

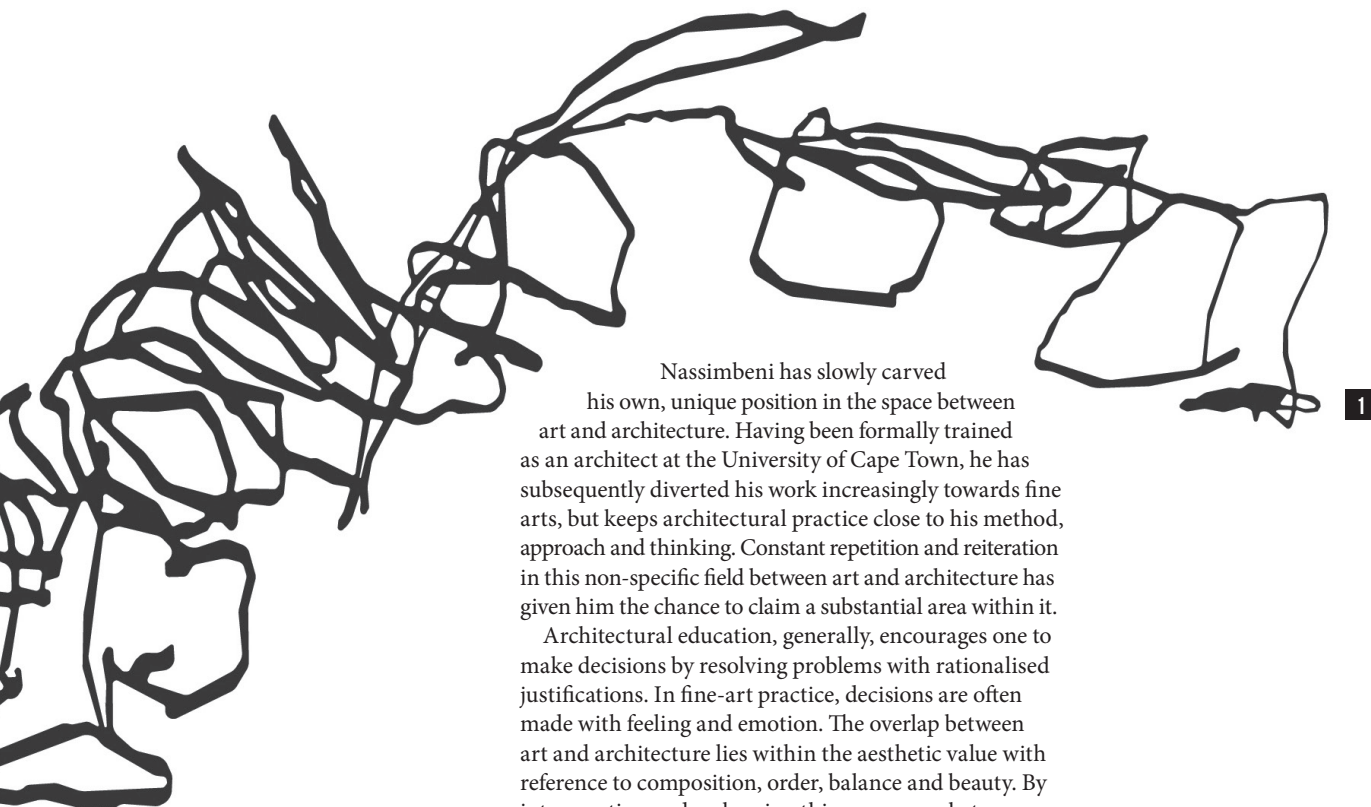


THE SPACE BETWEEN

A theoretical consideration of Lorenzo Nassimbeni's extensive portfolio, which explores the 'in between' intersection of architecture and fine art.

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Instead of an attempt at an all-encompassing catalogue of works, this article aims to demonstrate the work of Lorenzo Nassimbeni through a more theoretical framework, describing his design philosophy, his career approach and his passion for creating with references to key works at regular intervals.

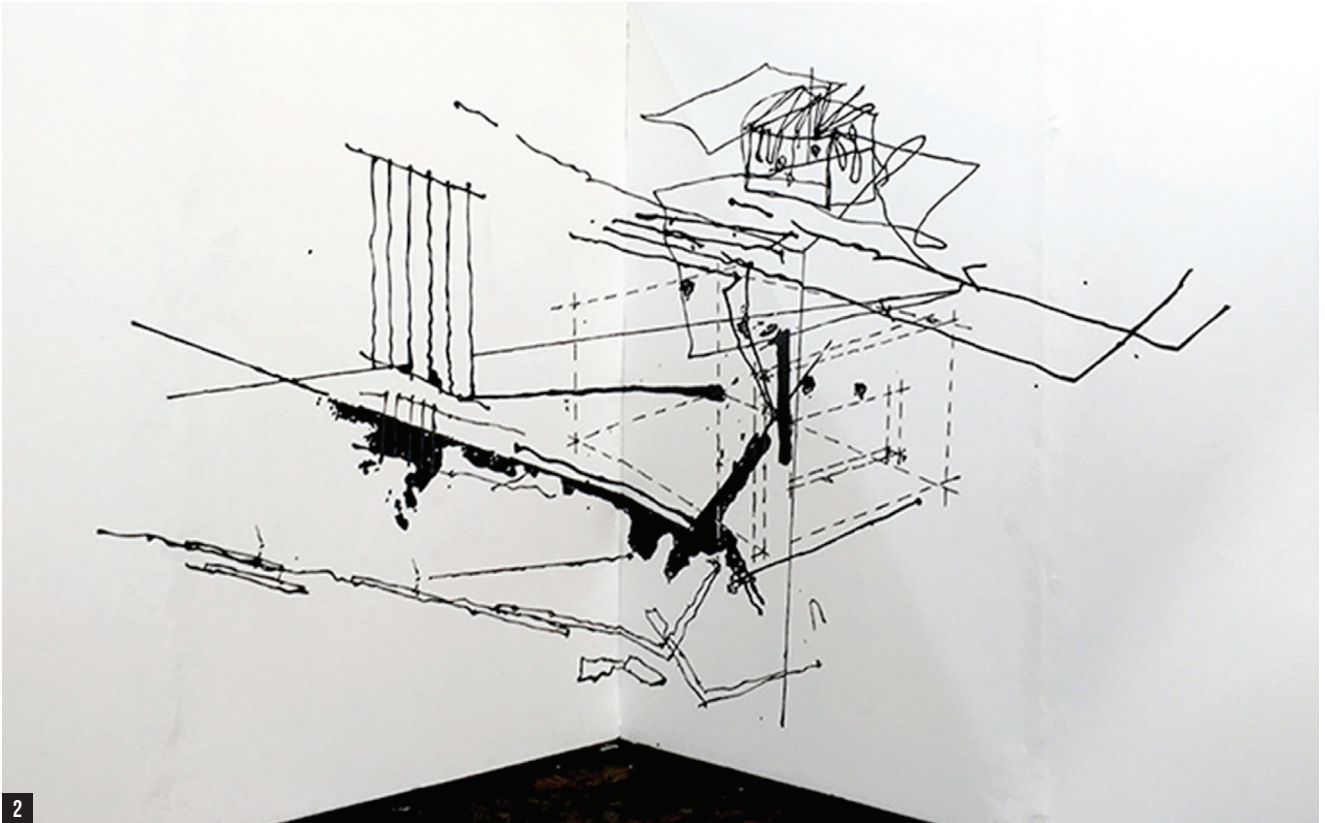


Nassimbeni has slowly carved his own, unique position in the space between art and architecture. Having been formally trained as an architect at the University of Cape Town, he has subsequently diverted his work increasingly towards fine arts, but keeps architectural practice close to his method, approach and thinking. Constant repetition and reiteration in this non-specific field between art and architecture has given him the chance to claim a substantial area within it.

Architectural education, generally, encourages one to make decisions by resolving problems with rationalised justifications. In fine-art practice, decisions are often made with feeling and emotion. The overlap between art and architecture lies within the aesthetic value with reference to composition, order, balance and beauty. By interrogating and embracing this vague area between the two fields, Nassimbeni often evokes reaction and encourages the viewer or user to find their own reasoning and interpretation within.

However, Nassimbeni's blurred area of working is not vague, but finite and clear. He defines his own unique 'in between' by always including and referencing two distinct fields of practice, not singling out the one or the other. He focuses on the relationships between the two, thus allowing each of his artworks to resonate as an architectural metaphor. The mediation between art and architecture broadens his spectrum in practice and field of knowledge by adding more flexibility, possibilities and focus.

At a certain point, art and architecture can be seen to overlap. They may even appear to collide before diverting into two distinct professions. Architecture gives reason to creativity, and art manifests the abstraction and intuition. Both professions are supported by a concept, to carry a broader idea forward over time. By Oxford Dictionary definition, architecture is 'the art or practice of designing and constructing buildings. The style in which a building is designed and constructed, especially with regard to a specific period, place, or culture'. >



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ARCHITECTURAL PRACTICE BEARS CERTAIN PERCEPTIONS ON HOW PROJECTS ARE DEVELOPED AND REALISED INTO BUILT FORM. COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENTS PLACE EMPHASIS ON DEADLINES, BUDGETS AND TURNOVER

I see architecture as less rigid; realised through a process of developing ideas of abstraction and conceptualisation that evolve and refine into built spatial form. By Oxford Dictionary definition, art is ‘the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power’.

For Nassimbeni, a year-long study sojourn in Venice inspired him to define and redefine his own perceived place between art and architecture. His objective was to find harmony between the two. Now, in his work, he shifts his thinking from theory to practice, searching for mechanisms to drive his creativity and find resolution within the ‘in between’.

STAIR TO IMAGINED CITY

This digital illustration, which was illuminated on the ABSA Tower for the Maboneng Art Week in 2014, is an example of how Nassimbeni finds the ‘practical state’ of ‘in between’. The black, individual lines floating in white space capture a moment in time and space. We are prompted to consider Henri Lefebvre’s comment, in *Critique of everyday life*, that everyday moments reveal emotional clarity and self-fulfillment (Lefebvre, 2002).

TOGETHER

For the FNB Joburg Art Fair 2016, Nassimbeni was asked by David Krut to exhibit under rather unique parameters. All the represented artists arrived with ready-made, framed pieces. He came with black ink, ladder and paintbrush, and produced artwork on the white exhibition panels among the rest. His was a temporary mural; to be washed away and remain only in memory or photographic form. His drawing of the experience, titled *Together*, references the two artworks on either side of his panel. This is done by effectively joining them together, adding a third dimension – and therefore longevity – to his own ‘moment’, which had no duration itself.

In a recent interview with Gabriella Pinto for *Between 10 and 5* (2015), Nassimbeni commented on the fact that skill in drawing and the ability to create are vital tools for both architects and artists in their interpretations of the world. Whereas artists are free to translate and communicate that world in whichever way they wish, an architect’s concepts and ideas tend to be curbed by regulations, ergonomics and pragmatic processes.

Architectural practice bears certain perceptions on how projects are developed and realised into built form. Commercial developments place emphasis on deadlines, budgets and turnover. In the office environment, the underpinning theory and philosophy of architectural discipline might be overshadowed by practicalities. Even so, drawing remains an invaluable way of communicating, right from that first sketch on a serviette all the way through to inception and construction.

The traditional tendency to separate the professions of art and architecture is affirmed by Patrik Schumacher,

principal of Zaha Hadid Architects, who insists: ‘Architecture is not art although form is our specific contribution to the evolution of world society. We need to understand how new forms can make a difference for the progress of world civilisation’ (Hosey, 2016).

A lot of Nassimbeni’s work trademarks the play between art and architecture. By using both fields to delve deeper into finding a new form, his unique niche defines the ‘in between’, formalising a space between art and architecture, where similar stages of overlap are shared. This area of overlap is sometimes difficult to encode and grasp. When referring to Nassimbeni’s work, his way of thinking and his position in his practice, the meaning of the ancient Greek *khôra* gives it clarity and validity: ‘It is neither being nor non-being but an interval between in which the “forms” were originally held; it “gives space”... the *khôra* rests between the sensible and the intelligible, through which everything passes but in which nothing is retained. For example, an image needs to be held by something, just as a mirror will hold a reflection’ (Wikipedia, 2017).

CONSTANTIA SCULPTURE

Nassimbeni succeeds in building ‘spatial art pieces’, or ‘art pieces representing spatial qualities’, or ‘art pieces of spaces’. The variety of spatial characteristics that emerge throughout his work can each be analysed to reveal his strong connection to architecture. The Constantia sculpture is a concrete mould, which derived from the ground-floor plan of the house designed by Antonio Zaninovic. The sculpture gives space by its interpretation as a scale model of the house. The mural contains space, yet has no inhabitants and can only be viewed upon entering the front door. Simultaneously, it is an artwork against the wall that supports a holistic spatial understanding of the house.

In *Questions of perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty says: ‘an in-between’ reality and ‘ground on which it is universally possible to bring things together,’ emerges from ‘the continuous unfolding of overlapping spaces, materials and detail.’ Beyond the physicality of architectural objects, there is something intangible to be experienced. Merleau-Ponty’s in-between reality could be like the moment individual elements begin to lose their clarity, and objects merge with the field (Holl, Pallasmaa & Perez-Gomez, 2006: 45).

THE POWER OF PAINT

Working with 100 scholars from Sea Point Primary School, and within a four-hour schedule, Nassimbeni >

1 *Stair to Imagined City*. Nassimbeni’s digital illustration curated by Parts & Labour for for the ABSA LUMEN project, Maboneng Art Week, 2014. 2 *Together*. Mural, assisted by Rhett Martyn. David Krut Projects, FNB Art Fair, 2016. 3 *Constantia sculpture*, commissioned by architect Antonio Zaninovic, 2015. Fabrication assisted by Cameron Barnes Furniture. Photographer: Tatjana Meirelles. 4&5 *The Power of Paint*. Mural in Sea Point, Cape Town commissioned by the Herzlia High School Interact Committee and Plascon.



NASSIMBENI RECOGNISES THE URBAN LANDSCAPE AS AN INTEGRATED PART OF ONE'S EVERYDAY EXPERIENCE THAT IS ALSO DRIVEN BY AN IDEAL OF 'CIVILISATION'



led the painting process for this mural. He designed it as a simple pattern of scholars holding hands, turning into houses that transform from dense to widespread, disappearing into an ocean. The design appears as a single building block that forms the basis of an ordered motif. On this he comments: '...besides bricks and mortar of buildings, cities are made up of the people who inhabit these buildings, and the space formed between them.'

These moments captured show a process of an in-between reality, where Nassimbeni gets scholars to participate in the process of making. The beauty lies with how things are brought together in a joint effort, enmeshed in experiences. The mural prolongs its existence by becoming part of the urban fabric. Now this spatial art piece defines a universal property that is part of the sidewalk experience and the continuous use for every day, merged within the field of city dwellers, pedestrians, art users and participators making the urban connection.

Nassimbeni prefers to express himself within the urban realm. Some of his works require public response and interaction, and this exposes a dependency on the urban dweller. To ensure reaction to his work, he seeks a deeper understanding of the city. He often partners and collaborates with other professions, so as to carry out projects for the city. These joint efforts contribute to exposing the complexities and heterogeneous nature of the city. Nassimbeni's public work gives way to its users. His own ego-imprint becomes secondary. He says (Pinto, 2015): 'The world has become so multifaceted and intertwined that it is encouraged to find spaces in between clear, defined practices to widen the spectrum and go across all borders.'

One cannot provide a single canon to the city. In his 1987 essay 'Weak architecture', Ignasi de Solà-Morales (1942–2001), the Catalan architect and philosopher, said that 'a single reality can no longer be regarded as a unitary whole, but appears instead as the overlapping of different layers' (Pitches & Popat, 2011: 61). By combining and merging a wide spectrum of professions and their activities, and by the sharing of workspaces, a rich understanding can be achieved, allowing for more informed possibilities and a broader field of study. In

Performance perspectives, Morales explains that the basis of universal rationality lies within the absolute reality of art, science, and political practice: ‘This is the strength of weakness, that strength which art and architecture are capable of producing precisely when they adopt a posture that is not aggressive and dominating, but tangential and weak’ (Pitches & Popat, 2011: 61). The notion of ‘weak’ is not cast into a negative shadow, but rather a quality that sheds light, as a well-informed, holistic realisation that accompanies and incorporates anything a city can carry.

WESTBURY PARK

For the new park in Westbury, Nassimbeni collaborated with Iyer Urban Design. The team encouraged the community to participate in the design process. Keeping in mind the history of Westbury and its layered context, Nassimbeni asked the community to explain their own idea of ‘boundaries’. Photographs and narratives were collaged into a uniform, pattern-like geometry. Nassimbeni says that because the community was involved, the mural relates to the park in the way that Westbury relates to its history and people. In the words of Tahira Toffa, urban designer at IYER: ‘To co-create our public work with the communities is key to making the work relevant and to getting buy-in from the community.’

ALICE LANE STAIRCASE

In Sandton, rapid development is leading to densification and the building of new skyscrapers. Walkability, access to parks and shared spaces is becoming essential for pedestrians to benefit from a safe and pleasant city-life experience. The relationship between buildings is becoming more important than the buildings themselves because the ‘leftover’, in-between spaces are all that give access, direction and pause. Nassimbeni mentions in interviews that he wants to look deeper into the essence of architecture and urban space. He uses words like *de-objectifying*, *repetition*, and *diluting* and speaks of making the in-between spaces ‘tangible and marketable’. He says: ‘This is an architectural comment on the value we place on buildings as singular icons, rather than the attention we ought to pay to cities as growing bodies composed of buildings and people.’

The entrance staircase to the mixed-use development designed by Paragon Architects is part of the new Alice Lane Precinct in Sandton. Nassimbeni was commissioned by Parts & Labour to decorate the steps. The design brief was ‘to add more vibrancy with colour to a predominantly monotone environment; and to scoop pedestrians up from the sidewalk at street level to engage with the raised podium piazza.’ Nassimbeni created a tiled-pattern graphic laid upon the risers of the steps, inspired by the form of the building. The triangle repeats turn into a dynamic of directional arrows that induce a spontaneous up-and-down movement. A palette of primary colours on a bed of ‘white canvas’ tiles were selected, so as to add vibrant colours.

When one approaches this colourful work, it is perceived as a two-dimensional image, mounted flat

against a surface. The scale has a human ratio to it, as well as a larger city-scale composition, in harmony with the urban building façade. As one proceeds towards the building, arrows and shapes elongate and stretch until they break up into single steps. Nassimbeni says the staircase itself is the space. It doesn’t obtrude as an object, but mediates between city and building, giving it an interesting contextual position. Small interventions like these contribute to enhancing city life and attract people to meet and gather in these transitional public spaces.

In *Questions of perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty talks about the merging of object and field. Spatial experiences are open-ended. Assorted observations are made from various overlapping perceptions and perspectives. Designers, artists and architects are challenged to think democratically to distinguish places of significance and address a collective existence. ‘The old conditions of linear perspective, with its vanishing points and horizon line, disappear behind us as modern urban life presents multiple horizons, hovering horizons and multiple vanishing points ... Our experience of a city can only be, however, perspectival, fragmented and incomplete (Holl *et al.*, 2006: 48)

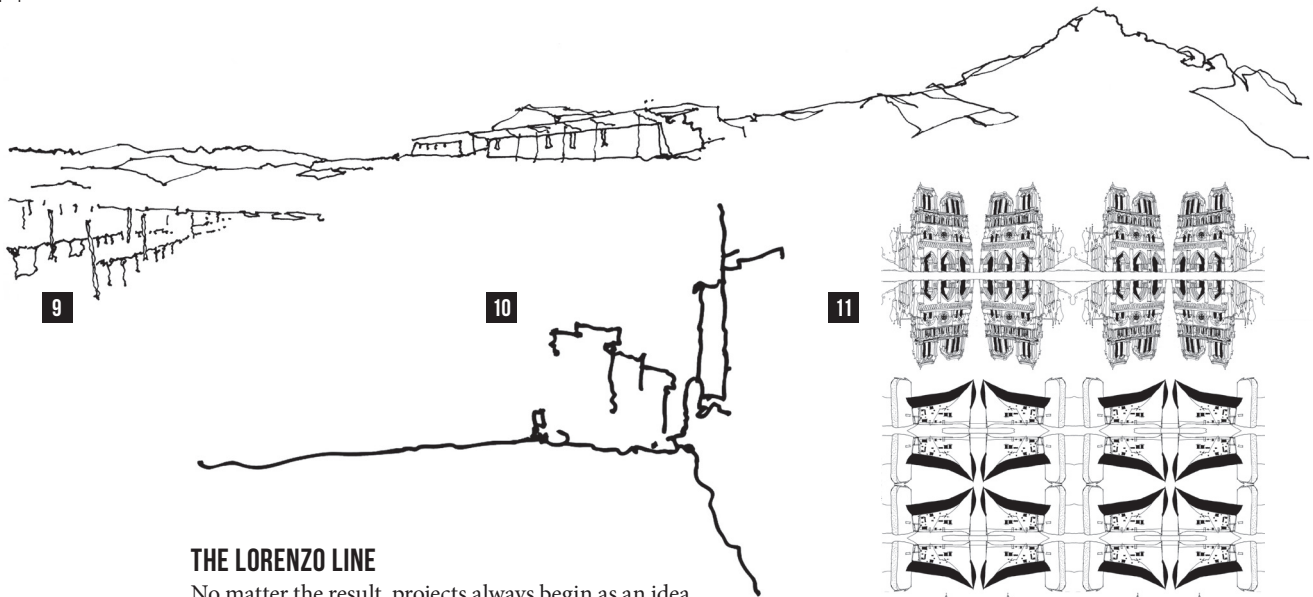
Nassimbeni recognises the urban landscape as an integrated part of one’s everyday experience that is also driven by an ideal of ‘civilisation’.

RAHIMA MOOSA MURAL

Nassimbeni’s Rahima Moosa mural was done in collaboration with 26’10 South Architects. It is located on the façade of an addition to the Mother and Child Hospital in Coronationville, Johannesburg. His drawings were translated into ceramic tiles of selected colours, which were drawn from a palette of the city landscape. Nassimbeni describes it as ‘a conglomerate landscape of lines, land, buildings and sky’. The lines of strata represent the contextual layers of Johannesburg’s underground, mined layer; the gold colour of the mine dumps; the black infrastructure shaping the skyline; and the sky above.

This tiled artwork is Nassimbeni’s take on Johannesburg, and it offers a distinct language, which translates serene tones that constitute its milieu. His process of developing a framed view of a place is generated through site analysis. For him, analysing the context is actually being present in that space where art and architecture meet. He enjoys being there, directing, integrating and connecting space and conceptual thought. >

6 *Westbury Park*, mural by Nassimbeni in collaboration with the Westbury community. Park designed by Iyer Urban Design (in association with Local Studio.) Graphic presentation, research and project management by Counterspace. Photograph by Tahira Toffa shared on Facebook. **7** *Alice Lane Staircase*. Building designed by Paragon Architects. Project Management by Parts & Labour. Graphic presentation by Counterspace. Photograph: Dharmaratna Saraswati. **8** *Rahima Moosa mural*: a view of the Johannesburg landscape. Mural in collaboration with 26’10 South Architects, designers of the building. Tiling contractor, d.ash (Ashley Heron). Photograph: Dave Southwood.



THE LORENZO LINE

No matter the result, projects always begin as an idea that is sketched in his mind then drawn on paper. Single squiggles, wiggling and continuous flow give quality to his unique line-language. These carry sensitivity and certainty. He seems to be longing for 'belonging', finding assurance in the space between art and architecture. When Nassimbeni constructs a double-life-size mural, he carefully measures and plots out each line and segment on the wall, then stands back to see the effect of a quick splat. He says: 'Changing gear means renegotiating my relationship to line – engaging a looseness and opening myself to a less rigid sense of control.'

FABRIC COLLECTION

This is a textile design collection composed through patterning a group of iconic buildings. They are copied and arranged to shift the focal point away from the buildings themselves. They are weakened through repetition and by drawing attention to occupying spaces in between. From line to drawing to building to street to city, this artistic expression reveals new possibilities of understanding the urban context.

In his TEDx Soweto talk from 2012, Nassimbeni states: 'Urban landscape to me speaks of a wide physical space that acts as the home of the city. It's a space that contains buildings, public spaces, streets, events, everyday urban life, human sentiment and communication ... It's a large cloth spreading itself far and wide, and shrouding urban artifacts' (Architecture and the art within: 2012).

Nassimbeni understands how people interact with architectural spaces within an urban environment. His is the art of looking at the way we live architecturally. He observes the not-so-obvious and generates work from that. He draws what he sees, with a line that communicates everyday things. The line is a tool to create spatial depth and perspective in a two or three-dimensional environment.

9 Mural at Neil Ellis Wine farm, commissioned by Three14 Architects who designed the interior. **10** The Lorenzo line: sketch by Nassimbeni. Digital illustration curated by Parts & Labour for the ABSA LUMEN project, Maboneng Art Week, 2014. **11** Fabric pattern. Mavromac textile collection designed by Nassimbeni.

NEIL ELLIS WINE FARM MURAL

Here, the work is simple, direct and effective. Nassimbeni strips away detail and dilutes a scene into its primary substance. A picture is framed within its context and the focus is drawn with simple black lines.

He depicts sites, cityscapes and destinations that one takes for granted when repetitively passing by every day. Lorenzo captures everyday moments into contour-line drawings, giving value and impression to the everyday. His two-dimensional line drawings are rhetorical, where simple lines of representation are drawn to allow for a personal spatial completion. They allow a person to enter the 'in between' he shares and enjoy it. ■

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