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We Are Also the Darkness After the Big Explosion

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Nolan Oswald Dennis sees the pre- and postcolonial worlds as contemporaneous and interlocking.



Detail of Nolan Oswald Dennis, "Articulated globe (pair)" (2024), black primer, cowry shell veil, steel armature (all photos Hrag Vartanian/*Hyperallergic*)

What does a “black consciousness of space” look like? Does it form a positive or a negative, or elide the two? And how about the tension or contrast between a “racialized, propertied world and heterogenous Black and Indigenous imaginaries”?

These are some of the questions you will grapple with in the first United States exhibition by Lusaka-born and Johannesburg-based artist Nolan Oswald Dennis, who has a knack for articulating their ideas in powerful objects that both conceal and reveal their inner logics and contradictions.

In “Articulated globe (pair)” (2024), which may express the vision of the exhibition most clearly, two spheres touch in a manner that suggests camaraderie or care. One, a conventional world globe turned upside down, leans into the other, a black version covered with a cowry shell veil, in what we could imagine is a joining of worlds. That in-betweenness is what excites the artist, who explores pre- and postcolonial worlds within a framework that suggests not the teleology of one becoming the other but rather a worldview of the two as contemporaneous and interlocking.

Despite some of the philosophical influences in their work, which may suggest otherwise — chief among them Jamaican writer Sylvia Wynter, who guides our focus toward the natural world to counter what she terms the “overrepresentation of Man” — object-making is still foundational to Dennis’s practice. These objects are prodding, sometimes asking the viewer to imagine non-existent versions such as their inverse or new iterations, and sometimes incomplete, like “Isivivane” (2023–ongoing), in which a 3D printer recreates rock fragments from around the world, including Australia, Palestine, and South Africa. In the context of the museum or art space, that reproduction of parts or relics touches on conversations around restitution and suggests that we are often stuck on the surface, rather than probing what lies below.



Installation view of Nolan Oswald Dennis: *overtURNS* with “Approximations (1)” (2021) to the left; “Black Liberation Zodiac (Kgositsile’s Folly)” (2022–ongoing) at center; and a partial view of “Isivivane” (2023 –ongoing) at the back right

In “further notes 4 a planet (nine-dash)” (2024), necklaces of letter beads connect panels of words like a switchboard channeling us to a different concept of reality. It looked like the work could be interactive, so I asked the attendant if I could touch it. They said no, as the necklaces are apparently too delicate for the audience to handle. That invitation to reimagine — and the ability to withhold — is an apt way to see how art can promise the unattainable, creating spaces that have never existed before while demanding we follow certain rules to be granted access.

One of the many sentences that appear on a screen in “Approximations (1)” (2021) is “discovery is code word for forgetting”; another is the title to this review. Rituals of learning and unlearning drive us to push forward and change, overturning what we know in favor of asking about what we don’t, and waiting for the answer, if it ever comes.

Nolan Oswald Dennis: overturns continues at the Swiss Institute (38 St. Mark’s Place, East Village, Manhattan) until April 13. The exhibition was curated by KJ Abudu.