

Instinctual Voyages

Nicholas Hlobo at Lehmann Maupin, NYC

by M. Neelika Jayawardane

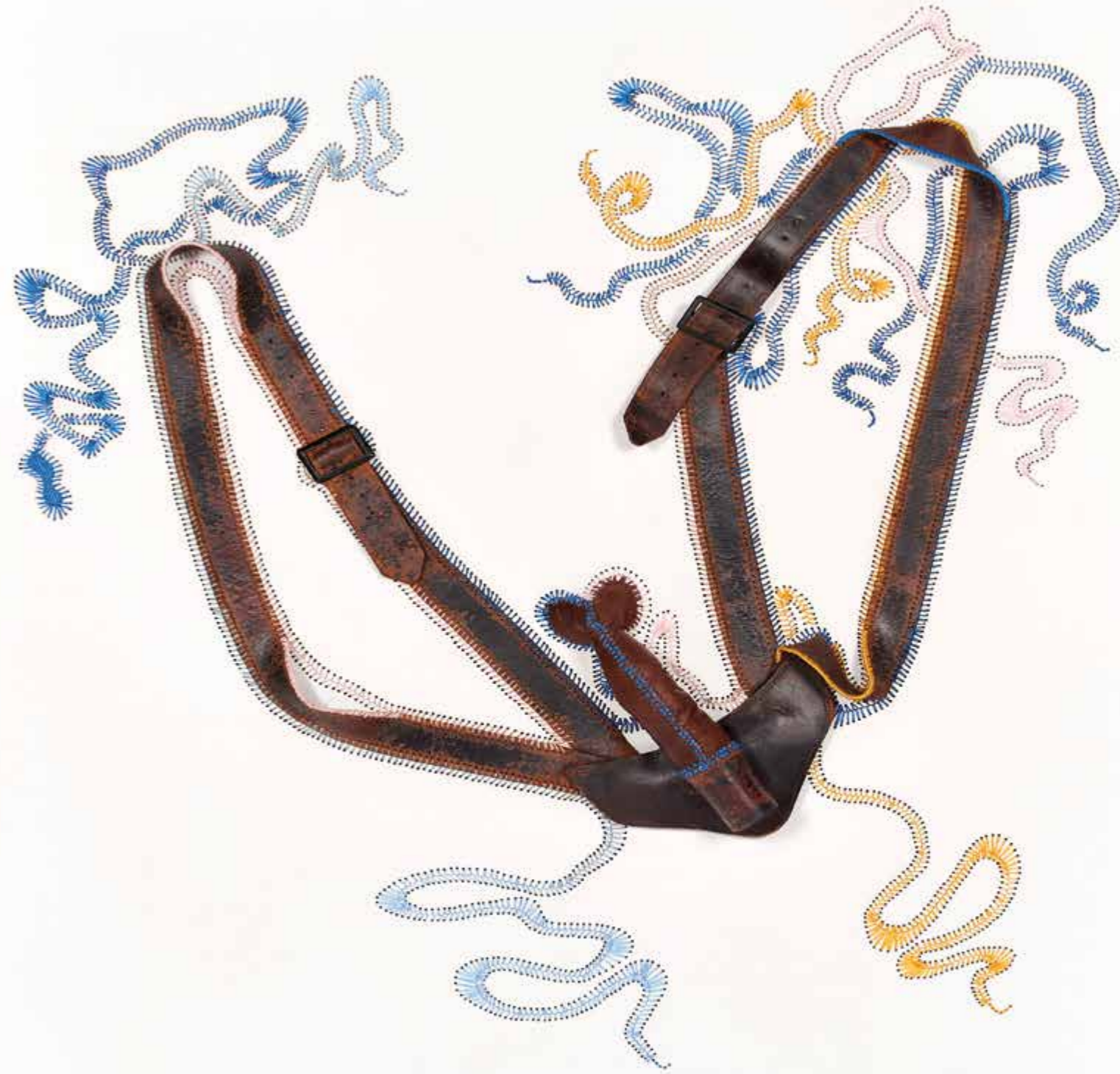
When I saw South African artist Nicholas Hlobo's first solo show, 'Izele,' at Michael Stevenson Gallery in Cape Town in 2006, I knew immediately that his work was directed by some remarkable creative impulse – it was a leap into something completely different. Rather than addressing political concerns in the aftermath of apartheid in an obvious manner, his sculptures gave pause. They gestured towards the ways in which the social and historical imperatives to which our lives are coupled – sexuality and gender expectations, and the ethnicities to which we have been tied – weigh in insistently, despite our wishes to make departures from these dictates and to fashion ourselves into the future.

Ten years later, Hlobo's new work is showing in Manhattan, at Lehmann Maupin's second location situated on the Lower East Side's gentrifying northern border. The canvas at the entrance of the gallery, *Umkhokeli*, makes explicit the erotic narrative running through the works. *Umkhokeli* roughly translates to 'leader' or 'master.' Here, Hlobo has sewn a leather flagpole holster – a found object – to a leather piece that looks like a crotch-cover and attached two loops of leather belts (complete with buckles). The story here is playfully – but unmistakably – sexual. The dark brown, weathered pieces of leather conjure up the shape of a strap-on dildo or a holster built to accentuate the masculinity of the phallus. But they are embroidered on to the canvas using delicate, pastel-coloured silk. There's

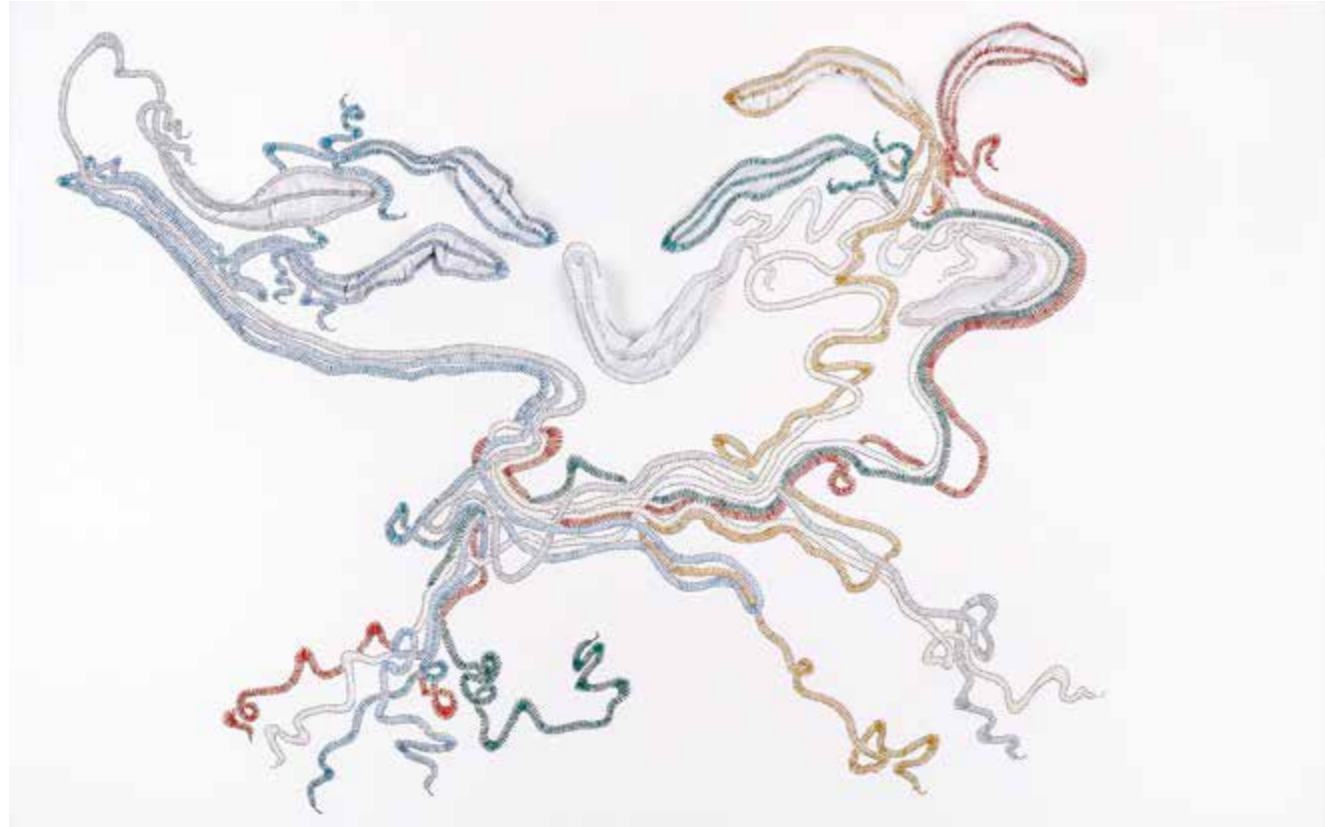
definitely a joke in there somewhere – among all the leather and delicate embroidery – suggesting the vulnerability of such accentuated masculinity and the feminine impulse that holds all that phallic 'stuff' consisting, as this piece suggests, of nothing but stuffing and old skin.

The sculptural work on show features found vegetal objects combined with inorganic materials: two hollowed-out tree trunks, joined to sections of leather stretched over wire frames, sculpted to look like the stylised, curlicued prow and stern of seafaring ships. Lengths of leather tubes, stuffed and sewn together to make potent, sensual, gourd-and-vine like objects, spill out of other hollows in the tree trunks. Hlobo joins these disparate items together using lengths of silk ribbon and strong metal wire. The leather tubing gives the impression of something large and unraveling, something that was once contained tidily and sealed off, but has now spilled out like intestines and organs from an open abdomen. We don't see the violent moment of excision, only the aftermath.

Hlobo's works on canvas are ethereal conversations about what it means to be directed – much like seafaring eels – by the dictates of a generative impulse so overwhelming that one may defy what appears sensible and reasonable to others. It might seem odd that Hlobo is drawn to the metaphor presented by the life cycle of eels. Although eels spend their entire adult lives in freshwater rivers, at



Nicholas Hlobo, *Umkhokeli*, 2016. Ribbons, leather and metal on Belgian canvas, 150 x 100 x 10.8 cm. Photograph: Anthea Pokroy. Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong.



Nicholas Hlobo, *Idabi*, 2016. Ribbons and leather on cotton canvas, 159.4 x 250.2 x 13.7 cm. Photograph: Max Yawney. Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong.

a certain moment in their lives they receive a signal that compels them to take a leap of faith. They swim as far as 2400 hundred kilometres to breeding grounds in saltwater seas, where they began their lives, and once they have fulfilled their procreative duty, they die. The North American eel (*Anguilla rostrata*), for instance, travels from rivers in the Northeast United States and – skirting modern obstacles like dams and polluted waters – swims to the Sargasso Sea to breed. Their elegant bodies roll in sine waves, moving through the water like ribbon streamers, directed and focused on fulfilling their desire, on meeting their ultimate and final goal: to generate new life and to leave their decaying bodies in order to create nourishment for new life.

The animals' instinctual determination to return to the ocean resonates with Hlobo, who is similarly driven by generative impulses that propel him. As an artist, and as a gay man, he too abandoned what was expected and familiar for a man instructed in the Xhosa traditions of masculinity. This

work is an expression of his own voyage, driven by subconscious impulses. One large, white canvas encapsulates Hlobo's concept and inspiration for this project: the migratory impulses of eels. Here, small, uneven lengths of leather – each stuffed with soft inserts to give a three-dimensional effect – are sewn into the body of the 'painting,' using neat, evenly spaced silk ribbon. Hlobo uses multihued silk ribbons: pale blue, forest-green, ochre-yellow, yellow as pale as beaten egg yolks, and even bright red. The ribbon works in and out of neatly punched, circular holes that follow the uneven contours of the 'eels.' This line of ribbon secures the eel-forms to the body of the canvas, accentuating their shape and three-dimensionality. More ribbons of embroidery – mirroring the ribbons that trace the outline of the eel-forms – wind along the non-linear trajectories that these bodies might have followed as they swam towards their meeting place.

From a distance, the effect of the three-dimensional eel-forms and embroidered

ribbon-work is that of looking at a still from a nature film, where we see the dance of mating bodies, ejaculating sperm and eggs into water.

It is a moment of fulfilment.

M. Neelika Jayawardane is associate professor of English at the State University of New York-Oswego, and an Honorary Research Associate at the Centre for Indian Studies in Africa (CISA), University of the Witwatersrand (South Africa). She is Culture and Arts Editor at *Africa is a Country*, a web magazine of African political and cultural affairs, and is currently working on two book projects. Jayawardane was born in Sri Lanka, grew up in the Copperbelt Province in Zambia, and completed her university education in the United States.

Nicholas Hlobo's 'Instinctual Voyages' was on at Lehmann Maupin, NYC from 24 February – 17 April 2016.



01



02



03

01 Nicholas Hlobo, *Ikroti*, 2016. Wood, leather, and ribbon, 75 cm.
 02 Nicholas Hlobo, *Igqabhuk 'imiphunga*, 2016. Ribbons and leather on Belgian linen canvas, 120 x 90 x 5 cm.
 03 Nicholas Hlobo, *Intili*, 2016. Ribbons and leather on Belgian linen canvas, 150 x 100 x 5 cm.
 All photographs: Anthea Pokroy. All images courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong.