

SLICES OF AIR

Gabro (Belfast Black Granite)

Crescent: 142 x 38.1 x 2.8 cm (55 15/16 x 15 x 1 inches)

Overall height upon installation: at least 4 metres (13.1 feet)

Collection of the artist

SLICES OF AIR was exhibited on the exhibition “African Cosmos, Stellar Arts”, curated by Deputy Director and Chief Curator Christine Mullen Kreamer, of the National Museum of African Arts, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC in 2012. The exhibition explored African contributions to the history of knowledge as part of global intellectual history, focusing on the interface between African cultural astronomy and African arts expression, both traditional and contemporary.

//Xam San master storyteller //Kabbo referred to his //Xam oral heritage as “stories that float from afar”. Wind is air, in motion. Languages are likewise constantly in a state of flux and movement. They tend to come and go in the history of the world, and the ideas they convey are kept relevant only with effort, either orally or in writing. The //Xam language was extinct after a series of brutal wars on the northern frontier of the Cape Colony.

My work, SLICES OF AIR, was inspired by a particular moment when I was driving back from a gabro quarry near Belfast in South Africa’s province of Mpumalanga, with a crescent moon rising above me. I was listening to a radio talk show. It was evening, and a crescent moon was rising above me. One of the callers from Beaufort West, a small town in a distant part of South Africa, mentioned something about the moon. At that moment, as I was looking up at the same moon, through his spoken words, I felt a concrete connection with what he was witnessing. *Slices of Air* drew on that moment and also on my fascination with the precision and inventiveness of language.

In this case words are sandblasted on to nine crescent shaped sections of black polished gabro, identifying nine layers of the atmosphere, as though one were moving up and outward from the earth to the farthest reaches of space.

The layers are:

EXOSPHERE

THERMOSPHERE (c. 700 km.)

APPLETON LAYER [F2] (c. 300 km.)

HEAVISIDE LAYER [E] (c. 100 km.)

MESOSPHERE (to c. 85 km.)

STRATOSPHERE (to c. 50 km.)

OZONE LAYER (c. 19-30 km.)

TROPOSPAUSE (17 km.)

NEPHELOSPHERE

TROPOSPHERE (to c. 17 km.)

There is a conceptual resonance between this work and the work *Blind Alphabet G* (2016) and the word *gibbous*, as it describes the shape of the moon at some point when it is almost full. In its *gibbous* state the moon is either waxing, becoming full or waning, getting smaller. In Latin *gibbus* means 'hump.' The word is also associated with an oxbow, a U-shaped collar in an ox yoke. The ox's head fits through a round piece of steel that does not complete a perfect circle, but is cut short just above the head of the ox. As is the case with the *gibbous* moon, the *gibbous* circle of the ox-bow is almost full. Finally, the *gibbous* bend in a river describes a horseshoe curve in a stream, with the flow of water eating the earth away, bringing the two points of the 'horse shoe' closer and closer to one another. I carved such a *gibbous* type of 'horse shoe' curve in a river as a solid shape in Leadwood (*Combretum imberbe*) in September, 2016. Leadwood is South Africa's heaviest wood and weighs seventy-six pounds per cubic foot.

A companion piece to *SLICES OF AIR* is titled *WIND ROSE*. It presents an inverted sun with irregular rays moving outward. The sun is usually pictured as a round globe, with irregular rays moving outward in what has become a kind of universal symbol as shorthand for good weather or good spirits.

As small children we all draw schema of the sun, gestalt-like and with even deeper meaning, at the centre of our internal world. By contrast, in the work *WIND ROSE*, rectangular marble granite slabs are each inscribed with different latitudinal and longitudinal markings, radiating inwards to an irregular centre. Theoretical threads mapped out on a flat wall space simulate a cosmos abstracted by scientific measurement.