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# COLLAPSE

A Conversation with

Ledelle Moe





*Memorial (Collapse)*, 2005. Concrete and steel, detail of installation.



BY SARAH TANGUY

Born and raised in Durban, South Africa, Ledelle Moe graduated with a degree in sculpture in 1994 from Technikon Natal and became a founding member of the FLAT Gallery, an artist initiative and alternative space in Durban. That same year, a travel grant enabled a move to the United States where she completed her MFA at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. She currently spends most of her time making work and teaching at Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore. Recent shows include Socrates Sculpture Park and Pratt Institute, New York City; Anderson Gallery, Des Moines, Iowa; the Kulturhuset, Stockholm, Sweden; and KZNA Gallery, Durban. While Moe has used concrete in combination with human and animal forms for the last 15 years, she feels that she has only begun to explore the history of her homeland and to understand its profound complexity. Fiercely psychological and ruthless in execution, her sculptures erupt from a cataclysm of bipolar forces into an edgy yet fluid balance.

**Sarah Tanguy:** *Let's start with an overview.*

**Ledelle Moe:** Even though I've been in the United States for 11 years, South Africa has remained the primary context of my work, and I return home annually, like a migrating animal. I have a different relationship to the country now, but my work stemmed from a very subjective understanding of my surroundings. In 1989, when I was studying at the sculpture department in Durban, my country was on the cusp of political

change; it was a shifting social environment. There was a lot of debate about content and how a work could have social relevance and be a weapon in the struggle. A wonderful man, Albie Sachs, wrote in his book *Spring is Rebellious* that people are going to make things no matter what. It's like plants growing through concrete.

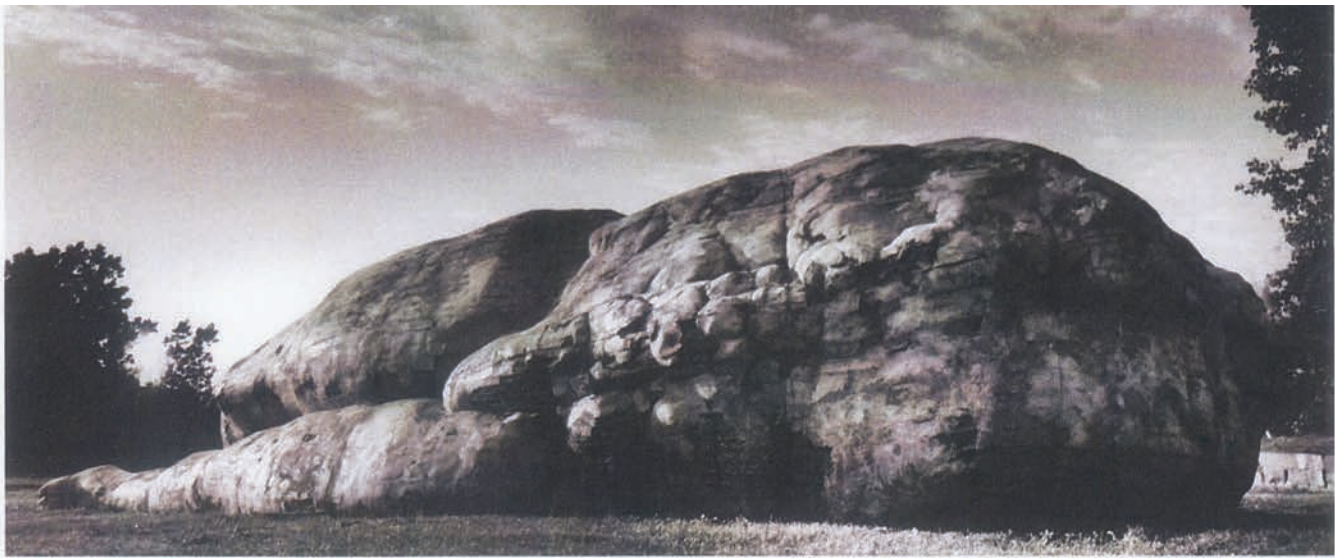
That's when I found the animal to be a very emotive metaphor for the prevailing anxiety. I started to use concrete with the animal form to create an evocative surface texture and narrative that reflected my personal feelings and my larger environment. I worked through a series of animal pieces that dealt with different power structures—the victim and the victor, the singular and the multiple. As the animal forms have progressed over the years, I've been able to focus in and pull back from different experiences, which is evident in the use of scale: it's either huge and monolithic or tiny and many-faceted.

**Below:** *Thrust*, 2003. Concrete and steel, 10 x 12 x 12 ft. **Right:** *Memorial (Collapse)*, 2005. Concrete and steel, each head approximately 10 x 12 x 12 ft.

**ST:** *What's the idea behind Thrust (2003), a massive, writhing amalgam of indeterminate form? How does Thrust compare to Memorial (Collapse), where one of the heads is taken from a photo of a young man massacred in Liberia, and Congregation?*







**LD:** *Thrust*, which I did in Washington, DC, returned to a work I created in Durban—a pack of dogs in conflict with each other as though they had been backed into a corner. It was very specific to the violence catalyzing change in the country at the time. The change was essential but difficult. I applied the concrete to the armatures in a very rough and aggressive way, implying decay in a solid form that was both impermanent and permanent.

In my work, the themes interweave and overlap; none is specifically chronological from beginning to end. *Collapse* is also an old idea that goes back to my early undergraduate days. It is literally a collapse of the form as in these latest portraits. It's also about the collapse of power structures, which I was responding to in a personal and a political way, more personal than political. Later, it became apparent that these images might imply something larger—the collapse of monuments outside of my own understanding, the collapse of heroes, and at the same time, the desire to create permanence out of the fleeting nature of existence. Death is a recurrent subject for me. It's an understanding and acceptance of the life cycle, reflecting that through the materials yet wanting to hold on to memorializing. A friend of mine said recently that I needed to make these things so that I could remember—they were like immovable boulders that I couldn't pass beyond until I articulated them. It's my way of understanding things.

*Congregation* is about retrieving. It happened very laterally, instead of working on one singular huge project, which is the way I've tended to work. I was carving a small head, and my friend and colleague, Jeff Spaulding, came into my studio, and said, "This is beautiful, can I have it?" I answered, "Sure." And because he was appreciative of it, I made another one. And it grew from there. The work was something that you could hold in your hand, and it felt different from having to climb over it and battle with it. As this modular congregation evolved into place, there was a certain resignation in being unable to focus on one thing to understand the whole.

**ST:** *What about individual differences—the heads weren't made from molds, were they?*

**LD:** No, not at all. I worked on this piece both here and in South Africa. It became a daily ritual of sitting and taking concrete that was fairly hard but not completely set and carving out different faces. In the process, I put them into boxes. I believed that I was making pretty much the same face over and over again, until it was time to put them up onto the wall and I discovered that they were very, very different—different in scale, different in temperament. This piece is much more autobiographical in the way that it tells the story of where the aggregate is from, the mood, the nuance, and the gesture of each head.

**ST:** *Are they sightless or are their eyes closed?*

**LD:** Most of them have their eyes closed. That was an intuitive decision that came mostly from not wanting the portraits to be confrontational; I wanted people to be able to look at them. I found that this was true for the larger ones too. People felt that they could go into a place and observe someone in a state of intimacy. Being with someone in his or her quiet space, with someone who continues sleeping, implies a level of trust; it verges on an erotic intimacy. Ironically, *Congregation* agitates people a lot more than the big pieces. While the big pieces act like caves (you can enter and find shelter), the faces seem quite menacing.



**Top:** *Collapse*, 2000. Concrete and steel, 9 x 30 x 12 ft. **Above:** *Untitled*, 1999. Concrete and steel, 10 x 13 x 12 ft.

**ST:** *Do you make preliminary drawings?*

**LD:** I draw almost every day, sometimes while I'm stuck in traffic, on the back of an envelope or in my sketchbook. It's a way of documenting people I've seen and don't want to forget. I find a lot of joy figuring out the strange shells that we look through and inhabit. But when the drawings stray from being portraits, they sometimes go into the fantastical—that's when dream images of the human and animal cross over. I've articulated a lot of them in dry-point etchings. It's interesting psychologically to observe how we see the human form in everything—a lamppost or a couple of marks on paper. You can roll a lump of concrete around for a while and end up with an organic form. I feel the process is very primal, very tangible.

**ST:** *Tell me a more about your technique.*

**LM:** In the large pieces, the concrete is applied to the armature and then carved, which creates an elephant-like skin and texture. With the small ones, the concrete is





Top and detail: *Congregation*, 2006. Concrete, each head 4 x 3 x 4 in.

placed into a plastic bag, left to sit for a couple of hours, and then carved while still green. It's wonderful to hold the concrete on your lap and carve, like playing with beach sand. When it's too wet, it's very crumbly and an accelerated erosion happens, and when it's hard, the chisel mark is more evident. Relative to how long the concrete has been left to sit, it will yield either a resistant surface or a very, very soft surface, which adds a textural and material gesture to perceiving the human form. I spend a lot of time with concrete. I love the smell of it.

**ST:** *I'm curious about your choice of concrete. It's a natural material, produced by intense geological changes. I see a parallel between it and the theme of social upheaval.*

**LM:** An enormous amount of stress is involved in mining the minerals out of the earth in order to create concrete. It goes through a furnace, where it is separated from what it was, and when you add water, it catalyzes back to what it was, evoking a romanticized birth, death, and resurrection. Concrete is fascinating in that it comes from the earth. The aggregate you use can really change in its color, texture, and feeling. When it is finally pulled back into its original nature, it becomes something that we readily understand because we are surrounded by it. Concrete and water are consumed at almost the same rate around the world. Conceptually, I like concrete as an industrial, cheap material. And that's what *Congregation* is also about: taking a given and transforming it a bit while staying out of the zone of the precious. The figure and narrative are very difficult subjects to pull off in a digital age, and my practice is a direct and deliberate regression to a fossil-like, mud-like old state.

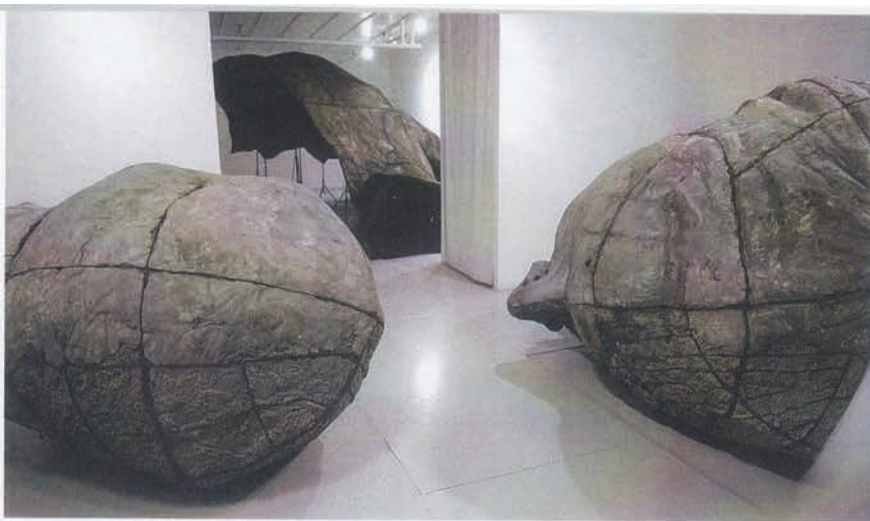
**ST:** *Let's return to Collapse, also the name of a hexagram of the I Ching that argues for overthrow as the natural progress, discontent leading to upheaval. Would you elaborate on your concept of collapse, and perhaps, the next step, healing?*

**LM:** I think of collapse as a midpoint. Something must have been standing in order to collapse; something must collapse before it becomes a ruin. There's always an attraction to things in construction or destruction. When things are in place, they are taken for granted. What fascinates me the most is the point when things are balanced just for a while before they tip over again. Without talking about it in the larger, political scheme of things, which I'm not able to do, I believe that the South African context casts a light on my identity and on how I fit into the world. It affects how I carry that memory and baggage with me. Recently, I've been drawn back to make work there, to get my fingers in the dirt there. I feel that reconciliation is possible, not through any doing of my own but through the surrender of people to the loss of loved ones when there is nothing they can do about it. So *Collapse* is about loss.

**ST:** *With regard to the idea of the memorial, I was thinking of a shell and the bigger heads. When you see a shell in nature it's because a life form has left it; I wasn't sure if this is something you considered or had to do, because they are so big.*

**LM:** It was a technical solution to the weight and size. I really wanted to create an enormous sense of volume like a giant boulder or landscape, where you would discover the face later. After a couple of earlier pieces in which the segments were too heavy to move, I





Top: *Land/Collapse IV*, 2006. Concrete and steel, installation view. Bottom: *Land* (detail), 2006. Concrete and steel, 9 x 18 x 13 ft.



or descending. I started to wonder where we find the horizon line: How does this horizon line differ from the horizon line of the larger pieces?

**ST:** *Do you see your creations as surrogates or a type of self-portrait?*

**LM:** I see all of the work, from South Africa until now, big or small, animal or human, as a by-product of living. I am very grateful to be able to do it and survive. I don't know what I would do otherwise. These things don't replicate me or anyone else; they just give me a way to live my life. I think that sculpture is a universal language—it's where communities form around a common purpose. This really holds true to *Congregation*. A lot of people understand a congregation as a religious get-together but it's not really. When two or more people get together there's a whole different energy than being alone. Surrendering to that and understanding community have caused a shift in my perception.

**ST:** *Are there future projects you want to mention?*

**LM:** I work so subjectively and intuitively that it's difficult to predict. However, in the last couple of years I have been exploring and understanding the South African landscape in a way that is new to me. In South Africa the mountains are very evocative of the human form, especially the Zulu landscape, which is often named after body parts. I remember that as a child I thought these hills looked like the backs of animals. I recently visited the Drakensburg mountains and climbed into the crotch of a huge hill where I discovered a waterfall. While up there, I did a lot of sketches that may influence the next installation. In addition to this inland experience, I have found a sense of beauty and awe in the Indian Ocean. The sea has become a very meaningful experience of power and constant change. Within these landscapes, I see myself in scale and now find myself revisiting these experiences through my sculptures.

*Art historian Sarah Tanguy is a curator and critic in Washington, DC.*

struck a deal that I would only make these three portraits in pieces as big as I could pick up on my own and bolt back together. What I found really appealing, and it seems that other people did too, is the blackness of the hole created by the large portraits. People would find the face, acknowledge it, then go to the hole and want to climb in. It's amazing how solid these concrete shells looked and weren't actually; it creates a tension of form. I don't think that artists really know what they're doing until they've finished. Other people do the clarification. Those who've climbed in have said, "The quality of light is beautiful; it sounds great in here." It definitely draws people in, if not psychologically then literally.

**ST:** *How about irony? I keep imagining a persistent wailing coming from your work.*

**LM:** I think that trying to create a human form from a more permanent material is an old, old instinct. Because we're soft and mortal, we think that this will last a little bit longer, but not that much longer. My work involves a sense of history that is much more romantic and heartfelt than ironic and encompasses natural as well as manmade wear and tear.

**ST:** *Are there artists with whom you feel a special affinity?*

**LM:** The German Expressionists impacted my thesis and undergraduate work. I tend to look at old sculpture, including Olmec colossal heads and other eroded, old things. Goya is one of my favorites because he never held back on talking about death and confronting us. On a psychological level, William Kentridge is my hero. *Congregation* moved the content into a different zone. In trying to capture a crowd, it relates more to painting and caricature, like a Daumier. It also made me think of Bosch and religious artists, in terms of the heads creating different hierarchies relative to our verticality: if they're high up, they seem higher in rank; and the way they cast shadows, they appear ascending