

art | southafrica

VOL 09 | ISSUE 01 | SPRING 2010

OPINIONS THAT MATTER



ISSN 1684-6133

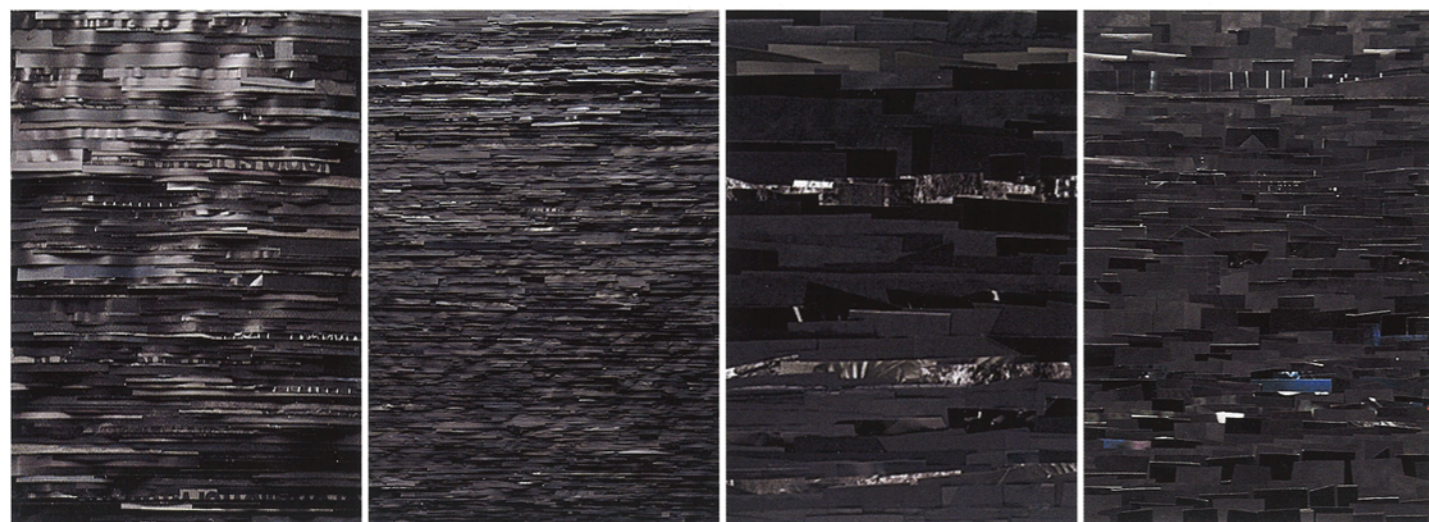


9 771684 613121

ZAR 95 VAT INCLUSIVE

Black Out

Malagasy artist Joël Andrianomearisoa is known for his meandering practice that trails through media and fixates for transient periods of time on particular materials and modes of presentation. By **Anthea Buys**



LEFT – RIGHT *Papier noir* series, 2008, collage on canvas with mixed black papers, left: 30 x 30 cm, middle left: 130 x 197 cm, middle right: 48 x 32 cm, right: 80 x 60 cm
OPPOSITE Joël Andrianomearisoa in front of his collage with money installation *Tres Cher*, 2010. Photo: John Hodgkiss

An open-top bakkie pulls up next to the menagerie of wire animals that have come to roost for the night in the Johannesburg Goodman Gallery's parking lot. It is late in the highveld winter afternoon, and the bakkie is delivering a bubble-wrapped and framed panel of black buttons against matte black cloth, a work completed by Malagasy artist Joël Andrianomearisoa just in time for the hanging of the Goodman's annual *Winter Show*. Behind the murkiness of the bubble-wrap, the buttons glimmer with deep purple and green as the work is hauled off the bakkie and into the gallery. Black is never simply black. This is what Andrianomearisoa, who is known for producing works using only black materials, likes about it.

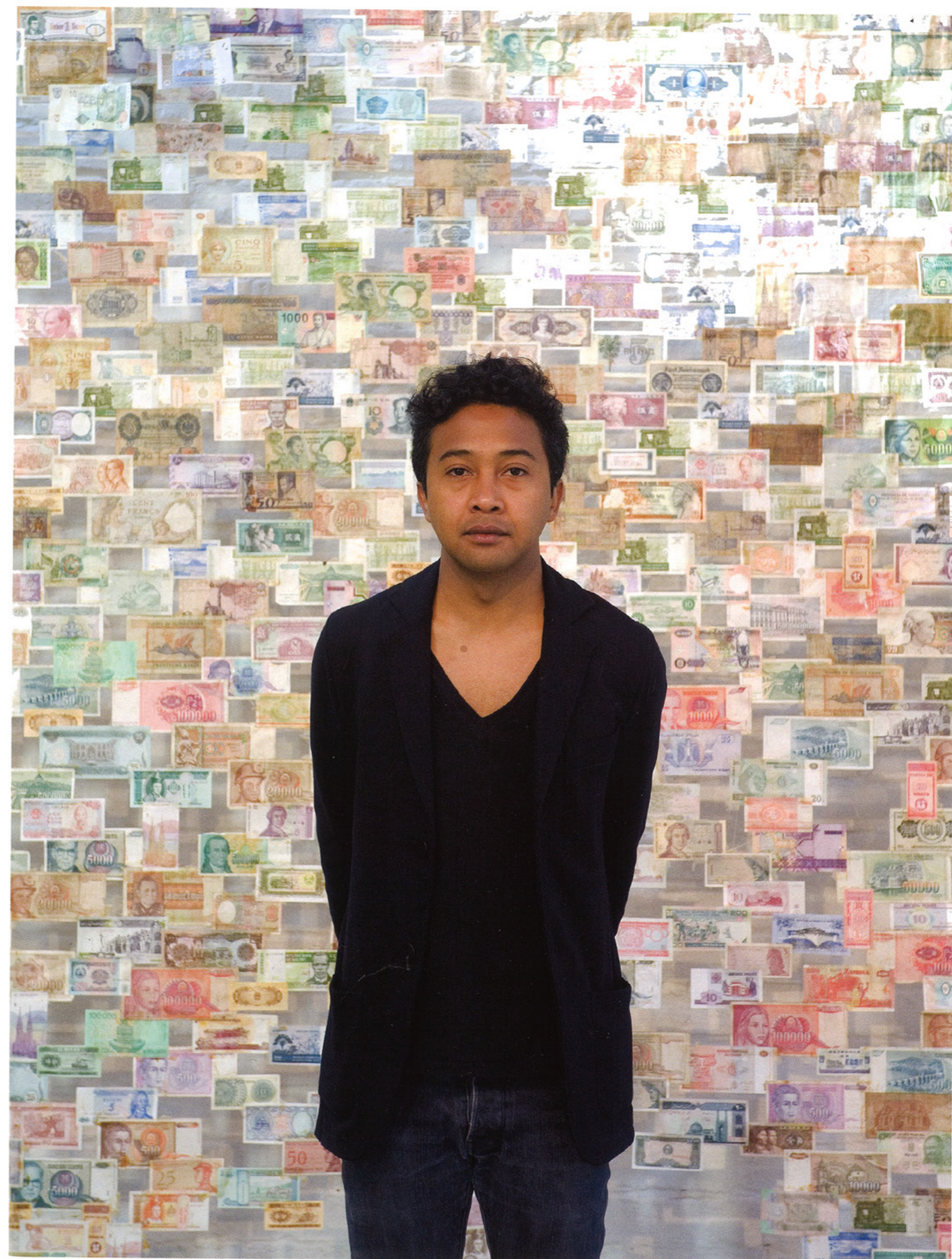
"You can write endless pages of stories about black," he said earlier that day, as he propped himself, dressed in black, against a stern office sofa in Liza Essers' bureau. "In Madagascar, if you wear black you are seen as very dramatic. But when you wear black in Paris you are so fashionable, so, so, so pretty. When you wear black in the countryside, you are just a big mistake." Born in Antananarivo in 1977, Andrianomearisoa completed his schooling there before moving to Paris. Once in Paris he studied architecture at the Ecole Spéciale d'Architecture, and wore black. A widely disseminated rumour maintains that Andrianomearisoa entered a fashion design school at the unlikely age of 12. This rumour has had so much purchase that it has even made it into biographies in exhibition catalogues. He clarifies: "There is not even a single art or fashion school in Madagascar! I was always interested in fashion, but not as a fashion designer."

Andrianomearisoa's interest in fashion, like his training in architecture, has been absorbed into his meandering practice as a visual artist, which trails through media fixating for transient periods on a particular material or mode of presentation. In 2006, he devised *Habillé–Deshabillé*, a performance that

approximates a fashion show and debuted in a museum. This performance, hosted by the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, entailed Andrianomearisoa dressing (or rather decorating) an ensemble of five models as they stood at attention in a rectangular court. With 20 minutes to transform the rigid bodies into a work, and an artillery of black materials – including paper, insulation and gaffer tape, fabric, plastic packets, ribbon and rolls of glossy black vinyl – Andrianomearisoa marched around the rectangle, entwining the bodies, adding to and subtracting from their attire, hanging things on and between them. Drawing on the performance conventions of fashion shows, *Habillé–Deshabillé* makes explicit the buried premise of fashion shows, the subjugation of human models, for the 20-minute duration of the fashion show, to a visual order and architecture of meaning devised by a single visionary.

This work neatly summarises Andrianomearisoa's sense of the connection between textiles and architecture. Soft materials articulate space and provide enclosures for bodies as much as concrete and steel does. "With textiles you have a structure – an architecture – in the way they hang and move and are themselves constructed," Andrianomearisoa says. "They lack the hardness of other architectural materials, but they are still architectural."

Memory Box and *The Doors 5*, two installations produced in 2007 demonstrate this connection fairly literally. The rigid walls of *Memory Box*, a black cubicle 2.5 metres high and wide, are completely covered in small, frayed leaves of black fabric. *The Doors 5*, Andrianomearisoa's installation for the exhibition *Africa Remix* at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 2007, features the same sort of rigid structure tempered by a soft surface. In this work, a black plywood wall is covered with a screen woven from thick strands of black cotton. Halfway down, the screen unravels and the fabric





TOP *Tap 2*, 2007, mixed materials, 100 x 100 cm **OPPOSITE TOP** *Tres Cher*, 2010, collage with money, 500 x 300 cm **OPPOSITE MIDDLE** *Papier cul*, 2008, collage on canvas with magazine cuttings, 100 x 73 cm; *Papier cul (Triptych)*, 2008, collage on paper with magazine cuttings, 35 x 27 cm each **OPPOSITE BOTTOM** *Papier cul*, 2008, collage on paper with magazine cuttings, 80 x 60 cm; *Papier cul*, 2008, collage on paper with magazine cuttings, 55 x 46 cm; *Papier cigarette*, 2008, collage on canvas with cigarette papers, 46 x 38 cm; *Papier alu*, 2008, collage on canvas with cigarettes box aluminium papers, 41 x 33 cm. Photos: Joël Andrianomearisoa

“There is not enough sensual knowledge,” he muses. “We need more sensual awareness of surfaces, and the world.”

strips dangle to the ground. This mitigation of hardness with softness reflects something of Andrianomearisoa’s personal philosophy and his own resistance to the rigidity of an art world that prescribes genres and themes, and values aesthetic consistency.

“There is not enough sensual knowledge,” he muses. “We need more sensual awareness of surfaces, and the world. And at the beginning of the story is always your body.”

Black fabric is only one of countless stops along Andrianomearisoa’s tour through the universe of surfaces and substances. He has made similar works with strips of paper and plastic, has worked in an entirely different vein in video and photography and has devised performance pieces derived from theatre conventions. It is nearly impossible to pin him down, to commit his work to a particular section of the museum or library. The ideological structure on which he hangs this precariously irregular practice is the coincidence in time of himself, some material and an audience. Like conversational utterances, his works are highly contingent encounters between himself and someone else. To borrow a metaphor from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, each one is “a fold in the immense fabric of language”.¹

In conversation, Andrianomearisoa describes this process as if his work only ever comes about entirely fortuitously: “At 3pm, maybe a little before, maybe a little in the future, I am going to make something using this paper, this light, this money, this picture, which is for you and your background and which comes from me and my background.”

For *Tres Cher* (2010), the work he contributed to the Goodman Gallery’s blockbuster exhibition *In Context*, Andrianomearisoa found himself in possession of foreign currency and in South Africa.

“I thought, ‘I have money, I have paper, and now I have to try and make some kind of an architecture with it,’” he explains. The work is a giant,

layered curtain made from banknotes in different currencies. Suspended from the ceiling of the exhibition space, it seems to replace the wall behind it while retaining the partial transparency and irresolution of a building under construction. The title refers to the ascription of value – monetary or esoteric – to works of art, but also, more literally, to the wealth amassed in order to make the work in the first place.

Andrianomearisoa, who has worked with the Goodman Gallery since 2008, has a solo show scheduled for September this year at their Johannesburg project space. For now, he plans to continue working with paper. With surprising foresight for an artist whose work seems very much to happen to him, he envisages that the show will consist of three installations. In the first, he reveals, he will use only black paper and light. In the second, he will introduce a range of different kinds of paper. The third installation will be constructed around images printed on paper. There is no theme; there is not even a title at this stage (early July). There is only the material and some time to work through its vagaries.

Beyond September, however, very little is certain for Andrianomearisoa. He is reluctant even to pledge himself to life as an artist. “I don’t want to say I am a real artist,” he states. “Well, I am – but I have a different vision. When you are cooking you have to smell, you have to taste all the different ingredients... It’s like that. Although today I am an artist, tomorrow I may be something completely different.”

Anthea Buys is an independent critic and a Research Fellow in the University of Johannesburg’s Research Centre Visual Identities in Art and Design

NOTES

1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence’, in *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McLeary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p.42.

