

Directions to find Thami Jali

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by Witty Nyide

Going through 'Top Rank', Zazi road, Claremont you pass a bus shelter-turned kiosk, it's busy, and the proprietor a pensioner in a white headdress seems overworked. Three primary school kids peck at a packet of cheese puffs next to a group of young men gathered around a red 1985 Jetta coupe, a youth magnet. Residential space collides with business here, newspaper headlines and 2014 election campaigning posters cling to the electricity poles, hand-written adverts tout for business edging out the digitally printed, some new some faded and tatty. Pass a white double storey near Mavundla tuck shop and turn left into Tenth Avenue. It's the third house on the left, nearly 85-year-old the building is now an artist's studio and gallery and home to Thamsanqa (Thami) Rutherford Jali.

But the Jali roots are further south, in the sprawling township of Lamontville, the oldest township in Durban established in 1934. The area was a reservoir for black labour working in what is now called South Durban Basin although it was set up ostensibly for a black middle class. NomasontomaThabethe Jali gave birth to a boy Thami, the fifth of her six children on a wintry Thursday, the 30th of June 1955. Although the family moved to Claremont when he was six, continued connections to Lamontville sparked Thami's earliest appreciation for Jazz music and a fascination with spaces, imagined or real.

Tracking Thami Jali over the last 50 years would yield a life path criss-crossing the country and travel abroad but it is the artist's relationship with place as metaphor that intrigues: the line between Jali's artworks and his varying surroundings, past and present, is fluid. His fascination with old buildings, scarified surfaces and people's occupation of space, present and historical, is played out in diverse mediums. The work draws the viewer in as would an open door and although the subject matter is diverse; there is a sense that Jali is present in each and every work.

He has lived a life seemingly in constant search for relevance: a false start in Law at the University of Zululand before becoming a clerk in Ulundi till once again the University beckoned, this time for a social science course. Here Jali was exposed to philosophy and ultimately to art by way of a visiting contingent of artists from Rorke's Drift. Having been drawn away to Rorke's Drift for two years and then on to Durban Tech, his formal art career featured time in Soweto, Clermont, Johannesburg, London, India, Nelspruit and Cato Manor. It is however his intellectual journey that reveals an artist revered by many and dictated to by none. From academia to life on the street, local political activist to Southern-African arts organizer Jali had a vision of creating a community-based arts organization that was unencumbered by political interference. Influenced by cultural production outfits such as Mhloti Black Theatre and the Medu Arts Ensemble, Jali has worked both within and outside the political mainstream eschewing patronage to focus rather on creating a space for free artistic expression.

A life in constant motion has brought him full circle geographically but his politics have shown linear growth, outstripping jaded struggle dogma to position him firmly as a liberal humanist.