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Ângela Ferreira

Johannesburg Art Gallery, South Africa

S BY [SEAN O'TOOLE](#) IN [REVIEWS](#) | 02 JUN 17

In the main, it has been photographers – among them South Africans Ernest Cole and David Goldblatt as well as, more recently, Swiss artist Laurence Bonvin – who have recognized the metaphorical yield of toilets in South Africa. Lisbon-based Ângela Ferreira is not a photographer, but her earliest work, which dates from the early 1990s, involved photographically documenting this potent symbol of the South African condition. Under white minority rule, public toilets were segregated and basic services such as sanitation unequally distributed. In the years since the advent of democracy, in 1994, the domestic toilet has emerged as a visceral marker of fraying political promises and bureaucratic deferral. Tired of dealing with the same old shit, a student protestor in 2015 sparked a social revolution when he dumped excrement on a statue of Cecil John Rhodes in Cape Town. The faeces had been retrieved from a portable toilet in Khayelitsha: the same low-income settlement on the city's south-eastern periphery where Ferreira had journeyed over 20 years earlier to take what she later described as her 'first cognitive step' as an artist.

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Ângela Ferreira, *Adventures in Mozambique and the Portuguese Tendency To Forget*, 2016. Courtesy: Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg

Sites & Services (1991–92) is the earliest piece included in Ferreira's austere yet engaging exhibition, 'South Facing'. Curator Amy Watson's installation privileges the artist's newest work – a sculptural commission titled *Remining* (2017), which offers a timely archaeological examination of the host venue – but *Sites & Services* feels more apt as a starting point, since it reveals how Ferreira's sublimated sculptures are products of rigorous social optic. The installation is composed of 12 descriptive colour photographs of grey concrete toilets on vacant suburban plots in Khayelitsha, two pastel drawings and four squat, tapering floor sculptures, all untitled. The photos came first and fed into Ferreira's expressionist architectural drawings of interlocking structures. The drawings, in turn, suggested the abstract forms of her rudimentary sculptures, which are made from construction materials (concrete, corrugated iron and white plastic piping) that appear in her photos.

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Ângela Ferreira, *Remining (Vault table)*, 2017. Courtesy: Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg

This relational way of working recurs throughout Ferreira's mixed-media installations, including *Maison Tropicale* (2007), an exploration of the legacy of French architect-engineer Jean Prouvé's three prototype aluminium homes erected in the Congo and Niger. As in *Sites & Services*, the installation is a dialogue between fact-based research – here figured in six documentary photographs – and an oblique materialization of this lost history, in the form of two rectangular wood sculptures with architectural forms.

The exhibition's centrepiece – a trio of large sculptures titled *Remining (Drill Tower)*, *Remining (Mine Building)* and *Remining (Vault Table)* (all 2017) – rehearses this presentation strategy. Installed in the Edwardian exhibition halls of the original Edwin Lutyens-designed building, the *Remining* sculptures are flanked by the artist's basic architectural sketches and a variety of archival photos depicting the 1989 extensions to the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG), mines in Mozambique and Congo, and a copper-vaulted modernist building in Boston. Cumulatively, these materials, including the sculptures, offer an allusive reading of a century-old municipal museum complex in terminal decline.



Ângela Ferreira, *Werdmuller Centre*, 2010. Courtesy: Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg

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The shoddy engineering of JAG's annexe, coupled with the theft of its copper roofing, forced the sudden closure of the museum in February after its newer galleries flooded. Ferreira's exhibition marks JAG's partial reopening. The artist's Remining sculptures, which purposefully quote architectural motifs from the building, reminded me of the stereometric plaster models in Hiroshi Sugimoto's photographic series, *Conceptual Forms* (2004): as objects, they are equal parts teaching aids and cryptic forms.

Whether working towards a sculpture, producing a performance or making a film, Ferreira's method is essentially archaeological. *Adventures in Mozambique and the Portuguese Tendency to Forget* (2016) is a single-channel projection composed of found footage describing urban life in colonial-era Maputo, where Ferreira was born. Scenes of white industry and idleness are juxtaposed with hackneyed tourist observations of village life; a subtitled narrative hints at an incipient revolution. While something of an outlier work, the film showcases the broad scope of Ferreira's materialist engagement with colonial and architectural failure on the African continent.

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Main image: Ângela Ferreira, *Sites and Services*, 1991-92. Courtesy: Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg

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