

# Back to the front

Thania Petersen takes a new look at history through her work, writes **Alexander Matthews**

**T**HANIA Petersen has come full circle in her search for a place to call home. She left Cape Town aged 10 when her family joined her father, a political exile, in London. After dropping out of a sculpture degree at Central Saint Martins (she couldn't afford the fees), a chance encounter with sculptor Sylvester Mubayi led to an apprenticeship in Chitungwiza, Zimbabwe.

While Petersen was carving stone under a mango tree, a South Korean popped up out of nowhere, told her he liked her work, and invited her to go with him to sculpt in Yeosu. So she did. When he turned out to be a bit of a jerk, acclaimed ceramicist Hwang Yea Sook took Petersen under her wing. She became Sook's apprentice and in 2005 exhibited her own pieces at the World Ceramic Biennale in Icheon.

In 2007, Petersen, 36, came to South Africa on holiday. "I had absolutely no intention of staying," she says. But then she met Amin, who became her husband. Three babies later, she's still here.

Having children meant taking a break from art. "I couldn't work, because either I would've compromised my kids or I

**'What urged me was this feeling of not belonging and not being noticed'**

would've compromised my work," she says.

She came back in 2015 with *I am Royal*, her first solo show, staged at the AVA Gallery in Cape Town. It was a series of photographic self-portraits tracing her identity back to the arrival in the Cape of her Indonesian forebears (including Prince Tuan Guru) in the 1700s.

"What urged me to do it was this feeling of not belonging and not being noticed and being ornamental in the landscape and just not being taken seriously," she says. "The Cape Malay are neither black nor white, so we're sort of stuck in the middle of nowhere... You don't feel good enough."

Last year she travelled to the Indian port town of Surat, once a major outpost for the Dutch East India Company. She visited the elaborate mausoleums where the company's officials are buried. These were the men responsible for bringing her forebears to the Cape from Indonesia, as well as uprooting and enslaving countless people from Ceylon, India and Madagascar.

"I thought I would confront the past," she says, "but when I walked through I realised the past had lost its power over me. It



**BRANCHING OUT:** 'God save our hedge' from Botanical Imperialism series by Thania Petersen which represents the Van Riebeeck hedge, grown as a barrier against indigenous people



**BEING NOTICED:** Petersen's exhibition 'I am Royal' was inspired by feelings of not belonging

going to stand at the back or next door. My image is representative of a person who has been on the sidelines for too long."

Last year she travelled to the Indian port town of Surat, once a major outpost for the Dutch East India Company. She visited the elaborate mausoleums where the company's officials are buried. These were the men responsible for bringing her forebears to the Cape from Indonesia, as well as uprooting and enslaving countless people from Ceylon, India and Madagascar.

"I thought I would confront the past," she says, "but when I walked through I realised the past had lost its power over me. It

wasn't about confronting anymore. It was about just being present, being there because I can. I didn't need to claim anything. I had taken something inside back; I was at peace."

Photographs from this visit form the heart of her new show, *Remnants*, at Everard Read Gallery in Cape Town.

"We carry the remnants of the past with us in our hurt and pain as people with no sense of belonging," she says. "These feelings are not exclusive to us. They are felt by displaced communities throughout the world, anyone removed from their indigenous homeland."

Red fabric, an extension of her

dress, flows dramatically across the grey in remembrance of those who came before. "It is symbolic of the blood spilt in the history of all these colonial empires," she says.

Twenty-five images capture her performance of *saman*, an Islamic dance from Indonesia. Petersen had to learn the dance from an American on YouTube because in the clips from Indonesia the dancers were moving too quickly. This frustration underlined her "how far removed we are from our own history."

She loves the irony of performing the dance among the mausoleums, given that the Dutch sought to ban Islam from their

colonies. "I can't imagine anything that would irritate them more," she laughs.

There have been times, however, when she has been almost overwhelmed by her emotional involvement in what she does, and anxiety over how it will be received.

"I'm scared of saying things, that's why I'd rather do it in my work," she says. "Sometimes I don't tell the full story of what the work's about because I'm scared of offending people or being too confrontational. I'm not the kind of person who likes to upset people."

"I have a huge social circle and you can't always accommodate everybody's sensitivities. It's a difficult space to navigate... It's such an incredibly sensitive time. You have to watch what you say because people are so defensive."

In *Aravana* (Sanskrit for "the veil of ignorance"), a video performance and sequence of photographs that appear alongside *Remnants*, Petersen walks through the Castle of Good Hope in a hijab.

"Muslim women are losing their rights to practise their faith as they choose," she says. "The West views the hijab as oppressive, yet many Muslim women feel oppressed not by the hijab but by ideals forced upon

**'This is a silent cry to be heard above structures that confine us'**

them by the governing bodies under which they live. In certain Islamic countries the hijab is used by men in an unlawful manner towards women. We are being robbed of our choices on both sides." She says the "masculine, overpowering" Castle embodies "an oppression we all understand".

"My movements are reminiscent of the pilgrimage around the Kabaa, but I am going in the opposite direction — this walk is a silent cry to be heard above structures that confine us."

Lighter but no less poignant, *Flamingoes* is a series of kitsch, crazy images inspired by the deluge of selfies that her husband, a casting director, receives from women hoping to become stars. They become a meditation on the social-media-obsessed madness.

"Modernity is not giving us everything we need," says Petersen. "It's just keeping us busy. I've come to realise that we are all displaced. Only each person can know what will fulfil them."

● **'Remnants' is at the Everard Read Gallery in Cape Town until March 5**



**BLOODY MEMORIES:** Thania Petersen's 'Remnants' series depicts the blood spilt when Indonesian Muslims were brought to the Cape in chains during the Dutch occupation of its new settlement in Africa