

Art in America

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Nolan Oswald Dennis: *overturns*
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Nolan Oswald Dennis Explores the Limits of Knowledge and Trouble with Authority

By *Nkgopoleng Moloi* January 24, 2025 5:00am



View of Nolan Oswald Dennis's 2024 exhibition "Understudies" at Zeitz MOCAA, Cape Town, showing the collaborative site-specific intervention Xenolith (Letsema), 2024. Photo Dillon Marsh. Courtesy Zeitz MOCAA

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“Understudies,” a survey of work by Zambian-born, Johannesburg-based artist Nolan Oswald Dennis at the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, opens with an overture—or so I thought. I entered through a reading room containing an imposing vertical steel structure, a wall drawing rendered in graphite, and the artist’s studio notes: research drawings that would become their new body of work. The room was an example of what Dennis described in the exhibition text as “quietly sharing secret strategies of liberation through convoluted and non-linear forms.”

I later found out that this room was actually the end of the exhibition: I had seen the show in reverse. This false beginning nevertheless set the tone for me and felt fitting for an exhibition set on challenging and reimagining knowledge and structures that feel fixed, whether astronomy, land sovereignty, geological formations, or cartographic systems.

Dennis relinquishes some authorship (read: power) in the making of some works in “Understudies,” calling on museum workers at the Zeitz MOCAA to cocreate. The work *Xenolith (Letsema)*, 2024, a large column made from lines of packed soil, is installed alongside the exposed hundred-year-old columns of the grain silo where the museum is built. *Letsema*, a Setswana word, speaks to the practice of voluntarily working together—a communal act typically applied to farming but extended to ways of organizing that took root during liberation struggles in Southern African countries. This collaborative work considers what images can emerge when labor is done collectively, and becomes a way to disorganize space and time—space, by reimagining the very structure of the museum, and time: the time of labor, and of geological deep time.



View of Nolan Oswald Dennis's 2024 exhibition "Understudies" at Zeitz MOCAA, Cape Town.
Photo Dillon Marsh. Courtesy Zeitz MOCAA

Space, time, and the mystifying yet ordinary ways they interact are recurring themes for Dennis, whose concurrent show, "overtuns," is on view at the Swiss Institute in New York through April. The most affecting work in "Understudies" is titled *Superposition, 2024*, after a principle of quantum mechanics: It describes how a physical system can be in more than one state at the same time. This immersive sonic room-size installation, boasting an infrasonic sound system consisting of a sub-bass speaker, LED unit, and sensors, is a techno-poetic reflection on our relationship to land, deep time, and planetary interconnection. The work uses acoustic compositions of seismic data documenting the earth's vibrations collected by the Wits School of Geosciences in Johannesburg during the 2020 COVID lockdown. These sounds capture data about volcanoes, bombs, and earthquakes, but are played at frequencies beyond the threshold perceptible by the human ear. *Superposition* explores how we might learn to listen to the earth, attuning ourselves to the vibrations that pass through it; it also points to the limits of what we can know and perceive, and to the limits of data's authority.

Indeed, the show often speaks corporeally as much as it does cognitively. Throughout the show, Fred Moten and Wu Tsang’s concept of gravitational feel rang loud in my mind. I kept thinking—nay, sensing—a kind of gravitational pull toward space and time, my body feeling its own mass, aware of its weight and the weight of time. Though maps, machines, data, and drawings fill the museum, they are arranged in installations that choreograph bodies. For instance, *Izintaba* (Hottentots-Holland), 2024, is a 12-minute immersive film featuring digital simulations of mountains, hills, and other elevations. Viewing the film, one is enveloped by it; the rocks seem to float toward you.

In *Biko.Fanon* (2018), receipt printers attached to a wall emit an imagined conversation between two radical Black thinkers, Steve Bantu Biko and Frantz Fanon, around the notion of love; Dennis used an algorithm to re-create a dialogue based on their specific writings. This simple yet powerful gesture speaks to how we might imagine radical Black liberation—as being necessarily founded on the ability to hold each other, where holding implies a love ethic in the manner described by bell hooks: a kind of radical love encompassing care, devotion, passion, longing, and tenderness, as well as tough love rooted in responsibility and action. Another work in the series imagines an exchange between Biko and Nomzamo Winnie Mandela. These speculative conversations are gestures toward centering radical love within the context of decoloniality, and toward imagining the possibilities of political solidarity grounded in care.



View of Nolan Oswald Dennis’s 2024 exhibition “Understudies” at Zeitz MOCAA, Cape Town. Photo Dillon Marsh. Courtesy Zeitz MOCAA

Care as resistance recurs in works like the pliable sculpture *Soft Rock* (leNqaba yo Mkhosi), custom seating featuring a photograph of a rock found by Dennis's interlocutor, the artist Vusumzi Nkomo. The yielding texture of the seating contrasts with the unyielding nature of the actual rock—a symbol of dispossession and resistance—what Dennis refers to as a “gesture for those who remember what the stone can do.” The stone, used as a weapon by millions of Black South Africans against authority and bullets, also poetically symbolizes the strength of countless women whose struggles remain unheard, referencing the isiZulu idiom: *Wathint' abafazi, wathint' imbokodo* (You strike a woman, you strike a rock.) This work speaks to the persistent tensions between pliability and rigidity when it comes to acts of resistance and care.



View of Nolan Oswald Dennis's 2024 exhibition "Understudies" at Zeitz MOCAA, Cape Town. Photo Dillon Marsh. Courtesy Zeitz MOCAA

“Understudies” foregrounds Dennis’s impulse to work against the existing logic of knowledge production and worldmaking. I can’t help but think of Dennis’s work through the lens of world-ending praxis, as propositions for ending this world and creating new ones informed by Audre Lorde’s mantra that “the master’s tools cannot dismantle the master’s house.” The work does not provide clear answers to the problem of what to do when systems of knowledge are polluted by entanglements with power, but it does offer ways of experimenting with liberation.

A question that lingers in my mind is whether Dennis, in crafting elegant works so deeply rooted in his own conceptual language, risks veering into ultra-abstraction. Do the smooth lines, undulations, and symmetries found in most of the works risk diluting the weight of those injustices embedded in the systems they critique, rendering them palatable and detached? Or is it that, as their work dreams of liberation and envisions

different, better worlds, the question becomes whether such visions offer genuine avenues for escape—or whether they, and art itself, risk being merely escapist.