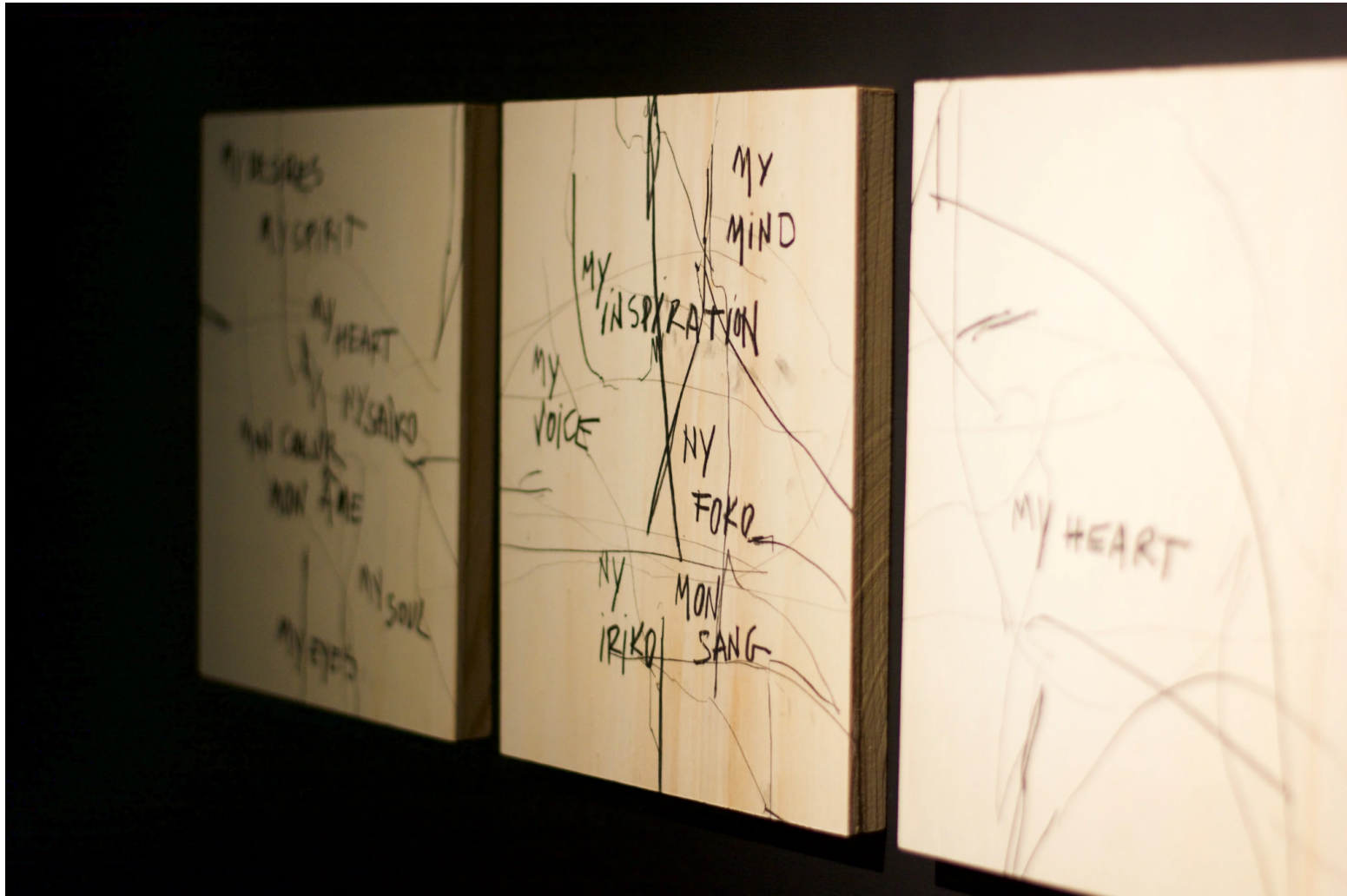


EXHIBITION

## Sights and smells of Madagascar: Art that blurs boundaries between disciplines



📷 Poetic scribbles on wood. Image: courtesy of gallery

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A chat with Malagasy artist Joël Andrianomearisoa about his sartorially inclined installation at Church Projects in Cape Town.

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**C**hurch Projects, an [art space on Church Street](https://www.churchprojects.co.za/), (<https://www.churchprojects.co.za/>). Cape

Town, could be mistaken for an upmarket trendy boutique. A rack of clothing — minimalist ivory-coloured shirts, dungarees, tunics, and fabric offcuts — lines the edge of the minuscule gallery. Closer inspection reveals the garments to form part of an exhibition, *My heart belongs to the other* (<https://www.churchprojects.co.za/my-heart-belongs-to-the-other>), by Malagasy artist Joël Andrianomearisoa.

On view until 22 April, the installation began as a conversation between the artist and Hoosein Mahomed, who co-founded Church Projects with Shelleen Maharaj. The exhibition coincides with another presentation by the artist, *The Five Continents of all Our Desires* (<https://zeitzmocaa.museum/exhibition/exhibitor-andrianomearisoa-the-five-continents-of-all-our-desires/>), at the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (Mocaa).

Situated in the museum's atrium, the large flowing installation made from black silk paper and suspended from the ceiling, is an abstract and poetic reflection on land masses and human migration.



Portrait of Joël Andrianomearisoa by Iac Júnior. Image: courtesy of Zeitz MOCAA

While the installation at Zeitz Mocaa is immense and towering, the artist's solo exhibition at Church Projects feels understated — more inward and exploratory. This approach is in line with the sensibility of the space. Church Projects is an unconventional art space — an almost corridor-size space with two floors that focuses on experimentation and invites both emerging and established artists to test boundaries.

Interested in art objects as well as transient art forms such as performances, Church Projects' founders encourage interventions that are immersive and daring.

Andrianomearisoa engages a wide range of styles and materials to create alluring forms; over the years, these have included synthetic flowers, paint, neon, and paper. His works have inhabited gallery spaces and museums globally, in Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Spain, Japan, Benin and South Africa, among others.

In 2019, Andrianomearisoa represented his birth country in its inaugural participation at the 58th Venice Biennale – a highly anticipated event in the international art scene, which, in that year, boasted a total of 90 national pavilions.



*Sound and light installation for the exhibition, MY HEART BELONGS TO THE OTHER, 2023, Church Projects, Cape Town. Image: courtesy of the gallery*

Andrianomearisoa sought to pay tribute to the land through an installation that used densely packed black paper, hung from the ceiling, to reimagine the Ilafy Palace, which was the secondary residence of King Radama II of Madagascar. His reign coincided with the pivotal period of reopening Madagascar to European influence.

Andrianomearisoa is no stranger to the South African art scene; he has taken part in solo and group exhibitions in Cape Town and Johannesburg over a period spanning two decades, beginning with the monumental Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent, an exhibition that featured work of over 70 artists from 23 countries across the continent, travelling across Europe and landing at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 2007.

In “*My heart belongs to the other*” – which he describes as a slight diversion from the more epic installation such as the one at Zeitz Moca – Andrianomearisoa uses textiles, light, sound and smell to create an immersive environment that conveys the liveliness foundational to his practice as he reflects on land, movement, migration and forms of othering.

The exhibition continues Andrianomearisoa’s exploration of Madagascar, which features often as the understructure of his conceptual inquiry. In this instance, he is interested in presenting clues and traces that make it possible for South African audiences, for whom the country is little known, to explore Madagascar.

“The show is not a statement – sometimes in my work I’ll write something very clear as a statement – but with this exhibition, I’m insisting on the experimental... everything is a suggestion. Everything is in between but also on the edge,” he says from Paris, over Zoom. He talks fast and excitedly but with clarity. He is every bit as graceful as the large draping silk paper constructions for which he is known.

The exhibition is introduced with a list of words that engender ideas he is interested in teasing out in relation to his identity, love, life, joy. The words are “a way to not only talk about the land but also about the idea of being human”, he explains.

Each word is represented by a specific item of clothing, creating a game where a costume becomes a representation of the type of person who might wear it. This kind of playful and gestural approach to material underlies his practice, through which he blurs disciplinary boundaries.

In 2010, he initiated a project called *Sentimental Products*, creating ephemera including household objects and collectible trinkets such as maps, tote bags and stickers. The project challenges clear definitions and distinctions between high art, fashion, and design. Often, his work is filled with non-representational associations that create new connections.

In the upstairs area of Church Projects, Andrianomearisoa charts the geography of Madagascar through a series of lyrical sketches — my mind, my inspiration, my heart, my eyes, my soul; these words, scribbled on wood, function as waves of thoughts, meditating on how land shapes identity.

Bars of fluorescent light fixed to the walls are visible through a vertical aperture and are overlaid with a dissonant song articulating the words listed on the window of the gallery entrance. A strong damp smell fills the room, adding a layer of olfactory texture to the exhibition.



Andrianomearisoa approached a local street vendor to create a scent that represents the humidity of his home country, Madagascar.

“The show is very intimate. It’s very private and you have more sensations to engage,” he observes.



*Layers of ivory-coloured garments draped over a rail in a textile installation, Church Projects, Cape Town. Image: courtesy of the gallery*



*Church Projects, Church Street, Cape Town. Image: courtesy of the gallery.*

Within his practice, Andrianomearisoa can tactfully shift scales, both in relation to the size of the work as well as the ideas in question, often beginning with very private and intimate objects (clothes, drawings and minuscule sentimental products), growing them into larger visions or concepts (large-scale installations that reflect on geopolitics).

He is interested in the emotional aspect of things.

“I talk about myself and my identity but it’s not pure representation. I’m convinced that identity and culture, of course, comes from flesh and blood, but it also comes from emotion... the nostalgia that you have for a place or maybe the emotion that you can get from some objects, from your family, from history and your experiences.”

The thread that binds Andrianomearisoa’s practice is his deep investment in asking questions that propel discussion and how the personal can be used to speak about the universal. His work traverses boundaries and geographies. At the moment, he is preparing for multiple solo exhibitions across the globe, including in Amsterdam, Lugano and Cotonou.

Against the backdrop of a local art scene that seems stuck in representational painting, Andrianomearisoa’s use of simple materials to create elegant and alluring abstract forms is a breath of fresh air. Methods of play, experimentation and portrayals of tenderness lend the work a sincerity that is difficult to ignore.

DM/ML

*Nkopoleng produced this text as part of an independent journalism development project by African Arts Content focused on the Church Street art node in Cape Town.*

My heart belongs to the other *shows at Church Projects, Cape Town until 22 April.*

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