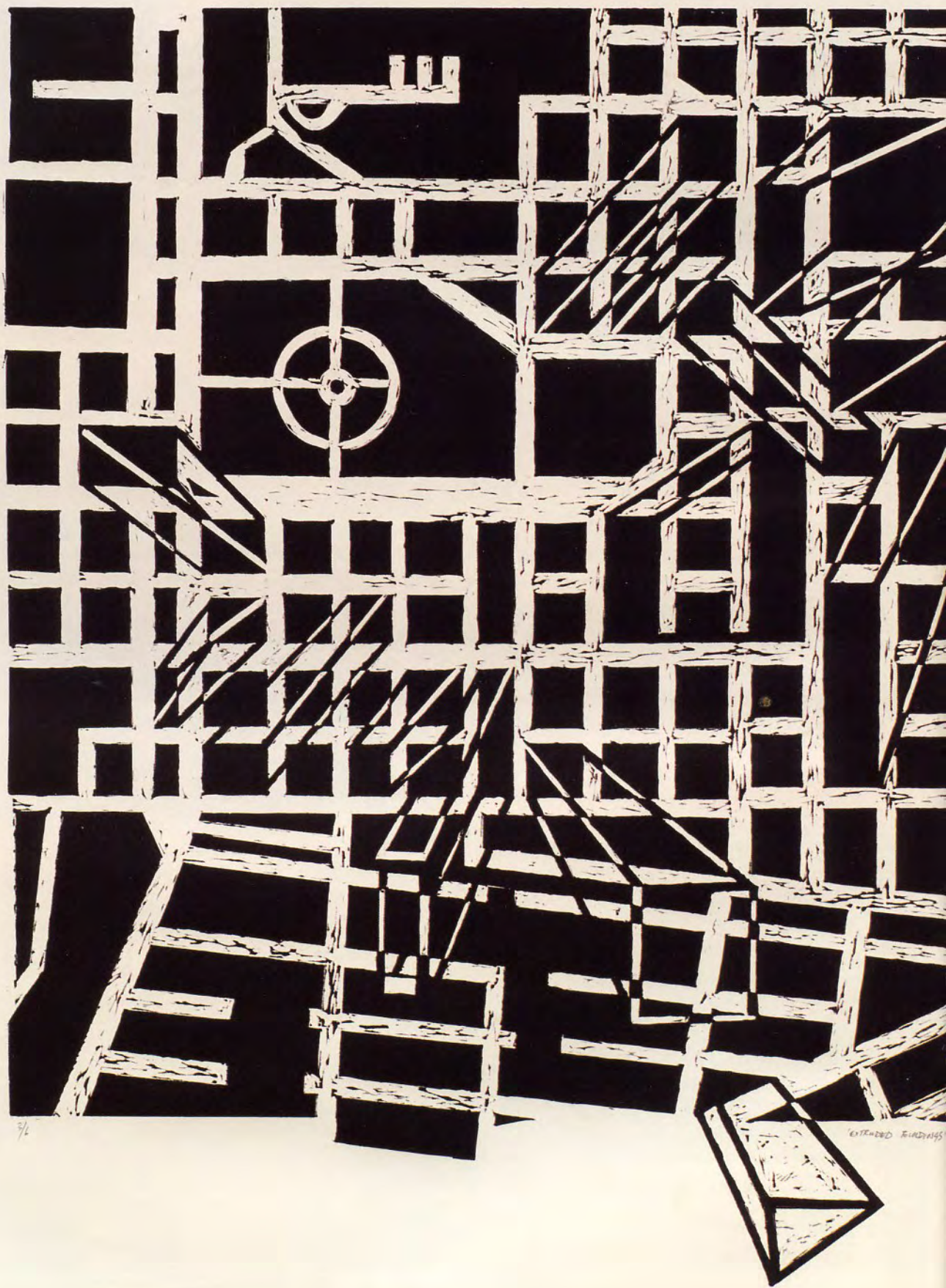


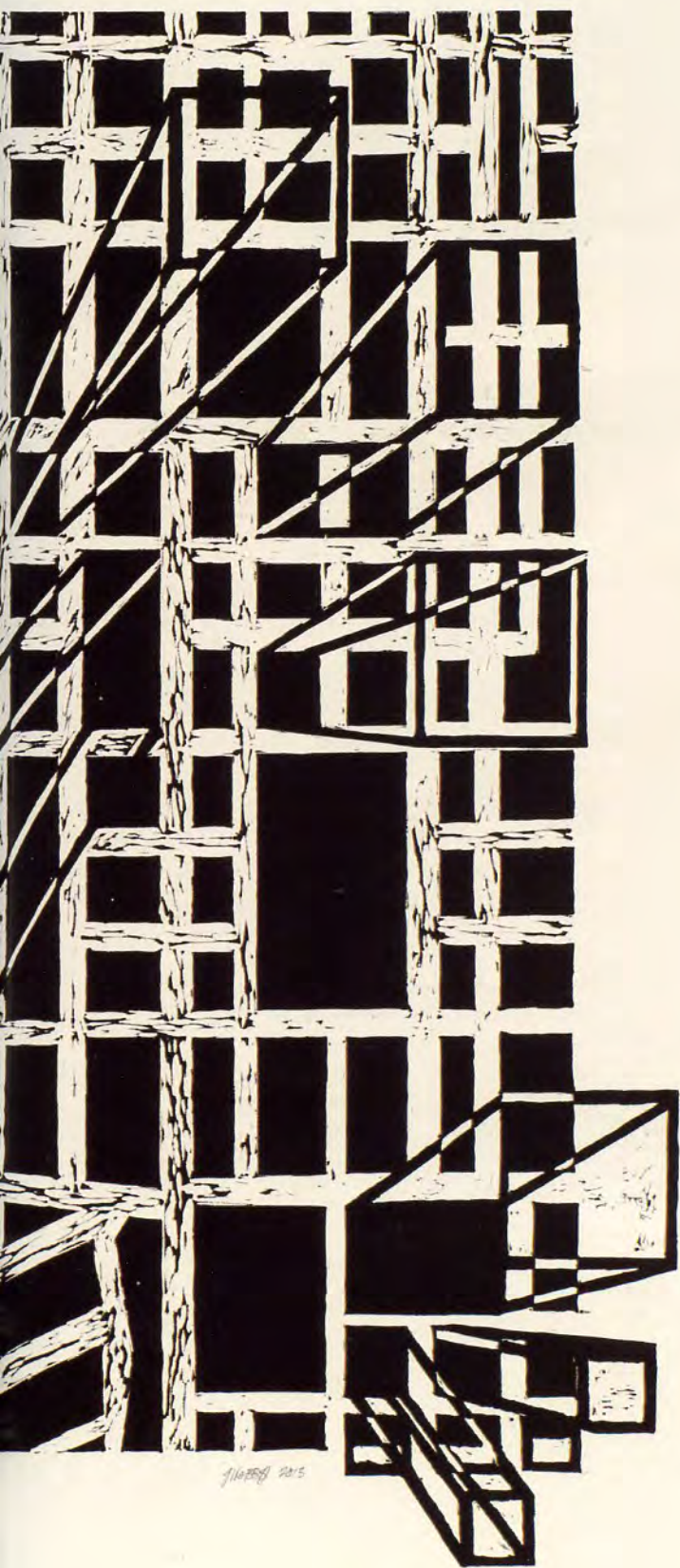
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Extruded Buildings, 2013, Linocut, Edition Size 6

Celebrating Urban Decay

With a knack for creating powerful and thought-provoking artworks, Stephen Hobbs continues to dazzle with his curious technique and use of mixed mediums.

When I ask Hobbs when his interest in art first began, he laughs before saying that he was born into it. "Literally from the age of three I was making things, making art," he says, explaining that his father was a painter, his mother a potter, and his grandmother and uncle both sculptors. It seems an obvious progression then that the aspirant young creative would grow to become a well-known and respected artistic talent.

"Finishing art school and working at the Market Theatre Galleries as the curator there, seeing the city accelerate its decline – urban decline and decay – turned me onto architecture and spatial practice," says Hobbs. "What followed was thinking how to document the city." He adds that photography and videography were always core to his practice during the nineties, and that he had a strong interest in filmmaking.

At one point during his career, Hobbs taught experimental filmmaking at AFDA (the South African School of Motion Picture Medium and Live Performance). By the early 2000s he had built up an extensive photographic archive of images of cityscapes from across the globe. One of his most striking works, *City Dazzle*, is a collage of buildings from 22 cities around



the world. "It is a playful piece, as much about photography as it is about composite global city ideas," he says, adding that it was inspired by the marketing poster for the 1927 film *Metropolis* by Fritz Lang. "It is like an Orwellian take on modern society – how we are slaves to the capitalist system. It is a beautiful vision for an imaginary city."

Hobbs' art is laced with meaning. As he explains: "My work is specifically about the kind of ironies and idiosyncrasies of large visionary architectural projects that tend to fail rather than succeed. It is about architectural planning or visionary thinking that is pathetic in a way. My starting point is always the city of Johannesburg. It is a gateway for Africans on the continent and a place to be avoided by some. I am interested in working with those contradictions." Current events further impact the meaning in Hobbs' work, which is fundamentally about space and territory. "I am influenced by radical situations that make one think more strategically about space – how we use it, how we share our cities, how we participate in creating healthy urban environments. My work is very much about showing the fickle, ambivalent and contradictory nature of how we are in public life or space," he says.

Hobbs' mediums range from drawing and collage through photography and print making to video and installation, spanning what he calls "the entire gamut" of what would be considered traditional, contemporary forms. As one would expect from an artist whose work is so complex and carefully considered, his artistic process is organic, evolving from within itself. "Because I spend a lot of time on site – on building or construction sites – consulting to public art

programmes and urban design programmes, the genesis for an artwork is often from an immersion in that incomplete landscape," he explains, adding that it is always an urban condition that sparks an idea, though the outcome can be very formal. "The ideas always morph," Hobbs says that he will photograph the space to create images that then become "props" for his sculptures. "My ideas have to do with the urban space and perception – what we see and don't see. I work with visual metaphors a lot. Some cities we feel safe in, others not. I am interested in finding the visual cue for what is considered the 'fear factor'. I am not interested in the literal social representation but rather the visually metaphoric equivalent of the psychological state of places that are in crisis."

The Trinity Session is an artist collective started in 2001 by Hobbs, Marcus Neustetter and Kathryn Smith in response to a lack of formal gallery and museum infrastructure in South Africa. According to Hobbs, the collective is about self-organising and formalising an identity for a group, and finding an alternative way to sustain themselves as artists. "When I started my career there was no economy for the artist," he explains. "We [The Trinity Session] became critically engaged with public spaces and took on a consultative role, advising and sharing ideas about urban change. In time we became public art curators."

Times have since changed, and when it comes to the state of South Africa's arts industry, Hobbs is confident that the future for local creatives is bright. "The foundations are already in place from a commercial point of view for the economy of the art world to support itself," he says. There is immense

room for growth, he believes, adding that artists these days can make a living from their art. "There is also space for other types of practice. I think the field of art and artistic production is more varied than before. That, coupled with a fairly secure art economy compared to say 10 years ago, is an indicator that we should be able to evolve and develop."

When questioned on his personal philosophies about life, Hobbs pauses to consider before answering: "It is boring but it is true – I have learnt that it is less important to pursue money and fame in so far as those are a great threat to the lessons you learn from sustaining an interest in your art. In other words, I am interested in a sustainable artistic practice rather than fame and fortune."

Major upcoming projects from Stephen Hobbs include the *Craftsmen's Ship*, an animated video installation on top of the *Absa Tower* in Johannesburg's Maboneng Precinct; a presentation of his work at Carnegie Hall in New York; and a solo show in Cape Town.

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