

RETURN

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LEDELLE MOE

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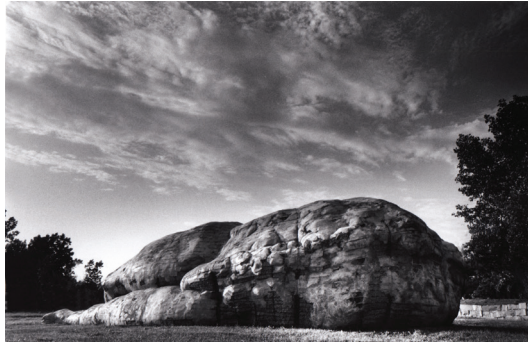


# LEDELLE MOE

## RETURN

In the accompanying brochure to *Collapse* – her large-scale concrete and steel sculpture exhibited at the Socrates Sculpture Park in Queens, NY in 2000 – Ledelle Moe weighs in on the collision of oppositional forces. Some of her work, she says, is “constructed to suggest an ambiguity about the nature of this collision.” *Collapse*, a work wherein the torso of a bison has been fused onto a set of human lower limbs, is a fine example of Moe’s ability to corner ambiguity into material form. Having spent some years as an undergraduate around *Collapse* once it had been moved to the grounds of the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, NY, I came to understand it as a work through which, given its enlarged scale, figuration becomes subordinate to representation or, more broadly speaking, recognisable form is of lesser importance than what it might communicate. At this scale, Moe is able to treat objects and concepts with the same level of priority. *Collapse* specifically, as a recognisably hybrid form, makes plain – in a state of suspended motion – an ambiguity to be felt at the focal point around which the collision of oppositional forces contend.

At Pratt, *Collapse* was initiated by various segments of the student body, first just as a place to be, then as personal monument to congregate around and eventually – once an entry point to its cavernous interior had been discovered – a hideout. To me, *Collapse* was a displaced echo of a faraway habitat yet to be fully codified by its citizens. For South Africa – a young country still defining the species of its own anatomy – the turn of the century was an ambiguous time. On the streets of Brooklyn, there was a sense that America, and by extension the world, could go either way. I’d look at *Collapse* from Pratt’s lithography studio windows and feel an awkward kinship with its invisible insides. Perhaps you had to be around it to really *feel* it, but in the company of *Collapse*, one’s gut was pulled by a concrete mass in two directions simultaneously. This lug of stuff jotted onto the lawn had the dynamism of an expanse still becoming, a vision still taking shape. No matter where you stood, you just didn’t know which way things were about to go.



*Collapse*

My first encounter with *Return* comes in a recently reclaimed space on Frere Street in Woodstock, Cape Town. Moe has been using the space as a temporary studio for the sole purpose of completing *Return*. Walking around her 2.8ton, 7.5m long, 2.2m high, 3m wide new work, I am struck by how different it is to *Collapse*. Its portside is all barnacled and razored coral – the results of Moe jabbing concrete onto the frame from inside the structure. Here Moe, like a kid building sandcastles from underneath the beach sand, is vehemently and passionately non-figurative. Generous as ever, she leaves us stuff to engage with in this sodden underworld we have no measure of: the exposed undercarriage, the mesh, the steel protruding from the hull. Round its keel and Moe has turned southpaw, adopting a stance of sculptor as painter. Her concrete brushwork is emphatic: desperate, hopeless strokes contend with determined, sweeping, overhand cuts. Again, she leaves some recognisable form to cling to: a head, a face, a body. If in the year 2000, Moe was going toe-to-toe with ambiguity in America, here on the streets of Cape Town, two decades of chewing fate later, *Return* sees her emerge from a slugfest with the collision of oppositional forces in ways that take one’s breath away.

Whereas the gut-punch impact of *Collapse* carried a weight of being winded, the suspended motion of *Return* is one of buoyancy. While *Collapse* – and its engineering challenge – was concerned with a decidedly downward trajectory, *Return* comes up for air, has been suspended mid-roll, resurfacing from an expedition into a central category of dialectics since the time of Heraclitus. Its abundant surface of nicks and cuts display the phenotypic variations of turmoil, of narrow escapes from hooks, propeller heads, the predators and parasites that prowled the depths of its voyage. Able to bond conversationally with opposite and contradictory ideas in equal force, *Return* is a sculptural form that, having completed its descent well below the corridors of letting go, has resurfaced with an abundance of new paradoxes in tow: it is a manifold whole that holds a diversity of elements in cargo. Reflecting on *Return*, Moe speaks of the lifeforms that have, over time, built nests in the cavities of her sculptures:

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wasps, bees, spiders and praying mantises, all of which follow “a logic and intelligence that is without regard to the sculpture itself and yet they live together symbiotically.” Cardinal to *Return* is not the rigidity by which it enforces its own logic, but rather the homeomorphic elasticity it grants to the diversity of coterminous and opposing logical systems – the bees and praying mantises – of its reclaimed sunken treasure.

Having circled its form, sitting down for a second, taking it all in, I find myself nudged adrift by what Moe refers to as “waves of clarity, incoherence, loss and an abundance of forces.” Kinship with the invisible insides of *Return* is less a matter of sticking to a single genotypical logic than it is to attempt floatation with the abundance of concurrent lifeforms salvaged from its voyage beyond ambiguity. In their waveform company, floating on our backs, we are returned to a land of propertyless things and constant oscillation, where our bodily functions and their inverse are continuous, where the conditions for awakening what has been slumbering in us are yet to be met, and the relations between us are yet to be determined.

- Jacob van Schalkwyk

