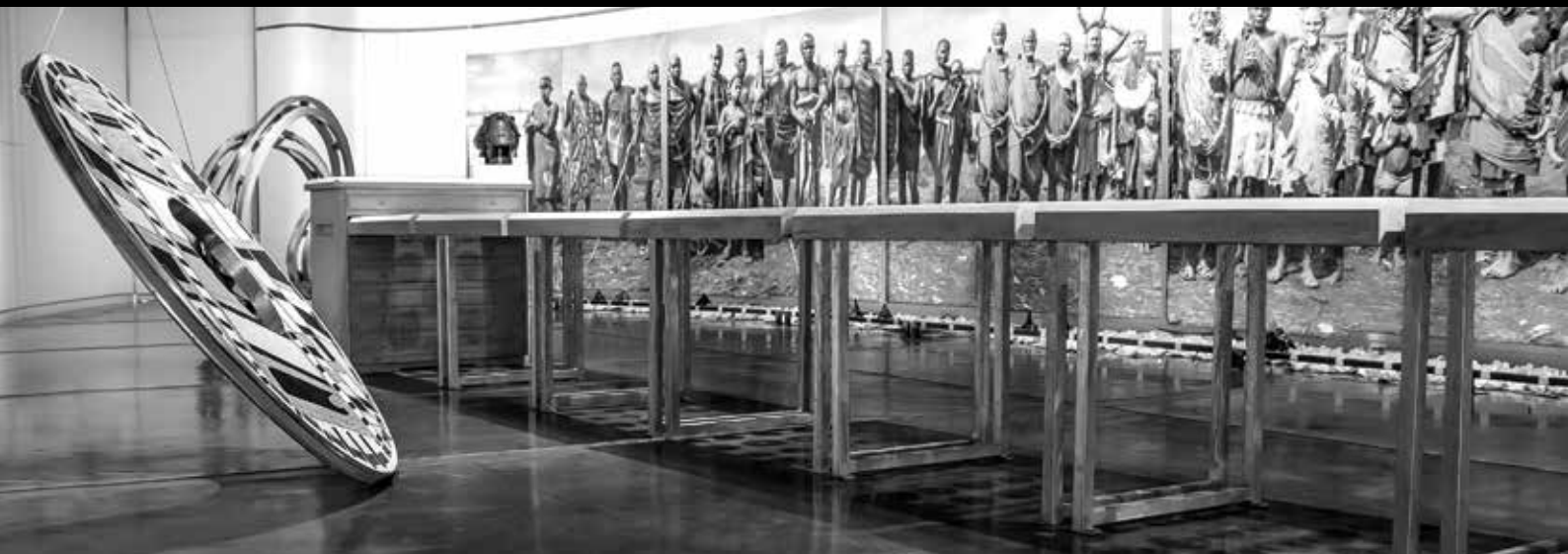


INDEPENDENCE



ROBERT **SLINGSBY**

CURATED BY HAZEL **FRIEDMAN**

EVERARD READ JOHANNESBURG MARCH 2019

ROBERT SLINGSBY

INDEPENDENCE

**DOMINATED BY A RIVER OF CONCRETE STEEL AND GLASS,
THE LIP PLATE CABINET IS A MONUMENT
TO THE DEFINITIVE ARTIFACT OF WOMANHOOD, CONTEMPORARY ART,
AND DEEP-ROOTED TRADITIONS HELD BY COMMUNITIES
IN AFRICA'S OMO VALLEY,
WHERE THE WISDOM OF A SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOOD
AND HERITAGE IS THREATENED BY THE IMPACT
ON CULTURE, LAND AND THE ENVIRONMENT
THROUGH MODERNISATION.**

ROBERT SLINGSBY



TEXT BY

HAZEL FRIEDMAN

To the outsider, the slo-mo serenity of the Omo River Valley, in Southern Ethiopia, is rendered all the more acute by its contrast to the cacophony of a nation hurtling along the highway of modernisation. Stretching to where the Sudanese and Kenyan borders are literally in sight, from a distance the region appears pristinely untouched by any of the accoutrements associated with Ethiopia's industrial revolution. One of the world's most biologically and culturally diverse regions, together with the national parks of neighbouring Lake Turkana into which the river flows, the Lower Omo River Valley provides a biological and paleoanthropic treasure-trove, earning it the status of UNESCO World Heritage site. For centuries it has also served as a conjuncture for communities traversing the region. About 200 000 indigenous people belonging to at least 10 cultural groups, have lived and continue to survive off the earth and river of the Omo basin, as nomadic pastoralists or small-scale farmers. Yet now, the Omo Valley faces inexorable changes to both its topography and inhabitants that are much more than a collision of tradition and technology; they provide a portent of calamity whose repercussions are as global as they are regionally specific.



ZENO, A KARA MAN FROM KORCHO, FISHES USING NATURAL MATERIAL AND HAND MADE TACKLE ALONG THE BANKS OF THE OMO RIVER



INDEPENDENCE A WORK OF IMMENSE COMPLEXITY BOTH HOMAGE AND EPITAPH, BOTH A LAMENT AND AN IMPASSIONED CALL TO ACTION

It is this combustion of forces that forms the fulcrum of Robert Slingsby's InDependence installation - the latest exhibition of this prodigious artist whose oeuvre spans almost half a century. The ambivalent title is self-explanatory: the notion of freedom intertwined with associations of control, even enslavement. It is a work of immense complexity - both homage and epitaph, both a lament and an impassioned call to action. It comprises multiple components hewn as much from the intricacies of science, anthropology, ethnology and history as from Slingsby's personal cultural observations and unfettered creativity.

And to even begin to access the layers of InDependence, we must traverse the landscape that has inspired it: the Omo River Valley in Southern Ethiopia. Much has already been publicised about the construction of Gibe I, II and III - three of Ethiopia's most ambitious

and contentious hydroelectric projects that began in 2006. Funded initially by Italy, followed by the Ethiopia government and now China's Exim Bank, the dams have already been completed in Ethiopia's south-western lowlands. These power stations have replaced the Omo river's natural flow cycle with regulated, man-made cycles that depend on the electricity demands from the Ethiopian grid and its international connections. But less has been documented about the effects of this ambitious project to transform a land described by historian Edward Gibbon as 'the country that slept a thousand years while the world ignored it.

There is an inescapable symbolism associated with dams particularly as shrines to development. They are perceived as pivotal for food security and poverty alleviation, particularly in the context of climate change and water scarcity. They continue to be supported by the

world's most elite and powerful, who are set to reap the benefits from their construction. Yet they are equally challenged by the scientific community, socio-environmental activists and advocacy groups as a means of centralising the supply of another natural resource - water - that is coveted and expropriated by governments and corporations, worldwide.

Defenders of the dams claim that effective hydroelectric management - whereby the river's annual floods are smoothed out and the low flows are increased - will be beneficial to the entire Omo River Basin. They point to the financial and technological advantages they will bring to the region and country as a whole. But is this simply a cynical spin on the currency of power and the power of currency? In their semi-nakedness, subsistence livelihoods, nomadic lifestyles and cultural separateness the tribes inhabiting the Lower Omo Valley along the margins of Southern

INDEPENDENCE INSTALLATION IS A NUANCED, MEDITATIVE REQUIEM ENCAPSULATING THE DEVASTATING CONSEQUENCES WROUGHT BY THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE DAMS IN THE OMO VALLEY

Ethiopia - do not conform comfortably to the narrative of progress. They are caught between conflicting values, precariously straddling the schism between old and new. Their material culture and group identities are predicated on and inextricably tied to the Omo River basin's delicate ecology. In fact their very survival revolves around the annual floods which are needed to cultivate the riverbanks and herd their livestock, not only for the continuation of their agro-pastoralist lifestyles, but for their physical survival and cultural identities, as well.

In order to establish and maintain inter-group boundaries, as well as for aesthetic purposes, the groups inhabiting the river banks, including the Kara, Mursi and Suri, have developed distinct material cultures and rituals, derived from their relationship with the Omo river. These include body modification, scarification and distinctive adornments. But these traditions are now being decimated in a barren, eroded land, segregated by a concrete stairway of water. And the groups that maintained their cultural identities for centuries have become pawns in a ruthless geopolitical game, collateral damage in the neo-colonial war of

economic imperialism waged in the name of progress, profits and power.

In order to provide irrigation for large-scale commercial farming, the dams cut a swathe through the Omo communities' grazing and agricultural pastures. The Chinese have built a road through which to transport their own cargo; the spoils of cash crop, sugar plantations and desiccated forests. Like the rest of the continent, Ethiopia is rich in natural resources, which China's industrialised, fuel-hungry economy desperately needs.

Considered to be one of Africa's top three investors, China also has unfettered access to Ethiopia's natural resources and the negative impacts are already apparent, in terms of their involvement in widespread deforestation, poaching and other disruptions of the valley's biodiversity. Indeed, where there were once trees as far as the eye could see, the bulldozer's claw had already left an indelible scar on the land and its people. The line had been crossed, leaving behind a great rift, with the freeze-frame irrevocably fractured. Of course, there is a counter-narrative to this almost dystopian scenario. Some tribal communities, such as

the Kara, have embraced the picture painted by the apologists of progress: the lure of electricity, schools, accessible health care, employment opportunities. But for many, the reality is at odds with the official propaganda.

To clear the land, the Ethiopian government has embarked on a policy of forced removals to 'model villages', where the traditional communities will have to find alternative livelihoods. Most have been relegated to the status of cheap labour on the heavily guarded cash crop farms - the cotton and sugar plantations - that have started to dominate the landscape. There exists the risk that over ½ million traditional livelihoods have been plunged into crisis and any resistance to resettlement or plantation labour is met with force - a situation that Slingsby likens to modern-day slavery or on the edge of the precipice.

It is within this context that Slingsby's InDependence installation should be approached. It is a meditative, nuanced, requiem encapsulating the devastating impact wrought by the construction of the Omo River

dams. The funereal references to this remote region also serve as eulogies to the loss of species worldwide and the desecration of nature's once-inviolable rights. Yet the installation is infused with preternatural symbols of hope, regeneration and renewal. It comprises multiple components, including a concrete sarcophagus-shaped chest of drawers - a reference to ancient Egyptian tombs - and the structural components of dam building.

Strewn on the gallery floor are over a thousand hand-blown, yellow glass flowers, reminiscent of those in Slingsby's photographs of the Omo Valley. Except that the flowers have been made in China, a reference to the commercialisation and degradation of authenticity within the valley, not to mention China's growing influence in the region. Slingsby's choice of materials and media are crucial to an understanding of the contradictory socio-cultural matrix framing his work.

Glass evokes the fragility of the promise made by proponents of the dam to deliver prosperity to the now-ravaged landscape. The flowers

peppering the region are an invasive species that has adapted to, and flourishes in, the arid conditions in which few other plants can survive. In bloom they form an exuberant carpet of yellow; but their seeds are robust, oval and adorned with sharp, savage, vertical-facing thorns, hence the plant's infamous name of 'Devil Thorn'. Slingsby has cast a series of these thorns in bronze - a medium that imbues them with an imperial permanence; evoking the sense of a perilously 'thorny' future for the remaining inhabitants of the Omo Valley. 'But one shouldn't interpret the forms too literally', Slingsby cautions. 'They are primarily vehicles of thought, catalysts towards greater awareness of ourselves, the planet and our place within it.'

For Slingsby, InDependence does not simply occupy a physical space. It constitutes another, multivalent place of consciousness that demands interaction, navigation and interrogation. The most astonishingly adept component of the installation would be just as appropriately displayed in the Smithsonian Institute as an art gallery.

SLINGSBY EXPOSES THE WAYS IN WHICH INEQUALITY IS MANIPULATED, LEGISLATED AND INSTITUTIONALISED TO SUIT AN ELITE

If we had to allocate an appropriate natural emblem for Slingsby's 50-year creative odyssey it would be a river, at times ebbing or meandering, but mostly swelling in rapid, tumbling torrents that slice through hills and mountains, its currents sweeping up silt, stone and gravel and offloading them along the riverbeds. And there are two rivers that form the principal tributaries of Slingsby's trajectory.

The first is the Orange or Gariiep - South Africa's major river that rises in the Drakensberg, in the Lesotho highlands, where it is known as the Senqu, before snaking westward into the Atlantic Ocean at Alexander Bay, adjoining Namibia. The Gariiep is Slingsby's River Jordan, his initial site of baptism and spiritual crossing into the alternative cosmos of ancient societies. It is a space where, for the artist, water, earth, sky and spirit align. For several decades, the Gariiep's surrounding terrain - particularly the Richtersveld, has served as Slingsby's lexicon, the rocks as his syntax, while the geometric signs and symbols engraved onto their surfaces have become the personal alphabet of his visual dialect.

The second of Slingsby's rivers is Ethiopia's Omo - which he first crossed in 2013. To even begin to understand his navigation, one must embrace these two river lands. They signify the junction from one state to another (both physical and psychic) as well as the re-imagining and intersection of the African diaspora. Both rivers are emblematic of multiple territories and identities - personal and collective, past, present and future. Each waterway represents a channel and a spatial-temporal continuum. Yet simultaneously both are sites of displacement, dispossession and calamity, representing stolen legacies.

Slingsby's research has focussed on the Anthropocene era. This term denotes the geological period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment and the scale of the former's impact on the latter. These can be gleaned from clues extracted and deconstructed from of the ancient layers of the earth. But his voice is not that of the interventionist; it is the more meditative expression of the artist. And his findings have been rendered in paintings, sculptures and in the case of InDependence,

HE CONFRONTS THE ISSUES OF ETHNIC IDENTITY AND IDENTITY POLITICS, PATRONAGE, AND THE DISTORTION OF GOOD GOVERNANCE

installations that comprise intricate, monumental and meticulously detailed homages to indigenous societies and their environment. Firmly grounded in his empirical experience of this world, Slingsby's art is the product of meticulous research into the ancient mark making of indigenous communities who have been marginalised through colonialism, apartheid and - in the case of Ethiopia - economic imperialism.

As with his lifelong focus on ancient societies, in this work, Slingsby exposes the ways in which inequality is manipulated, legislated and institutionalised to suit an elite. He confronts the issues of ethnic identity and identity politics, as well as the attendant problems of patronage, and the distortion of good governance. He also acknowledges the inherent instability of fixing or freezing social categories and their susceptibility to the overlapping dynamics of culture, economics and politics. And through his work

he expresses outrage at the uneven trade-off between history, identity, livelihood and the often bitter fruits of so-called civilisation which, for the poor and the marginalised, often bring servitude, displacement and the status of exiles even within their own lands.

InDependence includes rows of cabinets displaying scores of lip plates. Mursi and Suri women are two of the last groups in Africa to cut the lower lip in order to wear large pottery or wooden lip-plates. This occurs when a girl reaches puberty and serves as symbolic rite of passage from childhood to womanhood. It is therefore a signifier of a new identity. After a year of stretching by inserting increasingly larger plugs, she receives her lip plate fashioned from clay that seals her status as a mature woman, ready for marriage and child-bearing. But not only does the lip-plate signify womanhood; it also represents strength, self-esteem and unswerving allegiance to their cultural identity.

Slingsby believes that the lip plate binds the community, thereby according significant power in this circular piece of clay worn by the Mursi and Suri women. It can be considered the defining object cementing the female role as bride, spouse and mother, as well as her relationship with cattle and the spirit world.

On the one level this component of the exhibition provides a scathing critique of the fate of the Omo Valley: the decimation of indigenous cultural identity in the wake of land grabs by multinationals and super-powers. All that remains of the once-resilient communities are their lip plates - reduced to the status of relics or artefacts in a museum display cabinet.

But Slingsby's museological references are deliberately ambiguous. As sterile as these repositories of culture might have become, they nevertheless serve the function of protecting and

COMMUNITIES “LIVING IN DIFFERENT CENTURIES SIMULTANEOUSLY” PERCEIVED THEMSELVES AS EXISTING IN THE MORAL AND PHYSICAL CENTRE OF THEIR WORLD ARE WITNESSING IT BEING SNATCHED FROM THEM, REDUCING THEM TO SMALL, DISEMPOWERED MINORITIES PUSHED FURTHER ONTO THE EDGE OF SOCIETY.

preserving fragments of history and art that would otherwise be lost. The tragic irony is that the object accrues value and socio-cultural capital only after the annihilation of the societies who produced them. The lip plates vary in size and the intricacy of detail denoting the wearer’s marital status and lineage. Each piece functions as a unique personal and social narrative, much like the bodily scarification practised by most Omo Valley communities.

‘To the Western eye, they represent disfigurement, but it is through this so-called disfigurement that we learn about their relationship with cattle, each other, their social cohesion and commitment to their community.’

He adds: ‘As with all markings of the body, scars or anatomical modification delineate significant intervals in your life, whether they be rites of passage or specific achievements. Like contemporary tattoos each marking tells its own story inscribed onto the skin of its maker.’ Communities “living in different centuries simultaneously” once perceived themselves as existing in the moral and physical centre of their world are witnessing it being snatched from them, reducing them to small, disempowered minorities pushed further to the edge of society.

Slingsby acknowledges the slippery ideological slopes one encounters when entering this terrain. He is at pains to underscore his respect for communities who genuinely exist in communion with one another and their natural environment. This has always constituted the nexus of Slingsby’s art: the documentation and depiction of communities struggling to preserve centuries-old ways of life, in the wake of an unrelenting tsunami of ubiquitous industrialisation. Drifting effortlessly between diverse cultures and localities, he has waged

an unflinching protest against the rupturing of ancient rites and the scarring of physical spaces while acknowledging the polarities of wounding and healing, desecration and restoration. And in so doing, he advocates for the construction of an alternative global narrative that transcends the power of social control and environmental exploitation, one that serves as a homecoming of sorts - a reunion of the self, the other and the natural world we all inhabit.



DUS PARLIAMENT
THE KARA'S PARLIAMENT BUILDING IN DUS,
PLACE OF CEREMONIES AND DEBATE
INVOLVING ALL ASPECTS OF THE COMMUNITY







THE LIP PLATE CABINET

CONCRETE, STEEL, GLASS AND A LIP-PLATE COLLECTION

CABINET 109 X 120 X 60 CM

9 TABLES 86 X 100 X 105 CM EACH



THE REMAINING INHABITANTS OF THIS ONCE LARGE MURSI VILLAGE, EUPHEMISTICALLY EXPLAINED THOSE ABSENT AS 'GONE TO THE FIELDS', MEANING AS LABOUR ON THE CHINESE OPERATED SUGAR PLANTATIONS WITHIN MAGO PARK





THIS SURI CLAY DOLL
IS THE CATALYST FOR
RIVER BLIND



FOLLOWING SPREAD
RIVER BLIND
EDITION 1/8 BRONZE AND CONCRETE
BRONZE 50 X 25 X 22 CM
CONCRETE BASE 52 X 45.5 X 33 CM
STEEL STAND 111 X 44 X 31.5 CM





KORCHO TO DUS,
KARA CUSTOMARY LAND
CLEARED FOR FOREIGN FARM

KORCHO TO DUS, KARA CUSTOMARY LAND WAS BULLDOZED AND PLOUGHED TO MAKE WAY FOR A FOREIGN COTTON FARM - WHICH FAILED. NO CONSULTATION WAS MADE WITH THE OMO VALLEY COMMUNITIES BEFORE CLEARING OF ANCESTRAL LAND FOR AGRICULTURE NOR BEFORE GIBE DAMS, WHICH LOWERED THE OMO RIVER WATER LEVELS, COMMENCED CONSTRUCTION DIMINISHED LAND AND WATER, TURNED COMMUNITIES INTO RESERVOIRS OF CHEAP LABOUR PLACING THEM **IN**DEPENDENCE

GONE TO THE FIELDS

INDIGENOUS WOOD, MODELLED ON A MURSI HEADREST

40 X 140 X 73 CM



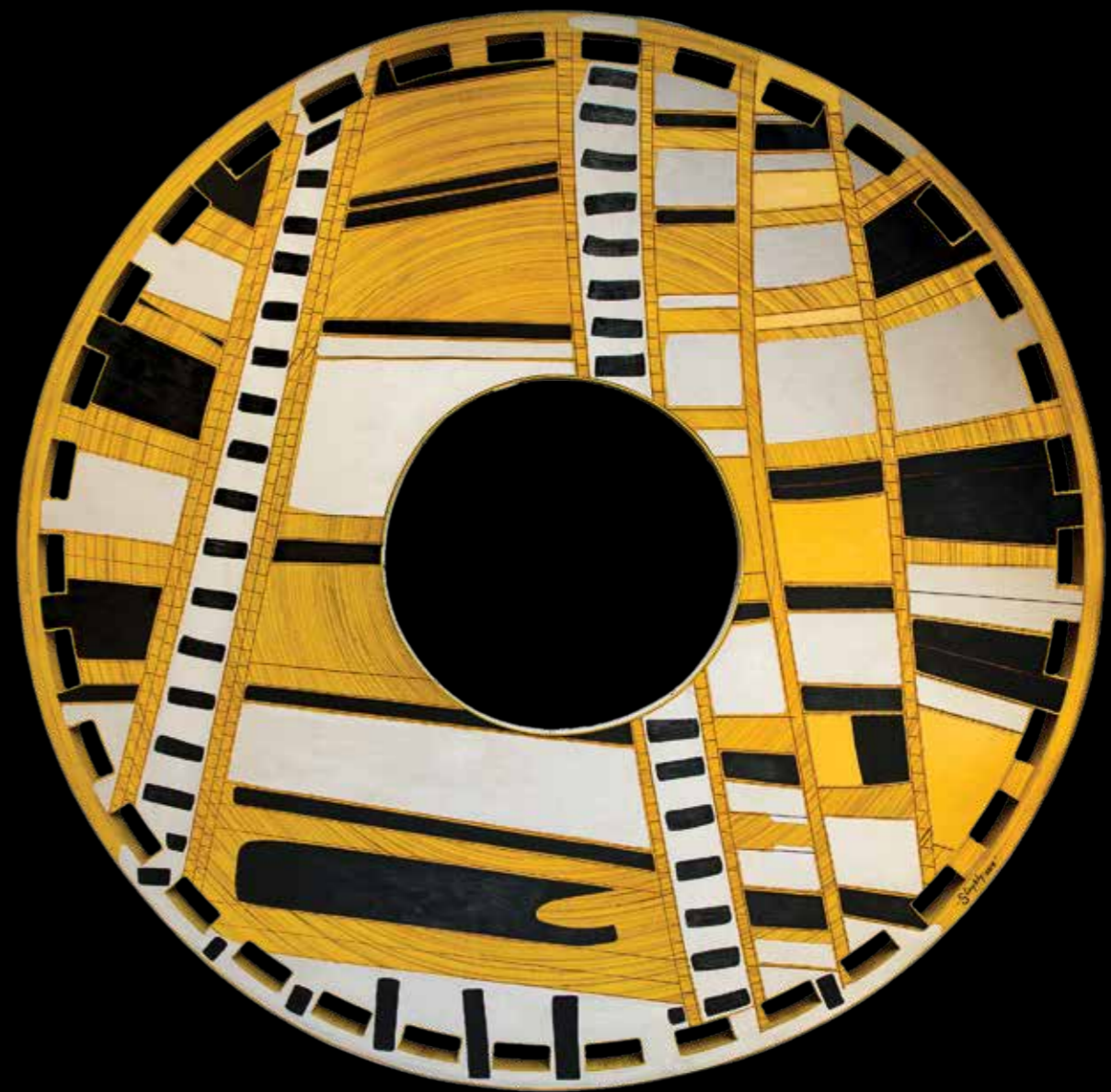


MEMORY
CREATED THROUGH REPEATED
LAYERING OF BENDING PLY,
REINFORCED WITH ALUMINIUM
220 X 225 X 125 CM





BACKDROP DEPICTS LIP PLATES BEING FIRED IN A MURSI VILLAGE



TITLE ARUNDHATI ROY

"THE PEOPLE MELT INTO THE DARKNESS
AND DISAPPEAR
AND THE SUGAR CANE SPRINGS UP"

THE REMAINING INHABITANTS OF THIS ONCE LARGE MURSI VILLAGE,
EUPHEMISTICALLY EXPLAINED THOSE ABSENT AS
'GONE TO THE FIELDS', MEANING, AS LABOUR
ON THE CHINESE OPERATED SUGAR PLANTATIONS WITHIN MAGO NATIONAL PARK





FOLLOWING SPREAD

TITLE ARUNDHATI ROY "THERE'S NO VOICELESS
THERE'S ONLY THE DELIBERATELY SILENCED
OR THE PURPOSELY UNHEARD"

DOLOMITE ARAGONITE STONE, HANDBLOWN GLASS FLOWERS, ON STEEL, GLASS AND PERSPEX BASE

SCULPTURE 41 X 35 X 29 CM STEEL BASE 100 X 25 X 31 CM

THE FLOWER TRAP

HAND BLOWN GLASS FLOWERS

10 X 5.5 CM

DOUBLE DEAL

BRONZE EDITION 1/18

18 X 26.5 X 26 CM



I AM ZINO ARI
CHIEF OF THE KARA PEOPLE
CHARCOAL AND CHALK PASTEL ON ARCHES 300 GRAM COTTON RAG PAPER
157 X 125 CM



I AM BIO-ITON-GIGA
KOMORA-JEHOLA
THE DOLA KOMORU
PRIEST OF THE NORTHERN MURSI
DIVINATOR AND RAINMAKER
CHARCOAL AND CHALK PASTEL ON ARCHES 300 GRAM COTTON RAG PAPER
151.5 X 118 CM





'I AM ZINO GADI'

94 X 117.5 CM

POST **IN**DEPENDENCE

'CLASSROOMS OF DUS' SERIES

CHARCOAL AND CHALK PASTEL DRAWINGS ON 300 GRAM PAPER

FEATURING THE YOUNG MEN FROM THE DUS FOOTBALL CLUB



ListEning SPEAKing REAding Writing

36.5 x 55 cm

A SERIES OF 11 LIMITED EDITION DIGITAL PRINTS FEATURING

THE YOUNG MEN FROM THE DUS FOOTBALL CLUB IN THEIR CLASSROOMS

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ALL OMO VALLEY IMAGES IN THIS CATALOGUE ARE BY SLINGSBY, TAKEN OVER SEVEN YEARS AND REPEATED EXPEDITIONS.

ALL OMO VALLEY IMAGES WERE PAID FOR ACCORDING TO THE PROTOCOLS OF SPECIFIC REGIONS

LIP PLATES WERE COLLECTED OVER A SEVEN YEAR PERIOD STARTING 2013. EACH ITEM WAS PURCHASED WITH THE INTENT

OF PRESERVING A RECORD OF CONTEMPORARY ART BY A CULTURE UNDER THREAT, THE OBJECTIVE OF THE EXHIBITION, IN

PARTICULAR, THE 'LIP PLATE CABINET' INSTALLATION AND MOST SIGNIFICANTLY, IN LINE WITH CONVENTIONS OF THE

UNITED NATIONS INTERNATIONAL POLICY CENTRE FOR INCLUSIVE GROWTH, WRT THE PROMOTION OF WOMEN'S INTERESTS.

