perhaps a squirrel is more likely.

I am smiling now, thinking this, because I am imagining talking about animal totems to my parents and their reaction (horrified dismay perhaps). I would use the phrase ‘turning over in their graves’ except that they were both cremated. Thinking fondly of my dead parents, I walk into the next room of the gallery, see blue lace, crafted by another South African artist.

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Three weeks later, I am back at the exhibition because *Clan Totem* has arrived. Six ceramic pieces sit on the tree trunks, bringing this shadowy gallery alive. Dyalvane’s works are ‘gestures of “Nkwakhwa” or the mole snake’. Poswa’s are ‘Ndlovu’—what we know as the elephant, her clan’s totem. Three ceramic urns—one blue, one white, one yellow—each have a carved wooden elephant head piece, made by Friday Jibu of Malawi. The wood is painted ebony-black, the chisel marks visible, not imitating elephant hide, but still visceral, full of life somehow. I know that I shouldn’t touch the wood, but I do, and it feels warm (though it can’t be warm in this cool gallery). The bright blue urn has circles imprinted on the ceramic and a single trickle of yellow paint. Rising out of this urn is a trunk, two tusks and a shape like the top of an elephant’s head. No eyes and no ears, although the white urn sprouts ears and trunk, and the yellow one a trunk and some strange knobby things. These are nothing like elephants and yet everything like them. They feel wild but also domestic; dense but animated. I see now how the works gesture to dried cow dung and to rural women carrying weighty burdens on their heads. I read in the printed catalogue that when discussing her own work, Poswa refers to an African proverb: ‘a trunk that’s never too heavy for an elephant to carry’.

I don’t entirely know why it is I am so drawn to these works. The empty space intrigued me, the idea of a totem beguiled me, and now

these not-elephant ceramics haunt me as I walk back to my office. Was it a coincidence that I thought about elephants before I saw these works, or a clever configuration of the gallery space that summoned them? In many ways the elephant epitomises presence, the opposite of blank space and emptiness. It seems to represent strength, power and wisdom. And to me, the elephant also signifies grief and compassion. It is not always possible, but we must live the idea that our burdens, so much a part of us, are never too heavy to carry.

Inspired by Andile Dyalvane and Zizopho Poswa, *iZilo (Clan Totems)*, 2021, especially Zizopho Poswa, *Gengesi*, 2021, glazed terracotta, with carved stone pine timber by Friday Jibu, 70 x 62 x 122 cm.

Quotes are from Indian Ocean Craft Triennial 2021, *Curiosity and Rituals of the Everyday*, exhibition catalogue.