

THE POWER OF THE EARTH

exist side by side with motorcycle magazines, jewels, and fashion pages in Mutu's studio. Yet while the artist's distortion of the female body and its fusion with machinery have received significant critical attention, little notice has been paid to the role of the land in grounding Mutu's cyborgs and seductresses. As discussed in Mutu's interleaf that follows this chapter, land, earth, and trees have long been a central, though overlooked, aspect of her work—both as a medium and as a subject.

Like Wangechi Mutu, Ledelle Moe understands the tensions that bind individual and collective relationships to the land. She describes how her art has been “influenced primarily by the landscape that we are in, whether that's emotional, psychological, political or nuclear family.”⁸⁸ Her family history of migration has strongly influenced both her bond with land and soil and her attention to the transience of belonging. Moe is a first-generation South African who now lives in Baltimore, Maryland. Her father's mother was born in the Shetland Isles but moved to Cairo, where her father was born. Her maternal grandmother was French Mauritian, yet her mother was born in what was then Rhodesia and is now Zimbabwe. Moe was raised in Durban during the final years of apartheid, flanked on one side by the ceaseless motion of the ocean and on the other, the body-like forms of the Drakensburg Mountains. The space between was filled with the conversa-

FIG. 57*
Ledelle Moe
b. 1971, South Africa
Land/Displacements
2012–13
Concrete, steel
255.2 × 678.2 × 198.1 cm.
(100½ × 267 × 78 in.)
Collection of the artist

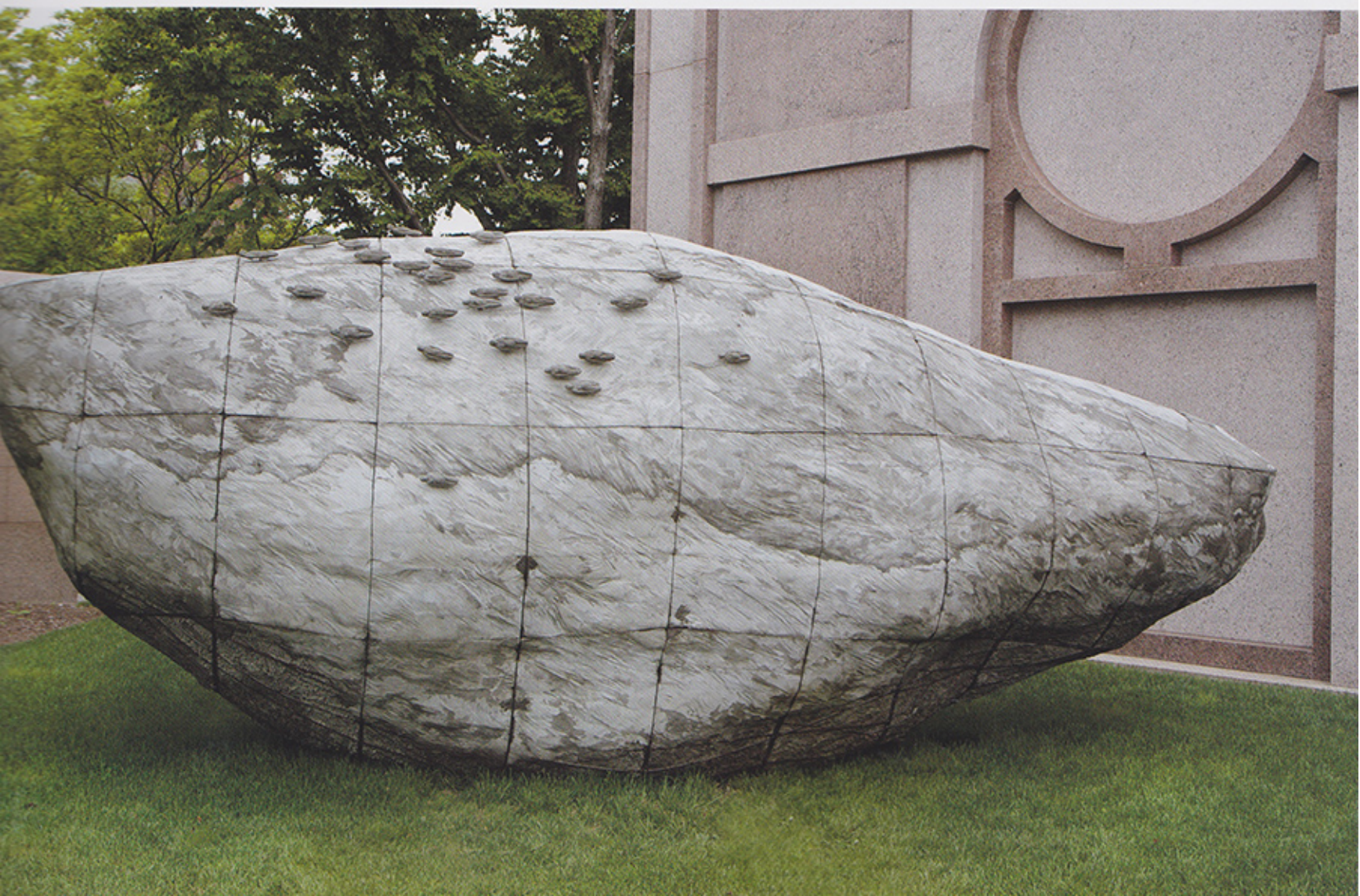




FIG. 58 (ABOVE)

Ledelle Moe

b. 1971, South Africa

Land

2006

Concrete, steel

274.3 × 609.6 cm (108 × 240 in.)

Collection of the artist

FIG. 59 (BELOW)

Ledelle Moe

b. 1971, South Africa

Transitions/Displacements

Concrete, steel

3 figures (front to back)

91.4 × 304.8 × 91.4 cm

(36 × 120 × 36 in.)

121.9 × 548.6 × 121.9 cm

(48 × 216 × 48 in.)

121.9 × 548.6 × 121.9 cm

(48 × 216 × 48 in.)

Kirk Hopper Fine Art, Dallas,

2011–12

tions of a family who always spoke of other places and the fraught politics of a nation being forced from within and without to reconsider its policies regarding those who could access the land and the rights to govern it. And so she works with soil and earth to explore themes of place, belonging, history, memory, impermanence, family, and gender. She finds her inspiration in monuments, gravestones, mortuary figures, and the colors and rhythms of the land itself.

Land/Displacements, an original work created for the *Earth Matters* exhibition (FIG. 57), combines two of Moe's earlier bodies of work. One is *Land* (2006), in which she looked at "land" as both a noun and a verb by creating a monumental wave of concrete using soil from the Chesapeake Bay as the aggregate (FIG. 58). From one side, the work appears to be an "impenetrable hill"; from the other side, a "beckoning cave."⁸⁹ The other work is *Displacements* (2011–12), in which the artist drew upon memories of her grandmother and the formal language of sarcophagi to create monumental, boulderlike sculptures from concrete, using the soil of South Africa as the aggregate (FIG. 59). While she worked on *Displacements*, Moe was reading Marina Warner's *Monuments and Maidens*, and one can see her attention to both mundane and heroic treatments of women in the sculpture's undulating forms.⁹⁰

In all her works, Moe fabricates industrial metal armatures onto which she pours, smears, sands, and gouges concrete until its recesses and protrusions take on the look of time-swept landscapes (FIG. 60). She describes her choice of material:

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 is something we readily understand because we are surrounded by it. . . . my practice is a direct and deliberate regression to a fossil-like, mud-like old state.⁹¹

For *Land/Displacements* (SEE FIG. 57), she created a boulder nine feet high. It is formed fully in the round—there is no wave here threatening to crash down. Instead, the sense of fragility so often incorporated into Moe’s work is again achieved through the crumbling edges and unfilled spaces between each section of concrete and through which she allows viewers to see her process. The outline of the boulder is based on South Africa’s eastern landscape, with its subtle colors and features recalling specific landmarks from this terrain (FIG. 61). The ripples and folds of the concrete are aggregated with an assortment of South Africa’s different colored soils gathered when the artist drove between Cape Town and Durban in 2012. “Flocks” of small concrete heads and figures cascade across the surface, recalling the migration of birds and people, the pathways that water cuts into the earth’s surface, and the artist’s earlier maplike work, *Congregation* from 2006.

Earth can be “perfect,” to imply bodies—to play upon Gaston Bachelard’s phrase from the opening of this chapter. The presence of earthen materials—their tactile look and feel—offers connections to generations both recently deceased and long departed; it can also counter the lingering ghosts of primitivism and help us grapple with migrations that are at once personal, familial, and cultural. Earth blurs “the fixed boundary of the body.”⁹² With the earth, bodies are implied, a relationship that finds further expression in ritual and performance.

In Audrey Richards’s landmark study of girls’ initiation in northern Zambia, the legendary anthropologist describes how Bemba girls in the 1930s were made into women by being “danced.”⁹³ During *chisungu*, Bemba girls and their bodies become “both a mode and an object of knowing.”⁹⁴ Likewise, the earthen figures, vessels, and forms (known as *mbusa*) used in their education were sung. *Mbusa* came into being by acts of the body, and they came into use and action when handled by singing bodies. When these modeled bits of earth were no longer to be performed, they were destroyed. Thus, few remain in museum collections, but their brief



FIG. 60
Artist Ledelle Moe
assembling sculpture



FIG. 61
Artist Ledelle Moe gathering
soil to use as aggregate in her
sculptures, South Africa, 2012