

OUT OF ANGOLA

Glen Nelson

Essay reprinted from Nzambi (God): Hildebrando de Melo by Glen Nelson, a catalogue of de Melo's work produced by the Mormon Arts Center in 2018.

The artwork of Hildebrando de Melo rises from Angola itself—from the valleys near Huambo where he was born, through the urban streets of Luanda where he lives with his wife and children, amid the dynamism of one of the world's most expensive cities, between the sounds of Portuguese and tribal Bantu languages, in the art and artifacts created by centuries of Africans, from the history of his ancestral tribal kingdom of Bailundo, with the political fallout in a country emerging from decades of brutality and war nearly incomprehensible to a foreigner and the convoluted legacies of racism, slavery, colonialism, liberation, interventionist politics, poverty, riches, and injustice, with the artist's own history, his religious probing, the nation's budding contemporary art scene, the artist's global travels—and his attempts to reconcile and personify all of it.

De Melo was born in 1978,¹ three years after Angola declared its independence from Portugal. The catalysts for self-rule were the death of António Salazar in 1970, the Portuguese dictator who ruled his country and its far-flung colonies ruthlessly for 40 years, and the Carnation Revolution of 1974, when the Lisbon government of Marcello Caetano was toppled bloodlessly in a *coup d'état*.²

1. For biographical information, see *Hildebrando de Melo, Deep Hildebrando de Melo: 20 Years of Work*, (Hildebrando de Melo Atelier, 2015).

2. For Angolan political history, see David Birmingham, *A Short History of Modern Angola*, (Oxford University Press, 2015).

The modern history of Angola—and it is a narrative caked in violence—is dominated by Portugal and mass migration from and then back to the Middle African nation on the Atlantic coast. Before that, a half million Africans were taken as slaves in the 19th century, nearly all of them men, and sent to Brazil, São Tomé, and other destinations. A century later, a similar number of wealth-seeking Europeans moved to Angola for a slice of its natural resources.³ The African nationalist movement in the 1970s ejected colonialists from Angola but left a void of power for the Soviets, Cubans, Chinese, Americans, Congolese, and South Africans to attempt to fill. They backed, by covert or overt means, the warring forces within the country: FNLA (Front for the National Liberation of Angola), MPLA (Movement for the Popular Liberation of Angola), and UNITA (Union for the Independence of the Totality of Angola).⁴ Angolan armies and rebels would brutalize their own citizens in a Civil War that lasted until 2002, interrupted sporadically with brittle truces. This coincided in world history with the fall of Saigon in 1975, American humiliation after the Vietnam War, and a fear in the western hemisphere that Angola might become the next global flashpoint. Meanwhile, as vast Angolan petroleum and mining industries were developed, the balance of political might was further warped by multi-national corporate influencers and foreign powers who played the long game to secure their own emerging interests.

In this, Hildebrando de Melo was no bystander. His paternal grandfather King Ekuikui II of Bailundo—the tribal kingdom dates back to the 15th century—and grandmother Laura de Jesus were among the pioneers in Angola's diamond industry. Adept at maneuvering between politicians, they instilled nonetheless in their children and grandchildren a sense of national responsibility. Both his mother and father held

3. Birmingham, *A Short History of Modern Angola*, vii.

4. Birmingham, *A Short History of Modern Angola*, 67–80.

important posts in government, as well. And his uncle is currently a prominent ministry official.⁵

De Melo tells the story that at his birth, his grandfather took one look at him and protested loudly that his daughter would dare to bring a white child into his house. He laughs as he recounts the anecdote, but whether it was originally spoken in jest or not, it reflects a life of nuanced racial definition that mirrors the country's itself. When an expedition of 19th century Germans explored Angola, they imagined that they would be the first white men to uncover Central Africa. Their expectations of finding barely-evolved primitives were dashed as they met Africans who spoke fluent Portuguese, led them over well-traveled paths of commerce, and wore clothing much like their own. These Angolan guides they called "white men," not because of the color of their skin but because they wore shoes and trousers. As historian David Birmingham writes of Angolans, "Identity was effectively determined by culture rather than by pigmentation."⁶ The artist notes that in the de Melo family tree is a white British ancestor and that his immediate siblings today include multiple races, all of which give him a broad racial identity.

His life tracks closely the trauma of his nation being born, as well. This included violence and death. Writing about his childhood,

As a child in Angola, I used to build roads of sand, and I would play with toy cars and insects that I captured. I would create stories out of these things. As an adult, I am still like a child, Hildebrando.

These things grew out of the state of terror and the war in my country. I lived in a city named Lobito, and when five years old, I remember seeing a dead body, spread on the ground at the Catumbela airport. I was only a child, traveling to Europe, but the memory has always stayed with me. It is like a wave that crashes against the shore and recedes.⁷

5. Interview between Hildebrando de Melo and the author, April 26, 2018, New York City.

6. Birmingham, *A Short History of Modern Angola*, 3.

7. de Melo, *Deep Hildebrando de Melo: 20 Years of Work*, 20.

At the age of five, de Melo became seriously ill and was anemic. With few treatment options in Lobito, his parents put him on an airplane to Portugal by himself with a sign attached to his chest that read, “Deliver to Laura de Melo,” where his grandmother resided. He received doctors’ care and lived with her. The family planned to have the boy seek medical help and then return home to his parents and siblings, but he so reminded his grandmother of her own, distant son—in his walk, voice, and facial features—that she convinced them that the child would be safer in Portugal with her, his aunt, uncle, and cousins. A woman of means who had traveled widely and was friends with Coco Chanel and other luminaries of the age, she became a powerful figure in the boy’s life.

They lived in the northern seaside city of Porto, the second-largest city in Portugal, and de Melo describes his childhood as idyllic and carefree. He vacationed at the shore, played in forests, watched American movies like *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer*, and he imagined that he was like them. He showed an early aptitude for drawing, and his grandmother encouraged him to enter a national drawing competition after she saw his sketch of the title pair of dogs from Disney’s animated film, *Lady and the Tramp*.

After he had been in Portugal a few years, his grandmother welcomed Mormon missionaries into their home, and the entire family in Portugal was baptized. Mormon doctrines of a preexistence, of spirit children living with a fatherly God before they are born, and a life after mortality with infinite development among eternal families made a permanent impression on the young artist in exile.

Their religion was new to the country. The first official meetings of the Church in Portugal were with U.S. military personnel stationed there in 1970, which coincided with the death of Salazar. The Portugal Lisbon Mission was established in 1974 when four LDS missionaries were transferred to Portugal from Brazil. By 1978, 1,000 members lived in the country, but in Porto, by the time of the family’s conversion, according to the artist, the de Melos were the city’s first members. Shortly there-

after, his grandmother became ill, and one of her dying wishes was to be buried with a copy of the Book of Mormon in her hands.⁸

All the while, his mother, father, and siblings remained in Angola as the country fell into waves of chaos of martial factions, reprisals, and repression of the war of liberation. Whenever peace seemed even a remote possibility between UNITA and MPLA, the nation witnessed a mass migration of former Angolans back into the country, and many of these people settled into the capital city of Luanda. Specifically, adult men went to the capital. Women, largely, remained in the countryside. The interior was a place where young men were kidnapped and forced into army service, and where women, children, and old men attempted to subsist as a cruel consequence of land mines—several million of them—which utterly destroyed their once-robust agricultural systems.⁹

His life darkened as well. After his grandmother's death, his aunt and uncle moved to a small town, where he had no friends. His grades faltered, and his aunt removed him from school and placed him in a factory to work. His life became what he refers to tearfully as a kind of indentured servitude. Occasionally, he was the sole breadwinner for his Portuguese relatives. His parents in Angola were kept in the dark about these developments. They were told that all was well and that Hildebrando was safe and happy.¹⁰ He ran away from home, returned, and bided his time until he could reach the legal age of 18 and go back to Angola.

Art making had become a safe haven. At the age of 11 or 12, a teacher named Ana Ilhão took him under her wing, and seeing his skills, she provided advanced training in painting while other students in the class were making basic sketch drawings. He was exposed to modern European art, and he began to imagine a career in the field.

8. Hildebrando de Melo interview, April 26, 2018.

9. Birmingham, *A Short History of Modern Angola*, 93–107.

10. Conversation between Hildebrando de Melo and the author, April 22, 2018.

The day after his eighteenth birthday, he flew home to Angola, to siblings he had never met, and to parents he had left thirteen years earlier. He arrived home, a stranger to Angola. Even his Portuguese was different than theirs. He knew little about Angolan culture. And of course, the fighting had dramatically altered everything. A conflict as a result of a failed election (1992–1994) had been one of the most violent yet, and for the first time, cities were attacked, and citizens suffered widespread starvation. President José Eduardo dos Santos, who had been at war with his own people for twenty years, consolidated power into totalitarianism and privatized the nation's assets for his own needs.¹¹ Birmingham writes, "By 1996, the orchestrated politics of violence were extended to include xenophobia and crowds were permitted to attack anyone who might be branded as 'foreign.'"¹² Briefly, the government considered issuing identity cards to each of its citizens denoting their ancestral tribes as a way to determine who might be loyal to the president. This was the Angola to which de Melo returned. Suffering was omnipresent, and the government did not permit humanitarian aid into Angola to temper it. In the countryside, children were routinely kidnapped to become soldiers. This bleakness continued until 2002, when Jonas Savimbi, the man who had been the leader of the liberation movement UNITA, was killed and buried, secretly.

At this point, the majority of Angolans—up to 75% of them—had never known peace. It had been forty years since independence from Portugal was declared and war had begun. Neither did they know about democracy, the rule of law, peaceful elections, trial by jury, nor the role of citizens in government. Still, the wars ended. The country had had enough.

Upon his return to Angola, de Melo felt that he was unready to begin painting. Instead, he immersed himself like a student in the culture and

11. Birmingham, *A Short History of Modern Angola*, 114.

12. Birmingham, *A Short History of Modern Angola*, 115.

history of his country. This included building expertise regarding the objects created over centuries by his people—both those of his own tribe and others. He collected many African sculptures, and all the while he situated himself philosophically into their history. Despite his claim to tribal birthright and social position, de Melo sensed he had to earn his place anew. It was insufficient to be welcomed like the biblical prodigal son and celebrated for simply having returned home. Among his peers, these acts gave him increased credibility. It was lost on no one that he chose to return voluntarily to a ravaged country still in the midst of war.

He began to make art that spoke to the politics all around him. His preferred method of making art is to work in series of intense bursts of activity to produce approximately two dozen objects on a shared theme or visual conceit. His first series of mature works is titled *Corpo e Alma* (Body and Soul).¹³ Made in 2005, the series is a politically strident group of eighteen images. Like the country itself that is shown emerging from bloodshed, the images use graffiti, collage, abstraction, and cartoon to question the nation's future. In one work, *0 ÷ Baratas = Angola*, the artist has painted a mathematical equation. Cockroaches are depicted trapped in a glass (the word *baratas* means “cockroaches”). It is a portrait of a nation that is caught by forces larger than itself, but the message is also that the ensnared can see what is happening. They are aware of their captivity.

In other works in the series, he scrawls phrases in English, Latin, and Portuguese that attempt to rally viewers to activism, including: “Freedom works” and “*carpe diem*.” He paints “Fragile” alongside the goblet that is the universal shipping symbol of warning. One exchange reads: “*Quem te mandou*” and “*Não te mintas*” (Who sent you? Don't lie to me).

13. In 2015, the atelier of Hildebrando de Melo published a 536-page book, *Deep Hildebrando de Melo: 20 Years of Work*, that presented twenty years of his work—from two early paintings created in Portugal through 23 series of works that lead to 2015.

*Humby H. Eating each other*¹⁴ is the name of a work from *Corpo e Alma* that would likely have little meaning to anyone outside the country, but an Angolan would recognize its umbi umbi birds, common creatures that according to local tradition bring good news. Here, they are depicted attacking and consuming each other—a metaphor for the Civil War itself and an indictment of the regime of José Eduardo dos Santos.

Each of this series' works is raw and accusatory. Collaged pages from the Bible first appear in his work here and add an almost religious zealotry to the artist's message. The scriptures are paired with images of blood and decay under titles including *Projecto Fusão* (Fusion Project) and *Projecto Fusão de Sangue* (Blood Fusion Project). This series is the most overtly political in the artist's oeuvre, but only because their texts are impossible to miss. These are fearless works of protest, the type that one can imagine someone leaving anonymously in a back alley. Of course, the difference here is that de Melo's name is emblazoned on them. There have been consequences for this activism. According to the artist, as retaliation he has been threatened, beaten, poisoned, and imprisoned.¹⁵

The Civil War destroyed the nation's infrastructure—its public transportation, electrical and water systems. The artist has used these as symbols for larger issues. A *candongueiro* is an Angolan mini-bus, and this network is a symbol of adaptability. These ubiquitous, privately owned, white-blue painted buses represent, for the artist, a circulatory system of the country. Without it, the artist says, the country would stop.¹⁶ In 2008, de Melo created a series of works honoring the *candongueiro* but also deploying it as a symbol of tenuous national stability. The art critic Nadine Siegert wrote of the works, "In his new series *Empirico Candongueiro* he draws more from the concrete situation of the people in the

14. The artist commonly titles his works in English. All translated titles are presented in parentheses.

15. Conversation between Hildebrando de Melo and the author, April 22, 2018.

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metropolis of Luanda. *Candungueiros*—the most important means of public transport—that is chaos, tightness but above all the exigency for the search of possibilities of survival in this constantly changing urban environment.¹⁷

Survival is a continuing theme of de Melo's art. It underpins his images of organisms like spiders, baobab trees, and hybrid creatures of his own imagination. These connect to the mythological, like Anansi, a character in West African folklore who is a spider able to appear as a human. De Melo's 2010 series, *Spider* is about shapeshifting, regeneration, the legendary agility of spiders, and by extension, the artist's willingness to reinvent himself, as well as the hope that a nation can do the same.

While Angola struggled to rebuild itself and remake its identity, de Melo left the relative comforts of family life and moved into an abandoned, rat-infested, raw building without windows. And he began to create a studio and artworks to populate it.¹⁸ A constant challenge was light. At the time, the national electrical grid was in tatters, and he often painted by candlelight. Frequent power outages caught him as he was painting, and not wanting to—or unable to—stop, he codified the gestures of painting through repetition to such an extent that he became able to paint in the dark. These ingrained kinetics grew into a visual lexicon that he taps into still, allowing him to enter a zone of image making and memory, free from the distractions of his surroundings.

As an artist working in abstract modes, he calls on the viewer to participate in this transformation, too: a loose network of vertical black lines, for example, become more than a graphic; it takes life, changes from inert marks into a creature, a presence, an animated object. The process of this changing is much of his point. The messiness is also on display—how a mark emerges and becomes a thing that is more than a

17. Nadine Siegert, untitled article was published in *Deep Hildebrando de Melo: 20 Years of Work*, 2015. The German Siegert's writing appears in Portuguese and English.

18. Conversation between Hildebrando de Melo and the author, April 22, 2018.

mark, something in and of itself, powerful. The picture of a spider as a symbol is rich enough, but de Melo presents something more profound: a picture about the spider coming into being with the simple gesture of a line transformed in the crucible of the viewer's mind. And this is what the artist's work is primarily about.¹⁹ He searches for the moment of transformation. He wishes to explore the power necessary to imbue life into the inanimate or to create order from chaos. This act, then, is political, autobiographical, and spiritual.



Hildebrando de Melo, photo courtesy of the artist

19. Also see the artist's series *Molimo/Deus* (Spirit/God) (2006), *Deep Hildebrando de Melo: 20 Years of Work*, 80–103.



Hildebrando de Melo
Red as Blood I (2018)
40.5" x 26.25"
acrylic and charcoal on paper





Hildebrando de Melo
Pre-God (2018)
80.25" x 152.75"
acrylic on canvas and welded iron





Hildebrando de Melo
Mustard (2018)
48" x 73.5"
acrylic and mixed media on canvas



Hildebrando de Melo
Red as Blood IV (2018)
40.5" x 26.25"
acrylic and charcoal on paper