

By Heidi Erdmann
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Nicola Roos is a recent BA Fine Arts graduate (May 2017) from the Michaelis School of Fine Art at the University of Cape Town. She majored in sculpture. Her 2016 series of five figurative female sculptures, *DIS(re)MEMBERINGS*, has earned her two awards: *The Simon Gerson Prize*, which was co-awarded to students who produced an exceptional body of work and *The Michaelis Prize* – the most prestigious prize awarded annually to the single most outstanding body of work produced by a student during his/her final year.

HE: *Before we get started on your most recent series of sculptures, let's briefly revisit the story of Yasuke - the first black samurai in recorded history. There is no doubt that your 2015 series of life-sized figurative sculptures, which you had titled No Man's Land (and which were featured in this magazine in 2016) stimulated a global interest in this forgotten bit of history. You found this story; you researched it and then proceeded to make the sculptures primarily using recycled inner tyre tubing. What was the initial response to this subject matter when you submitted your ideas to your supervisors at the time? Did you get the sense or inkling that you were onto something unique?*

NR: I could speculate that it was partly the epic scale and almost fantastical vision of the project that piqued the interest of at least one of my supervisors. Figurative work was not a mode of creation that had normally been encouraged at Michaelis in the past and my proposal was perceived as quite a welcome challenge for both my supervisors and for myself as its success would set a precedent for future students. However, I was not fully aware of "what I was on to", as you say, until I began to see the responses of a wide variety of individuals from both inside and outside the academia.

HE: *Can you tell me what attracted you most this story? Was it the sculptural potentiality of the costumes, the weaponry and armour, and/or the opportunity to make works larger than yourself?*

NR: I've always been interested in the history of obscure individuals whose legacies have impacted the way in which people (subconsciously) perceive themselves in the postcolonial setting. Naturally, I veered towards seeking out *African* stories in particular to counter-act the weight of all the Western-based narratives and perspectives in the art world and the entertainment industry. Especially now that the socio-political climate has re-ignited certain racial tensions in South Africa, I became determined to find an African hero who we could all look up to in order to remind ourselves of the larger-than-life goals our own ancestors had achieved before us. I was predominantly interested in narratives from the beginning of the European colonial project in Africa, because this was seedbed for a myriad of the deep-seated conflicts and pressures that still haunt us today. This was partly what led me to Yasuke... the opportunity to recreate an icon of African triumph in both a theoretical and a practical sense.

HE: *Was it a conscious decision to retell this story (the recycling of this history, if you like) and then to make the actual work with recycled materials? Is there a connection here?*

NR: Of course! In this current climate where the shortage of our world's resources is being felt more bitterly than ever before, I would think that art institutions should emphatically encourage students to incorporate recycled materials into their work. Cut-up soft drink cans and newspaper-maché are what I used to associate with the concept of recycled art. I wanted to change this perception of the inferiority of the medium. I wanted to create work that an audience would take seriously on an academic level as well. This particular kind of rubber is also fast becoming an almost entirely superseded material now that the majority of new cars do not require inner tubing in the tyres anymore. It was a natural choice to articulate "obsolete" narratives in history in the language of an obsolete medium. Furthermore, a strong association has always existed in my mind between rubber and the colonial project in Africa... It is difficult to forget photographs in the history books of the atrocious physical punishment dealt out to slave workers on the rubber plantations in the Belgian Congo under King Leopold II. I wanted to create work that speaks to a victory over the historical weight of the incomprehensible cruelty and hatred of colonialism.

HE: *You have announced your plans to continue with your post graduate studies in 2018. I expect that it will set you off onto a different path of exploration, not only in search of new content but maybe also in experimentation of medium, maybe something other than inner tyre tubing. But let me ask you this - do you think you will ever become "done" with the story of Yasuke? Will you revisit this subject again after the completion of your Master's degree in 2020? I think I know this answer if I had to ask a few collectors, but do you think that there is more scope and angle left in the story for you to want to explore?*

NR: One of the aspects of this subject matter that I enjoy most is its ability to continuously evolve. Just as our perceptions of ourselves and our views about socio-cultural/ethnographic belonging are constantly in flux, so the tales that sparked this societal introspection can perpetually be re-imagined. I tend to find diverse tidbits of the narrative that speak to me and my current circumstances/thought processes every time I return to a certain subject matter or theoretical body. Different sub-concepts become relevant with each new cycle. The narratives I choose to engage with have been subjected to constant investigation, revision and re-interpretation over the last five hundred years. They are completely fluid and I think that there is always something new to discover. I don't ever want to stagnate by deciding that I will not return to a previous project in some way or another in the future. Also, my technical ability improves with each new sculpture that I create, and I often feel that I owe it to my older subjects to return to their stories and improve my representation of them on a practical level.

HE: *Tell me about the genesis of your graduate series. Can you expand a bit on your interest in wanting to give a voice to the historically important Mexican woman known as "La Malinche"?*

NR: As a young woman in the art world, I have to be aware of the patriarchal and misogynistic tendencies that have underscored and continue to influence the most historically significant literary, political and artistic voices in our society. La Malinche was one of those profound women in history who have been degraded by the male voice and then re-introduced as an icon of feminine salvation by feminist authors hundreds of years after her death. She is a wholly dichotomous, wildly enigmatic figure – a characteristic that is articulated through the various names and personas that she has been assigned and has taken on during the last five hundred years. In order to explain *why* I chose her, I need to explain a bit about her.

Malinalli, as she was originally known, was born to a local chieftain between 1496 and 1501 in the region between the Aztec-ruled Valley of Mexico and the Maya states of the Yucatán Peninsula. The Aztec star sign presiding over her birthday, however, was perceived to be an ominous omen and the Nahua girl's destiny of a life on the outskirts of society (and history) was put into motion. Even though very few details of her personal history remain known to us today, the story goes that she eventually came to live – likely in slavery – under the great Aztec king Moctezuma II. Known to the Aztecs by the honorary title of Malintzin Tenépal, Malinalli was one of a group of around twenty young girls that were gifted to Conquistador Hernándo Cortés by Moctezuma when the Spanish forces triumphed over a tribe that had long been a significant rival to the Aztecs' growing political and military power in the Yucatán region.

Her phenomenal diplomatic skills and proficiency in languages caught the attention of the Conquistador and she came to serve as his most invaluable interpreter and mediator during the Spanish military project in Mexico. She was renamed to Doña Marina after becoming the first Native American to be baptized by the colonials. However, she is most commonly remembered for her role in the events of 1521 that culminated in a great Spanish victory in the Aztec capital (and her previous home) of Tenochtitlan. Cast out by her own people as an ethnic traitress, La Malinche – or, “The Outsider”, as she is most frequently referred to in discourse – was posited by Mexican author and philosopher Octavio Paz as a scapegoat for the debilitating sense of chauvinism and rootlessness that destabilizes the Mexican postcolony. The illegitimate son she bore to Cortés in 1523, Martín, became known as “El Mestizo”, the ancestor of the Mexican mestizos, the “Cosmic Race”. In wake of Paz' concept of the *chingada*, which infers a sense of powerlessness and pure receptivity upon women, a wave of Chicana feminist authors active in the 1970s resurrected La Malinche as an icon of feminine salvation by drawing on playwright Carlos Fuentes' re-imagination of her as the Virgin of Guadalupe.

This self-perpetuating cycle of death and rebirth is what drew me to this incredible woman. Despite her role as a translator and cultural mediator that changed the course of history in the Americas, she had no remaining voice of her own. I wanted to return that to her after her violently turbulent journey towards near-mythological status. As a woman in a world filled with so many voices that are not your own, I felt that I identified with this historical anti-heroine. I wanted to re-remember La Malinche as the central figure in an entire tableau that spans across five centuries. I wanted to show the whole picture to remind us of how far we have come as postcolonial women in our struggle to discover our own autonomy.

HE: *In the same series you also introduce (or reference) South Africa's own version of “La Malinche”: the woman known as Krotoa-Eva. You write that “despite their roles as interpreters and translators, their autonomy has been wholly eroded: they have been dismembered and disremembered by all the voices who have spoken for them and through them for the last five hundred years, in a struggle to consolidate a myriad of disparate ancestries in today's Mexico and South Africa alike.” The central figure in your research is La Malinche, presented in this series through four different disguises. Can you expand on the thread you focused on in developing a connection between her and Krotoa-Eva?*

NR: The parallels between both the personal histories and socio-cultural legacies of these two women are absolutely remarkable. Fellow UCT graduate M.A. Samuelson summarises it quite profoundly in *Remembering the Nation, Dismembering Women? Stories of the South African Transition* (2005): “La

Malinche's story can usefully inform our understanding of Krotoa-Eva's symbolic significance, given the depth of scholarship on it and Mexico's prescience in terms of the nation-building discourses we encounter during the South African transition." Eva-Krotoa was the focal point of my research because of her relevance to our own heritage and our own country and then I branched into an investigation of La Malinche and the Mexican postcolony in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding Krotoa-Eva's legacy here at home. Since the advent of democracy in 1994, various new national ideologies have emerged. My own Afrikaner heritage definitely piqued my interest in Krotoa-Eva in this regard: according to my research, there seems to be a new trend in expressing Afrikaner identity that is characterised by a yearning to reconnect the white Afrikaner with an African ancestry. This, in turn, encourages a re-examination of Krotoa-Eva, who is possibly one of the most extensively written-about women in (South) African history. "Krotoa-Eva" becomes a hybrid of her indigenous and colonial identities, situating her in history and discourse as a liminal entity, much like La Malinche, her so-called "historical echo".

It was important for me to first have recognised these similarities in details of their personal lives in order to begin to unpack the broader connection. Taken into the Fort when she was only twelve, Krotoa-Eva came to serve as a mouthpiece, a mediator, a translator between the European colonials and the Goringhaicona people of Table Bay in the mid-17th century. Marked as a traitor to her own family and condemned for "currying favour" with the Dutch, she was bound in matrimony to a European colonist in her adult life. Despite her high standing amongst the Dutch community at the Cape, she was eventually branded as an "unruly drunk" under the "veneer" of Christianity – an unfit mother. Her children were removed from her care to be raised by a colonial family after the death of her husband and her subsequent banishment to Robben Island, where she eventually died.

Furthermore, Krotoa was also known as much for her linguistic and diplomatic skills as for her baptism. As a permanent member of the household of Jan van Riebeeck, she was christened under the name of Eva: the "first woman" of the new era. Despite the obvious parallels between the personal lives of these two women, I also concentrated on the fact that they are both figures from colonial time that have been re-conceptualised in order to help lessen the nightmare of their respective chaotic and traumatic national histories. To me, that is the most important thread that binds them together.

HE: *You are clearly digging around in history books for your content! It may perhaps be an unreasonable question but should we expect future Nicola Roos sculptures to continue in this vein? Will you be embarking on a continuation of contemporizing historical and forgotten bits of history?*

NR: Yes, I would like to continue with this kind of work. I am always looking towards the past to attempt to make sense of the current socio-political state. Everything is connected and the best way for me to make these connections relatable and understandable is to visualise them through the people in the history that set off the dominos leading to the current world state. Colonialism was the first such domino to fall and it still casts a great and violent shadow over us all. There are so many hidden stories left that I would like to be able to tell. These incredible historical individuals have altered my perceptions about people, politics and society for the better – and the least I can hope for is that I can continue to give them a voice to be able to do the same to others out there today.