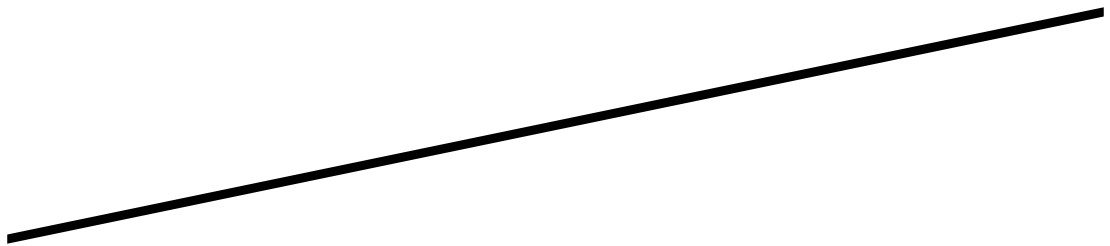


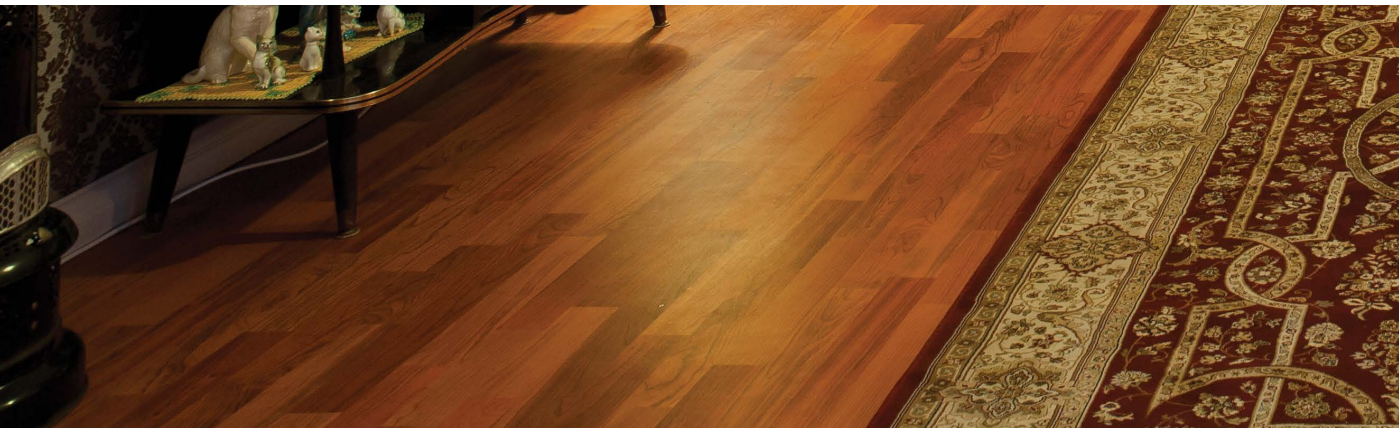


THE FRONT ROOM 'INNA JOBURG'

An exhibition by Michael McMillan in partnership with
the Visual Identities in Art and Design Research Centre



**MICHAEL
MCMILLAN**





THE FRONT ROOM 'INNA JOBURG'

30 July 2016 to 26 August 2016

FADA Gallery
University of Johannesburg

An exhibition by Michael McMillan in partnership with the
Visual Identities in Art and Design Research Centre,
University of Johannesburg



(Front cover)
Michael McMillan
The Front Room
'Inna Joburg'
2016
Details from the installation
FADA Gallery,
Johannesburg
Courtesy of Eugene Hön



(inside front cover)
Michael McMillan
The Front Room
'Inna Joburg'
2016
Details from the installation
FADA Gallery,
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(Top left)
Michael McMillan
The West Indian Front Room: Memories and Impressions of Black British Homes
2005-2006
Installation comprising found objects, home furnishings, wood
2 x 4 x 3 metres
Geffrye Museum, London
Courtesy of John Neligan

(Bottom left)
Michael McMillan
Van Huis Uit: The Living Room of Migrants in the Netherlands
2007-2008
Installation comprising found objects, home furnishings, wood
2 x 4 x 3 metres
Imagine IC, Amsterdam
Courtesy of Hassan Soulail

The Front Room 'Inna Joburg'

In the domestic interior there is often a designated space reserved for receiving guests, where hospitality takes place. This is usually the front room, which emanates from the Victorian parlour. In an English context, the quintessential example of this material culture was created by the Windrush generation, who are associated with West Indian immigrants that came on the *Empire Windush*, which arrived at Tilbury Docks, outside London, in 1948. They were British citizens of the British Empire, who, upon arriving in the 'Mother Country' began to see themselves as West Indians when they met other West Indians through the process of postwar Caribbean migration to Britain. This moment was also a conjuncture, to use Stuart Hall's term (2013), of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles for independence and social justice; the civil rights, anti-apartheid, anti-racist movements as well as the emergence of a mass consumer and communication culture. The 'West Indian' front room expresses a shift, therefore, from the colonial 'sacred' codes of respectability, propriety and decorum, to the 'secular' stylistic signification of post-colonial modernity and consumer culture. Regardless of their social background in the Caribbean, these migrants were down-sized to the space of working class, if not underclass, and therefore the front room also signifies working class respectability: no matter how poor we were, if the front room looked good, then we were respectable.

I have used oral history work in my research as a playwright, artist/curator, and author, as seen in *The Black Boy Pub & Other Stories* (McMillan 1997), which emerged from a year-long writer's residency in High Wycombe. High Wycombe is a town in the County of Buckinghamshire that was colonised by Vincentian migrants from the late 1950s, like my parents. I was born in High Wycombe before we moved as a family to London. While I was carrying out oral history interviews in the front rooms of Caribbean elders in High Wycombe, I experienced a kind of ritual *de ja vu* – as if I was in the same room, though each respondent was different. Growing up, the aesthetics of the front room felt for me like nails scratching a blackboard, because it seemed to embody all that the 'Protestant Work Ethic' meant, and was decked out in 'bad taste' or with no taste at all. In other words, it was 'kitsch'. Yet, through this epiphany, I realised that the front room was intrinsic to the formation of my black British identity, and that if I had such an ambivalence, then others of my generation and cultural background might also, and therefore the front room was worth exploring as an artwork.

The project was eventually conceived as *The West Indian Front Room: Memories and Impressions of Black British Homes* – an installation and immersive environment contextualised by archival photographs and audio-visual materials, which I guest curated at the Geffrye Museum (London, 2005-2006).

In 1985, OBAALA (Organisation for Black Arts Advancement and Leisure Activities) Arts Collective had already presented a Windrush generation-styled living room in their *From Generation to Generation: the installation* (1985), which was housed in the Black-Art Gallery in North London. Included in this reimagined living room were two mannequins: a black middle-aged man seated in an armchair, as if too tired to remove his National Railway uniform, and a similarly aged black woman, with her head wrapped and a cardigan over her shoulders, standing at an ironing board with the iron's electrical cord connected to the light switch. Through an adjoining passage was a bedroom with white-washed walls, in which the mannequin of a young black man was seated at a plain white desk, wearing a dashiki, tracksuit pants and locks hair-style, and with the room itself dressed with Pan-African styled political posters and artefacts.

From Generation to Generation resisted sentimentalised heritage orientated portrayals of the Windrush generation that tend to negate how intergenerational identifications, disavowals and negotiations have shaped the formation of black British interiority in the home. Community begins in the



Michael McMillan
A Living Room
Surrounded by Salt
 2008
 Installation comprising
 found objects, under a
 dead tree
 4 x 3 x 3 metres
 Buena Vista, Instituto
 Buena Vista, Curacao
 Courtesy of
 Michael McMillan

home, in social spaces like the front room, and yet in dominant representations of the black British experience our homes are not featured: we appear to live on the streets. My own curatorial strategy was thus not to recreate a definitive representation of the Windrush generation's front room, but rather an authentic interpretation of its material culture that provided a means of identification through recognition. For me, *The West Indian Front Room* also speaks to a 'kind of truth', to use Toni Morrison's phrase (Morrison 1987), about rebelling against what the front room symbolised in the transition from being a 'coloured boy in short pants' to a sense of being black and British during a key moment of radical black politics and pan-Africanism in the 1970s.

With over 35,000 visitors, *The West Indian Front Room* was eventually more successful than any of my plays, as it evoked and invoked for culturally diverse audiences personal and collective memories of childhood, 'everyday' cultural traditions, aspirations, gendered domestic practices, consumer desires and identities in the home. As a consequence, it resonated with multiple migrant diasporas beyond the black diasporic experience, such as South East Asian, Turkish and Greek Cypriot, Jewish, Italian and Irish communities, as well as white working class families. This also led to *Van Huis Uit: the living room of migrants in the Netherlands* in Holland (2007-2008), and an artist residency in Curacao that resulted in *A Living Room Surrounded by Salt* (2008), where installations were created with local materials and oral histories. I have written extensively about the ethnographic research that informed the curating of *The West Indian Front Room* (McMillan 2003, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2013, 2017, 2018) as well as forming the basis of my arts doctorate (McMillan 2010). Subsequent iterations of the installation-based exhibition signify the ongoing broad appeal of the project, now simply called *The Front Room*.

My introduction to VIAD at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) came via my colleague, Vanley Burke, the Birmingham-based Jamaican photographer, who mentioned me and *The West Indian Front Room* to VIAD's Director, Leora Farber, who subsequently got in touch. It wasn't until I raised the funding via the Arts Council that the idea of bringing it to Johannesburg could be realised. The funding facilitated a two-month artist residency in Johannesburg, from June-August 2016, during which *The Front Room 'Inna Joburg'* was produced in collaboration with VIAD. Other iterations of *The Front Room* involved an extensive organic research process that would usually enable me to work peripatetically in the field with local communities identifying and sourcing specific materials, and gathering oral history interviews and archival images that might be used to dress the installation.

Working in Johannesburg, however, presented a different set of challenges. Before coming to Johannesburg, memories of witnessing the racist brutality of the apartheid system on television, reading about it in newspapers and books, and hearing of it from South African visitors to the United Kingdom (UK), resurfaced. Yet, just as post-colonialism does not signal complete decolonialisation, the current post-apartheid moment raises questions about the psychological and physical legacies of apartheid in terms of contemporary South African cultural politics. It was evident from the preliminary research I undertook before coming to South Africa, that the policy of 'forced removals' of black, Indian and coloured communities into 'homelands' and 'townships', and the separation of families through the 'pass laws' under apartheid, had legacies for the meanings and uses of home in a contemporary context.

As a member of VIAD's curatorial team, Maria Fidel Regueros made preliminary contacts in Soweto, Lenasia and Vrededorp and conducted informal audio-recorded interviews with selected respondents in their homes on my behalf. This was challenging for the respondents. Firstly, because I could not be present to lead the research, and secondly, because at the time, the VIAD staff comprised – though with all the best intentions in the world – three middle-class white females. In a post-apartheid Johannesburg where, amongst

other complexities, race is still contested, the issue of white privilege, and our choice to work with the local black, 'coloured' and Indian communities (taking account of apartheid's legacy of racial hierarchies), were factors that compounded the complexity of the situation. We were acutely aware of these cultural politics. Any attempts to 're-present' these local communities in an installation-based exhibition based on research carried out by white women and remotely by a black British man, ran the risk of perpetuating an orientalist 'grand narrative' that paternalistically claims 'knowledge of the unknowable' (Williamson 1987b).

I knew South Africa and I didn't know South Africa, and therefore I was fully aware that in contemporary Johannesburg, the cultural politics of globalisation could resonate as me being seen as a 'foreign' black person from the UK, who has the privilege of being able to travel internationally. Moreover, what did this research mean to those communities engaging with VIAD at UJ, with its inherited history of apartheid, from its predecessor institution Rand Afrikaans University? Given such unknowns, all I can rely on, as an arts practitioner, is what I know, and being true to my own sense of integrity. Ethically, such a reflexive position enables one to be aware of one's own humanness and that of others. Moreover, unknowns are also intrinsic to the creative process, where limitations of resources, space, materials, finance, personnel, etc. usually emerge. The challenge therefore, is how to transcend these limitations through freedom of the imagination. In other words, it isn't what you have, but what you feel about what you have. Therefore, from a pragmatic and ethical standpoint, it was agreed with VIAD that *The Front Room 'Inna Joburg'* would be reconfigured curatorially, and that I would draw on what had already been tested and proven to work in previous iterations of *The Front Room*.

Consequently, I liaised with Maria and Claire Jorgensen, VIAD's Project Manager, to identify materials that could be used to dress the installation based on the aesthetics of *The West Indian Front Room*. Because storage space was not available before and after the show, objects and furniture were mostly sourced from *The Cottage Hire*, a company that hires out props for film and television shoots. Materials were sourced with relative ease, which reminded me how much the British Empire had travelled, which made perfect sense, as the British colonial elite in South Africa recreated the Victorian parlour in their kitsch romanticisation of English domestic interiors, just as *The West Indian Front Room* was a cultural translation of a colonial modulated space.

Curatorially, my intention was not that *The Front Room 'Inna Joburg'* should be a facsimile of *The West Indian Front Room*, but rather to use its aesthetics to construct a hybrid black diasporic intervention in post-apartheid Johannesburg, so as to open a dialogue around what was similar locally to the material culture of the 'West Indian' (Windrush generation of post-war Caribbean migration) front room, and what was different.

Black identity is culturally, politically and historically constructed, and its representation shifts according to the context. In South Africa, I was aware that given my ethnic mixture (African, Indian, Scottish, Portuguese), I might be seen as 'coloured', and also as a 'foreign' black person from a 'developed' country. I rented an apartment in Melville, nearby the Auckland Park Campus of UJ, which as a 'securitised community' reminded me of middle class areas in London, such as Hampstead, with restaurants, boutiques, and trendy bars, though domestic dwellings were often compounds surrounded by electrified fences, with private security guards patrolling the streets. Consequently, I walked the streets of Johannesburg as if I were in Hackney where I live, where I am always aware of where I am and who is around me.

We had just over a month from the date I arrived to the opening of the show, so I hit the ground running at VIAD in terms of the production, for which the pre-planning helped as most things were simply confirmed and collected, rather than sought. I found numerous crochet doilies, though

(Top right)
Michael McMillan
& Christine Checinska
*The Front Room
'Inna Joburg'
& The Arrivants*
2016
Wooden glass cabinet
displaying archive
materials and gold framed
TV monitor screening
*Tales from the Front
Room* (BBC4 2007)
FADA Gallery,
Johannesburg
Courtesy of
Thys Dullaart

(Bottom right)
Michael McMillan
& Christine Checinska
*The Front Room
'Inna Joburg'
& The Arrivants*
2016
Details of archive
materials in wooden
glass cabinet
FADA Gallery,
Johannesburg
Courtesy of
Thys Dullaart

(Following spread)
Michael McMillan
*The Front Room
'Inna Joburg'*
2016
Installation comprising
found objects, home
furnishings, wood
2.5 x 4.5 x 5 metres
FADA Gallery,
Johannesburg
Courtesy of Eugene Hön







none were starched, so in keeping with the aesthetic of *The West Indian Front Room*, I brought some from my collection, which had belonged to my mother. Moreover, it wasn't until Christine arrived in Johannesburg that we both realised how much the themes of our respective exhibitions, *The Arrivants* and *The Front Room 'Inna Joburg'*, resonated with one another. These overlaps were manifest in the choice of objects we both brought over, such as archive portraits of our parents, their immigration papers, and in Christine's case, her mother's white gloves. These materials were housed in a 1950s period cabinet with glass shelves and doors, located at the back of the gallery. The cabinet was used in an interactive performance piece entitled *Back a Yard* that Christine and I scripted, and presented at the exhibition opening. Beside this cabinet was a black plinth onto which was placed a flat-screen television framed with a gold-painted ornate wooden picture frame, on which was screened *Tales from the Front Room*, a BBC4 documentary that emerged from *The West Indian Front Room*.

The plays I write are not complete without the creative, collaborative input of others. This approach also informs my practice as an artist/curator, where I invite creative input from those involved in the production process. This meant that Christine and I often sought advice from each other about the dressing of our respective installations. *The Front Room* installation was situated on the far side of the FADA gallery, which is essentially a white cube on the upper floor. Based on my preliminary design drawings, it consisted of a 2.5-metre high by 4.5-metre wide, and 5-metre long four-walled wooden structure painted a chocolate brown on the outside with a mock-pressed steel ceiling, and a 2-metre entrance-exit draped with lace curtains and a wooden pelmet.

The walls of the interior were covered in dark maroon floral-patterned velvet flock wallpaper, which we had sourced prior to my arrival in Johannesburg, and the floor was lined with laminated vinyl wood flooring, though in *The West Indian Front Room* it would have been a floral patterned red or maroon carpet. The ceiling was covered in polystyrene pressed tiles, in the centre of which hung a frosted glass globe light fitting. We had initially acquired a 1950s-style long-stemmed three-armed light fitting, but this was changed, not only because it was too large for the space, but also because it would have been used in a middle-class English home, where the ceiling would have been higher than that of a working-class home. Having to source a smaller light fitting made me realise that the design of the installation embodied a working-class or lower-middle-class domestic aesthetic. Moreover, my original floor plan design for the installation was smaller than what was eventually built, because I thought that visitors needed space to move around in the installation. On reflection, it would have been more 'authentic' to keep the smaller and potentially more cramped spatial environment that visitors would have had to negotiate, because this would have been more to the scale of the actual front rooms.

The assemblage of furniture and fixtures, and the aesthetics and spatial arrangement of *The West Indian Front Room*, featured similar 1970s period appliances, soft furnishings, ornaments and wall hangings. This included an orange and cream patterned upholstered three-piece lounge suite, on which were placed antimacassar lace 'chair-backs', and cushions, such as a black velour cushion with 'Jamaica' written on the front that I brought with me from the UK. There was also a black wooden framed glass drinks cabinet, which Leora kindly loaned fine glassware to fill. I was amazed to find a paraffin heater, as this was what many Caribbean migrant families used before central heating arrived in the UK. It was a dangerous appliance that used kerosene (blue and pink paraffin), gave off toxic fumes, burnt children and caused domestic fires – so much so that in *The West Indian Front Room* its presence triggered traumatic memories for some audience members.

Two ceramic dogs sat either side of a radiogram, which consisted of a radio and phono turntable housed in a wooden cabinet that in Caribbean

(Top left)
Michael McMillan
The Front Room
'Inna Joburg'
2016
Details from
the installation
FADA Gallery,
Johannesburg
Courtesy of Eugene Hön

(Bottom left)
Michael McMillan
The Front Room
'Inna Joburg'
2016
Details from the
installation
FADA Gallery,
Johannesburg
Courtesy of Eugene Hön

(Following spread)
Michael McMillan
The Front Room
'Inna Joburg'
2016
Simphiwe Buthelezi
on telephone in
the installation
FADA Gallery,
Johannesburg
Courtesy of
Simphiwe Buthelezi



households was nicknamed the 'Bluespot', after its German manufacturer, 'Blaupunkt'. It provided entertainment with imported vinyl records when many of those migrants had been barred from English pubs and clubs. The radiogram didn't work, but came alive via an audio-loop playing on a MP3 player, which included: Lord Kitchener's *London is The Place For Me* (1948), Millie Small's *My Boy Lollipop* (1965), Jim Reeves's *Distant Drums* (1966), Mighty Sparrow's *Good Morning Mr Walker* (1968), Bob and Marcia's *Young, Gifted and Black* (1970), Toots & The Maytals' *Monkey Man* (1968), and the black South African singer, Miriam Makeba's *Pata Pata* (1957), which were mixed with extracts from oral history interviews that were used in *The West Indian Front Room*. On the top of the radiogram was a clay bowl traditionally used by South African Venda women to make home-made beer, as a means of supplementing their income.

Soft furnishings like lace curtains, plastic doilies and other small accessories were bought from the *Oriental Plaza* in Fordsburg a mall of shops that are historically Indian-owned, and where many Joburgers shop for fabrics and domestic goods for their homes. This included a central 'Oriental/Persian' styled rug, under a marble-effect coffee table, on which sat my mother's best crochet doily – enhancing the display of artificial flowers in a blow-glassed styled vase.

The wall hangings included: a reproduction of one of J.H.Lynch's series of paintings featuring the eroticised *Tina*, reproductions of Stephen Pearson's *Wings of Love*, *The Last Supper* and other religious pictures, two circular light fittings displaying the painting of a deer in an idyllic natural setting that might have been popular in Afrikaner homes of the era, and another depicting the Taj Mahal in India. There was also a black velour scroll displaying a tourist map of St Vincent, and the portraits of my family that I had brought with me, which seemed more ethically appropriate than those of people that a limited research process had not afforded me the opportunity to develop relationships with. Finally, on either side of the inside walls of the installation, as one exited, was a painted portrait of Nelson Mandela and a chrome etching of Queen Elizabeth II, the juxtaposition of which was playfully subversive.

I have written elsewhere about *The West Indian Front Room*, which reveals a form of 'impression management' or 'carrying on like a poppy-show' as in Eastern Caribbean vernacular, where there is a slippage between what Daniel Miller (1996) calls the transcendent as a register of respectability, and the transient as a register of reputation. In this sense, the performativity of the front room is also a slippage between the public and the private, between the secular and the spiritual.

While my dad often entertained in the front room, it was my mum who dressed and maintained it, which symbolised her aspirational feminine style as the fruits of her two jobs, which entailed cleaning and shift-work labour. As a room of their own, to echo Virginia Woolf's novel, *A Room of One's Own* (1929) – and captured in Maxine Walker's series of images, *Auntie Linda's Front Room* (1987) – the front room was important for black women, because they are rarely portrayed as respectable, good spouses, mothers, home-makers, but as domestic labour in someone else's home as in the trope of the 'black mama'.

Townships were created under the apartheid Group Areas Act of 1950, which was a key instrument of racial segregation from the 1950s into the 1960s, and in which 'forced removals' pushed black communities out of cities. For instance, in former multi-cultural areas within inner-city Johannesburg, such as Fietas (currently the suburbs of Pageview and Vrededrop), Indian families were forcibly removed to Lenasia, black families to Soweto, and coloured families to Eldorado Park.

Once in Johannesburg, Maria took me to the homes of respondents whom she had initially interviewed, in Lenasia, Eldorado Park, and Shonisani 'Shoni' Netshia, a post-graduate researcher and lecturer at UJ, took me to meet a number of black women, including her mother, in Soweto. During our



Michael McMillan
The Front Room
 'Inna Joburg'
 2016
 Cushion cover with
 Jamaican tourist design
 and *Tina* painting
 by J.H.Lynch in
 the installation
 FADA Gallery,
 Johannesburg
 Courtesy of Eugene Hön



Michael McMillan
The Front Room
 'Inna Joburg'
 2016
 Mirror displaying etching of Queen Elizabeth II and convex mirror with floral patterned brass frame in the installation. FADA Gallery, Johannesburg. Courtesy of Eugene Hön

(Following spread)
 Michael McMillan
The Front Room
 'Inna Joburg'
 2016
 Detail of coffee table displaying artificial flowers in vase on Escalita McMillan's crochet doily in the installation
 FADA Gallery, Johannesburg
 Courtesy of Eugene Hön

(Following page - top left)
 Michael McMillan
The Front Room
 'Inna Joburg'
 2016
 Simphiwe Buthelezi lit by circular light fitting displaying the painting of a deer in the installation
 FADA Gallery, Johannesburg
 Courtesy of Simphiwe Buthelezi

(Following page - bottom left)
 Michael McMillan
The Front Room
 'Inna Joburg'
 2016
 Simphiwe Buthelezi lit by lava lamp in the installation
 FADA Gallery, Johannesburg
 Courtesy of Simphiwe Buthelezi

meetings, respondents were invited to participate in an oral history workshop, and bring objects from their living rooms that they could share stories about. Oral history work is intrinsic to iterations of *The Front Room*, and in Denise Noble's essay about *The West Indian Front Room* (2018), she describes a 'call-and-response', which as a black diasporic cultural practice, is a call-out from myself, the artist, to the black communities for response. This dialogue adds to the experience of the front room as a site of personal and collective memory.

During the oral history workshop in the FADA Gallery, one of the memorable objects that black women participants brought and shared stories about, were colourful crochet doilies they had made, used in their homes, and sometimes sold. These crochet oral histories resonated with Shoni's research into Dutch lace, crocheted doilies and Shweshwe fabric, and the fact that my mother put 'seamstress' as her occupation in her passport, which she used to come to England in 1960. Seamstressing, domestic science and crocheting were taught to girls from poor backgrounds in a rudimentary and limited colonial education system in the Caribbean in preparation for the only 'vocation' available to them – domestic labour. My mother worked for six years as a maid for a Dutch family in Curacao, before coming to England. Like the black women from Soweto, Caribbean migrants creolised the craft of crocheting, which had originally been brought to the colonies by missionaries, from plain white and cream colours, to colourful three-dimensional sculptural pieces with copious folds, where each design was unique to the individual maker, and that many sold to supplement their income.

Whilst UJ represents itself as a post-colonial cultural institution, with an 80% black student body, the audiences that visited *The Front Room 'Inna Joburg'* and *The Arrivants* were predominantly white, and like the few black, Indian, coloured and other visitors from other ethnic groups, shared the middle-class inscribed cultural capital of visiting art galleries and museums. It was ironic that the FADA Gallery, and the demographic of staff and students in the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture, felt similar to my experience of higher education institutions within in the UK. Therefore, as with any audience, it was the personal encounters with individuals that struck me most. Amongst the artists, writers and intellectuals, there were also some progressive staff members and engaged students at UJ, such as Simphiwe Buthelezi, a young black woman studying Fine Art, who took images of her interventions into/ with the installation, some of which are included here.

One of the most rewarding moments for me, was inviting the black security staff and black female cleaning staff whom I encountered whenever I came to the gallery to respond to the installation. In their responses, they shared the aesthetics of their own living rooms, and the importance of having Sunday dinner consisting of food with seven colours. Spiritually, I felt my mother's presence in the installation at this moment.

Finally, in Jacob Dlamini's *Native Nostalgia* (2009) he recalls the material culture of the township life of his youth as what he calls a 'reflective nostalgia', where in the summer of 1976, black students rose up in Soweto against what they saw as the complacency of their parents in response to state-legitimised oppression. Similarly, black youths, who did not share the values of their Caribbean migrant parents, revolted against police oppression at the Notting Hill Carnival at the same time in 1976. I made this diasporic connection in one of two text panels on the outside of the installation, which as a final ritual in dressing the installation, also included placing objects I had brought from the UK. I have a fantasy of a teacher, who in bringing her students to see *The Front Room 'Inna Joburg'* and *The Arrivants*, was moved to reflect on human interconnectedness, and back in the classroom, she would tell the story of how a young white girl fell in love with a young black boy, because he gave her his ripe mango that he had brought over from the Caribbean when he came to England.



The Front Room 'Inna Joburg'

