Artist Meleko Mokgosi Appointed Associate Professor of Painting/Printmaking at Yale School of Art

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE

THE YALE SCHOOL OF ART announced the appointment of **Meleko Mokgosi** as associate professor of painting/printmaking on May 14. A painter, Mokgosi uses figuration and representation to explore political themes, notions of democracy, and post-colonialism in Southern Africa. His tenure-track appointment begins July 2019.

“As an artist and an educator, Meleko Mokgosi is dedicated to an expanded language of aesthetic and historical references while building on the necessary tools to build a sustainable and critical studio practice,” Marta Kuzma, dean of the Yale School of Art, said in a statement. “His regard for the larger political ramifications of techniques of production explore the conceptual foregrounding of painting and in doing so, his approach challenges the way in which many graduate students grapple with negotiating critical social questions within their artist practice.”

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Mokgosi’s artistic practice focuses on project-based history painting. He often incorporates text in his work and draws on a range of fields including cinema studies, psychoanalysis, critical theory, and post-colonial studies.

Presented across eight exhibitions in six years, his series Democratic Intuition (2014-2019) considers democracy as a practical matter in terms of its macro and micro effect on everyday life.

Jack Shainman, the artist's gallery, described the project as, "Touching on the often-contradictory notions inherent in the concept and practice of democracy—the individual in the face of the collective, intuitive versus inscribed behaviors—Mokgosi probes the idiosyncratic ways in which democracy is reciprocated and unfolds across time."

Meleko Mokgosi: Bread, Butter, and Power, 2018. Fowler Museum at UCLA. | Courtesy the artist and Honor Fraser, Los Angeles. Photo © Monica Nouwens

BORN IN FRANCISTOWN, Botswana, Mokgosi lives and works in New York City. He holds an undergraduate degree in studio art from Williams College and earned an MFA from the interdisciplinary studio program at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). In 2011-12, he was an artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem. When the Yale appointment was announced, Mokgosi was serving as an assistant professor of practice at the Gallatin School of Individualized Study at New York University.

Mokgosi has exhibited widely. Most recently, he had three solo shows in 2018. "Meleko Mokgosi: Acts of Resistance" was on view at the Baltimore Museum of Art. The Fowler Museum at UCLA presented "Meleko Mokgosi: Bread, Butter, and Power." Last fall, Honor Fraser in Los Angeles featured "Objects of Desire: Reflections on the African Still Life."

Speaking publicly about his work and the depiction of black bodies, Mokgosi periodically discusses how art students are instructed to mix paint, the formula prescribed in order to achieve a color equivalent to "flesh" tone, meaning white skin.

In a conversation with Interview magazine, Mokgosi said: "When you're painting skin tone, there's a big difference between white skin and black skin, obviously. Black skin really depends on shadows and white skin depends on layering of highlights. …the way it has to be done, it's reductive. I put paint on and then I remove it, to build volume. It's important to me because ultimately, this is what I am interested in painting: black skin."

He is developing a related monograph. The working title is "Flesh Tones: The Politics of Painting Skin." Based on interviews with an intergenerational slate of artists, including Laylah Ali, Jacob Lawrence, Kerry James Marshall, and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, among others, the project is about the complexities of rendering black skin tones.

Meleko Mokgosi: Bread, Butter, and Power, 2018. Fowler Museum at UCLA. | Courtesy the artist and Honor Fraser, Los Angeles. Photo © Monica Nouwens

A SIX-MEMBER search committee selected Mokgosi for the faculty appointment. Members included Kuzma, dean of the art school; Byron Kim, senior critic in painting/printmaking; and Tavia Nyong'o, Yale professor of African American studies, American studies, and theater studies.

"Meleko brings an international artistic vision to Yale, as well as an assured grasp of the critical conversation," Nyong'o said when the appointment was announced. "The committee was impressed in particular by his commitment to pedagogy and mentorship at all levels. He is well-positioned to build on Yale's historic strengths in painting, while contributing to emerging interdisciplinary conversations in critical practice."

Yale School of Art alumni include prominent painters such as Jordan Casteel, Titus Kaphar, Mickalene Thomas, Howardena Pindell, Stanley Whitney, William T. Williams, and Kehinde Wiley.

> *"I am thrilled and feel honored to be welcomed into the Yale arts community. ...I am excited to work with the talented and exceptional students at Yale, and look forward to contributing with my utmost as an artist and educator. No doubt, the painting/printmaking department at Yale has a rich and incredible history, and continues to make some of the most significant contributions to the discourse as a whole." — Meleko Mokgosi*

Mokgosi said he is "thrilled and honored to be welcomed into the Yale arts community."

In an email statement to Culture Type he added: "It truly is a dream to join the ranks of esteemed faculty and practitioners such as Byron Kim, Anoka Faruqee, Alexander Valentine, Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, and Robert Storr, to mention a few. As equally important, I am excited to work with the talented and exceptional students at Yale, and look forward to contributing with my utmost as an artist and educator. No doubt, the painting/printmaking department at Yale has a rich and incredible history, and continues to make some of the most significant contributions to the discourse as a whole." **CT**

TOP IMAGE: Portrait of Meleko Mokgosi. | Courtesy Yale School of Art

BOOKSHELF

"Meleko Mokgosi: Pax Kaffraria" documents one of Meleko Mokgosi's earlier series of paintings, produced between 2010 and 2014. The volume was published by the Hammer Museum.

Meleko Mokgosi: Bread, Butter, and Power, 2018. Fowler Museum at UCLA. | Courtesy the artist and Honor Fraser, Los Angeles. Photo © Monica Nouwens

Meleko Mokgosi: Bread, Butter, and Power, 2018. Fowler Museum at UCLA. | Courtesy the artist and Honor Fraser, Los Angeles. Photo © Monica Nouwens

Los Angeles Times

Review: Exhibitions by Kwame Brathwaite, Deana Lawson and Meleko Mokgosi challenge how blackness is represented

By SHARON MIZOTA NOV 14, 2018 | 6:00 AM

In a fortunate coincidence, three shows currently on view in L.A. engage in a rich conversation on how black people are represented in the West. At Honor Fraser, Meleko Mokgosi's exhibition raises questions about the role of African people and artifacts in an art history that has largely erased and stereotyped them. Photographers Kwame Brathwaite — at Philip Martin Gallery — and Deana Lawson — at The Underground Museum — provide perspectives from two different generations of African Americans.

Mokgosi, who was born in Botswana and lives in New York, dissects the "primitive" frame through which African art has been presented in the West. His installation intersperses painted still lifes of African objects and images with texts from the Museum of Modern Art's 1984 exhibition "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern." The texts, taken from the show's exhibition labels, are heavily and passionately annotated in the artist's hand. Line by line, Mokgosi emphatically exposes the racism and white supremacy of the curators' focus on famous European artists at the expense of the African art that influenced them. Mokgosi's notes reveal how the exhibition lumped all African art, regardless of origin, into the simplistic and infantilizing category of the "primitive," neglecting rich histories and varied cultural contexts.

These texts are interspersed with paintings and sculptures of African interiors and objects that counter this historical erasure. They depict modest, domestic tableaux in which anti-apartheid posters hang above framed family photos. Other images feature a black baby doll, grocery products on a shelf, or ads for hair relaxers. In one painting, a portrait of Jesus appears next to a photo of a woman wearing a leopard-print bathing suit. Below sit two decorative ceramic dogs. These images form an oblique and motley portrait of contemporary African life. The specificity and humanity of the images — the ways in which they do and don't align with what we think of as "African" — serves as a counter to the oversimplification of the "primitive" label, even as they exist within its long shadow. The show opens up the category "African" and asks us to think about how it might be represented otherwise.

Fortunately, one has only to go down the street to Philip Martin Gallery to see one such vision. Kwame Brathwaite began photographing black celebrities and models in 1950s New York. With his brother, Elombe, he founded the African Jazz Art Society and Studios, and Grandassa Models, organizations devoted to promoting the concept "black is beautiful." In 1962, they initiated "Naturally," a series of modeling contests for black women sporting "natural" hairdos and African-patterned clothing.

The show includes several of these striking images, charting a civil rights-era awakening to black beauty and power in defiance of dominant aesthetic standards. Gender politics of the 1960s being what they were, "beautiful" mostly applied to women, but Brathwaite pioneered a photography capable of capturing the rich colors and textures of black skin. Within the limits of film stock color-balanced for white faces, he figured out how to make black people not only visible, but reflect their beauty too.

Of particular interest is "Untitled (Grandassa Models, Merton Simpson Gallery)," circa 1967, in which three black women, arrayed in bold print dresses, pose amid African sculptures. Simpson was a prominent African American dealer of African art and an authority in the field. This image by Brathwaite places black pride alongside African sculpture. It is an act of reclamation, even as it reflects the lack of specificity that Mokgosi laments. We may not know where these sculptures came from, or what their cultural significance was in their places of origin, just as we may not know the provenance of the prints the women are wearing. What matters is that they are African.

This lack of specificity reflects the legacy of slavery, which brutally erased and transformed most African Americans' relationship to their heritage. Reclaiming something nominally and broadly "African," even if inauthentic, is in this light a poignant expression of desire and resistance. When everything has been taken away, one has to start somewhere. Brathwaite used what tools he had to fashion a new space for black representation.

This desire to connect with traditions bigger and older than oneself also surfaces in Deana Lawson's exhibition, just a few miles east at The Underground Museum. Although best known for her photography, Lawson also presents a video, interspersing footage she shot in Africa and the U.S. of everyday life and public rituals. In the States, these rituals seem to center around music and sports, including footage of concerts and tailgate parties. These are intercut with scenes from an Asante ceremony, and the piece is scored with an Asante chant.

Here, I am guilty of MoMA-style erasure: I did not find out which rituals (ceremonies, sporting events, concerts) the video depicts. I cannot place them in their proper historical and cultural contexts. Yet the similarities seem more important to Lawson than the specifics.

Where Brathwaite's images seek to smooth out differences between blacks in the U.S. and in Africa, creating a romanticized connection, Lawson's video highlights jarring juxtapositions. But its quick cuts also reveal formal similarities. Community rituals are forms of communing after all, even if the regalia and the dance moves aren't the same.

The rest of the exhibition focuses on Lawson's devastatingly frank photographs of black people she has met on the street. She invites them back to her home or theirs and carefully stages a portrait, choosing props, costumes and poses. The images look naturalistic but are not unlike Brathwaite's more obviously manicured photographs of "natural" women. In part, Lawson's images look authentic because they play on familiar stereotypical tropes: the hypersexual black woman, the single mother, the group of shirtless young men gesturing aggressively.

Meleko Mokgosi, "Objects of Desire 10." (Jeff McLane / Honor Fraser Gallery)

"Eternity" depicts a woman wearing spangled lingerie, standing coquettishly so that her buttocks and breasts are on view. The pose and dress evoke photo studio vanity pictures, but the setting is decidedly unglamorous. She stands amid a radiator, a space heater and a sagging floral-print couch. A faux-gold clock featuring a cheesy winged horse seems to alight overhead. The image is a far cry from Brathwaite's polished photos of uniformly slim models, but its aim is similar — presenting a frank image of the black body, albeit one that reverberates with stereotypes. In particular, "Eternity" evokes images of Sara Baartman, a South African woman put on display in Great Britain in the 19th century as a curiosity because of her large buttocks. The image simultaneously reckons with this exploitative and dehumanizing history and reclaims black beauty in the face of predominant, Caucasian beauty standards.

Similarly, "Sons of Cush" plays with black male stereotypes. It depicts a muscled, tattooed young man holding a small baby. To the left, we see the arm of another man, holding a wad of cash. The small window in the door behind them has been crudely papered over; the blinds on the window to the right are drawn. Were this a movie, the spot could be a drug den or thieves' hideout, but these sinister stereotypes are belied by the framed copy of the kitschy, inspirational Christian text, "Footprints," on one table and an array of smiling family photos on the others. A carefully hand-drawn diagram hangs on the wall, outlining a family tree of biblical descent. It's a more tender, complex portrait of black masculinity than what is commonly presented.

Lawson's pictures employ artifice to get at deeper, more layered realities. Mokgosi and Brathwaite do much the same thing, framing their stories themselves lest others do the telling.

What unites the three is the longing to reconstruct something that has been lost. How does one represent black people when so much has been done to erase them, or reduce them to stereotypes? These artists, along with many others, turn a skeptical eye on history and make up the rest as they go along. The results are part circumstance and part fabrication, but ring entirely true.

Meleko Mokgosi, Honor Fraser, 2622 S. La Cienega Blvd., (310) 837-0191, through Dec. 19. Closed Sunday and Monday. www.honorfraser.com

Kwame Brathwaite, Philip Martin Gallery, 2712 La Cienega Blvd., (310) 559-0100, through Dec. 22. Closed Sunday and Monday. www.philipmartingallery.com

Deana Lawson, The Underground Museum, 3508 W. Washington Blvd., (323) 989-9925, through Feb. 17, 2019. Closed Monday and Tuesday. www.theunderground-museum.org

ARTFORUM

NEWS

Meleko Mokgosi, *Acts of Resistance I*, 2018. *Click above for more images.*

December 21, 2018 at 8:37am

BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF ART ACQUIRES FORTY-EIGHT WORKS BY AMY SHERALD, MELVIN EDWARDS, AND OTHERS

The Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA) announced that forty-eight works of art, including paintings by Meleko Mokgosi and Amy Sherald; photographs by Louise Lawler, Wolfgang Tillmans, and Carrie Mae Weems; sculptures by Melvin Edwards and Senga Nengudi; and textiles by Stephen Towns, were added to its collection.

Thirty-five of the works, gifted by Baltimore collectors Mary and Paul Roberts, will go on view in a special exhibition that will open on April 3, 2019 and run until June 30, 2019. It will be presented as a tribute to Mary Roberts, who passed away in November. Among the works donated were pieces by Richard Diebenkorn, Jasper Johns, Glenn Ligon, Elizabeth Murray, Gabriel Orozco, Martin Puryear, Gerhard Richter, and others.

Four of the acquisitions were purchased using proceeds from the sale of seven works from the museum's contemporary collection, which were recently deaccessioned so that the museum could grow its holdings of works by artists of color and women.

The four works are Melvin Edwards's *Scales of Injustice*, 2017, which reconstitutes *Corner for Ana*, one of four site-responsive works he created out of barbed wire and chains for his March 1970 Whitney Museum exhibition; Meleko Mokgosi's *Acts of Resistance I*, 2018, a painting, made for a BMA exhibition with the same title, that features a child standing near a wing chair and an Africanis dog and is brimming with South African historical references; Senga Nengudi's *R.S.V.P. Reverie-0*, 2015, a sculpture comprising a ready-made metal armature adorned with braided nylons and lengths of pantyhose affixed to the wall, culminating in a sand-filled pouch jettisoned across the floor; and Carrie Mae Weems's *May Flowers*, 2002, an artist's proof from her "May Days Long Forgotten" series, which evokes the work of the nineteenth-century Pictorialists.

"The BMA has now acquired eleven major works of art by women and artists of color purchased in full or in part with funds from the objects that were deaccessioned last spring," said director Christopher Bedford. "This is just one aspect of the museum's strategy to broaden the historical narrative of art and build a more diverse and inclusive art experience for Baltimore."

Los Angeles Times

The art of daily existence: Meleko Mokgosi's provocative show at the UCLA Fowler Museum

LA Times | By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT | ART CRITIC | MAY 07, 2018 | 8:00 AM

Meleko Mogkosi, "Bread, Butter and Power," 2018; installation view (UCLA Fowler Museum)

Meleko Mokgosi describes himself as a history painter, but what he considers to be historic is what sets his work apart. Kids at school, people lounging at home, a young woman getting her hair done — ordinary life is offered with the same focused intensity of classical history and myth, history painting's usual subjects.

At the UCLA Fowler Museum, curator Erica P. Jones is presenting the Botswana-born, New York-based artist's first West Coast museum show. (Mokgosi, who completed his master's at UCLA, won the 2012 Mohn Award in conjunction with the Hammer Museum's "Made in L.A." exhibition.) In "Bread, Butter and Power," daily existence and stamina interact.

A gallery is lined with 19 large canvas panels, while a 20th — neatly rolled and wrapped in plastic, as if awaiting its eventual display — leans against a post in the center of the room. The rolled painting offers a tantalizing glimpse of a man clutching a large trophy, delighted winner of we-know-not-what. (Maybe the Mohn Award?) The rest are snapshot-like scenes based in unidentified places in southern Africa — in schoolyards, bedrooms, at the market, at a gathering of military veterans and more.

UCLA Fowler Museum, 308 Charles E. Young Drive N., L.A. Through July 1; Closed Mondays and Tuesdays. (310) 825-4361, www.fowler.ucla.edu

Most of the panels are installed edge to edge. Sometimes the image in one slides into the panel adjacent, as when a grinning girl dressed in a bright-red school uniform shares pictorial space with an unrelated scene of a woman on a patio grooming a young woman's hair. A stylized presentation of formal and informal education comes into view.

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Meleko Mokgosi, "Bread, Butter and Power (detail)," 2018 (UCLA Fowler Museum)

Mokgosi paints in a concise, declarative manner. He's a realist, but he's not overly attentive to the minutiae of representation. A few strokes of gray and white paint conjure a tin bucket. The stripes on a school uniform necktie are the same quick white lines that define the edge of the student's sweater and the pattern of her jacket in a scene composed like a yearbook's class picture..

Meleko Mokgosi, "Bread, Butter and Power (detail)," 2018 (UCLA Fowler Museum)

Meleko Mokgosi, "Bread, Butter and Power (detail)," 2018 (UCLA Fowler Museum)

The economy of means can be provocative. Those same white stripes on the students' clothing also describe security bars on the window behind the kids. Only then does it sink in that the girls and boys both wear masculine-identified attire, locking into place a prevailing social hierarchy. The jacket-and-tie clothing identifies the pecking order as traditionally European.

Nearby, a picture of veterans, older men and women dressed in military uniforms and laden with medals, telescopes the student yearbook picture's intimation of institutionalized power relations. The image is sent spinning by the adjacent panel, in which a teenage boy wearing shades and a red beret sits cross-legged in a chair and flanked by two muscular security guards. He's part Napoleonic wannabe, part Black Panther revivalist.

Mokgosi slyly pulls abstraction into the mix, which he divides into black and white. One nearly blacked-out panel slowly reveals a barely legible woman sleeping in a bed, her dark skin congruent with the jet-black night. Other panels are raw canvas covered in cursive white text — barely legible writing in Setswana (the language of Botswana), or else dense academic jargon (the language of the university).

A scholastic dissertation on the relationship between "alterity and ipseity" — otherness and selfhood, to use common language — becomes almost satirical juxtaposed with a painting of an attractive young woman casually posed in regal profile on a throne-like upholstered chair. The window curtains behind her are pulled back like those on a theater stage.

In relation to grand canvases that depict ordinary daily life, colonial history painting merges with contemporary genre painting. The two written texts — obscure to most viewers and implying the divisions between an initiate and a comrade — resonate as power tools that cannot help but divide, even as they struggle to connect.

C&

Round Table "identity"

Meleko Mokgosi: “the limitations that produce narrow interests are not caused by the artist”

In our ongoing series of round-table discussions we ask a selection of artists and art practitioners to answer a set of questions on a specific topic. This time around the theme is “identity” and here C&'s deputy editor Will Furtado talked to Meleko Mokgosi.

Meleko Mokgosi, Democratic Intuition Lerato Philia I, 2016 © Meleko Mokgosi. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Tuesday September 4th, 2018

“Identity” and “identity politics” are terms with which artists from Africa and the Diaspora are often associated, whether they like it or not. This has been the case for decades, or rather ever since there has been a debate around artistic production by artists from African perspectives. The idea that those artists are working on “identity” may be one of the assumptions made by a “Western” audience — and this applies just as much to Black communities. But is this fair? Is it not also leading to a “burden of representation,” as Kobena Mercer once called it? What does it really mean to make work on our “identity”? And who gets to decide that? And what about those artists with African perspectives who aren’t addressing the issue of “identity”? Their work and viewpoints are relevant and important, as they move away from this “burden to represent.” In this round-table discussion, four intergenerational artists discuss the problematics of these terms and their usage.

Meleko Mokgosi is a Botswana-born, New York-based artist who works within an interdisciplinary framework to create large-scale project-based installations. His approach to examining history, which primarily involves a critique of historiography through history painting, is centered on southern Africa as a case study. Currently he is working on *Democratic Intuition* (2014 – present), a project based on the idea that democracy is something that – according to Gayatri Spivak – is founded on the double bind between alterity (other) and ipseity (selfhood), in relation to the daily-lived experiences of the southern African subject.

Meleko Mokgosi, Democratic Intuition Comrades VII, 2016 © Meleko Mokgosi. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Contemporary And (C&): In your paintings, you examine the role of history and how that translates to the present. With your main focus being Black subjects, what signi cance does this focus have for you and your work?

Meleko Mokgosi: My approach to examining history, which primarily involves a critique of historiography through history painting, centers on southern Africa as a case study. I am reluctant to say that I focus on Black subjects because this presumes a number of things that I am ambivalent about. Admitting to this would first and foremost propose that the paintings reflect a preoccupation with the notion of race, and the binary of White versus Black within this discursive framework. Although, as an African, I am aware of the histories and politics of race and how these are implicated in the colonial legacies of the region, my first priority is to articulate questions I am invested in, and simultaneously represent and voice experiences and histories that have been excluded from dominant narratives.

For example, my current, project *Democratic Intuition* (2014 – present), doesn't begin with the Black subject but rather with the idea that democracy is something that is founded on the double bind between alterity and ipseity (to follow Gayatri Spivak's phrasing), in relation to the daily-lived experiences of the southern African subject. Thus the project focuses on the ways in which democracy is something that is inscribed within the individual by various institutions, and how access to knowledge on how to use the state and its apparatuses affect a subject's claim to democracy. These ideas, I believe, examine larger systemic and historical issues that include but are not limited to questions of race.

Secondly, the specificities of the images, compositions, and histories that my paintings engage with actively try to stay away from overt encounters with race discourse. The primary reason for this, which is more strategic than anything else, is that the continued fascination with race and Blackness in the fine arts and beyond has produced a peculiar effect, namely that the image of the Black subject within any narrative trope is always overcome by the politics of Blackness. It seems virtually impossible for the Black subject in any narrative to exist as just a subject, without a viewer projecting histories, metaphors, and metonyms connected to Blackness. These limitations obscure important specificities about the lived experiences of any given Black subject, and perpetuate the binaries and politics through which Blackness is produced and situated. So my strategies of engaging with the Black subject (and here I should acknowledge that I am referring to Blackness in the African context and not to African Americans) is important to me because it is a way of figuring out the extent to which it is possible to delay projecting essentializing history, metaphors, and metonyms onto representation of the Black subject, therefore allowing for an alternative abstraction of the subject within any given narrative.

Meleko Mokgosi, Acts of Resistance. Exhibition view at The Baltimore Museum of Art, 2018. Courtesy the artist and The Baltimore Musuem of Art.

C&: Why do you think "identity" (in the broad sense of the word) is a recurring topic with artists from Africa and the Diaspora across generations?

MM: I don't think it is something that is necessarily recurring but is always there. It just so happens that the discourse and history are invested in pulling out and projecting identity materials onto certain artists and their work. But to address the question in more detail, I think what is conventionally called 'identity' is also tied to 'identity politics'. So we have to first agree that identity is first and foremost the way in which a person conceptualizes who they think they are based on both internal and external points of reference; and that 'identity politics' is a way of acknowledging how all subjects are differentiated, in addition to respecting these differences as evidence of the limits of

empathy and that there can never be perfect identification. From here we can then make the move in connecting these ideas to humanism and the formation and development of the fine arts as a discourse.

In many ways, the entry of different aesthetic objects, tastes, and histories into the dominant conventions actually affects the ways in which they are perceived and develop. African art, for example, entered the (Western) art historical canon first and foremost as essentialized anthropological objects made by anonymous people during an unspecified time period, and the opaque meaning of these objects rests on a specific cultural context and not beyond that. Therefore any appreciation of the aesthetic and formal qualities of these regionally specific and essentialized objects (mostly acquired through force) – this appreciation has to happen through Western artists and historians appropriating and abstracting these "African" objects. In other words, the value and relevance of these objects had to be manufactured by the West because their supposed value from where they were taken from was illegible. I understand that this is a rather simplified version of how institutional forces work but all of these processes have played a part in terms of what is being made now and how contemporary objects are being received.

It also seems necessary to add that the interest in "identity" from the *othered* subject is connected to the discourse of race, therefore exposing how whiteness is produced and functions: firstly because those who identify with whiteness are perceived as occupying the norm – a subject-position that is perceived as already understood; second, whiteness is connected to the construction of race and structural complicity within a system that intentionally and unintentionally supports and justifies white supremacy. Pared down, whiteness has been defined as a position in a power relationship that builds itself in opposition to all the people who are produced as non-white, and uses moral rhetoric and institutional forces to defend and systematize exploitation, racism, mass murder, and crimes of the empire. Some theorists rightly argue that whiteness is a form of capital that is not always apparent but can be traded in at any time. Therefore, to treat whiteness as the unspoken norm is to fail to see precisely how those who are perceived as white have systematically acquired this capital, buttressed by the particularities of the law. In sum, to quote Homi Bhabha, "Whiteness is held up by the histories of trauma and terror that whiteness must perpetrate and from which it must protect itself; the amnesia it imposes on itself; and the violence it inflicts in the process of becoming a transparent and transcendent force of authority."

Meleko Mokgosi, Acts of Resistance. Exhibition view at The Baltimore Museum of Art, 2018. Courtesy the artist and The Baltimore Musuem of Art.

So I think all of these histories and frameworks compel an investment in identity from many sides, but most importantly, I think the inability to conceptualize “our” experiences outside of Western humanism is a driving force in the fixation on “identity and identity politics”. After all, Western humanism argues for the secular notion that history is something that is produced and can be rationally understood by the human subject. Therefore, class identity, racial identity, gender identity, sexual identity, cultural identity etc. are all conceptualized under the organizing principle of humanism (not forgetting connections to neo-liberal ideological structures).

C&: How would you refer to your practice when exploring subjects related to your culture or identity? How is it relevant to speak about your work in these terms?

MM: My artistic practice, to use the popular phrase, can be simply defined as a project-based studio practice. This definition came from working closely in graduate school with conceptual artist and educator Mary Kelly. The term project-based is specific here because it does not refer to project as a theme or topic around which a body of work is made. Rather 'project-based' describes the whole artistic approach to developing that which the artist wishes to say. Put differently, project-based outlines how a specific constellation of discursive frameworks come together, and the questions that arise from interrogating the point at which those discourses intersect. I would describe my project as one that is centered on various southern African nationalist movements in both their emergent and subsequent forms. Because the southern African nationalist movement functions as the discursive site, my work will always be informed by post-colonial studies and Marxism, while the rules of the studio are generated by history painting, cinema studies, and psychoanalysis.

All in all, the question of representation, both literal and conceptual, is key. And some of this is reflected in a recorded James Baldwin lecture I heard recently. In a public lecture titled 'The Moral Responsibility of the Artist' delivered in 1963 at the University of Chicago, the renowned writer and intellectual made a simple yet powerful statement: namely that the artist, needed and produced by a community, "is somebody who helps others see reality again." That is, the artist is a historically conditioned and culturally specific subject who questions the taken-for-granted and normative bodies of knowledge and assumptions about both the observable and invisible aspects of reality. The last word in his phrase, "again," is important because it highlights the fact that given the ways in which the human subject is constructed and negotiates the world, it is impossible to always have access to reality or realities. Representation then, both abstract and otherwise, is an important factor in the continuous efforts to pull individuals towards reality. As an educator and artist, my approach is rooted in the belief that questions around representation and the human body are crucial because subjectivity is not just about ideas and theories, but more importantly it involves the materiality of the body together with its psychic and emotional realities. Put differently, my work engages with subjectivity as a felt experience so as to highlight the body in languages that are necessarily tied to the specificities of lived experiences, untraced histories from the periphery, and work against the already established narratives within which certain subjectivities, peoples, and cultures are stereotyped, violated, and misrepresented.

Meleko Mokgosi, Acts of Resistance. Exhibition view at The Baltimore Museum of Art, 2018. Courtesy the artist and The Baltimore Musuem of Art.

C&: When artists from Africa and the Diaspora explore themes beyond their "identity", for example a conceptual artist from Accra focusing on Bauhaus, they are often questioned in a way white artists would never be. How do you think this can be challenged?

MM: I believe it is almost impossible to see how any artist can go beyond anything having to do with their identity because the formation of subjects has to involve subjection, to use Foucault's term. So everything we do is an echo of this process, thus it is difficult to see how any one action or investment is separate from our identities. The problem then would be the fact that identity is understood in very specific terms and the art historical context seems to have an inclination towards only hearing specific things about a narrow conception of identity, meaning that everything else will

remain in the periphery. I think the first way to challenge this is to try to reformulate the problem because we already mostly understand the epistemological and methodological limits of this Eurocentric discourse and why it is fixated on the identity of the *othered* subject.

So, in a way, I am proposing that instead of asking what should be done with the fact that there is always a perverse interest in the identity of the non-Western artist regardless of what she makes; rather let's propose asking what this perversion reveals about the limits of the discourse and what could be used to supplement these limitations. Put another way, the limitations that produce these narrow interests are not caused or aligned with the object or the artist but rather with the methods of analysis and historical baggage of the reader. Or, since we already know why there is a fixation on the identity of the othered artist, then what does this reveal about the asymmetrical nature of the reception, analysis, consumption, commodity speculation, and pedagogical framework of the field? And, equally important, how does this fixation and asymmetry affect what and how these artists (myself included) produce art objects? So the emphasis on the identity of the not-white artist versus the lack of interest of the white artist clearly reveals the mechanisms through which whiteness reproduces itself; and as long as this continues to happen, the field of the fine arts will remain uninterested in expanding the notion of the subject of history because, as far as it is concerned, the subject of history is something that is already understood and spoken for. Therefore, the field needs to develop the tools and methods of conceptualizing why and how other artists are trying to re-articulate and add to our understanding of the subject of history.

*Interview by **Will Furtado**.*

culture type

On View | ‘Meleko Mokgosi: Bread, Butter, and Power’ at Fowler Museum at UCLA

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE *on* Jun 14, 2018 • 6:58 am

IN RELATABLE IMAGES, **Meleko Mokgosi** explores weighty themes. He makes history paintings about the politics, culture, and history of Southern Africa. Post-colonial scenes of the quotidian are visions of democracy.

For five years, Mokgosi has been pursuing “Democratic Intuition” (2014-present), a singular project, composed of eight chapters, each realized as an exhibition. The latest in the series, “Meleko Mokgosi: Bread, Butter, and Power” (Feb. 11-July1, 2018), at the Fowler Museum at UCLA, features 20 episodic panel paintings. The works consider issues of feminism, gendering, and the “many ways that democratic concepts influence our lives, loves, and relationships on macro- and micro-levels.” The exhibition is the artist’s first solo museum show in Los Angeles.

Born in Francistown, Botswana, Mokgosi lives and works in New York City. He received his undergraduate degree from Williams College (2007), the same year he participated in the Independent Study Program at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Mokgosi earned an MFA from the Interdisciplinary Studio Program at UCLA in 2011, and was a 2011-12 Artist-in-Residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem. His West Coast exhibition is balanced by an East Coast show, "Meleko Mokgosi: Acts of Resistance" currently on view at the Baltimore Museum of Art. **CT**

Meleko Mokgosi: Bread, Butter, and Power, 2018. Fowler Museum at UCLA. | Courtesy the artist and Honor Fraser, Los Angeles. Photo © Monica Nouwens

Meleko Mokgosi: Bread, Butter, and Power, 2018. Installation view, Fowler Museum at UCLA. | Courtesy the artist and Honor Fraser, Los Angeles. Photo © Monica Nouwens

Meleko Mokgosi: Bread, Butter, and Power, 2018. Fowler Museum at UCLA. | Courtesy the artist and Honor Fraser, Los Angeles. Photo © Monica Nouwens

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Meleko Mokgosi: Bread, Butter, and Power, 2018. Fowler Museum at UCLA. | Courtesy the artist and Honor Fraser, Los Angeles. Photo © Monica Nouwens

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

Paintings that Question the Promises of Postcolonial Democracy

Meleko Mokgosi questions democratic ideals in his paintings of contemporary life in Botswana.

Abe Ahn April 13, 2018

Meleko Mokgosi, *Bread, Butter, and Power* (2018) (detail) (all images courtesy of the artist and Honor Fraser, all photos by Monica Nouwens)

LOS ANGELES — In Meleko Mokgosi's paintings of contemporary life in the south African nation of Botswana, he suggests that the promises of postcolonial democracy may be unevenly distributed or realized. The works are the latest chapter of Mokgosi's ongoing *Democratic Intuition* project, in which he invites viewers to consider how democratic ideals can be undermined or complicated by the realities of the present. Currently, they are on view in *Bread, Butter, and Power* at the Fowler Museum.

Combining elements of social realism, history painting, and the artist's own scholarship, the installation can sometimes feel pedantic. Hanging by a bookshelf lined with the artist's scholarly and literary influences, one panel reproduces (in painting) part of an academic essay about the semiotics of gender (complete with

footnotes) as if to prescribe an entry into the artist's choice of images and references. But even with the essay, the paintings remain open-ended and enigmatic.

Installation view of Meleko Mokgosi, *Bread, Butter, and Power* at Fowler Museum, UCLA

The 21 panels circling the museum gallery resemble a storyboard of private and public moments gathered from the artist's observations and research, although they eschew tidy narratives about the way things are or how people live. The paintings progress in medias res, throwing the viewer into scenes in which people are deep in thought or overcome with emotion. In one panel, a young woman (ostensibly affluent based on her furnishings) sits in quiet contemplation of a piece of paper (perhaps a letter?) she holds in her right hand. She could be processing either good or bad news and her thoughtful expression could erupt into pleasure or disquiet in seconds.

In another panel, a man sits in bed, regarding something in the distance. His gaze is not directed at the television (turned on to what looks like religious programming), but instead just past it. The man's dog, a ghostly apparition of black and white, also curiously looks on at whatever is outside of the frame. Another bedroom interior features a man in work clothes lying in bed as he shields his eyes from daylight. The white, hard hat that sits at the foot of the bed suggests he works in heavy industry; his resting pose gives a sense of the exhaustion of performing that labor. The walls are white and bare with no decorations to furnish a sense of home or individuality.

Detail of Meleko Mokgosi, *Bread, Butter, and Power* (2018)

Also in a separate panel, an older woman dressed in black leather sits at the corner of her bed, staring warily into a vanity mirror. The expression reflected in the mirror could be one of fatigue or distress. It's unclear whether she's pondering her self-image or simply staring beyond her reflection as she considers something else. Tucked underneath the bed sheets and propped up against a pillow is a doll with white skin and blonde hair, its blank eyes seemingly directed at the woman in leather.

These panels invite the viewer to consider the inner lives of their human subjects. We can identify explicit markers of social and economic status like furniture, clothing, and other personal effects, but the thoughts and feelings of people are not as obviously determined by their immediate setting. This gives the subjects of these paintings a degree of agency or personal narrative that is not overdetermined by their class, race, and gender.

Other panels represent more public or explicit expressions of power and authority. Resembling the iconic image of Black Panther Party co-founder Huey P. Newton sitting on a throne with rifle and spear in each hand, a young man wearing sunglasses and a beret sits cross-legged on a rattan chair. Flanked on each side, however, are two sexualized men, shirtless and muscular, with portraits of a military leader and Jesus Christ hanging on the wall behind them. The panel pays tribute to the iconography of the Black Panthers, but is executed with symbols of nationalism and religion that complicate the politics of those being represented. Just to the left of this panel is another scene depicting what looks like a group of retired servicemen and women attending a memorial ceremony, possibly for the dignitary whose bust stands solemnly on a tall, black column. These images, in contrast to the aforementioned domestic scenes, are posed and public-facing. They contain official markers of state power and nationalist pride, and project the dignity and authority of those present in the frame.

Installation view of Meleko Mokgosi, *Bread, Butter, and Power*

Despite the realism of these images, Mokgosi is not just concerned with verisimilitude or documentation. The artist sometimes paints backgrounds in abstract or unfinished strokes, while his choice of imagery often ventures into the realm of the surreal. The ghostly dog in a previous scene surfaces again in another panel, this time in a still-life painting with a bowl of fruit, wall posters, and other accessories of domestic life. In another interior scene, a naked woman, with jet-black skin and exaggerated racialized features, stands statuesque atop a plinth. A similar figure, albeit with less exaggerated features, reappears in a successive still life in which she lies crumpled and defeated on the floor, her right arm broken off like that of a

statue. On the wall above her, a collage of newspaper and magazine clippings advertise the trappings of success in modern life: physical health, nuclear families, and material wealth.

Meleko Mokgosi's project is in some ways a counterpoint to the work of another painter from the African diaspora, Toyin Ojih Odutola. Her paintings, as Seph Rodney writes in his review of her recent show at the Whitney Museum of American Art, represent an iteration of black excellence and beauty that is founded upon wealth and status, the self-image of the aristocracy. While Ojih Odutola's work presents a vision unmoored from or unburdened by history, Mokgosi's rendition of contemporary Botswana feels unsettled by the colonial past and the nationalist present.

Installation view of Meleko Mokgosi, *Bread, Butter, and Power*

Meleko Mokgosi: Bread, Butter, and Power *continues at the Fowler Museum (308 Charles E. Young Drive North, Los Angeles) through July 1.*

Los Angeles Times

The art of daily existence: Meleko Mokgosi's provocative show at the UCLA Fowler Museum

LA Times | By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT | ART CRITIC | MAY 07, 2018 | 8:00 AM

Meleko Mogkosi, "Bread, Butter and Power," 2018; installation view (UCLA Fowler Museum)

Meleko Mokgosi describes himself as a history painter, but what he considers to be historic is what sets his work apart. Kids at school, people lounging at home, a young woman getting her hair done — ordinary life is offered with the same focused intensity of classical history and myth, history painting's usual subjects.

At the UCLA Fowler Museum, curator Erica P. Jones is presenting the Botswana-born, New York-based artist's first West Coast museum show. (Mokgosi, who completed his master's at UCLA, won the 2012 Mohn Award in conjunction with the Hammer Museum's "Made in L.A." exhibition.) In "Bread, Butter and Power," daily existence and stamina interact.

A gallery is lined with 19 large canvas panels, while a 20th — neatly rolled and wrapped in plastic, as if awaiting its eventual display — leans against a post in the center of the room. The rolled painting offers a tantalizing glimpse of a man clutching a large trophy, delighted winner of we-know-not-what. (Maybe the Mohn Award?) The rest are snapshot-like scenes based in unidentified places in southern Africa — in schoolyards, bedrooms, at the market, at a gathering of military veterans and more.

UCLA Fowler Museum, 308 Charles E. Young Drive N., L.A. Through July 1; Closed Mondays and Tuesdays. (310) 825-4361, www.fowler.ucla.edu

Most of the panels are installed edge to edge. Sometimes the image in one slides into the panel adjacent, as when a grinning girl dressed in a bright-red school uniform shares pictorial space with an unrelated scene of a woman on a patio grooming a young woman's hair. A stylized presentation of formal and informal education comes into view.

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Meleko Mokgosi, "Bread, Butter and Power (detail)," 2018 (UCLA Fowler Museum)

Mokgosi paints in a concise, declarative manner. He's a realist, but he's not overly attentive to the minutiae of representation. A few strokes of gray and white paint conjure a tin bucket. The stripes on a school uniform necktie are the same quick white lines that define the edge of the student's sweater and the pattern of her jacket in a scene composed like a yearbook's class picture..

Meleko Mokgosi, "Bread, Butter and Power (detail)," 2018 (UCLA Fowler Museum)

Meleko Mokgosi, "Bread, Butter and Power (detail)," 2018 (UCLA Fowler Museum)

The economy of means can be provocative. Those same white stripes on the students' clothing also describe security bars on the window behind the kids. Only then does it sink in that the girls and boys both wear masculine-identified attire, locking into place a prevailing social hierarchy. The jacket-and-tie clothing identifies the pecking order as traditionally European.

Nearby, a picture of veterans, older men and women dressed in military uniforms and laden with medals, telescopes the student yearbook picture's intimation of institutionalized power relations. The image is sent spinning by the adjacent panel, in which a teenage boy wearing shades and a red beret sits cross-legged in a chair and flanked by two muscular security guards. He's part Napoleonic wannabe, part Black Panther revivalist.

Mokgosi slyly pulls abstraction into the mix, which he divides into black and white. One nearly blacked-out panel slowly reveals a barely legible woman sleeping in a bed, her dark skin congruent with the jet-black night. Other panels are raw canvas covered in cursive white text — barely legible writing in Setswana (the language of Botswana), or else dense academic jargon (the language of the university).

A scholastic dissertation on the relationship between "alterity and ipseity" — otherness and selfhood, to use common language — becomes almost satirical juxtaposed with a painting of an attractive young woman casually posed in regal profile on a throne-like upholstered chair. The window curtains behind her are pulled back like those on a theater stage.

In relation to grand canvases that depict ordinary daily life, colonial history painting merges with contemporary genre painting. The two written texts — obscure to most viewers and implying the divisions between an initiate and a comrade — resonate as power tools that cannot help but divide, even as they struggle to connect.

THE WORLD NEWS

TRUSTED 11:00 / 07.05.2018 LOS ANGELES TIMES

The art of daily existence: Meleko Mokgosi's provocative show at the UCLA Fowler Museum

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Meleko Mokgosi, "Bread, Butter and Power (detail)," 2018 UCLA Fowler Museum

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SOUTHERN JOURNEYS

THE GREAT HITCHHIKE - CATFISH MEMORIES - A DISAPPEARING COAST
CHURCH IN THE AFTERLIFE - THE END OF THE WORLD

"Democratic Intuition, Comrades: Addendum" (2016) © Meleko Mokgosi. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Botalaote Hill

A STORY

BY

GOTHATAONE MOENG

In the morning, woken by the two gunshots, I heard the rising flurry of ululations that followed and knew immediately that I would go to the wedding, no matter what my mother said or did. I understood that the two cows to be slaughtered for the feast had collapsed upon the swirling red dust, that an old man would be stalking toward them to plunge a knife into the quivering warmth of their necks, that soon the whole yard, only five compounds away, would be swarming with joyous people. My friends would be there and I wanted to be there, too.

In my cousin Tebogo's room, which I shared, I lay in my bed, listening to my mother's feet thumping up and down the passage, forcing the whole household awake. Doors slammed in her wake. In the kitchen, dishes clattered, hot cooking oil splattered, and the aroma of frying potatoes rose. In the bathroom, where my parents conversed, water streamed into the plastic tub my mother used for the patient's bath, her voice weary and my father's distorted by the toothpaste foaming his mouth. Water slapped at the sides of the tub as Mama lugged it into the patient's room—formerly mine—on the other side of the wall I was tapping my foot against. As I did every morning, I imagined I could smell the Dettol disinfectant Mama eddied into the water with her fingers, I imagined the steam fogging up the mirror I had bought for myself and stuck up on the wall, I imagined the steam warping my books and my posters and my photos and my magazines.

Alpert, Avi. "Allegories of Painting: Review of Meleko Mokgosi's Democratic Intuition: Lerato." *Art Margins Online.* 03 April 2017. Online.

ARTMARGINS[online]

ALLEGORIES OF PAINTING: REVIEW OF MELEKO MOKGOSI'S DEMOCRATIC INTUITION: LERATO

WRITTEN BY AVI ALPERT (NEW YORK/SÃO PAULO)

PUBLISHED: 03 APRIL 2017

Democratic Intuition: Lerato at Jack Shainman Gallery, New York City, September 8 - October 22, 2016

Democratic Intuition: Lerato is part of an ongoing series of exhibits by the Botswana-born, NYC-based painter Meleko Mokgosi.(1) The first iteration, *Exordium*, was shown at the Institute of Contemporary Art Boston in 2015, and was followed by *Comrades* at the Stevenson Art Gallery, Cape Town, in 2016. In his new show at Jack Shainman (20th St.), Mokgosi presents *Lerato* alongside *Comrades II* at the gallery's second Chelsea site. The series explores how a democracy is sustained and nurtured beyond formal political mechanisms. The symbols of democracy as a political system, such as community participation, voting booths, and houses of parliament, are but a spectral presence in the paintings. The viewer, instead, finds herself surrounded by images of matriarchs, bulls, household items, class portraits from high school, and long, untranslated texts in Setswana. The challenge for the viewer of these shows is to think through the connections that suture everyday experience to the politics of democracy, and to stretch beyond their immediate knowledge base to think this connection as it appears in Southern Africa, and as Southern Africa relates to the world.

“Democratic Intuition, Lerato IV,” 2016. Oil on canvas, bleach on portrait linen; 72 x 191 1/4 inches; 90 x 90 inches. Photo courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Mokgosi began work on this series in 2014, shortly after completing the series *Pax Kaffraria* (2010-2014), which itself followed *Pax Afrikaner* (2008-2011). Across these series, Mokgosi, who has resided primarily in the United States since 2003, pursues the possibility of political subjects and institutions that can move beyond the impasses of racism and violence, while remaining aware of the limits of human finitude and comprehension. A graduate of the Whitney Museum’s Independent Study Program, as well as UCLA’s Interdisciplinary Studio Program, Mokgosi’s practice is deeply informed by the history of political aesthetics and the rigorous study of critical theory. To understand his new works, then, we will also have to come to terms with the difficult conceptual apparatus that surrounds them. Indeed, I will be arguing, a large part of the meaning of Mokgosi’s work is that any naively experiential engagement with his paintings is bound to bring with it histories of both colonial prejudice and philosophical blunder. This review-essay thus explores both the formal attributes of his paintings and the conceptual stakes they raise.

In this show, Mokgosi has identified *lerato*, a Setswana word that roughly translates as love (more on this below), as a fundamental component of the ties that make a democratic community possible.(2) But Mokgosi is no sentimentalist; he is as appreciative of the highest ideals of love and democracy as he is aware of the nefarious uses of both. On large canvases, with rich colors, he presents the humans and objects that form

these dueling potentials. Thus, as the viewer enters the gallery, she is first presented with warm images of household goods, and then a sordid appeal to the empty, pop love of advertising.

It would be a mistake to "read" this show as a simple exploration of the relationship between love and politics, however. For what intercedes, quite literally, on the viewer's discernment of these images is the problem of reading itself. After all, it is safe to assume that most Chelsea gallerygoers do not speak the Setswana language that is inscribed on the paintings that surround these opening images. So how are they to understand the works in the show, given the prominent place of long, untranslated texts in Setswana?(3)

This problem of interpretation is something that viewers have often queried Mokgosi about, asking how they can interpret images whose contexts, history, and symbolism they know so little about.(4) I read the works in *Lerato* as, in part, an answer to that question. In a sense, this turn to interpretation is a precondition to the possibility of democracy, for it is hard to see how a community can hold together if its members do not understand each other (even if, as we shall see, part of what they need to understand is the impossibility of their fully understanding each other). The works respond to this problem of interpretation in two interconnected ways: by destabilizing the assumption that the history of Botswana is disconnected from the history of modern art in the West, and by destabilizing the assumption that even if one does know context, that an interpretation is therefore readily available. Before we can properly see Mokgosi's paintings, then, we have to engage with his para-painterly interests in the theory of interpretation and the history of art.

As he was painting these canvasses, Mokgosi was simultaneously reading the works of the literary theorist Paul de Man. (5) De Man's theories of reading and allegory will not elucidate the meaning of Mokgosi's paintings; rather, they will help us understand what we cannot understand about them. De Man's target across his dense and formidable writings was what he called "the systematic avoidance of the problem of reading."(6) "Reading" for de Man is not isolated to words on a page but rather to all interpretation. "The problem of reading" is our attempt to develop definitive meanings for the things we read (or see or hear) in spite of the fact that there is an unbridgeable gap between a sign (word or image) and its referent. When we see the woman floating above the bed in Mokgosi's painting, for example, we cannot give a fixed interpretation. I have suggested that it relates to the theme of love in the show, but one may just as well say that it is about image-making, or

commodity fetishism, or the painter's attempt to fix and trap the Western gaze. Because of the indeterminacy of symbols, there can be no absolute point at which to fix our "reading" of this image. All we can do, as I have done, is to propose what de Man calls "misreadings," attempts to sketch out a possible meaning, knowing full well the inherent limits of that attempt.

This theory of reading is the first part of Mokgosi's answer to his perplexed viewers: you should not assume the transparency of meaning to any work, from any culture or historical period. Knowing the context does not and cannot remove the problem of reading. De Man also uses the concept of allegory to underscore this difficulty. He does not accept the standard definition that an allegory tells one story in order to signify meaning about another event. (As *Lord of the Rings* is, for example, sometimes said to be an allegory for World War I.) In *Allegories of Reading* de Man offers this cryptical definition: "Allegories are always...allegories of the impossibility of reading."(7) Allegories are not stories about stories, then. They are stories about how a story can never, in fact, definitively signify any specific meaning. Mokgosi is explicit that his paintings have been influenced by de Man's theory of allegory as well.(8) Constantly asked about the meaning of his work, he claims that they are allegories in de Man's sense, which is to say, they are about the fact that they will be misunderstood: "[The work] knows and asserts that it will be misunderstood. It tells the story, the allegory of its misunderstanding."(9)

This is not the end of the story, however. Mokgosi's works, though indebted to de Man, also depart from his arguments. While it may be true that the gap between the sign and referent cannot be overcome, it is equally the case that words do manage to express some basic meanings. The very intelligibility of de Man's own theory is proof of this! This is signified in Mokgosi's decision to call the show *Lerato*. As he explains, "Lerato is compelling to me because it is not an abstract and poetic concept [like love, its possible translation]...but rather it is as concrete as a human subject."(10) *Lerato*, in other words, both conforms to and departs from de Man's theory. It is unstable because its referent is always unclear, yet, Mokgosi insists, it is able to break through the layers of language to become real in a human subject. Perhaps this insistence on something beyond language is part of why he paints such dense, bold images.

Further still, de Man's theory does not necessarily help us parse other ways in which meaning is fractured. If someone shouts "Look, a negro!" (to take Frantz Fanon's famous example), that speech act obviously

signifies differently for people who have been racialized in different ways. As a reflection upon language itself, de Man's theory is limited to analyzing general conditions, not specific histories.(11) Mokgosi's histories, however, emerge out of such specific, violent histories. Two key themes of Mokgosi's show merge here: the possibility of communication within a fractured world, and the fact that such a possibility rests on coming to terms with the histories of colonialism.

"Democratic Intuition, Lerato I," 2016. Oil on canvas, 96 x 78 inches. Photo courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

To see how this plays out in the paintings, we first need to understand how Mokgosi is challenging the formalist history of modern art. In the standard story, modern art achieved abstraction through a process similar to de Man's; that is, by reflecting on its own internal components. In this inward turn, color, line, and shape replaced the representation of reality as the subject of painting. As Clement Greenberg put it, to take a notable example, "In turning his attention away from subject matter of common experience, the poet or artist turns it in upon the medium of his own craft."(12) And both Greenberg and de Man maintain a basic principle: this is a Western history. This is a history of how European writers and artists turned into the medium of their language or painting and, thereby, transformed the subject of art. It is this history that Mokgosi challenges by engaging the allegorical works of the late nineteenth-century French painter William-Adolphe Bouguereau.

Many of the paintings in *Lerato* recast the images of Bouguereau. For example, Mokgosi significantly transforms the latter's *The Motherland* (1883). He keeps the basic composition of the original: a mother, her breasts exposed, stares stoically out as her children clamor, beg, and fight around her. He makes some marked changes, too, altering the race of the mother and softening her gaze a little, adding a white child in a supplicant pose, and reducing the background from Bouguereau's dreamy landscape to a few blocks of color. These small changes are of great significance.

We should first note that Bouguereau's painting is a classic example of allegory; here, the mother stands in for France, and the children for her citizens and colonial subjects. Mokgosi transforms this classical allegory into what we could call, following de Man, an "allegory of painting." That is to say, as in Greenberg's theory of modernism, they are paintings about painting itself. But moving beyond Greenberg's formalist conception, they suggest that for a painting to be about painting, it must be about what painting denies in the construction of its own formalism. That is, it must recognize that form and history and inseparable. In asserting that painting is about line, color, form, and so forth, one denies that painting is equally about the creation and imagination of race, the nation-state, the colonial ideology. This is what Mokgosi's painting, by transforming the color of the mother, reveals. It insists that the questions of representation, slavery, and colonialism are already in Bouguereau's paintings at the "formal" level of color. As Françoise Vergès puts it in another context, "the centuries of slave trade and slavery were not about 'something over there,' but were also about [Europeans'] own society, about how their daily lives had been deeply transformed by sugar, tobacco, coffee, and cotton and about the birth of antiblack racism."(13) And this can also be seen as part of Mokgosi's response to his perplexed viewers: the history of Africa is already part of "your" history, just as much as the history of Europe has indelibly marked the present of Africa.

Greenberg wrote of pre- or anti-modernists like Bouguereau: "Everything [in their work] contributes to the denial of the medium, as if the artist were ashamed to admit that he had actually painted his picture instead of dreaming it forth."(14) This is why Mokgosi's transformation of the background is important. He removes the dreamy landscape and gives a few, abstract blocks of color. I read the painting as suggesting a concrete link between this nineteenth-century moment and the move toward abstraction. This link is absent from the formalist narrative. In Greenberg's story, it is by admitting to the fact of painting, by taking on the burden of the form, that art moved past this representational impasse. It is Bouguereau that modernism must escape to become modern.

Installation view of “Democratic Intuition, Lerato,” at Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, 2016. Photo courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Mokgosi’s work subtly suggests a different history. He notes that Bouguereau painted *Motherland* in 1883, a year of ongoing colonial struggles over the division of Africa, and a year before the Berlin Conference that haphazardly divided the continent among Western powers, fomenting much of the internal strife within African nations that we still see today.(15) How might this context help us understand how we go from, say, Bouguereau to Picasso? Because what is happening in the colonial context is the same break up of space that will later be depicted in his canvasses. Africa is being parceled up into fragmentary and incoherent states, just as Picasso’s geometry does to an object. The “scramble for Africa” is, thus, revealed as one of the *constitutive* conditions for the “scrambling” of representation in works by Picasso and others.(16) This constitution is often reduced to a “formal” effect, which is to say that sculptures from Africa offered new ways of representing the human body.(17) By combining elements of abstraction and fragmentation with this specific painting from this specific year, Mokgosi is suggesting that the abstract turn is an epiphenomenon of the deeper struggle. The history of form is not (or not just) about painting turning in on itself; the history of form is also the history of colonial politics.

This critique of pure formalism is equally part of the response to de Man: the fracture between sign and meaning is not simply a generic, transhistorical condition. It is also *produced* by the violence of colonialism. It is this violence that rips apart the meaning of Bouguereau’s allegory, as much as the generic “problem of reading.” By

restoring this violence to the image, Mokgosi cannot create a determinate meaning, but he can shift the terrain of meaning that appears in the original image. He can call up the original's colonial unconscious. Thus, his paintings are not just about the impossibility of communication as such, but about the specific ways in which our own blindness to history complicates the possibility of understanding. Equally, as with the word *lerato*, they are about how this problem can, even if to a limited extent, be overcome.

"(Angels) Democratic Intuition, Lerato," 2016. Oil on canvas, 90 x 179 1/4 inches. Photo courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Consider in this context Mokgosi's representation of a well-known allegory—a man wrestling an angel. Mokgosi depicts two figures (one man, one angel) wrestling in the sand in the foreground, with an onlooker and seeming future challenger in the background. As in his recasting of *Motherland*, this painting's spatial features are created through abstraction: streaks of yellow create sand, and a black line creates the outer border of the wrestling space, perhaps a stadium. By using abstraction to signify concrete spaces, Mokgosi's painting again joins the generic with the specific. This image, of course, represents the Biblical parable of Jacob wrestling the Angel. There is again the problem of reading here: is that not just an imposition of a Western narrative onto a scene from Botswana? And, indeed, it may be. Still, it is also important to remember that while the Abrahamic faiths eventually travelled West, they had their origins in North Africa and the Middle East, and they ultimately returned to these spaces in the colonial era. It is this

intertwining of origins, this inseparability of representation, violence, and form, and this undecidability of interpretation that marks all the works in this show.

And at the same time, the exhibition is marked by a desire to overcome some of these conditions. We have seen these dueling desires since the juxtaposition of the first two paintings in the gallery. De Man found these opposites to be represented by the allegory and the symbol: "Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference.(18) Symbols are hopeless dreams for transcendence; allegories represent the difficult truth of the failure for the fullness of meaning. I think we can read the figure of the Angel here as a symbol, and I would read it as the symbol of presence. Whereas humans are finite, and their meaning always eclipsed by history, the angel represents the hope for a way of being beyond the ravages of time. Perhaps we could say, the Angel is the fulfillment of the community of love in a democracy, and the humans are the forces of time that always seem to make such a redeemed society impossible.(19) It is in the struggle (the wrestling match) of these two forces that life as we know it takes place. Perhaps this is why the image of the wrestlers sits in the middle of the gallery, a base out of which the rest of the work expands.

Installation view of "Democratic Intuition, Lerato," at Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, 2016. Photo courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

In the end, while drawing sustenance from the work of the great literary theorist, Mokgosi avoids de Man's mistake of assuming that only the failure is real. *Democratic Intuitions* insists that historical embodiment, fleeting though it may be, matters as much as formal anguish. Mokgosi's work thus holds out the possibility of redemption, fullness, and meaning, while remaining fully aware of the inevitable reversals of time. And it won't let us stop looking before we acknowledge that we, too, are locked in this violent yet hopeful struggle.

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1. Another installment of the project, *Comrades II*, ran concurrently at the Shainman Gallery's second site. I make brief reference to this other exhibit, but focus my analysis on *Lerato*. [back]

2. Meleko Mokgosi, in discussion with the author, August 2016. I had two informal conversations with Mokgosi prior to writing this review. One took place just before the show opened (August), and the other just after (September). [back]

3. Mokgosi told me while gallerists were required by the artist to give overviews of the texts to anyone who asked, no one was told that the gallerists had such knowledge, and their versions of the stories often suffered a "whisper down the lane" degradation – something I experienced after hearing Mokgosi's version and the gallerist's of a few different paintings. Mokgosi, in discussion with the author, September 2016. [back]

4. Meleko Mokgosi, in discussion with the author, September 2016. [back]

5. Meleko Mokgosi, in discussion with the author, August 2016. [back]

6. *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 282. [back]

7. Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 205. [back]

8. Both in conversation and in the press release. Meleko Mokgosi, in discussion with the author, August 2016; Jack Shainman Gallery. 2016. *Meleko Mokgosi: Democratic Intuition, Lerato*. [back]

9. Paul de Man, Blindness and Insight, 136. [back]

10. Jack Shainman Gallery. 2016. *Meleko Mokgosi: Democratic Intuition: Lerato*. [back]

11. This does not mean that his theories cannot be put to that use, as Gayatri Spivak attempted to show in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999). [back]

12. Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon, 1989), 6. Greenberg, it should be noted, did suggest that this was itself a response to changes in bourgeois culture, but he does not make the link to colonialism, in spite of his interest in "primitive painting." [back]

13. Françoise Vergès "The Slave at the Louvre: An Invisible Humanity," *Nka* 38-39 (2016): 10. [back]

14. Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoön," in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, Ed. Francis Franscina (New York: Routledge, 2000), 63. [back]

15. Meleko Mokgosi, in discussion with the author, September 2016. On this history see, for example, Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). [back]

16. For an insistence on thinking Picasso's relation to Africa as "constitutive" of his art, see Simon Gikandi, "Picasso, Africa, and the Schemata of Difference," *Modernism/modernity* 10.3 (2003): 455-480. I mention this piece also because of its importance for Mokgosi. Meleko Mokgosi, in discussion with the author, September 2016. [back]

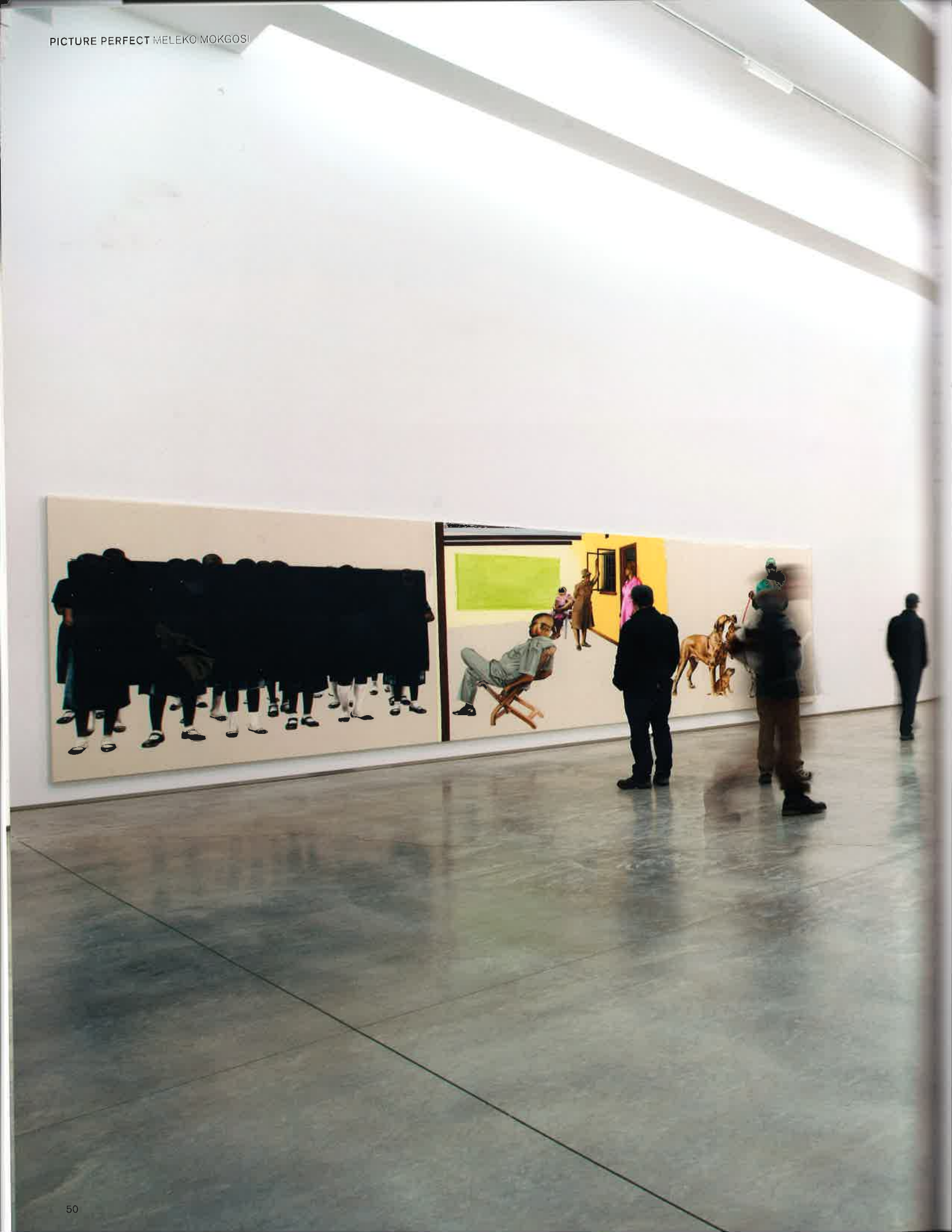
17. Denise Murrell's "African Influences in Modern Art," written for the Metropolitan Museum of Art's website, is here a representative account. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/aima/hd_aima.htm (http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/aima/hd_aima.htm) (2008). [back]

18. "Paul de Man, Blindness and Insight, 207. [back]

19. There is also arguably a visual lineage from depictions of Jacob wrestling the Angel (such as Gustave Doré's on the Wikipedia page for the story, from 1855) through to Mark Tansey's *Derrida Queries de Man* (1990). Here, Mokgosi is querying de Man. [back]

Offodile, Anaeze. "Pax Kaffraria: Anaeze Offodile in Conversation with Meleko Mokgosi." *Osmos Magazine*. Issue 9 Summer 2016. pp. 48-53, illustrated.

48 *Pax Kaffraria: Terra Pericolosa*, 2013



PAX KAFFRARIA

ANAEZE OFFODILE IN CONVERSATION WITH MELEKO MOKGOSI

The work of Meleko Mokgosi, hyperrealist montages of post-colonial life, can in some ways be construed as a contemporary extension of the works of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Homi Bhabha. Their shared thematic elements of power, protest, modernity, and cultural identity are more relevant today than ever given the current (and previously unfathomable) political discourse and mood in which we find ourselves.

In other ways, the work of Mokgosi stands proudly alone both in his intentions and the unique vernacular through which he is able to assert them: an amalgamation of classic and modern techniques that often leaves us with larger-than-life tableaus in scope of content and physical proportions. A critique levied against Mokgosi has been that his canvases are often "too cinematic." I could not disagree more. In person, his use of scale does not increase the volume with which he communicates, rather it allows him to tell a richer story. The first panel in *Fully Belly II*, a large oil of a dozen schoolgirls standing defiantly (or are they?) toward the viewer with their faces blacked out, illustrates this point beautifully. Devoid of geographic or historical markers, it forces you to interpret the appropriateness of cultural and political socialization. At what point does it deviate towards imperialism and, if so, does it have to? Yes, the works of Meleko Mokgosi are transportative, as it has been styled by some. However, for myself—and no doubt many others—it's a remarkable journey inward.

ANAEZE OFFODILE In *Pax Kaffraria: Terra Pericolosa* I was struck by how well the pieces work well both together and in isolation. In particular, I was able to draw different sets of lessons and references each time. Was this the intent?

MELEKO MOKGOSI I composed *Terra Pericolosa*, which was made for a specific exhibition at the Yerba Buena Center for the arts, using the design and layout of the coat of arms in order to interrogate associative narrative structures. I examined how the coat of arms was constructed as something nationalistic, as a trope that is about the nation-state, asking myself how individuals and groups identify, signify, and symbolize a nation-state and its politics (not forgetting that the coat of arms is probably more about the nation and how kinship groupings are connected to a common nation, which precedes the state). So I took apart the generic structure of the coat of arms and found that it's basically made up of associations rather than a sequential narrative. It's literally associations strategically put together around a shield, whether it's a Zulu traditional shield or what have you, and I used that structure to inform the narrative structure of the chapter. Given the historical ties to the nation-state, connotations of the armory, state pageantry, military conquest, achievement, and so forth, the coat of arms was crucial for me in providing a method of understanding not only how objects held meaning but, as Gayatri Spivak would say, how objects are created toward knowledge. With this work, I started to think much more in depth about this relationship between metaphor and metonym and the narrative structure. So it was an attempt at finding an alternative to linear and sequential narrative structures as a way to further my practice.

AE I was/am incredibly intrigued by your process, in particular the utilization of storyboards and how that makes for an uncompromising result. How long is it typically from concept to finished product? Is there a role of error in all of this? What's the best error you have ever made?

MM Depending on the breadth and scale of the installation, a chapter within a project can take up to a year or two years to complete. However, there is no time frame on how long it would take to complete a whole project (usually made up of eight chapters). The development of this way of working is really in line with many artists work within a project-based framework; the research and conceptual material really dictate the approach. In a sense, it is an approach that also tries to indirectly disavow the idea and necessity of the temporary exhibition structure—which is too easily tied to production and the reproduction of specific socio-economic relations in the global circulation of capital. The storyboard is also a particular strategy that was taken out of cinema as well as the way in which many conceptual artists used to work. But it is not so much a way of avoiding error, but rather a way of choreographing the point at which one can or aught to improvise. So the storyboard allows me to restrict this to particular instances, and it is on these instances that I am made aware of how and when to make the painting seem painterly.

AE What guides the selection of source material (archival photos, paper clippings) that you use? Is there a role for non-fact based references i.e. purely imaginative elements?

MM I have an ongoing archive made up of thousands of photographs, ranging from ones I take to ones that are acquired from journals and magazines and so forth. There are many rules that govern the collection of the images; i.e. they must all have a close connection to southern Africa and must depict something about the region. The formatting of the photographs and composition are also key. Because my work is invested in ideas of historicity, historicism, and representation (understood in all its multiple meanings), I cannot invent people or histories or cultural specificities.

AE What's next for you in the short and long-term future?

MM I am currently working on *Democratic Intuition* (2014–present), which investigates the irresolvable contradiction that is the foundation of democracy; namely the contradiction between recognizing one's supposed freedom as an individual and the recognition that has to be applied to one's partner to interaction as also bound in freedom. My aim is to look at the specificity of the daily-lived experiences of diverse populations that occupy southern Africa, and focuses on how people think about and reciprocate the democratic. The first chapter was exhibited at the ICA Boston; second in Cape Town, and now working on the next few chapters in conjunction with an exhibition at Jack Shainman gallery in September 2016.

OPPOSITE *Fully Belly II*, 2014

52 *Modern Art: The Root of African Savages III*, 2015

VOGUE

Fall Art Guide: 13 Shows to See This Season

AUGUST 30, 2016 4:53 PM
by DODIE KAZANJIAN (HTTP://WWW.VOGUE.COM/CONTRIBUTOR/DODIE-KAZANJIAN/)

Labor Day is near, and another summer is fleeting. But the plethora of art shows to see this fall more than makes up for that. Here are a dozen of them I plan to see, along with some new artists I'm keeping an eye on:

New Artists to Watch:

Meleko Mokgosi's "Democratic Intuition, Lerato" and "Democratic Intuition, Comrades II" at Jack Shainman Gallery (September 8 to October 22, 2016)

ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS

Meleko Mokgosi

JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY | WEST 20TH STREET
513 West 20th Street
September 8–October 22

JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY | WEST 24TH STREET
524 West 24th Street
September 8–October 22

In two concurrent solo exhibitions at the gallery's Twentieth and Twenty-Fourth Street spaces, Meleko Mokgosi presents the latest "chapters" in an ongoing series titled "Democratic Intuition," 2014–. His monumental paintings give us African subjects in compositions derived from vernacular photography, film, and European history paintings, but the project is far more complex than a mere blending of African and Western influences. Mokgosi examines the construction of historical narratives and questions of representation—both visual and political—through a process of continuous becoming: Precise, photorealist renderings are juxtaposed with raw and unfinished swaths of canvas, while multipanel paintings unfold like cinematic storyboards. Several text-based works transcribe, but do not translate, *dinaane* (Setswana for "folk stories"), addressing the temporality of storytelling and the complexity of cultural translation.

View of "Meleko Mokgosi: Democratic Intuition, Lerato," 2016.

In "Lerato," on Twentieth Street, Mokgosi reimagines canonical works by the French academic painter William-Adolphe Bouguereau, whose career was contemporaneous with the Berlin Conference and European imperialism in Africa. In *Democratic Intuition, Lerato: Agape I* (all works cited, 2016), the artist restages Bouguereau's *Alma Parens* (The Motherland), 1883, which depicts a maternal France nurturing her young dependents; Mokgosi's African protagonist, conversely, embodies France's colonial exploitation of both land and labor abroad.

On Twenty-Fourth Street, "Comrades II" turns to the legacy of liberation struggles and the notion of democracy in postcolonial Africa. In *Democratic Intuition, Lex I*, stoic figures inhabit an enigmatic, modernist interior that is adorned with masks and ethnographic photographs. Framed for display and pressed to the picture's surface, these images highlight the cultural and temporal dislocations that sometimes characterize postcolonial experiences. Here, Mokgosi seems to marshal a Steinbergian "flatbed" aesthetic—also legible in *Democratic Intuition, Comrades: Addendum*, that features various photographs of African women, done with silk-screen and pigment transfer, that prompt reflection on the mediating role of images in public and political life.

— Allison Young

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

ARTS | ARTS IN REVIEW | ART REVIEW

New York Gallery Shows for the Weekend

Meleko Mokgosi in this week's Fine Art

Meleko Mokgosi's 'Democratic Intuition, Lex I' (2016) *PHOTO: ©MELEKO MOKGOSI. COURTESY OF THE ARITST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK.*

Democratic Intuition: Comrades II
Jack Shainman
524 W. 24th St., (212) 337-3372
Through Oct. 22
Meleko Mokgosi, the Botswana-born (1981) and American-educated artist (a bachelor's degree from Williams College and a 2011 Master of Fine Arts degree from UCLA) is nothing if not ambitious. In a double exhibition of oversize photorealist paintings with mildly surrealist juxtapositions, he attempts, under the umbrella heading of "Democratic Intuition," what the gallery calls an examination of—in "Comrades II"—"the historical, aesthetic and conceptual links between southern African liberation movements and communism, while 'Lerato' is centered on the concepts of allegory and *lerato*, the Setswana word that roughly translates as 'love.'"

Mr. Mokgosi's pictures are, at first glance, stunning. His iconography includes brightly colored portraits of African bourgeoisie, a Brahma bull, groups of black and white boarding-school students, and bleached-into-linen text in Setswana (pointedly, the artist does not furnish translations), all set against veritably blank canvas or brushy swatches of paint.

What an inexpert, non-African viewer is to make of this, other than to be persuaded by scale and imagery to think something important is being said, is up in the air. A critic of Mr. Mokgosi's similar 2015 exhibition at Shainman's upstate venue in a beautifully reclaimed public school in Kinderhook, N.Y., said that the emphatic ideology of the work detracted from their "quality as paintings." I have an opposite opinion: Mr. Mokgosi simply doesn't do realism as well as he needs to in order to pull us smoothly into his social content. It could be, of course, that his harsh, brittle-edged figuration is deliberate. My take, though, is that obvious talent and zeal aside, Mr. Mokgosi has some distance to go as a painter.

—Mr. Plagens is an artist and writer in New York.

THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Art
INCONVERSATION

October 4th, 2016

MELEKO MOKGOSI with Allie Biswas

Meleko Mokgosi grew up in Botswana and has lived in the United States for over a decade. His large-scale, project-based paintings depict narratives from his hometown and the wider region of southern Africa, which he constructs using found images, newspaper clippings, and photographs taken on his travels. Mokgosi is currently showing two bodies of work at Jack Shainman Gallery, *Democratic Intuition: Lerato* and *Democratic Intuition: Comrades II* (September 8 – October 22, 2016), which continue his examination of issues relating to the construction and representation of history.

Allie Biswas (Rail): Art school played a prominent role in your life. How did your experiences at various institutions help your work to get to where it is now?

Portrait of Meleko Mokgosi. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui. From a photo courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

Meleko Mokgosi: I was accepted by a few art schools in London but then found out that there wasn't any financial aid available. So I looked to the U.S. and, by luck, met Phil Smith, a former head of admissions at Williams College, during a trip he took to Botswana. Likewise, I ended up at the Whitney Independent Study Program (ISP) after being rejected by all the MFA programs I had applied to after college. By great fortune, that is where I met Mary Kelly, and I followed her to UCLA. All of these sites were transformative: Williams College expanded my access conceptual rigor and gave me a sound foundation in art history and English literature. The ISP narrowed my interests and provided more depth and breadth in my approach to politics and theory. It also gave me the opportunity to be in New York, and, consequently, have access to museums. I feel that everything came together during the three years I worked with Mary at UCLA: this is where I really developed the central ideas around my project and process. Mary guided me to find what is normally understood as a project-based practice, which is necessarily driven by a process of interrogation.

Rail: What does having a project-based practice mean to you?

Mokgosi: From my training, the project can be simply described as the entire framework and field of inquiry of any given discipline. And in terms of the discursive site for my work, I would outline this as the various southern African nationalist movements in both their emergent and subsequent forms. Because the southern African nationalist movement functions as the discursive site, my work will always be informed by postcolonial studies and Marxism, while the rules of the studio are generated by history painting, cinema studies, and psychoanalysis.

Rail: What made you want to explore these issues? How did they become your subject matter?

Mokgosi: I cannot say with certainty what sparked my project, but I think my investment as someone from that region plays a major role. No doubt, I am heavily committed to history, and am trying to figure out how it is constructed and its effects on particular publics. These interests lead me to the idea of the localized narrative as a way of questioning how outside forces historicized our region, as well as how Eurocentricism reproduces itself.

Rail: How does the localized narrative function within your paintings?

Mokgosi: To quote a previous text: the localized narrative brings to the forefront how a narrative structure is always under negotiation and construction, putting emphasis not on the narrative itself but on the witnessing behind narration. The localized narrative allows for a constant and careful analysis of one's positionality vis-à-vis the narrative structures, within which one is implicated directly and indirectly, as well as how one takes stock of and utilizes established and untracked histories. Above all, my efforts are invested in tracing these untracked histories that almost always counter and reside within already understood and taken-for-granted historical narratives about specific events and geopolitical locations.

Rail: You have referred to the genre of history painting for several years. How would you say this framework allows you to explore "untracked histories"?

Mokgosi: It is a useful tool and genre for investigating narrative tropes and ideas of representation; even more so when it comes to representations of particular people and histories that were established outside the control of these publics. So the most important thing, I would say, is that I am attracted to the limitations of this genre, because it is precisely in these limitations that I find productive material for my project. As the championed genre, history painting in Europe went beyond being about a particular style. It was, to paraphrase a colleague, a summation of Western moral and aesthetic principles, and the medium through which early modern society saw its ideals in images. In addition to this, it was a genre that was strategically used in relation to the European imperialist mission, so in many ways it was complicit with European imperialism.

Rail: The abstract brush mark is often seen within your work, sitting within or around the main composition.

Mokgosi: Yes, I tend to use history painting together with the abstract minimalist gestural mark. The abstract and minimal brush mark has a history of connoting a particular performativity of painterly-ness, and revealing something visceral about the construction of that mark. For all these reasons, and more, it

has become a source of entertainment because it looks and acts like “painting” and “art.” I use abstraction as a kind of fake painterly-ness, and as a way of mapping things out with more economy.

Rail: Your first series of paintings, “Pax Afrikaner” (2008 – 11) was a response to xenophobic attacks towards black foreigners in southern Africa. The project seemed to connect history to the role of national identity, particularly in our “borderless” age.

Mokgosi: Indeed, the project was centered on trying to understand the role that the nation-state played in group identification, and psychoanalytic theory informed how I wanted to look at the material. And, as you rightly point out, my specific interest was fueled not only by xenophobia but also by the continual bogus claims about the promise of globalization and transnationalism, and so on. The questions I was addressing focused on how one should make meaning of what is normally called “nationalism” in one’s specific region; how we can account for the perseverance and fixity of national identification in the age of globalization; and the so-called multiplicity of identity formation. Having noticed the dangerous deterioration of relations between foreign nationals and natives in countries like Germany, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Netherlands, Sweden, and the United States, these questions became increasingly crucial.

Rail: Would it be right to say that this series also introduced the subject of “home” in your work, in the sense of focusing on the specificity of place, whether that be Botswana or the larger region of southern Africa? Place seems central to your overall project.

Installation view: *Meleko Mokgosi, Democratic Intuition, Lerato*. Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. September 8 – October 22, 2016.

Mokgosi: Home and place—or site—are two rather separate entities, and the project was looking more at sites as opposed to home. Indeed, focusing on particular sites allows me a kind of specificity that would otherwise be missing. So the site as an idea and its particularity are quite important. The nature of the specificity of my case study (southern African histories and politics) makes the work, I believe, more abstract and therefore open for the viewer. So the more specific the work is, the more abstract it becomes and therefore possible for the viewer to conscientiously project their reading. Sometimes I do fear that the specificity could lead to a kind of generalization and essentialization regarding the work, but I cannot control that.

Rail: The more general associations, relating to issues of injustice or representation, for instance, could be considered by viewers who don’t have access to the specificity that you’re referring to.

Mokgosi: Yes, my hope is that, although some audiences may not have access to what some of the specificity is pointing to, they will be able to identify other reference points that may be informative. My work does deal with issues of injustice, representation and, in some regards, blackness. It may be a stretch to connect this to how these things are understood in the American context, but I hope the connection does exist. There are obviously big differences between British colonialism and enslavement, which historically informs the African-American identity. In Botswana, our perspective is not formed through racial categories as it is in this country, yet we have been conditioned to accept the white foreigner as always a better version of what we aspire to be, although this is disappearing now. The formation of South Africans’

general conception of the world, like in the U.S., is inescapably conditioned by race: that is, any and all subjects who are brought up in these two places, like it or not, have racial categorization as part of how they conceptualize the world. In South Africa it was formally legitimized by the Population Registration Act of 1950, which divided the population into four groups: Whites, Natives, Coloreds, and Indians. In the U.S., the institutionalization of race occurred at a different pace, but at its core, the importance of race was—and still is—substantiated by the extent to which people believe in it and by the very reason of its existence. That is, its purpose as something that was designed to secure domination for Europeans, to paraphrase a colleague. This machinery continues to serve this function: namely, the systematic exclusion of a sector of a population from power, authority, governance, and wealth, not to mention the basics of social welfare.

Rail: Did your move to the U.S. encourage you to consider blackness and identity specifically within the American context, as something separate from your explorations within a southern African setting?

Mokgosi: Yes, I'm at a point where I am thinking about these things more and more within an American context, more so because I have been here for quite some time. My paintings cannot directly address these issues within the American context, but I rely on my role as a teacher, to engage with them. I do think there is a correlation between issues of race here and how they manifest in South Africa. The question of race is a complex one. Being black or white here in the U.S. automatically and symbolically functions as a trigger of associations that place you in either the group whose ancestors were enslaved for generations, or the other group, whose ancestors benefited handsomely from turning black muscle and bone into profit, that strategically dehumanized and chained generations of another people, confining them only to forced labor and denying them the slightest possibility of ever being counted as human.

Rail: So you're saying that to be an American is intrinsically to be brought up with a racialized perspective of the world.

Mokgosi: We all know that no one is really black or white, yet we buy into these categories and attach our identities to them. We attach the formation of who we are to these shortcuts; we are quite comfortable to perform narrow stereotypes of our identities. I do not know much about this, but I think part of the difficulty in dealing with the issue of race here is acknowledging that the American perspective is an irreversibly racialized one. The only way for Americans to fight this sustainable racialized underdevelopment, guaranteed by the legacy of slavery and institutionalized racism, is to collectively undermine this perception of the world and find ways to repay ancestral debts.

Rail: You have said that your work has always been political.

Mokgosi: Yes, my work has always tried to engage with contemporary political events and issues. The big change, I think, is that after college, politics began to be filtered through different kinds of theory. I use theory as tools that guide how I may or may not want to look at a set of questions. So instead of a reactionary, pan-Africanist, generalized conception of politics and Africa as a whole, I try to narrow my focus with specificity. The former seemed to always already essentialize and reduce complex histories and ideas into general statements. I have

Installation view: *Meleko Mokgosi, Democratic Intuition, Lerato*. Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. September 8 - October 22, 2016

come to see this as violent, and I think it also produces a weak argument.

Rail: Is social responsibility tied to the role of the artist?

Mokgosi: I cannot say that there is anything such as social responsibility because that would be too prescriptive. However, I am committed to the idea that as cultural producers, artists ought to critically consider, yet not necessarily engage with, how they conceptualize this thing called "culture." It is only in doing so that these cultural productions can be understood. So, for example, since we are already implicated in the circulation of global capital, one important question then is: to what extent do we allow our studio practices to reproduce the existing socio-economic relations to production? The question of culture is also key, although this might seem like a rehash of the 1990s. My reason for saying this is that how an artist understands the idea of culture has ramifications in terms of what he or she produces as cultural objects. Put otherwise, I would say that art is a personal and strategic way of trying to pose urgent questions through ambivalence, ambiguity, and polysemy—and done in a way that defines and acknowledges "culture" to perform specific roles in society.

Rail: How did you prepare for your current exhibitions at Jack Shainman Gallery?

Mokgosi: This body of work was produced over a two-year period and developed around ideas of allegory and *lerato* (love). The impetus here was to experiment with visual and narrative strategies that did not depend on sequential expectations. In my readings, I found what I had felt for a while but was never able to formulate: the idea that allegory is always something through which a viewer cannot help but be cognizant of the method of reading and interpretation at the moment he or she begins to engage with any allegorical narrative, whether visual or textual. The viewer is aware of how he or she is reading something the moment that he or she starts to read it.

Rail: And this led you to the painting by William-Adolphe Bouguereau?

Mokgosi: Yes, these preoccupations led me to a chance encounter with Bouguereau's 1883 painting, *The Motherland*. It struck me as a peculiar allegorical and history painting that did not feel right in its representation, and so I began an in-depth examination of his tropes, techniques, and history. Added to this inquiry, and perhaps more importantly, was the coincidence that most of the paintings that I was looking at were painted around or during the Scramble for Africa. Although coincidence is sometimes seen as arbitrary, it was an important factor in this case because it revealed something quite difficult to ignore: that History, with a big "H,", is better understood through historicity. Quite broadly, historicity can be thought of in relation to the idea that history is not something that happens, but as something that unfolds in different directions and folds the subject into these multiple directions. History, then, is not an event or collections of events, but rather a number of "unfoldings" that bear the mark of things before. So I tend to think of history as something that is always already present and set out to navigate ways in which I could, as a black southern African painter, create complex representations around the idea of love through literary theories of allegory.

Rail: Both bodies of work that make up the show—*Lerato* and *Comrades II*—are individual chapters from your series "Democratic Intuition" (2014 – present). What direction will this project be taking next?

Mokgosi: Overall, this project aims to ask questions about how one can, without becoming overly academic, approach ideas of the democratic in relation to daily lived experiences of the subjects that occupy southern Africa. In dealing with this material, I focus on the ways in which democracy is both something that is inscribed within the individual from various institutions, in addition to being partly intuitive or self-taught through processes of socialization and intersubjective exchange. If the democratic is primarily founded on the simultaneous recognition of alterity and ipseity, then this chapter, *Lerato*, seeks to uncover how the manner in which individuals invest intense emotional energy into others and objects, and how these investments play out in relation to the democratic. The next chapters that I will be working on for upcoming exhibitions are "Triomf," "Lex," and "Gloria." "Triomf," for example, aims to investigate how access to intellectual labor affects both the understanding and reciprocation of democracy at the level of daily lived experiences. The chapter title refers to a set of historical events that helped cement apartheid in South Africa, specifically during the 1950s with the forced removal of black South Africans from the Johannesburg suburb of Sophiatown. A legendary black cultural center of the nation, much like District Six in Cape Town, Sophiatown was razed after black South Africans were forcibly moved to Soweto on the outskirts of Johannesburg. Subsequently Sophiatown was remade as Triomf, and became a working-class, white South African neighborhood. Through the destruction of sites like Sophiatown that fostered black intellectual creativity, black South Africans were actively and purposefully distanced from engaging in intellectual labor. In addition to these removals, laws such as the Bantu Education Act, which barred blacks from attending existing schools, also created a separate education system for the sole purpose of preparing all black South Africans for life as manual laborers; and the Group Areas Act—which segregated suburbs, created townships and separated blacks into tribes—were all crucial in formulating an oppressive system of intergenerational epistemological violence whose effects are still felt today. The legacy of these laws, institutionalized racism, and denial of education, affect the ways in which ideas of democracy are lived, how the state has transitioned since independence, how democracy was understood during the fight for equality versus now, and why the problem of inequity persists. In examining these histories, this multi-panel painting installation will look specifically at ideas of labor.

Installation view: *Meleko Mokgosi, Democratic Intuition, Lerato*. Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. September 8 – October 22, 2016.

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BLOUIN ARTINFO

Q&A: Meleko Mokgosi on His Dual Presentation at Jack Shainman Gallery

BY JULIET HELMKE | SEPTEMBER 07, 2016

Detail of Meleko Mokgosi's "Comrades" (2015)
(© Meleko Mokgosi / Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

Meleko Mokgosi is deep in the midst of his most recent large-scale installation project, "Democratic Intuition," in which the Botswana-born artist examines the meaning of democracy in relation to the daily-lived experiences of the people of southern Africa. Two of his most recent editions of the project, "Comrades II" and "Lerato" will be on view at Jack Shainman Gallery's Chelsea locations, opening October 8. Mokgosi spoke with ARTINFO about the evolution of this body of work.

How do the two Jack Shainman shows relate to each other?

The gallery will be presenting “Comrades II” at West 24th Street, and “Lerato” at West 20th Street from my current project on democracy, “Democratic Intuition.” This body of work, produced over a two-year period, was developed around ideas of allegory and lerato (love). The impetus here was to experiment with visual and narrative strategies that did not depend on sequential expectations. In research and reading, I found what I had felt for a while but was never able to formulate: the idea in allegory that the viewer cannot help but be cognizant of his or her reading at the moment he or she begins to engage with any allegorical narrative, whether visual or textual. To put it another way, the viewer is aware of how he or she is reading something the moment he or she starts to read it.

I had a chance encounter with William-Adolphe Bouguereau’s 1883 painting, “The Motherland,” around the same time as these thoughts. The work struck me as a peculiar allegorical and history painting that somehow did not feel right in its representation. So I began this in-depth examination of the French painter, his tropes, techniques, and history. Added to this inquiry, and perhaps more importantly, was the discovering the coincidence that most of Bouguereau’s paintings that I was looking at were painted around or during

the Scramble for Africa. Although coincidence is sometimes seen as arbitrary, it was an important factor in this case because it revealed something quite difficult for me to ignore: that history, with a big “H,” is better understood through historicity. Historicity can be thought of in relation to the idea that history is not something that happens, but as something that unfolds in different directions yet folds the subject into these multiple directions. History, then, is not an event or collections of events, but rather a number of “unfoldings” that bear the mark of things before. So I tend to think of history as something that is always already present.

So, I set out to navigate ways in which I could, as a black southern African painter, create complex representations around the idea of love through literary theories of allegory. Because of the structure of Allegory (contrived to show something else), it presents itself as first and foremost a constructed thing. This *constructedness* of presenting itself as one thing, with the promise of saying something else, necessarily places emphasis on the method of construction and the reading one will always employ. In a way, the allegorical has a built in alibi for the viewer, in the sense of there being an “elsewhere” that is accessible through the viewer’s idiosyncrasies.

How did these series, or chapters of your project "Democratic Intuition," develop in tandem?

I suppose democracy was the logical development from my previous project, which dealt with national identification and xenophobia, among other themes. I try to negotiate the world conscientiously and with a certain level of criticality, and the way in which particular publics are systematically denied access to the state apparatuses that grant participation in governance (codenamed: democracy), has always been bothersome to me. Hence the current project. With it, I try to find ways of using representation to pose questions such as: if democracy is founded on the impossible choice between exercising my nation-state granted freedoms as an individual, and having to recognize the individual freedoms of another, then how can one reciprocate democracy, precisely because it is based on the simple idea of reconciling your relationship with everyone as a friendship – in the proper sense? That is, to wish the best for him or her.

The whole project consists of eight chapters, and they come about simultaneously through a period of research, usually lasting 8 to 12 months. While doing my research, I storyboard each chapter with line drawings — planning out the composition for every panel. “Comrades” in particular is my attempt at examining the ways in which language was used to articulate the fight for freedom and outlining the kind of political goals and democratic state that was sought for during the fight for liberation in the 1960s. Here, I ask how the idea of democracy, articulated during the struggle, has and continues to shape the current state of citizens’ experience and reciprocation of democracy. No doubt, issues of language and education are central. Following the French revolution, the term comrade has always had political resonance and was developed as a form of address between socialists and workers. Comrade then, was meant to always refer to egalitarianism, thus became a demonstrative form of address that was supposed to cut across gender, racial, ethnic, and class lines — which is obviously a bogus claim.

Tell me about the role of the text that crops up in your work.

I began working with text from museum wall labels in 2008. These installations take text as a form of representation. Therefore, by looking at exhibitions that deal with African art and artifacts, the work addresses the problematic re-inscription of colonial discourses, using museum labels as source material. My aim is to make critical interventions in the ways in which the public understands works of art within the exhibition system; and systematically deconstruct the power dynamics and cultural biases that underpin these presumably neutral, educational descriptors. For example, I recently worked on a project where the museum labels were appropriated from the deeply problematic exhibition: “African Art, New York, and the Avant-Garde” at The Met in 2012. The exhibition created peculiar narratives of inclusion and exclusion in relation to the place of the “primitive” or “African Art” within shaping the trajectory of the avant-garde in the West. Following writers such as Adrian Piper, Simon Gikandi, Sally Price, James Clifford and Okwui Enwezor, to name a few, I inserted my commentary on these labels in ways that are personal, analytical and poetic, and so also inserting an individual voice to counter these institutional constructions of history.

Adding to this, I would say that it also seemed perverse to always have human history in the form of the linguistic wall label, thoroughly take over the art object and the many formal and aesthetic elements that the artist had planned out carefully. So in some ways, the museum wall label is designed as a short-cut or to stand-in for the presumed short-comings of the art object; and in the setting of exhibitions that have to deal with Africa, Africa and all that is associated with it seem to always already be opaque for the West.

What are you working on next?

The next chapters that I will be working on, for upcoming exhibitions are “Triomf,” “Lex,” and “Gloria.” “Triomf”, for example, aims to investigate how access to intellectual labour affects both the understanding and reciprocation of democracy at the level of daily-lived experiences. The chapter title refers to a set of historical events that helped cement apartheid in South Africa, specifically the 1950s forced removal of black South Africans from the Johannesburg suburb of Sophiatown. A legendary black cultural center of the nation, much like District Six in Cape Town, Sophiatown was razed after black South Africans were forcibly moved to Soweto on the outskirts of Johannesburg. Subsequently, Sophiatown was remade as Triomf, and became a working-class, white South African neighborhood.

Through the destruction of sites like Sophiatown that fostered black intellectual creativity, black South Africans were actively and purposefully distanced from engaging in intellectual labour. In addition to these removals, laws such as the Bantu Education Act, which barred blacks from attending existing schools also created a separate education system for the sole purpose of preparing all black South Africans for life as manual labourers; and the Group Areas Act, which segregated suburbs, created townships, and separated blacks into tribes, were all crucial in formulating an oppressive system of intergenerational epistemological violence. The effects of these actions are still felt today.

The legacy of these laws, institutionalized racism, and denial of education affect the ways in which ideas of democracy are lived, how the state has transitioned since independence, how democracy was understood during the fight for equality versus now, and why the problem of inequity persists. In examining these histories, this multi-panel painting installation will look specifically at ideas of labour.

ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS

Meleko Mokgosi

JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY | WEST 20TH STREET
513 West 20th Street
September 8–October 22

JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY | WEST 24TH STREET
524 West 24th Street
September 8–October 22

In two concurrent solo exhibitions at the gallery's Twentieth and Twenty-Fourth Street spaces, Meleko Mokgosi presents the latest "chapters" in an ongoing series titled "Democratic Intuition," 2014–. His monumental paintings give us African subjects in compositions derived from vernacular photography, film, and European history paintings, but the project is far more complex than a mere blending of African and Western influences. Mokgosi examines the construction of historical narratives and questions of representation—both visual and political—through a process of continuous becoming: Precise, photorealist renderings are juxtaposed with raw and unfinished swaths of canvas, while multipanel paintings unfold like cinematic storyboards. Several text-based works transcribe, but do not translate, *dinaane* (Setswana for "folk stories"), addressing the temporality of storytelling and the complexity of cultural translation.

View of "Meleko Mokgosi: Democratic Intuition, Lerato," 2016.

In "Lerato," on Twentieth Street, Mokgosi reimagines canonical works by the French academic painter William-Adolphe Bouguereau, whose career was contemporaneous with the Berlin Conference and European imperialism in Africa. In *Democratic Intuition, Lerato: Agape I* (all works cited, 2016), the artist restages Bouguereau's *Alma Parens* (The Motherland), 1883, which depicts a maternal France nurturing her young dependents; Mokgosi's African protagonist, conversely, embodies France's colonial exploitation of both land and labor abroad.

On Twenty-Fourth Street, "Comrades II" turns to the legacy of liberation struggles and the notion of democracy in postcolonial Africa. In *Democratic Intuition, Lex I*, stoic figures inhabit an enigmatic, modernist interior that is adorned with masks and ethnographic photographs. Framed for display and pressed to the picture's surface, these images highlight the cultural and temporal dislocations that sometimes characterize postcolonial experiences. Here, Mokgosi seems to marshal a Steinbergian "flatbed" aesthetic—also legible in *Democratic Intuition, Comrades: Addendum*, that features various photographs of African women, done with silk-screen and pigment transfer, that prompt reflection on the mediating role of images in public and political life.

— Allison Young

ARTFORUM

DIARY

Begin Again

NEW YORK 09.09.16

SHIFTING FROM THE START of a new school year in the morning to the season's first round of Chelsea gallery openings in the evening was never going to be an entirely smooth transition, but there was at least a measure of common feeling among those who, on a Thursday evening, flooded the dozen blocks of former taxi garages that so many of us in the biz call home. There was a wholly expected though sometimes still jarring mix of excitement and resignation among the crowds wandering from one space to the next that made for a telling barometer of status and mindset, as the prospect of a new raft of encounters with the sublime and the ridiculous loomed.

Where to begin? With something like 130 openings uptown and down, coinciding with the bustle of New York Fashion Week, this was hardly an inconsequential question. After a pit stop for empty calories at the Tenth Avenue CVS—surely the area's most vital professional resource—I headed south to Petzel Gallery for the opening of Kiwi artist Simon Denny's "Blockchain Future States." A sleek tripartite installation of computer case-mods, supersize board games, and infographics confronting the machinations of Bitcoin-era geopolitics, it would have been a sobering start to proceedings had there not been a bucket of trash beer to hand. Cracking open a can, I bumped into artists Davide Cantoni and Alexi Worth, the latter of whom rated one of Denny's strategies in particular ("Wherever I see a speech bubble, I'm happy"), but was already planning a next move. I accompanied the pair down the block to Hauser & Wirth, the venue for Rashid Johnson's similarly grand-scale "Fly Away."

Skirting an air-kissing Jerry Saltz and Scott Rothkopf on the way up the gallery's none-more-dramatic stepped entrance, I fetched up in another grand-scale installation, this one notably clogged with Instagrammers. Johnson held court as visitors orbited *Within Our Gates*, a massive arrangement of black steel shelves stocked with books, monitors, plants, and shea butter. From somewhere inside the work emerged the muffled sound of Antoine Baldwin playing the piano. Already shadowed by the sense that I might be running late, I headed out and over to the Kitchen, where Katherine Hubbard's "Bring your own lights" was opening. An elegant and much more low-key affair, it also made for a useful interlude of relative quiet—even incorporating artist-designed seating—before the real crush began, a block north.

Left: Artist Meleko Mokgosi at Jack Shainman. (Photo: Nicole Casamento) Right: Katherine Hubbard's opening at The Kitchen. (Photo: Michael Wilson)

Festivities at Jack Shainman Gallery, Bortolami, Anton Kern, and ZieherSmith made for a hectic scene as the boldface names—a Thelma Golden there, a Jon Hamm there—began to accumulate. Matthew Marks, presenting a show of paintings by Peter Cain, was, characteristically, a lot more restrained. Over at Sikkema Jenkins, which was hosting new work by Leonardo Drew and Jennie C. Jones, the Guggenheim Museum's Christina Yang directed me to what sounded like the center of the center—Matthew Barney's opening at Barbara Gladstone: "There's only a *short* line to get in." Sure enough, not only was there a bouncer-administered one-in, one-out system in effect, but further queuing was required inside for admittance to the artist's vintage refrigerated-room-filling installation *DRILL TEAM: screw BOLUS*. Three burly guys in summer dresses—not inappropriate garb given the inclusion of Barney's sculpture *TRANSEXUALIS*—snaked through the space while a pair of adolescent skater bois admired the complex hardware of its complementary work, *REPRESSIA*. The authenticity of Björk's tag in the guest book, however, felt doubtful.

Having clocked the Brooklyn Museum's Nancy Spector heading, with laser-like focus, to check in on her guy (Spector curated Barney's Guggenheim exhibition in 2002), I dipped into the westernmost of Marianne Boesky's twin locations for half of Donald Moffett's "any fallow field." Then, finally, it was over to Tanya Bonakdar for a delicious warm, frothy tin cup of Turkish yogurt drink *ayran*, served at a "bacteria bar" in honor of collective Slavs and Tatars' first show there, a meditation on the microscopic "original Other." At a subsequent dinner, the group's Berlin dealer Amadeo Kraupa-Tuskany talked far-flung travel while I did my best to edge away from the restaurant's roaring fire (really), and another guest rested his forehead on the table. The next day we'd do it all again.

— Michael Wilson

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THE BLOG

Back to School for the Art World: 6 Must-See Exhibitions in Chelsea

09/09/2016 06:26 pm ET | **Updated** 4 days ago

Madelaine D'Angelo
Founder and CEO of Arthena, she is a specialist in the merger of Art and Technology www.arthena.com

On Thursday, September 8th, 2016, galleries in Chelsea unveiled their new exhibitions for the early fall season. There was anticipation and excitement in the air as NY art enthusiasts bobbed and weaved from one gallery to another, trying to absorb as many works as possible between the fleeting hours of 6pm and 8pm. If you are still planning your gallery-hopping trip in Chelsea, check out Arthena's list of 6 must-see exhibitions:

Meleko Mokgosi: Democratic Intuition, Comrades II
Jack Shainman Gallery
513 West 20th Street

Jack Shainman Gallery's presentation of work by Meleko Mokgosi are chapters from 'Democratic Intuition', a body of work that questions how ideas and social constructs of democracy relate to the everyday lives of southern African residents. The exhibition engages with the audience's thoughts and attitudes toward communication, freedom, and politics, making it a fitting exhibition in light of the turbulent political sphere in the U.S.

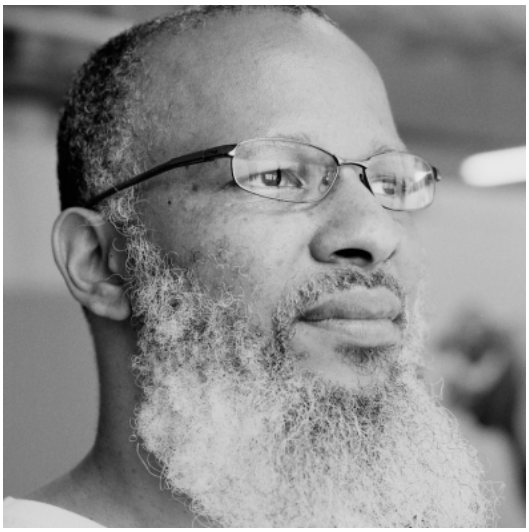
Interview

ART

ARTISTS AT WORK: MELEKO MOKGOSI

By MATT MULLEN
Photography MARK DAVIS

Published 08/11/16



MELEKO MOKGOSI IN BROOKLYN, NEW YORK, AUGUST 2016. PORTRAITS: MARK DAVIS.

This summer, during group shows and ahead of fall exhibition openings, we're visiting New York-based artists in their studios.

Meleko Mokgosi paints his subjects at just above life size. It's an artistic sleight of hand that makes the figures seem poised to step off the canvas and into the room —or, rather, float off into space. His paintings take on a dream-like quality: they

are meticulously rendered, fragmentary (some appear unfinished), imbued with magic and portent, and full of symbols, animals, faces obscured by darkness.

Mokgosi is less interested in dreams, though, than he is in looking to the past. He was born in Botswana in 1981 and moved to the United States to study art at Williams College. He received an MFA from UCLA in the Interdisciplinary Studio program, and now teaches full-time at New York University. Though he claims that he is "no academic, just a painter," he combs through the past like a historian, looking to form a clearer picture of the present. A voracious collector and reader (of topics like postcolonial and gender theory), it is only after months of research that his brush touches the canvas. And when it does, everything is brought into dazzlingly high relief.

In September, Jack Shainman Gallery will present Mokgosi's first solo show in New York at both of its Chelsea locations. The show focuses on two chapters of an ongoing project that Mokgosi calls "Democratic Intuition." Its first iteration was shown in 2015 at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston.

MATT MULLEN: It's less than a month until your show. How have you been feeling?

MELEKO MOKGOSI: It's really terrifying. I've been living here for five years, but this is my first New York solo exhibition.

MULLEN: That's a big deal!

MOKGOSI: Some would say so. You know, New York bills itself as the cultural capital. Obviously we know that's not true, but we still feel it. So I'm nervous. I've been here for a while. It's where my institution [NYU] is. It's like sharing your backyard. I think the most important thing for me is if one or two people can see what I'm trying to do and find the ideas interesting, then I'll be happy.

MULLEN: Can you tell me about those ideas?

MOKGOSI: This project began in 2014. It's called "Democratic Intuition." My previous project was about the idea of nationalism; it was basically trying to understand things like xenophobia. Things like why people, at a certain time or period, become so nationalistic. I tried to really pose these questions but not come up with any big theory or answers. It just came from this place of, "What is going on? I can't understand this." And after that project I was stuck. I thought, "What the hell am I going to do?" Slowly I started thinking about democracy. How can we —without majorly philosophizing it and making it an academic thing—how do ordinary people understand this thing of *democracy*? How do we have access to it? Who has access to it and who doesn't? That also came through [Indian scholar] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's work and how she's trying to understand democracy. She's a superstar intellectual and the first person to translate Derrida into English, actually. So she's kind of a big theory person—a theorist, a feminist. And at the same time, Axel Honneth, who's a German theorist, he also wrote a book on the idea of democracy. I'm always looking at theory and history.

At its most basic, the project is about how do normal people understand, reciprocate, have access to, and not have access to the ideas of democracy and the democratic ... I'm thinking about things like education, things like gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality. And even just the nation state—who has access to the nation state and who doesn't? If you're an illegal immigrant and you live in New York, you don't have access to the state. You don't know how to use the state. You can't vote. And that means already that you're outside of understanding of the democratic, right? That's long-winded, but that's basically it.

MULLEN: What I like is that it ultimately all goes back to this really simple idea, or seemingly simple idea: democracy. It's accessible.

MOKGOSI: I hope so! I'm not interested in making it into some academic nonsense, but instead bring in things like love, things like emotion, progress, and group identity. My challenge is how to, in a not so cliché way, represent the complexities and complications of the idea of love.

MULLEN: That's even more ambitious than tackling democracy.

MOKGOSI: [*laughs*] Right—especially if you're from Southern Africa. You think of all the cliché and stereotypical ways that love is represented in relation to the African continent and, *oh my god*. So I've been thinking about this for a while, researching it.

MULLEN: What is your research process like?

MOKGOSI: All the stuff I've been talking about is the research phase, where I spend as long as I can—anywhere between a year or year and a half or eight months—just reading and researching, trying to think things through. And I travel; I go to Botswana and I take a lot of pictures. That, for me, is definitely research: going somewhere, looking, and spending a lot of time trying to figure out what I want to do aesthetically. I also go through a lot of publications, a lot of magazines, a lot of newspapers. I used to collect music. And I would collect sand samples, because the sand is so, so particular. Some sand that has clay in it that is red, but some sand is very grayish. Some sand is obviously yellowish. But then I was like, "You know what, I can't keep smuggling sand into the country." And it's heavy. So, the research this time around was really trying to give myself enough time and space to think, to read, to look, to listen, to speak to people. And really just understand—or try, as much as I can, to understand—what I think I'm trying to articulate.

For me, thinking is slow. At least good thinking is slow. So I try to take my time. And then, as I'm doing it, I actually create the paintings titles. I work from the research, create the titles, and then each project so far, like this is my third one, has a title—a general title—and then I have chapters and all those chapters have titles. So this project, again, has eight chapters, and all those chapters have titles. And after those titles, I start the actual storyboard. Which, as you can see, is a series of line drawings arranged in order.

MULLEN: Going back to the idea of democracy and nationalism, I have to ask about the current U.S. presidential election. Has that been informing your work at all? Even in a more abstract way, like tapping into some sort of energy?

MOKGOSI: I don't know. I mean, it's hard for it to inform the paintings because all of them come from the storyboard. And like I said, once the storyboard is done, I am *not* going to change it, because what I try to do is build safeguards. As artists, as human beings, you live, you experience things, you're affected by things, and sometimes we feel very strongly about something and it affects the work. But I don't want to let it affect it, because it's too reactionary. So if I'm going to take a year to research this stuff, and I take six months to do the storyboard, and it takes, like, another year to paint the thing ... I don't want to compromise the decisions I made a year ago with something that's happening in this moment. I think that's what makes me a very boring artist, because my work, I try to distance it, so that it doesn't get too affected by the contemporary, because I'm dealing with other questions about history, about postcolonial theory, about xenophobia, about race. I try not to let it get tied too much into the contemporary.

MULLEN: Let's turn to the paintings. The first thing that strikes me about them is their scale. They're so big.

MOKGOSI: These are still small!

MULLEN: Well, true! They're not even *that* big. But something about them ... I don't know if it's the use of space or the shapes of the canvas, but they suck the energy of the room right into them. Can you talk about why you gravitate towards bigger canvasses?

MOKGOSI: When I first started to think about these questions of history and so forth, I settled on the ideas of history painting and also the cinematic. They fit perfectly together, mostly because history painting began as kind of the grand European genre of championing the nation state. Using this format, using this method, is a way to kind of unsettle what is going into this system of representation.

I have also been taught to understand that in art, two things become really important: the material and the scale. The materiality and scale, as you just showed, position how the viewer has the first emotional response. How do you, as a human being, respond to an object in space? That has everything to do with scale and material. So, as artists, that's one of the first things in the equation. To do

things that are always at life-size or just above life-size, it's important to me. It gives the viewer and the painting a one-to-one relation.

MULLEN: The figures seem so alive, is that why?

MOKGOSI: Yes, but also it's because I don't use a white ground. Usually how you're trained in painting is to have three to five layers of gesso, and then you sand in between layers. It gives the painting luminosity, but—more importantly—it gives you room for error. Because you can paint over things. But I don't do that; if I screw it up, the painting is done. You know, I can't paint over it.

MULLEN: Why not give yourself the room for error?

MOKGOSI: It's a level of commitment. It's not to show that I know how to paint, but to say, this is the commitment to this representation, or this thing. It takes a certain amount of time and energy and looking and resources, and understanding. But the viewer can see decisions came first and which came last. So what if I did screw that up?

Anyway, back to the figures. When you're painting skin tone, there's a big difference between white skin and black skin, obviously. Black skin really depends on shadows and white skin depends on layering of highlights. So I've found using this surface is the best surface to render black skin. But the way it has to be done, it's reductive. I put paint on and then I remove it, to build volume. It's important to me because ultimately, this is what I am interested in painting: black skin.

FOR MORE ON MELEKO MOKGOSI, VISIT HIS WEBSITE. HIS SOLO SHOW AT JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY OPENS ON SEPTEMBER 8, 2016.

artnet®

Art Guides

Your Ultimate Guide to New York Gallery Crawls

Rain Embuscado September 10, 2016

In the year 2016, where selfies prevail (https://news.artnet.com/art-world/24-billion-selfies-uploaded-to-google-in-a-year-508718) and the consumption of art is increasingly mediated by iPhones (https://news.artnet.com/art-world/millennials-prefer-social-media-over-museums-473222), gallery hopping in historic Chelsea is as much a source of casual amusement as it is a serious tradition. But for earnest first-timers hoping to connect with the neighborhood's offerings, the sheer number of shows to see, paired with the anxieties of art world exclusivity, can prove daunting.

To lend a helping hand, artnet News has rounded up a list of advice for newcomers planning on hitting the circuit this gallery season. Our first tip: Dress for comfort.

8. Keep notes.
Stumbling upon work that really resonates is a gratifying—and universal—feeling. Whatever your reasons for scoping the art may be, it helps to keep track of the artists (and the galleries that represent them), if only for your own records.

Installation view of Meleko Mokgosi's "Democratic Intuition: Lerato" exhibition at Jack Shainman's 24th Street gallery. Courtesy of Rain Embuscado for artnet News.

ARTFCITY

This Week's Must-See Art Events: Painted Rooms, Painted Faces, Digital Everything

by Michael Anthony Farley on September 6, 2016 Events

Wed

Well, we hope the art world had a good summer vacation because school is officially back in session. There are so many good shows opening on Thursday night in Chelsea we just couldn't list them all—Matthew Barney at Gladstone, Rashid Johnson at Hauser & Wirth and Lynda Benglis at Cheim & Read, to name a few.

We've focused on the absolute can't-miss openings and those that might get overlooked below. From Wednesday night's opening exhibition on the work and collaborative legacy of early digital/conceptual artist Alison Knowles at The Graduate Center to Thursday night's absolute must-see double exhibition of Meleko Mokgosi [pictured] at both of Jack Shainman's Chelsea locations there's plenty to see and do.

But to offer a quick summary of where the most openings which nights, expect to spend Wednesday on the LES, Thursday in Chelsea, and Friday, Saturday and Sunday rushing from neighborhood to neighborhood. This should be a good week for Uber.

Jack Shainman

513 W. 20th Street and 524 W. 24th Street
New York, NY
6:00 p.m. - 8:00 p.m.Website

Meleko Mokgosi: Democratic Intuition; Lerato & Comrades II

There's probably no show that I'm personally looking forward to more this fall than *Democratic Intuition*. I saw a previous iteration at Boston's ICA last year, and it remains one of the most memorable exhibitions of my life. Mokgosi collects and collages photographs from his native Botswana from afar (he's a New Yorker now) and renders them as a life-sized cinematic tableau in oil on canvas. The canvases are hung end-to-end, creating a wholly immersive landscape of fragmented storylines and a variety of techniques—from the painterly to photo-realistic. They're beautiful surfaces and wholly dreamy, curious imagery.

This show spans both of Jack Shainman's Chelsea locations, so I'm especially curious to see how this is hung.

ARTSLANT New York

The Slant 9/7/2016

New York Gallery Guide: The Fall Shows Not to Miss

by The Artslant Team

We've already shared our Fall picks for must-see exhibitions at museums and art spaces around the world. But come September, commercial spaces and non-profits also step up their game. While our calendar is packed with the hottest exhibitions listings from the world's biggest art hubs—from L.A. to London and beyond—few cities support the sheer density of formidable openings that New York does.

Let us help you achieve calendar clarity. These are the New York gallery openings we've set our sights on this season.

Meleko Mokgosi, *Democratic Intuition: Lerato & Comrades II*

Jack Shainman Gallery I 20th Street
513 W. 20th Street

and **24th Street**
524 West 24th Street
New York, NY 10011

September 8–October 22
Opening: September 8, 6–8pm

Meleko Mokgosi

artnet®

On View

A Lot Happened In Jack Shainman's Basement With Artist Meleko Mokgosi

The artist marks his New York debut with two hotly-anticipated shows.

Rain Embuscado, September 8, 2016

Meleko Mokgosi. Courtesy of Patrick McMullan.

Meleko Mokgosi's enigmatic history paintings are hardly new to the international circuit. Within the last five years, the artist has shown at the Hammer in Los Angeles, Art Basel in Miami Beach, and the Lyon Biennale in France. Tonight at Jack Shainman

Gallery in Chelsea, Mokgosi marks his New York debut with two hotly-anticipated shows: "Democratic Intuition: Lerato " and "Democratic Intuition: Comrades II."

A week before the opening, I ventured over to Shainman's 20th Street location, with recorder and notebook in hand. Mokgosi was in the middle of install, and within a minute of arriving on scene, he gave me a gentle push away from the ground-floor exhibition space and we walked down the stairs to the basement, where prints by Richard Mosse hang (another artist in Shainman's stable). Curious gallery assistants and art handlers shuffled to and from the back offices, stealing glances from time to time.

When I told him I'd be recording the conversation, Mokgosi swiftly, albeit politely, insisted against it. "Sometimes," he said, "my words are taken out of context." (The admission was fair, but it left me wondering how *Interview Magazine*'s Matt Mullen was able to capture his studio visit.

Installation view of Meleko Mokgosi's "Democratic Intuition" (2016). Courtesy of the artist via Jack Shainman Gallery.

Broadly speaking, Mokgosi's precaution with misinformation mimics a central problem his projects grapple with: "the difficulty of cultural translation," as artist Malik Gaines once put it. But with little more than past works, previous interviews, and what I could glean from an obtuse exhibition statement, the nature of my questions had few other places to turn beyond, well, him.

Mokgosi comes from Francistown, Botswana, a city of roughly 100–150,000 along the country's eastern border with neighboring Zimbabwe. Though he was formally trained in the United States, the artist focuses much of his artistic output in depicting scenes of quotidian life in the southern African region.

During the hour-long interview, Mokgosi raised a number of matters that touched on the substance of his practice—namely the difficulty he encounters in translating his experiences without losing the element of nuance. "I have to fight grand narratives," he explained. By this he means the infinite number of cliches associated with African life that often color Western imaginations.

Installation view of Meleko Mokgosi's "Democratic Intuition" (2016). Courtesy of the artist via Jack Shainman Gallery.

Looking back at previous exhibitions like “Pax Kaffraria ,” his large-scale paintings, which he storyboards into quasi-narrative configurations, are laden with material and compositional references drawn from the Western art historical canon. His decision to engage with art commonly referenced in college textbooks is an effort to “undo how people think about the post-colonial.” In this framework, Mokgosi’s project takes aim at issues of representation. “It’s as basic as that,” he said.

Despite his academic leanings, Mokgosi claims to be the everyman. “[The subjects in my painting] are just ordinary people of southern Africa, and I’m invested in this space because I’m one of them,” he said. “My work is also about love, and fun, and sharing jokes. The post-colony is not just about critique.”

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ARTNEWS

9 ART EVENTS TO ATTEND IN NEW YORK CITY THIS WEEK

BY ***The Editors of ARTnews***

POSTED **09/06/16 11:47 AM**

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 8

Meleko Mokgosi, *Comrades*, 2015, oil on canvas.

Opening: Meleko Mokgosi at Jack Shainman Gallery

It's tempting to call Meleko Mokgosi's multi-canvas allegories "sprawling," but that's not quite the right word for them. There's something bare, removed, piecemeal, even sad about his naturalistically painted scenes, which often involve groups of humans and animals depicted against starkly blank backgrounds. With these paintings, the skeleton of the stories the Bostwana-born, New York–based artist presents are more important than his characters—Mokgosi is getting at something deeper than just tales about history. In two new bodies of work (one shown at each Jack Shainman space), Mokgosi will look at the concept of democracy in southern Africa and the concept of "lerato," or the Setswanan word for "love."

Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 West 20th Street and 524 West 24th Street, 6–8 p.m.

VOGUE

Fall Art Guide: 13 Shows to See This Season

AUGUST 30, 2016 4:53 PM
by DODIE KAZANJIAN (HTTP://WWW.VOGUE.COM/CONTRIBUTOR/DODIE-KAZANJIAN/)

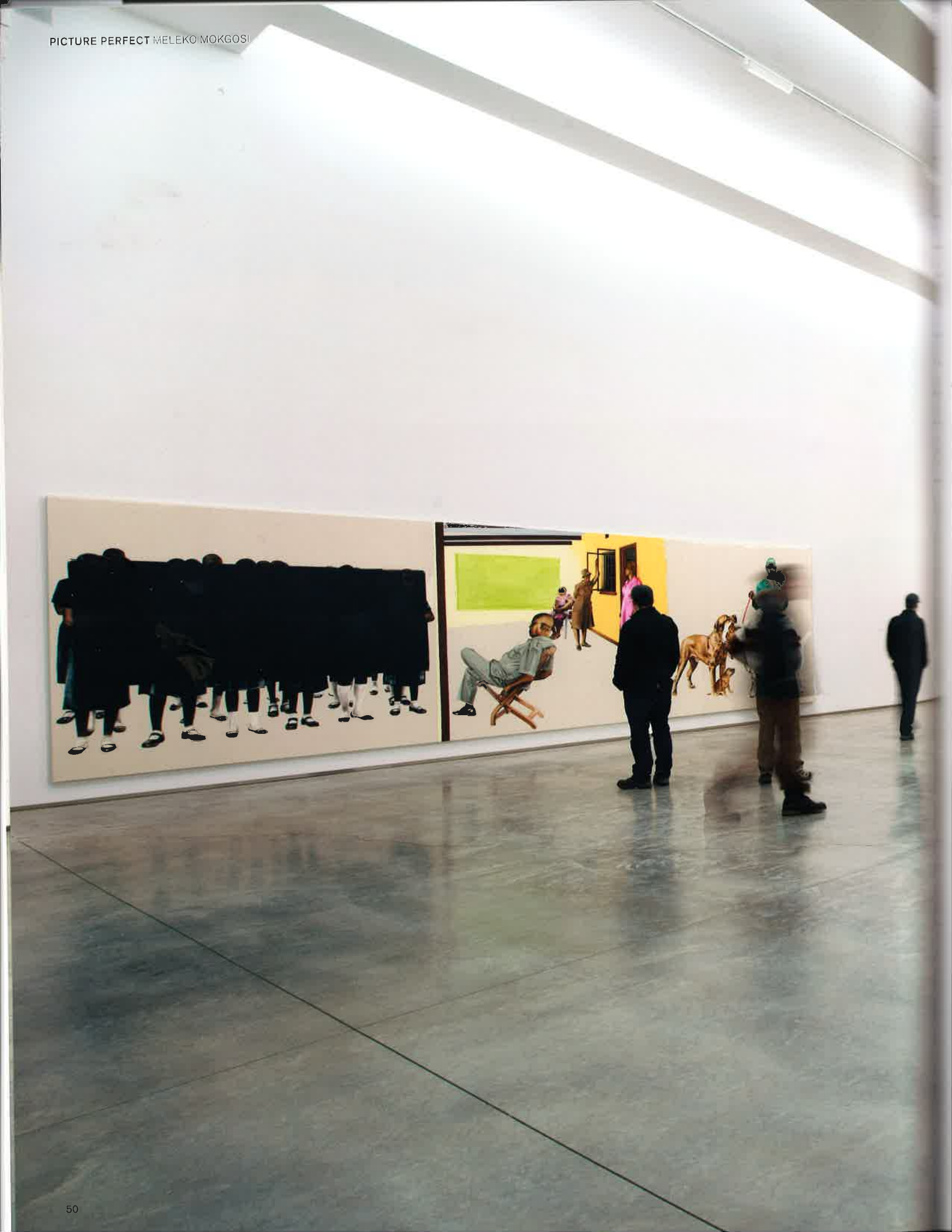
Labor Day is near, and another summer is fleeting. But the plethora of art shows to see this fall more than makes up for that. Here are a dozen of them I plan to see, along with some new artists I'm keeping an eye on:

New Artists to Watch:

Meleko Mokgosi's "Democratic Intuition, Lerato" and "Democratic Intuition, Comrades II" at Jack Shainman Gallery (September 8 to October 22, 2016)

Offodile, Anaeze. "Pax Kaffraria: Anaeze Offodile in Conversation with Meleko Mokgosi." *Osmos Magazine*. Issue 9 Summer 2016. pp. 48-53, illustrated.

48 *Pax Kaffraria: Terra Pericolosa*, 2013



PAX KAFFRARIA

ANAEZE OFFODILE IN CONVERSATION WITH MELEKO MOKGOSI

The work of Meleko Mokgosi, hyperrealist montages of post-colonial life, can in some ways be construed as a contemporary extension of the works of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Homi Bhabha. Their shared thematic elements of power, protest, modernity, and cultural identity are more relevant today than ever given the current (and previously unfathomable) political discourse and mood in which we find ourselves.

In other ways, the work of Mokgosi stands proudly alone both in his intentions and the unique vernacular through which he is able to assert them: an amalgamation of classic and modern techniques that often leaves us with larger-than-life tableaus in scope of content and physical proportions. A critique levied against Mokgosi has been that his canvases are often "too cinematic." I could not disagree more. In person, his use of scale does not increase the volume with which he communicates, rather it allows him to tell a richer story. The first panel in *Fully Belly II*, a large oil of a dozen schoolgirls standing defiantly (or are they?) toward the viewer with their faces blacked out, illustrates this point beautifully. Devoid of geographic or historical markers, it forces you to interpret the appropriateness of cultural and political socialization. At what point does it deviate towards imperialism and, if so, does it have to? Yes, the works of Meleko Mokgosi are transportative, as it has been styled by some. However, for myself—and no doubt many others—it's a remarkable journey inward.

ANAEZE OFFODILE In *Pax Kaffraria: Terra Pericolosa* I was struck by how well the pieces work well both together and in isolation. In particular, I was able to draw different sets of lessons and references each time. Was this the intent?

MELEKO MOKGOSI I composed *Terra Pericolosa*, which was made for a specific exhibition at the Yerba Buena Center for the arts, using the design and layout of the coat of arms in order to interrogate associative narrative structures. I examined how the coat of arms was constructed as something nationalistic, as a trope that is about the nation-state, asking myself how individuals and groups identify, signify, and symbolize a nation-state and its politics (not forgetting that the coat of arms is probably more about the nation and how kinship groupings are connected to a common nation, which precedes the state). So I took apart the generic structure of the coat of arms and found that it's basically made up of associations rather than a sequential narrative. It's literally associations strategically put together around a shield, whether it's a Zulu traditional shield or what have you, and I used that structure to inform the narrative structure of the chapter. Given the historical ties to the nation-state, connotations of the armory, state pageantry, military conquest, achievement, and so forth, the coat of arms was crucial for me in providing a method of understanding not only how objects held meaning but, as Gayatri Spivak would say, how objects are created toward knowledge. With this work, I started to think much more in depth about this relationship between metaphor and metonym and the narrative structure. So it was an attempt at finding an alternative to linear and sequential narrative structures as a way to further my practice.

AE I was/am incredibly intrigued by your process, in particular the utilization of storyboards and how that makes for an uncompromising result. How long is it typically from concept to finished product? Is there a role of error in all of this? What's the best error you have ever made?

MM Depending on the breadth and scale of the installation, a chapter within a project can take up to a year or two years to complete. However, there is no time frame on how long it would take to complete a whole project (usually made up of eight chapters). The development of this way of working is really in line with many artists work within a project-based framework; the research and conceptual material really dictate the approach. In a sense, it is an approach that also tries to indirectly disavow the idea and necessity of the temporary exhibition structure—which is too easily tied to production and the reproduction of specific socio-economic relations in the global circulation of capital. The storyboard is also a particular strategy that was taken out of cinema as well as the way in which many conceptual artists used to work. But it is not so much a way of avoiding error, but rather a way of choreographing the point at which one can or aught to improvise. So the storyboard allows me to restrict this to particular instances, and it is on these instances that I am made aware of how and when to make the painting seem painterly.

AE What guides the selection of source material (archival photos, paper clippings) that you use? Is there a role for non-fact based references i.e. purely imaginative elements?

MM I have an ongoing archive made up of thousands of photographs, ranging from ones I take to ones that are acquired from journals and magazines and so forth. There are many rules that govern the collection of the images; i.e. they must all have a close connection to southern Africa and must depict something about the region. The formatting of the photographs and composition are also key. Because my work is invested in ideas of historicity, historicism, and representation (understood in all its multiple meanings), I cannot invent people or histories or cultural specificities.

AE What's next for you in the short and long-term future?

MM I am currently working on *Democratic Intuition* (2014–present), which investigates the irresolvable contradiction that is the foundation of democracy; namely the contradiction between recognizing one's supposed freedom as an individual and the recognition that has to be applied to one's partner to interaction as also bound in freedom. My aim is to look at the specificity of the daily-lived experiences of diverse populations that occupy southern Africa, and focuses on how people think about and reciprocate the democratic. The first chapter was exhibited at the ICA Boston; second in Cape Town, and now working on the next few chapters in conjunction with an exhibition at Jack Shainman gallery in September 2016.

OPPOSITE *Fully Belly II*, 2014

52 *Modern Art: The Root of African Savages III*, 2015

ARTFCITY

Postcolonial Cinema in Oil on Canvas, After Canvas: Meleko Mokgosi at the ICA Boston

by Michael Anthony Farley July 10, 2015

In Meleko Mokgosi's current exhibition at the ICA Boston, Democratic Intuition, painting functions as location. Individual canvases are hung end-to-end, wrapping the gallery to form a single installation. The effect is utterly transportative and cinematic. The irregularly-shaped, epic panels—each one large enough to support nearly life-size figures—form a sort of disjointed storyboard. We're unsure of the narrative, as seemingly unconnected figures come in and out of focus in overlapping vignettes. What is the story?

Fragmented hints of interior and exterior spaces give the impression that Mokgosi is describing a certain place, but the specificity of miss-matched, often incomplete details allude to a desire to describe that place as more than the sum of its architecture or landscape. Within each panel, sometimes spanning two or three, a mise-en-scène might disintegrate into painterly abstraction or dead end at a poignant void of negative space.

The uncertainty of this interconnected landscape means that any individual panel can read very differently when liberated from the complicated context of the installation as a whole.

I was first exposed to Mokgosi's work through his domestic scenes of people with dogs, and there's something seductively ambiguous about these canvases as stand-alone paintings. They skirt the boundaries of cute or kitsch with a tone that compels us to take them very seriously. They're not quite family snapshots and not quite portraiture in the classical tradition—an impression that isn't just based on the fact that the majority (or potentially all, I can't remember) of the human subjects are black. They feel documentary, yet fantastically constructed at the same time.

I first saw these family dog paintings when I was in a rush—they were shown in a cramped and crowded booth at the last Art Basel Miami Beach by the gallery Honor Fraser. I regretted not having more time with them, and found myself wondering about them as I walked the rest of the fair. They seemed so specific yet universal—the subjects were not merely figure models posed to represent an idea but individuals with stories—their location a mystery at the time. The non-descript patio could easily have been in Queens, Rio de Janeiro, London, Capetown, my hometown Baltimore, or Los Angeles, where Honor Fraser is based.

But that patio is in Mokgosi's native Botswana, and that fact is largely what has defined the artist's practice. In Democratic Intuition, Mokgosi envelops viewers with snippets of life in the postcolonial republic—reconsidering the white cube as a cinematic, immersive environment. The dog paintings are here, but now they're subsumed as vignettes in an epic, often contradictory narrative. A somewhat foreboding mass of soldiers uneasily shares the space with a cluster of women performing an inscrutable task on hands and knees. Wildlife and domestic animals roam the canvases, at times overlapping with mundane tableaus of everyday life. I could've spent hours in this room and never been bored.

That collage-like assemblage of imagery doesn't feel random, and it isn't. Each panel is a meticulous composition, and the process behind their fruition informs their content. Mokgosi lives and works in New York, sourcing imagery from photographs and news clippings from his homeland. He's selecting these images at a geographical remove, albeit with a personal connection to the source material. They feel calculated in the best possible way—but only occasionally cold.

One panel in particular stands out as a highlight, even in a room that is itself best considered as one fantastic painting. It depicts a woman in a space that might be an office—it's hard to tell, and that's part of the appeal. It requires an active reading on the part of the viewer to fill in the blanks around the sparse details of a setting within a country few American audiences are familiar with. Her skin is rendered photo-realistically in contrast to the rest of her figure. Her garments are described using a skilled economy of simple, dry brushstrokes that evoke the look of a silkscreened image.

That variety of mark-making is less readily apparent but perhaps more impressive in his depictions of singular objects that are texturally homogenous. A shiny leather chair, for example, is described with techniques ranging from watercolor-like washes to opaque backgrounds built up with glazing—all while maintaining legibility as a solid form. In the background, framed photos hint at political/historical events.

Details like that are scattered throughout Mokgosi's paintings, at times with impressive realism and at others deliberately obscured. I get the impression that these images are loaded with significance, and occasionally felt frustrated by my lack of knowledge to fully access them. To be honest, I know very little about Botswana beyond what I've gleaned from binge-watching HBO's The No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency (a somewhat guilty pleasure last winter, don't judge). But there's an undeniable sense of wonder from being exposed to the unfamiliar. As audiences who live in The West/Global North/Privileged-Imperialist-Zone, we've been conditioned to resist that impulse of curiosity lest we're perceived as casting a problematic, colonizing gaze upon the culture of "The Other." Mokgosi seems to anticipate and work around that discomfort—editing out the sensationalized "exotic," emphasizing salient details, and speaking in a visual language that's a hybrid of Western, Botswanan, and universal signs.

Of course, not everything can be translated, and Mokgosi readily admits that. The vast expanses of negative space in his paintings are an integral, contributing element of Meleko Mokgosi's gestalt. They function both as a space for the viewer to imagine one's own completion of the narrative and as a symbol of an American audience's inability to fully comprehend the complexities of his country's history, identity, and politics. He accomplishes all this and still manages to not come across as overly didactic or preachy.

That's a fine line for artists to tread. All too often, artists with origins outside of Europe/North America are assigned the role of ambassador. This is especially true of African artists, whose work is frequently presented in Western/global contexts under an anthropological gaze. There seems to be an expectation that a work of African art is most valuable as a synecdoche for Africa—as if it's the job of any one artist to teach or explain the entirety of a continent to foreign audiences. That's an awfully big, unfair burden to place on the shoulders of an individual artist. I know this is a ridiculous analogy, but imagine if Jenny Saville had been expected to speak for all Britons when she lived and worked in Italy, rather than being viewed as "just" a painter. On some level, Mokgosi's work subverts and exploits that unfair desire for evidence of "THE African Experience."

Rather than attempting to tell us what Botswana is, Mokgosi shows us found images—almost to the point of overload—implying an incomplete, ever-changing accumulation. Despite the carefully coordinated palette, these hand-reproduced images suggest that there is no homogenous face to Botswana. This is all executed in a fluent esperanto of painterly techniques and styles that miraculously harmonize—evidence that Mokgosi is a painter well versed in the history and theory of the medium, not merely a skilled mimic dabbling to illustrate a point.

And a major component of painting's history is its relationship to place. Prior to the innovation of the movable canvas panel as support, painting was married to architecture. The context of an artwork was a constant—frescos didn't often walk away from their site. This place-lessness of painting would define various genres: sublimist landscapes offered citizens of the early industrialized world a glimpse of the frontier, reinforcing the idea of manifest destiny. Similarly, Orientalist tableaus constructed the Western conception of "The Other." Paintings from early European modernists appropriated African aesthetics and disseminated a bastardized simulacrum around the globe. Decades later, the moving image was also divorced from architecture, when cinema went from being a ritualistic place to a medium that could be enjoyed in one's own home, and eventually from the palm of one's hand.

Mokgosi's considers the ontological and social implications of all of the above—creating movable, cinematic murals that address the inevitability of visual language to be lost in translation when exported. Appropriately, photographing the installation is prohibited. And really, this painting/place is meant to be experienced, not viewed in segments as a thumbnail. It's a long way to Botswana, but it's more than worth the trip to Boston.

Meleko Mokgosi: Democratic Intuition is on view at The Institute of Contemporary Art Boston until August 9th, 2015

HYPERALLERGIC

GALLERIES

Paintings that Get (Kind of) Close to South Africa's Colonial Aftermath

by **Faheem Haider** on April 10, 2015

Detail of "Terra Pericolosa" (2013) by Meleko Mokgosi (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

KINDERHOOK, NEW YORK — Meleko Mokgosi's eponymous solo show, well installed at The School, Jack Shainman gallery's bunker-like space in Kinderhook, New York, will hit your sweet spot if you're in the mood to see some colossal paintings in an atrium-like space that compete with Dia: Beacon, but for paintings.

The serpentine walk down to the main gallery space mirrors the journey one must take to get to The School: all twists and turns, it requires a sustained, but thrilling, approach to reach your destination. You've only just parked your car, and you still need to walk over and cross the threshold into the holy site of your early spring pilgrimage.

The show consists of just three pieces, but what three pieces! Left to right, two works in oil and charcoal on panel announce their relationship to history painting, in particular the painterly account of protest/propaganda painting that traces its lineage from grand

ecclesiastical works. A third piece, a series of framed inkjet prints on rag paper, is an institutional critique of museum didactics of so-called “Primitivist work” as well as of the oeuvres by the great heroes of modernism who appropriated Primitivism to set ablaze their own careers. Taken together, the three works, installed like some reverential pageant, play at history and truth.

Installation view of ‘ Meleko Mokgosi’ at The School, Kinderhook, New York (© courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

The setup of these giant paintings, set side by side, does much of the work in telling that tale. There’s a touch of the Platonian in the painted work; there’s a truth about them that only those who know what Mokgosi is up to can see. Part of a series told in eight chapters titled *Pax Kaffraria*, only two works are on display, “Full Belly II” (2014), a larger than life triptych, and “Terra Pericolosa” (2013), a work on five panels. They are both exceedingly well-made, but have the telltale signs of ideological pictures, detracting from their quality as paintings. It’s as though the images might have been projected onto the canvas and then painted as if by numbers. “Full Belly II” pictures what must be the disciplinarian and sexist schools through which most Southern Africans get an education. When encountering it, it’s hard not to sing out “Hey, teacher, leave us kids alone!“ “Terra Pericolosa,” in proper colossal fashion, takes colonialism and imposed military might in Southern Africa to task, though the charge fails to incriminate anyone, any country, or any power in particular.

Mokgosi was born in Botswana and trained in some of the most renowned institutions in the U.S, and the paintings are indeed windows into Botswana's and Southern Africa's colonized political history, but more than that, at least in these two works, the narrative charge is a bit of a broadside since it's not clear whether Mokgosi has in mind a contemporary subject whose story is both the subject and object of these paintings. Yes, that the history of colonialism lives on in the day to day political and bureaucratic morass is part of Southern Africa's story. But it is also the case that Botswana, like the rest of Southern Africa, is now governed by autocratic leaders who owe their power to their bloodline and elite heritage, and some leaders who were once lionized as nationalist independence heroes have become murderous pariahs.

The two large works are painted in the visual language of the oppressor, and, in fact, "Full Belly II" invokes strong associations with the history of abstraction as couched in pictorial representation: two squeegee marks riff on Gerhard Richter's work. One mark pictures a teacher's green board, the other effaces the identities of the students who might just rise up and start singing your favorite Pink Floyd chorus. It matters, though, whether the marks represent students already silenced, or whether in making the mark Mokgosi has silenced the students. The mark itself won't answer that question.

Part of the problem with the work is that by choosing to paint Platonian allegories in the visual tropes of pictorial realism, Mokgosi pictures the stories we tell each other about South Africa's devastating problems. Sure, he comes closer to the truth than most have done, but by picturing his views as a generic allegory, and not a deeply specific, modulated one that you'd encounter in, say, Kehinde Wiley's work, Mokgosi fails the more pressing Aristotelian task of naming, defining, and examining the problems he wants to target.

The third work, "Modern Art: The Root of African Savages III" (2015), plays on institutional critique as a production and exhibition strategy. Handwritten notes on museum didactics are enlarged and printed on archival quality paper, and framed, elegantly. They marry simple note-taking — here, the attempt and the necessary failure to fully grasp the way high culture defangs power — to Mark Lombardi's drawings that map the interpenetration of corporations, money, and industrially scaled violence. However, as institutional critique

of the way museums have disarmed the political and cultural devastation of colonialism, the work fails. As a set of objects framed off, commodified, and ready to be packaged, sold and placed in storage in some collector's vault, the work becomes just another example of work that succeeded better as an idea.

Installation view of ' Meleko Mokgosi' at The School, Kinderhook, New York (©courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

Detail of "Terra Pericolosa" (2013) by Meleko Mokgosi (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

But, it is undeniable that the attempt to deal with this history in some kind of critical way is admirable, and the work so arranged is remarkable, and The School is where you want to see that critique live, and maybe die. So, it's not a bad thing that the show feels like the homecoming of a major talent, whose works will soon trade among the powerful, and, who, one hopes, might yet attempt a more direct, more targeted criticism, and make it stick.

Meleko Mokgosi *continues at Jack Shainman Gallery: The School (25 Broad Street, Kinderhook, New York) through April 12.*

BLOUIN ARTINFO

The Definitive Top 11 Booths at Art Basel Miami Beach

By Scott Indrisek
December 3, 2014

According to press materials, there are more than 165,250.7 galleries participating in this year's edition of Art Basel Miami Beach (our fact-checkers are on vacation, so don't quote us on that figure). To help you focus your marathon art expedition, we've culled, narrowed, and judged our way to a hyper-scientific, incredibly definitive list of the fair's top 11 booths.

Honor Fraser
As Part of ABMB's Positions programming, this Los Angeles gallery presents a single work by Botswana-born, New York-based Meleko Mokgosi. The multi-part figurative painting becomes an environment of its own, with one long diptych wedged tightly into the booth facing a pair of accompanying tondos. It's part of a new body of work from the artist that will form the basis of an April 2015 exhibition at ICA Boston.

Mail & Guardian
AFRICA'S BEST READ

An Interrogation of Post-colonial History
By Medeine Tribinevicius
June 27, 2014

The image of a stout-shouldered Boer goat is mesmerising. A man dressed in a teal-green farmworker's uniform, pant cuffs tucked into white gumboots, holds the animal on a leash, striking a showman's pose. Two solid boerbuls look on – a large male stands protectively over a seated puppy.

In a second canvas, a pair of middle-aged women converse by an open window, a green chalkboard on one wall betraying the space as a classroom, while a louche martinet lounges in a chair gazing at a third image. We watch him watching several rows of schoolgirls, feet clad in black shoes and white socks, faces and uniformed torsos obscured by an over-painted black box. The visual obstruction is just transparent enough to discern a row of crossed arms and distinct faces – faces that are both exposed and negated by the filter of black paint.

These three enormous canvasses (the smallest measures just over 2m x 2m), hang edge to edge, constituting a stunning triptych titled *Fully Belly II* (2014). They are part of Meleko Mokgosi's large-scale – in size, time line, and ambition – *Pax Kaffraria* series (2010-2014).

A couple of months after first seeing his work, I sit down to chat with Mokgosi at an organic brunch spot in the Lower East Side of New York. He's a quiet man with a gentle face and a grey beard that makes me think he's older than his 33 years. We chose not to meet at his Sunset Park studio where he works because, as he puts it: "It's empty."

Barely a week before our meeting, his first solo show with Honor Fraser Gallery in Los Angeles opened, and all of his most recent works – the final three suites of *Pax Kaffraria* – are on display.

Pax Kaffraria is a work comprising eight "chapters"; each including a number of works that constitute sub-chapters. Very broadly speaking, the theme of the work is a re-narrativisation of the history of Southern Africa, spanning Mokgosi's home country of Botswana outwards into neighbouring Zambia, Zimbabwe, South Africa and Namibia. The images are characterised by a precise painting style, prominent blank canvas backgrounds, and distinct, almost mythologised figures ranging from day labourers and housekeepers to tribal chiefs

and military generals. It's a work that if shown in its entirety would engulf an institution. And that's kind of the point.

Born and raised
Raised in the town of Maun in Botswana, Mokgosi attended high school in the capital, Gaborone, on a government scholarship. It was there that he started painting, encouraged by a supportive teacher. After high school he took an opportunity to study abroad, again on a scholarship, completing a BA in Studio Art at Williams College in Massachusetts in the United States in 2007.

But it was his participation in the independent study programme at the Whitney in New York in 2008/2009 that really pushed his budding career in its current epic direction.
"I was the youngest one there," he says, "the least experienced."

At the Whitney he met artist Mary Kelly and the two formed a bond – Mokgosi completed a masters in fine arts at the University of California, Los Angeles, under her mentorship. Kelly's influence is clear: she works in large-scale, narrative installations. But that's where the similarity ends. Kelly's images are delicate, and she is best known for works made of compressed drying-machine lint.

Mokgosi is a rare breed in today's art world – a pure painter. His work is grounded in classical training, both in terms of technique – his early influences include Caravaggio and Vermeer – and in his approach to the theories of art history.

Unlearning how to paint
Over the course of the Whitney residency Mokgosi came into his own. "That was when a practice became a practice," he tells me. "At Whitney I unlearned how to paint." This unlearning started at the most basic first steps of the painting process.

"When you paint, you stretch a canvas first and then you prime it in white," Mokgosi explains. "The art world takes this white background for granted." So after stretching his canvasses Mokgosi instead primes them with a clear coat. Even this seemingly neutral first-step is minutely considered. In Mokgosi's work everything is accounted for. The clear primer also means he cannot over-paint in order to correct his errors. The canvas registers all marks; there are no mistakes.

"Everything happening on the canvas is because it needs to be there," says Mokgosi. "There are no improvisations. I have 80% of an idea of how it will look before I start," he says. Before putting down a single mark on the canvas, Mokgosi storyboards the work on 11x14-inch paper, in pencil. In the case of *Pax Kaffraria* the title came first followed by the sub-titles, which he then organised into eight chapters.

Each canvas in each chapter is carefully planned, right down to the brush size and the tone and colour of paint used to create each mark. Images are researched. Source material includes photographs and images taken from newspapers and magazines – most recently farmers' digests and wedding periodicals – as well as on-site research.

Mokgosi travels back to Botswana as frequently as he can. Given this exhaustive process, he can take between two and five months to story-board a work. Mokgosi's practice speaks to one of the foundational structures behind his art: in the discourse of post-colonialism, decolonisation, or globalisation, the mode of production has to be accounted for.

“Production is a political question,” he says, “and the gallery absorbs it. Artists no longer think about the -politics of production, about the socioeconomic conditions they are -reproducing.”

Negating history
For Mokgosi, painting – as an act, object and commodity – is always political. “You have to know the history to painting,” he tells me, “but you also have to know how to negate that history.”

This principle grounds his practice in a deep well of art and literary theory, to say nothing of art history. “I was colonised very well,” he says with a laugh. He namedrops post-modernist theorist Craig Owens, the Greenbergian formalist Rosalind Krauss and feminist artist Barbara Krueger, but one can also sense the Frankfurt School at work.

“Painting is part of the discourse of post-colonialism and materialism,” Mokgosi tells me. “And these questions [of what history and narrative are] must be articulated in the medium. This is the aesthetic of how I approach painting.”

At its core, the *Pax Kaffraria* series considers the creation of capital “H” History and the ways in which societies produce narratives. The title brings together two terms: “pax”, a Latin term referring to a period of peace, usually imposed by a predominant nation; and “Kaffraria”, a British term used in the 18th century to refer to what is now the southeast part of the Eastern Cape of South Africa, a territory primarily inhabited by the Xhosa.

The imagery is drawn from the histories of Southern Africa, transmogrified under artist’s deft brush as questions of nationhood, colonialism, history and post-colonial aesthetics.

Complex and brutal
Mokgosi’s histories are complex and often brutal, even if his canvasses are gorgeously precise.

The chapter titled *Sikhuselo Sembumbulu* (2012) is derived from a Xhosa term meaning “bulletproof”. It’s a reference to the Xhosa cattle killings of 1856–57, which were intended to drive away the colonial powers and simultaneously resurrect the ancestors. The work includes images of slaughtered cows, a priest, schoolchildren, uniformed men, domestic workers and a couple dancing, arranged on canvasses that touch and images that occasionally overlap.

His depiction of the event is not a conventional narrative; he is not documenting a specific series of historical events. Instead, his stories take shape image by image, all of which form a narrative through association and juxtaposition.

“The question I’m asking is ‘what is narrative?’ and the answer is that nothing can be reconciled, it is always going to be messy,” he says. He references the Zakes Mda novel *A Heart of Redness* alongside an academic text, *Bulletproof: Afterlives of Anticolonial Prophesy in Africa and Beyond* by Jennifer Wenzel.

“I’m interested in the way the Xhosa used failure as a way to succeed,” he says. “We are going to lose in order to win … It was their only response to colonial power. It was their form of resistance.”

Two abiding concerns
The title *Pax Kaffraria* points to two abiding concerns: the nation and its influence on historical creation, and the mythologies and assumptions associated with “Africa”. In his

careful painting technique, he parses the way history is constructed and transmitted. And although they are aesthetically stunning, the works demand close, intelligent reading to grasp their intentions.

Critics have described Mokgosi's work as cinematic, no doubt a reference to the storyboards as well as the large scale of the works and the vivid imagery. The viewer is confronted with bold visuals on stark backgrounds. The dogs, goats and cattle are rendered with gleaming musculature; the figures are crisp in the details of dress and expression.

But this realism is tempered by a spatial unfinishedness. Figures often float in space, suspended in the matrix of the canvas, asking the viewer to work to understand their interrelations and meanings, challenging any simple reading.

As Yael Lipschutz wrote in an *Art in America* review of Mokgosi's works in the *Made in LA* Show at the Hammer Museum in 2012: "Like social commentators of the past such as Larry Rivers and Leon Golub, who worked in a similarly open and unfinished tradition, Mokgosi channels his painterly 'pauses' to allow us Westerners a psychic entry point into stories that may seem out of reach if handled -differently."

Finding a home in a commercial gallery is a challenge for many artists; it's even more challenging when your work is as specific in its needs as Mokgosi's. Honor Fraser Gallery in Los Angeles has represented Mokgosi for nearly three years, but this past May was his first solo show.

Broad spectrum of artists

The Los Angeles-based gallery boasts a broad spectrum of artists, from conceptual to abstract to realist, but what binds them, says artist liaison Corrina Peipon, is quality: "It's the artist's commitment to their own projects. They are uncompromising in their work."

Uncompromising is a good word to describe Mokgosi. Each show is a careful negotiation of how he wants his painting installation to be read, and due to the size and number of large canvases, spaces tend towards the gargantuan. Past exhibitions have included the Lyon Biennale (Lyon, France), the Yerba Buena Centre for Arts in San Francisco and the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles.

His approach to subject matter is also uncompromising. He is dealing with a complex history, one that continues to be narrated from a number of often conflicting perspectives.

"Cultural interrogation and literary criticism are what drive Meleko's work," Peipon tells me. "The overall project is looking at something much more broad, at cultural biases and how the biases we hold often affect how we see history."

When asked if the gallery considers Mokgosi an "African" artist, Peipon replies: "We take our cue from Meleko. It's strong work. The content and the form are inextricable, and the content is related to Southern Africa. Meleko feels very strongly, as do we, that the work is very much about narrative and how it helps us construct history, for better or for worse."

The completion of the last chapter raises an important question: are there any plans afoot in presenting all eight chapters of *Pax Kaffraria* together, for the very first time? Peipon defers: "All I can say is that ideally this work would be seen in its entirety." Such a show would be a seminal moment in this incredible artist's career. Something to think about, South African art world movers and shakers.

Los Angeles Times

Meleko Mokgosi's work flames with purpose and pointed history

by Leah Ollman
May 9, 2014

The three parts to Meleko Mokgosi's absorbing show at Honor Fraser are formally distinct, all falling under a broad umbrella of concern with post-colonialism and misrepresentation across the continental, cultural divide.

A pair of multi-panel works pointedly argue their case against the way African art has been primitivized by conventional Western art history, considered good enough for the masters of European modernism to steal from but not valued for its own sake, for its own formal and cultural sophistication.

Mokgosi has printed an enlarged museum wall label (accompanying either a work of African art or a piece by Matisse, Picasso or Sheeler) onto each linen panel, then annotated it by hand in charcoal, taking terms and assumptions to task with fierce intellectual rigor and palpable exasperation. The works are compelling to read and flame with purpose.

At the opposite extreme are three panoramic charcoal drawings of dogs, whose political subtext is *sub* indeed. The show's press release identifies the breeds as particular to the region, and the renderings as teasing out deeper aspects of the legacies of colonialism. Without the contextual scaffold, the drawings are merely canine group portraits, but gorgeous ones, muscular in their range of resolution and modes of description.

Somewhere in the middle of the didactic spectrum falls a set of large, panoramic history paintings, whose political charge can be sensed more than decoded. The paintings string together domestic and ceremonial scenes from southern Africa in horizontal groupings, like adjoined photographs or film stills.

Mokgosi, born and raised in Botswana, earned his master's at UCLA in 2011 and now lives in Brooklyn. Earlier installments of "Pax Kaffraria," this eight-chapter project, were featured in the Hammer Museum's "Made in L.A. 2012" exhibition, for which he received the best-of-show Mohn Award. These vivid glimpses smolder with subtle, subversive intent.

Los Angeles Times

Hammer Museum's $100,000 Mohn Award goes to painter Meleko Mokgosi

By Jori Finkel
August 16, 2012

The votes are in: Meleko Mokgosi, a 30-year-old painter who was born and raised in Botswana and is now based in Los Angeles, has become the first recipient of the Hammer Museum's Mohn Award, given for outstanding artwork in the museum's "Made in L.A." biennial.

Chosen through an unusual combination of jury selection and popular vote, Mokgosi will receive a book about his work and $100,000 split over two years – one of the largest prizes for visual artists anywhere.

Museum director Ann Philbin praised Mokgosi's work, a 10-canvas series that wraps around three walls inside the museum, as a powerful combination of "beautiful and brutal" at once. "His work is a form of historical painting that comes from various stories of postcolonial Africa. We might not know the particular references to slaughtering cows in the 19th century, but we do feel the tension and understand that they are paintings about resistance."

In a recent Art in America article online, critic Yael Lipschutz described his contribution to the show as a portrait of Africa that reflects the artist's "unusual social realism, involving both crisply rendered figures from African society and politics, and passages of raw empty canvas."

"Rather than emulating journalistic set pieces with fixed story frames, Mokgosi's paintings come to us as detective stories or dreamscapes from a faraway continent," she wrote.

The award, like the "Made in L.A." biennial itself (which runs through Sept. 2), is in its first year. But the award's funders, contemporary art collectors Jarl and Pamela Mohn, have pledged to support it for at least four more exhibitions.

A jury of curators consisting of Doryun Chong of the Museum of Modern Art, Cecilia Alemani of the High Line Art Program, Rita Gonzalez of the L.A. County Museum of Art and Anthony Huberman (independent) selected five artists of the 60 in the show for the award. The other artists selected, which museum visitors could then vote for, were Simone Forti, Liz Glynn, Erika Vogt and the art-collective Slanguage (Mario Ybarra Jr. and Karla Diaz).

All artists are based in L.A., though Mokgosi is currently living in New York for a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem.

Out of roughly 50,000 people who visited the show before voting closed on Aug. 12, 4,300 registered to vote. But only 2,051 people actually voted through a website set up for that purpose. (Full disclosure: This reporter was one of them, which I did to check out the process. There were no technical glitches, and I voted for an artist who didn't win.)

Museum staff acknowledged that voter turnout was smaller than they had hoped. They also said they might not continue the same voting process in its 2014 biennial because of concerns raised by artists in the show and those on a museum advisory council.

“We’re going to continue the award, there’s no question about that. The question is how,” Philbin said. She described hearing from some artists in the show who were uneasy about the popular vote component as well as getting feedback from visitors who said they wished they could vote for anyone in the show, not just the five chosen for them.

So the hybrid voting process, which combined the opinions of art-world cognoscenti and public sentiment, got flak for both components.

“It's really interesting. In a way we could decide to have the public vote completely or not have the public vote at all.” Philbin said. “As a result, we will have a lot of conversations going forward.”

Art in America INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

Meleko Mokgosi's Existentialism

by Yael Lipschutz
June 29, 2012

Pax Kaffraria: Sikhueselo Sembumbulo (2012), Botswana-born painter Meleko Mokgosi's stunning 60-foot-long canvas currently on view at the Hammer Museum at part of "Made in L.A.," presents viewers with a portrait of postcolonial life in southern Africa. Comprising 10 interlocking panels and wrapping three gallery walls, the painting evidences Mokgosi's unusual social realism, involving both crisply rendered figures from African society and politics, and passages of raw empty canvas. This allusive visual strategy, in which larger-than-life African priests, soldiers and grandmothers float atop blank zones of negative space, results in a "realism" that is magical, imaginative and fluid. Rather than emulating journalistic set pieces with fixed story frames, Mokgosi's paintings come to us as detective stories or dreamscapes from a faraway continent.

Raised in the city of Maun in the heart of the Okavango Delta, Mokgosi began drawing in primary school. "I drew for years in Botswana, mostly self-portraits and images from photographs, before emigrating to the United States in 2003 to attend Williams College. It was there that I really started painting."

After participating in the Whitney Independent Study program and attending UCLA, Mokgosi is currently an artist-in-resident at the Studio Museum in Harlem, where he is working on the eighth and final chapter in his "Pax Kaffraria" painting series "I began 'Kaffraria' in 2011," explains Mokgosi, "to explore how people in southern Africa think about nationhood. Kaffraria comes from 'British Kaffraria,' the name of a black settlement that the British established when they first arrived here. Today it's code for 'kaffir,' the equivalent of the 'n word.' Each chapter deals with a different set of issues, so for example the first, *Lekgowa*, which means white/light-skinned person, examines how white and black people's identification procedures are inextricably bound together."

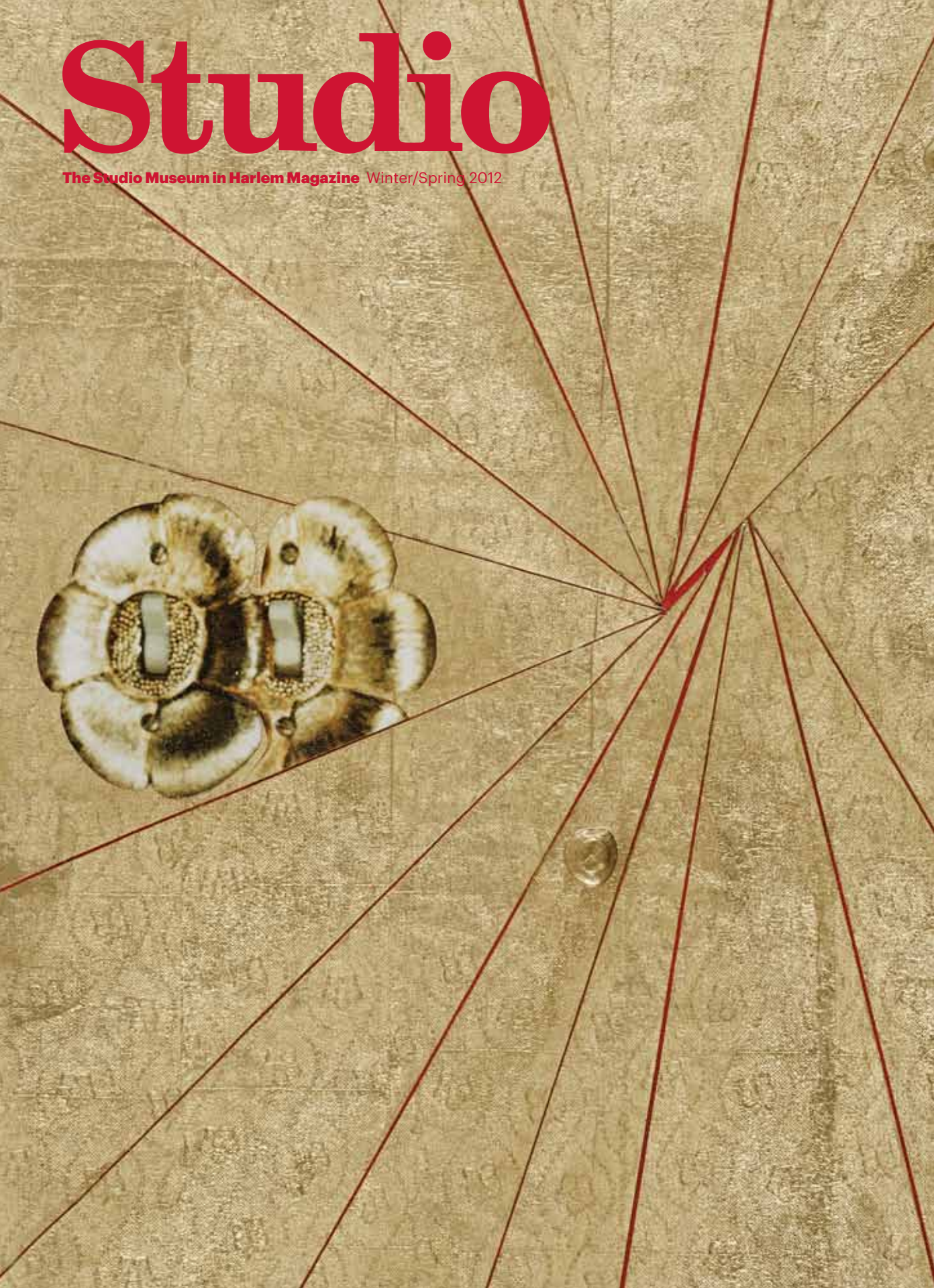
Sikhueselo Sembumbulo, the gargantuan work at the Hammer, is the seventh chapter in the Kaffraria series. Its title, a Xhosa word meaning "bulletproof," is a reference to the so-called "Xhosa cattle killings" of 1856-57, when the Xhosa people in Cape Colony (formerly part of Botswana, Cape Colony is now part of South Africa) sacrificed over 400,000 cows in order to revive the spirits of their ancestors and thus combat colonial power. Mokgosi uses this tragic historic event, which resulted in the expansion of British territory and the death of 40,000 Xhosa from starvation, to anchor a chain of vignettes that address imperialism, globalization and nationalism in Africa. A sepia-soaked central panel strewn with slain bulls and dagger-wielding warrior tribesmen gives way to various scenes: an African priest clenching a bible and a giant golden crucifix, a 19-century military sergeant clad in Royal British garb, a well-to-do suited businessman at home in his modern living room, a glamorous couple in satin couture and Ray-Ban sunglasses dancing on the ballroom floor, white and black politicians in conversation.

Cast as existential everymen, Mokgosi's figures come to us as actors on the screen, their drama a monumental unfolding. Mokgosi, who counts film as one of his primary influences, speaks of "storyboarding out" his narratives and considers the painting's panels as individual "strips of celluloid," their vast fields of unprimed canvas as filmic "pauses." Like social commentators of the past such as Larry Rivers and Leon Golub, who worked in a similarly open and unfinished tradition, Mokgosi channels his painterly "pauses" to allow us as Westerners a psychic entry point into stories that may seem out of reach if handled differently. Referring as they do to issues such as Zimbabwe's "Indigenization Act," which requires at least 51% of all companies to be owned by native-born

Zimbabweans, had the canvases been overly worked-out, inch-by-inch, their intrinsic unfamiliarity might have closed them off from us before our wonder had the chance to trigger. Now they are who-dunnits that leave us standing before the spectre of history in a state of suspension and expectancy. This image stream continues at the Studio Museum, where excerpts from Mokgosi's *Terra Nullius* (2009–2012), the fifth chapter in his "Pax Kaffraria" series, will be on view through Oct. 21.

Studio

The Studio Museum in Harlem Magazine Winter/Spring 2012



Meleko Mokgosi
Pax Afrikaner: Full Belly (Part 4), 2011
Courtesy the artist

Meleko Mokgosi

Pax Afrikaner |päks ˌafrikänər|
appellation chiefly historical *and* mythical

How can we account for the perseverance of national identification in the age of globalization, transnationality and the so-called fluidity/multiplicity of identity formation? My thesis: Nationalism arises out of a singular mixture of *jouissance* and *lalangue*. *A nation persists so long as its distinct enjoyment continues to be materialized in a set of practices and transmitted through national myths that structure these practices*. Jouissance is the incomplete paradoxical enjoyment that cannot be fully represented in meaning—yet invests meaning. Lalangue is the part in language where despite the *investment* in meaning carries no actual meaning. Lalangue, the symptomatic use of language, reveals the existence of only enjoyment in language—meaningful nonsense (*ab-sens*). And this is how we can understand a word like *grigamba*. The Xhosa term refers to a dirty little animal, a dung-beetle and the apparently nonsensical and ugly "noises" that foreigners make when they speak. Grigamba names purely for the sake of naming; it stands in for the negative affect that is displaced onto the black foreign national. So the word, from a particular mother tongue, *represents a certain untranslatable idiosyncrasy relating to the very materiality of the signifier, the sonic material that differentiates one language from another*. Nationalism is not about ideas, political procedure or institutions. It is about enjoyment and libidinal investment, the thing-ness of desire and the partial experience of enjoyment. The libidinal bond between subjects *always implies a shared relation towards a thing. It appears to us as our thing; the nation-thing*. Nationalism, compelled by the thing, comes before the nation-state yet it has no distinct origin. There is no nation-state, no nation, before nationalism.