



Kemang Wa Lehulere, *Conference of the Birds*, 2017–21, salvaged school desks, ceramic dogs, paper scrolls, music stands, mixed media, dimensions variable.

Kemang Wa Lehulere

BLANK PROJECTS

“Art doesn’t have to solve problems, it only has to formulate them correctly,” as Anton Chekhov said. Kemang Wa Lehulere’s solo exhibition “Bring Back Lost Love” attempted to formulate the problem of loss and reclamation—of land, dignity, and ultimately, love. A gathering of drawings and mixed-media installations let us feel the weight of history.

Wa Lehulere’s works engage what he refers to as the “double lives” of objects, that is to say, the multiple ways a thing can be interpreted and reconfigured. This show took its impetus from the concept of love, bringing to mind bell hooks’s reflection, in the essay “Love as the Practice of Freedom” (1994), that “without love, our efforts to liberate ourselves and our world community from oppression and exploitation are doomed.” Wa Lehulere’s works likewise suggest that the struggle for liberation is founded on love.

Wa Lehulere’s sculptural installations collect the ghostly and haunted ephemera of our past: objects ranging from salvaged school desks, ceramic dogs, concrete, and plaster to shoelaces, glass bottles, sand, and chalk. Most refer to and reflect on colonial and apartheid history through the language of education and ubiquitous household objects. One wall of the white-

cube gallery was painted emerald green, immediately drawing the viewer's eye. This was the background to the installation *Reddening of the Greens 2 (ii)*, 2021, in which found items such as crutches sticking out of old suitcases—emanating a sense of historical gravity that is recurrent in Wa Lehlere's work—are mounted to the wall. In *Conference of the Birds*, 2017–21, fifteen birdhouses have been constructed out of sixteen salvaged school desks. Some upright, others upended, they are encircled by music stands and paper scrolls scattered on the floor and are guarded by life-size black-porcelain dogs, typical ceramic decorations found in the homes of many Black working-class families in South Africa. Here they are also reminders of the dogs used by apartheid-era police. They evoke familiarity and fear all at once.

Wa Lehlere's practice participates in a kind of call-and-response with writers and artists who have influenced his thinking. One of his longtime inspirations is the great South African modernist painter Gladys Mgudlandlu, affectionately known as “Bird Lady” for her keen interest in painting avians. Perhaps Wa Lehlere's birdhouses are sculpted to shelter these creatures. Mgudlandlu was also a schoolteacher and taught Wa Lehlere's aunt Sophia Lehlere until they were forcibly removed from their homes in Athlone to Gugulethu—a result of the Group Areas Act, which designated certain areas as for whites only. The subtlest, most surprisingly delicate work in the exhibition was a series of ink drawings the artist made in collaboration with his aunt Sophia. These depict finely rendered flowers, trees, and forests—wonderful and serene landscapes inspired by hand-painted murals that famously adorned Mgudlandlu's home.

In the five-page framed missive, *Letter to the Nobel Committee*, 2016, Wa Lehlere calls for a posthumous award to early-twentieth-century linguist Sol Plaatje for his book *Native Life in South Africa* (1916), which was written to protest the Natives Land Act of 1913. This law, which prohibited any purchase or lease of land by Black people outside of certain “native reserves” amounting to less than 13 percent of the country's landmass, resulted in massive dispossession. Wa Lehlere's letter performs a kind of utopian vision through which one social action might have launched a chain of events disrupting the sustained violence enacted on Black people in South Africa and pointing toward liberation. “Bring Back Lost Love” induced a feeling of being immersed in history and working through the ways in which narratives can be retold or reimagined: What would have happened if Plaatje had won the Nobel Peace Prize? Such speculations are not without real-world implications. Although its tone was not didactic, the exhibition offered moral instruction nonetheless.

— *Nkgopoleng Moloji*