The New York Times

Meleko Mokgosi Wants You to See the Politics of Everyday Life

The artist's work is steeped in theory and history. He hopes it makes viewers see outside themselves.

Meleko Mokgosi steeps his work in history and theory. His series "Pan-African Pulp" reinterprets the imagery of popular African graphic novels to highlight the violence of colonialism and the dream of Pan-Africanism. Calla Kessler/The New York Times

By Laura van Straaten

Oct. 23, 2019

If you've ever felt you lack the education to understand art representing histories, people and symbols from a culture outside your own, the artist Meleko Mokgosi isn't going to let you off easy.

With six solo shows in four states this season, the Botswana-born, Brooklyn-based Mr. Mokgosi believes that it is incumbent on "first-world" viewers to understand that "the world doesn't revolve around them. There are other histories."

This season, Mr. Mokgosi, 37, is staking a lot on that first-world (and likely American) viewer. By Nov. 1, when his show at Stevenson Gallery in Johannesburg closes, the artist will have taken over both of the Jack Shainman Gallery's exhibition spaces in Manhattan, as well as its colossal building in Kinderhook, N.Y. He will also have three solo museum shows: this fall at the University of Michigan's Museum of Art in Ann Arbor and the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago, and later this winter at the Pérez Art Museum in Miami.

Mr. Mokgosi, whose paintings, prints, drawings and sculptures are as rooted in his native culture as in his readings in post-colonial studies, cinema, psychoanalysis and critical theory, said he wants viewers to "figure out how to empathize and look at something from a position that is not theirs."

The biggest testing ground for viewers will be the biggest show, which encompasses the 30,000-square-foot former high school in upstate New York that Mr. Shainman turned into a gallery called The School. Through next spring, packed in under one roof for the first time, are seven of the eight chapters of Mr. Mokgosi's "Democratic Intuition," the voluminous series of artworks he began in 2013.

Meleko Mokgosi, "Democratic Intuition, Lex I," 2017. Mr. Mokgosi is strongly influenced by cinema and likes to install his paintings together like a film strip — sometimes upside down — to form large installations.
Meleko Mokgosi, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

"Democratic Intuition" examines democracy in relation to the daily lives of southern Africans, most often with political imagery like campaign posters as a subtle presence. The show derives its title from the critical theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. "Basically, her conceptualization is that democracy depends on our understanding of the state apparatus," Mr. Mokgosi explained. "It's kind of a counterintuitive intuition." To understand democracy, you need comfortable access to its various forms and institutions. Then, "depending on how you're educated, the kind of abstract thinking

you have available to you, the kind of resources you have, it will affect how you conceptualize democracy," he said, adding that the risk is being "miseducated" and "misinformed."

Though his paintings and sculptures depict African life and he still refers to Botswana as "back home," he is quick to draw parallels to the electorate in the United States, where he has lived since 2003. "If you look at America and the people who voted for the current sitter in the White House," he said, "what mental processes happened so that these people are convinced to vote against their own self-interests? Whether it's class, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, tax breaks or you name it."

The one chapter of "Democratic Intuition" missing from Kinderhook, "Bread, Butter, and Power," is on display at the Smart Museum in Chicago through Dec. 15 as a single-room installation of more than 20 paintings exploring "women's work" versus "men's work" and the consequent asymmetries of power.

Artwork from a newer series Mr. Mokgosi has termed "Pan-African Pulp" looks at power in a different way and populates the shows at both Mr. Shainman's West 24th Street gallery (Nov. 1 through Dec. 21) and at the University of Michigan Museum of Art (through fall 2021). "Pan-African Pulp" extrapolates and reinterprets through a political lens an early type of graphic novel widely circulated in Africa starting in the 1950s.

Mr. Mokgosi at his studio in Brooklyn. His voluminous series "Democratic Intuition" looks at the ways education and access to resources influence perceptions of how democracy operates.
Calla Kessler/The New York Times

Popularly called "look-books," Mr. Mokgosi explained, "they weren't allowed to be political because it was during the apartheid regime." A popular hero was Lance Spearman, nicknamed the Spear. "It was this kind of adventurous black James Bond figure who's fighting crime, but the dialogue was tame." With access to a trove from the Comic Art Collection at Michigan State University, Mr. Mokgosi revisits the images in new, more overtly political ways through painting and screen prints. He also, as he put it, has "rewritten the script," bringing to the surface — in speech bubbles, captions or annotations in his own hand — the violence of colonial and post-colonial Africa and the dream of Pan-Africanism.

Such annotated texts are also part of Mr. Mokgosi's all-new body of paintings on view at Mr. Shainman's West 20th Street gallery (Nov. 1 though Dec. 21). In these large-scale canvases, Mr. Mokgosi has painstakingly painted poems and prose by women from Africa and the African diaspora (including from Toni Morrison's novel "Beloved") whose subjects range from love to liberation. He has then added his own hand-painted analyses as marginalia. The show is titled "The social revolution of our time cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the poetry of the future," after a line from Marx.

Mr. Mokgosi examines a different cultural product in his final show of the season for The Pérez Art Museum Miami (Feb. 27 though May 30, 2021), and it's an unsettling one. "Meleko Mokgosi: Your Trip to Africa" will be a new site-specific commission of eight paintings created in response to the Austrian structuralist filmmaker Peter Kubelka's gruesome 1966 film "Unsere Afrikareise (Our Trip to Africa)," which exposes the violence of European hunters on safari and is a harsh critique of European colonialism and tourism in Africa.

"That work, like a lot of my work, is never going to be easy to exhibit, sell, or, for some, maybe even to understand," Mr. Mokgosi conceded. "That's why I feel grateful for the support of the people in these galleries and institutions that care about and are invested in my ideas and commitment to considering other histories."

Correction: *Oct. 23, 2019*
An earlier version of this article misstated the closing date for Meleko Mokgosi's "Bread, Butter, and Power" installation at the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago. It is Dec. 15, not Dec. 29.

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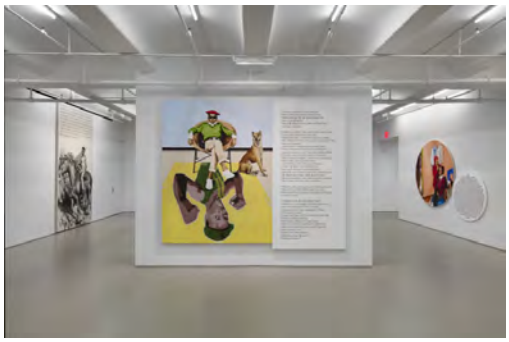
HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

Meleko Mokgosi's Discursive Art

Mokgosi is as interested in the discourse around the figures in his paintings as in their representation — not that the two could ever exist separately.

Alan Gilbert December 14, 2019



Installation view, *Meleko Mokgosi: The social revolution of our time cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the poetry of the future,* Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 West 20th Street, New York, November 1–December 21, 2019. Foreground: Meleko Mokgosi, "The Social Revolution of Our Time Cannot Take Its Poetry from the Past but Only from the Poetry of the Future, 10" (2019), panel 1: 92 x 72 x 2 inches, panel 2: 96 x 48 x 2 inches (© Meleko Mokgosi. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

In her essay "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," originally delivered as a paper in 1980, Audre Lorde says of poetry: "Yet even the form our creativity takes is often a class issue. Of all the art forms, poetry is the most economical. It is the one which is the most secret, which requires the least physical labor, the least material, and the one which can be done between shifts, in the hospital pantry, on the subway, and on scraps of surplus paper." Later in the same paragraph, she contrasts this with the sometimes prohibitive costs of art materials for poor women of color and others. Access to resources and questions of representation are inseparable in Lorde's work, and encompass race, class, and gender, as well as age and geographic location.

A similar attention to intersectionality is central to Meleko Mokgosi's two current exhibitions, spanning both of Jack Shainman Gallery's New York City spaces, and poetry plays an important role. A number of the paintings on display at the 20th

Street exhibition, titled *The social revolution of our time cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the poetry of the future*, include a poem by a female African or African diasporic writer and activist, such as Ama Ata Aidoo, June Jordan, and Nkiru Nzegwu. Born in Botswana and currently living in New York City, Mokgosi understands both sides of this diaspora.

The poems are printed on separate canvases placed flush with Mokgosi's figurative paintings of a range of African and African American figures. Image and text are frequently in conversation, directly or indirectly; in some cases the diptych composition resembles an open book. In one work, a young woman rendered on a thin, vertical canvas executes a ballet leg hold while standing on a man's head; next to it, Aidoo's equally vertical, short-lined poem describes the discrepancy between middle-class and working-class women — the latter "taken up with / what's waiting of the / brutal loads that were / their lives" — in terms of time and access to a local public library and the knowledge that translates into power to be gathered there. (All works at both locations are from 2019.)

Meleko Mokgosi, "The Social Revolution of Our Time Cannot Take Its Poetry from the Past but Only from the Poetry of the Future, 9" (2019), panel 1: 96 1/8 x 40 x 2 inches, panel 2: 96 x 40 x 2 inches (© Meleko Mokgosi, courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

Like most of the figures in the exhibition, the woman is near life-size and realistically painted. The faces in other works impassively look at the viewer, radiating a sense of self-possession, but this woman is smiling, adding a performative dimension to the work; her gaze is turned away from us but still directed at an audience. She is backed by swathes of white paint against a blank background. As with all of the paintings on display, the accompanying text helps provide a narrative framework focused more on general issues of race and gender than on specific political or historical moments. Mokgosi is as interested in the discourse around these figures as in their representation (not that the two could ever exist separately). Thus, on a number of the texts he has written in black cursive his own comments and annotations, explicating and contextualizing, and in a few cases amending them.

Each of the 11 paintings on display at 20th Street share the exhibition title along with a number (the aforementioned work is #9). The titular phrase, "the social revolution of our time cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the poetry of the future" is from Karl Marx's 1852 essay "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon," in which he reflects on the failures of the European revolutions of 1848. Mokgosi's exhibition is a bit more hopeful than Marx's diagnosis as the poems he has chosen are mostly ones of female empowerment, an approach mirrored in his figurative representations of African and African American identity.

Installation view, *Meleko Mokgosi: The social revolution of our time cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the poetry of the future,* Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 West 20th Street, New York, November 1–December 21, 2019. Left: Meleko Mokgosi, "The Social Revolution of Our Time Cannot Take Its Poetry from the Past but Only from the Poetry of the Future, 8" (2019), panel 1: 96 x 96 x 2 inches, panel 2: 44 1/8 x 44 x 2 inches. Right: Meleko Mokgosi, "The Social Revolution of Our Time Cannot Take Its Poetry from the Past but Only from the Poetry of the Future, 7" (2019), panel 1: 92 x 72 x 2 inches, panel 2, 3 and 4: 24 x 18 x 1 1/2 inches (each) (© Meleko Mokgosi, courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

Pride of place near the entrance is given to #3 in the series, which features an excerpt from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* exhorting a (self-)love of (Black) flesh next to Mokgosi's rendering of a girl posing in a tiara and formal white dress, its skirt spread out to cover the entire loveseat on which she sits. Mokgosi's underlining and comments on the companion text are extensive. They include a box around the phrase "love your heart" and address the treatment of the Black body by Whites as a "psycho-somatic object." The canvas with Morrison's text is larger than the painting next to it, and its descriptions of body parts violated by White violence are more visually vivid than the adjacent figure. Mokgosi's annotations and his preference to work in series suggest that the individual painted image is not intended to be the final criteria of his artwork's value, with the elements of containment and commodification this involves.

Meleko Mokgosi, *Pan-African Pulp* (2019), inkjet on canvas with permanent maker a series comprised of 31 panels, 64 x 44 x 1 1/4 inches (each) (© Meleko Mokgosi, courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

In keeping with this practice, Jack Shainman's 24th Street gallery presents a single serial work with annotations entitled *Pan-African Pulp* printed on 31 large panels measuring 64 x 44 inches each. Here, Lorde's concern with representation, class, and politics is even more clearly defined. In the 1960s, Black South Africans without the resources to make films instead produced photo novels — stories told in photographs and text resembling graphic novels. Mokgosi has chosen to repurpose one entitled *Spear Magazine* (1968–72) that presents action-and-adventure narratives featuring a James Bond–inspired African protagonist named Lance Spearman (more informally known as Spear). Reproducing the original pages but substituting his own text, Mokgosi tells the story of a Black minority in an imaginary postcolonial African country attempting to impose its rule over a more democratic and revolutionary populace. Spear infiltrates the usurpers' secret hideout and destroys it before barely escaping in a dramatic getaway.

Mokgosi's handwritten annotations to the image-text combinations of *Pan-African Pulp* are extensive, ranging from critiques of capitalism to Michel Foucault's notion of discourse as materially creating the conditions it describes. The works in *Pan-African Pulp* also deal with the ways in which colonized people internalize oppression, and in this sense the show differs from the more liberatory paintings

Installation view, *Meleko Mokgosi: Pan-African Pulp,* Jack Shainman Gallery, 524 West 24th Street, New York, November 1–December 21, 2019 (© Meleko Mokgosi, courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

on 20th Street. In both sets of works, language engages the image in ongoing, contested histories on either side of the Atlantic, inextricably joined by the slave trade. In an annotation to one of the canvases in *Pan-African Pulp*, Mokgosi describes the importance of not only what gets said publicly in different societies but who gets to say it. Access is central to what both Mokgosi and Lorde seek, whether in art or poetry, in order to expand the realms of the visible.

Installation view, *Meleko Mokgosi: The social revolution of our time cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the poetry of the future,* Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 West 20th Street, New York, November 1–December 21, 2019 (© Meleko Mokgosi, courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

Meleko Mokgosi: The social revolution of our time cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the poetry of the future *continues at Jack Shainman Gallery (513 West 20th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through December 21.* Meleko Mokgosi: Pan-African Pulp *continues at Jack Shainman Gallery (524 West 24th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through December 21.*

MORE FROM HYPERALLERGIC

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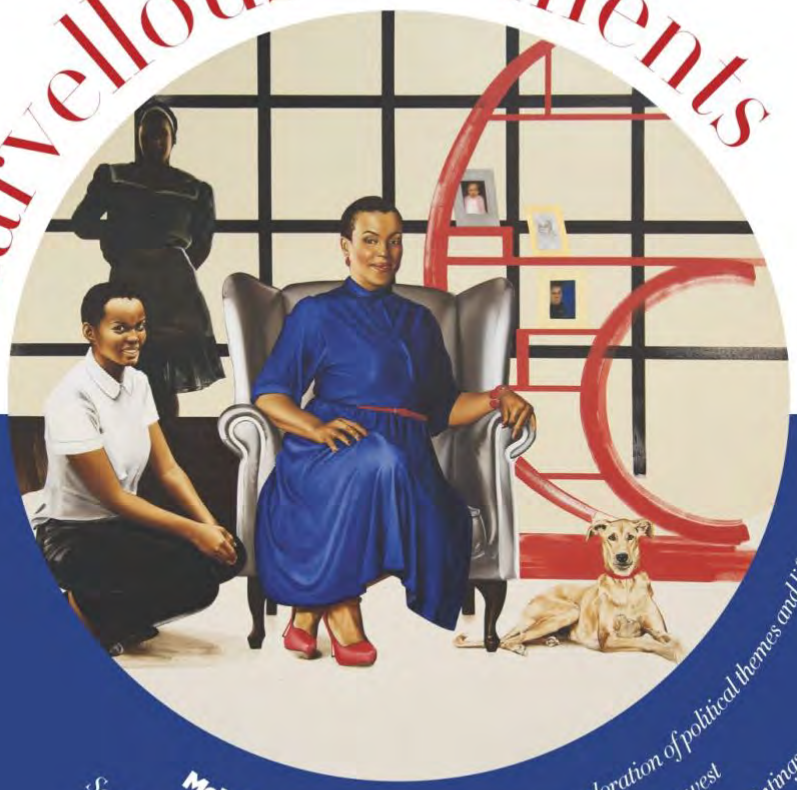

Meleko Mokgosi *is renowned for his exploration of political themes and life in Southern Africa. Paul Laster surveys the Botswana-born artist's newest large-scale, project-based history paintings*

Meleko Mokgosi. *Lerato: Philia II*, 2016. Oil on canvas, 238.8 cm diameter. Courtesy of the artist

Top and right: Meleko Mokgosi. *Bread, Butter, and Power.* From the project *Democratic Intuition* (2014-2018). 2018. Oil, acrylic, bleach, graphite, photo and pigment transfer, permanent marker on canvas. dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Honor Fraser Gallery, Los Angeles

Recently appointed an Associate Professor in painting and printmaking at the prestigious Yale School of Art, Botswana-born artist Meleko Mokgosi has solo exhibitions at Jack Shainman Gallery's two New York City locations and a big survey show at Shainman's Upstate New York locale, The School; a travelling solo at the Smart Museum of Art in Chicago; a commissioned project at the University of Michigan Museum of Art; and an upcoming one-person exhibition at the Pérez Art Museum Miami (PAMM).

A graduate of Williams College and the University of California, Los Angeles—where he received a BA in Studio Art and an MFA in Interdisciplinary Studio, respectively—the Brooklyn-based artist also studied at the Whitney Independent Study Program and was an artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum of Harlem, but he credits his high school teacher with setting him on a course to become a visual artist.

Introduced to the socially conscious work of the German modern-

Loneliness in me lies! In the dark pall,
Whereon the deep cerulean deepest glows,
Whence the pale lily and blood-hearted rose
Draw regal splendour!
Flag of the King of trees, emblem of Death am I.
And man's surrender—

Beneath my soothie cloak, man his first succour drew;
To me at last all men must turn anew.
Unknown the stars would burn but for my mantle;
Man's dreams and fears are mine, his secrets half-divine—
None can dissemble!
I in the bowels of earth uncover untold worth,
Where subterranean flames quiver and tremble.
I guard the deeps of seas, I keep the crumbling bones
Of the dear dead, even the weak lover's groan's
Shield from cold laughter? I close the outwards eyes.
Bear his dull spirit to the Hereafter!
I see the Player throw off his poor disguise,
Assume the master-role! I pitying trace
The fearful murderer's lone hiding place!
I know the miser's hoard, good done without reward,
The hidden sins of man, small deeds of grace:
The timid beneath my wing find sleep and comforting,
The sick and sorrowing seek my embrace.

Wherefore, then, having eyes, my loneliness despise?
Wherefore my dark delights spurn ever anew,
Pluck rather from their place what hath so little grace—
Servants so poor!

Loneliness in me lies, all wisdom's store!
Without me, ye are nought; I am the greater part—
I am man's inner heart, life's very core!
Complement ye of me; complement I of thee—
What would ye miss?
Though I am black, Yet I for whom the poets sigh,
Of whom all heaven knows;
Death, sleep, oblivion, rest and repose!
Deep am I as the sea; high heaven cradled me;
Usher am I of birth; I am the nurse of growth—
Heart of man's worth.
Comely am I, though black;
Where then in me the lack?
Wherein the dearth?

Clockwise from left: Meleko Mokgosi. *The Social Revolution of Our Time Cannot Take Its Poetry from the Past but Only from the Poetry of the Future,I0.* 2019; installation view of *Acts of Resistance;* installation view of *Democratic Intuition*

ist artists Max Beckmann, George Grosz and Käthe Kollwitz, who also taught, the young Mokgosi decided that he wanted to become an educator through art—a career that's allowed him the luxury of developing his heavily researched allegorical art at his own pace.

A figurative painter, who is known for exploring political themes, concepts of democracy and post-colonialism in Southern Africa, Mokgosi makes large-scale project-based history paintings, which mine cinema studies, psychoanalysis, critical theory and cultural studies. Much like a novelist, he works in chapters. For example, projects from his Democratic Intuition series, parts of which are currently on view at The School and the Smart Museum, was spread across six years and eight exhibitions, including the Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA) last year.

Examining democracy's effect on everyday life in Africa, the paintings—many of them employing text-based imagery—represent experiences and histories that have been excluded from the dominant narratives. Multi-panel canvases in the BMA's presentation of Acts of Resistance depict subjects that refuse to give in to the oppression of her or his spirit, such as school children standing up for their right to be educated. Mixed with historical works from the museum's collection, including Flemish Renaissance painter Caterina van Hemessen's Portrait of a Young Lady, the show also gave a voice to Mokgosi's work amongst the European masters.

At The School, which is an enormous school house that Shainman turned into a quasi-kunsthal/gallery in Kinderhook, NY, Mekgosi is exhibiting paintings from seven of the eight chapters of Democratic Intuition, including *Objects of Desire: Reflections on the African Still Life*, which features clever critiques of two controversial Museum of Modern Art exhibitions—Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern from 1984 and 1997's *Objects of Desire: The Modern Still Life*. Adding to his analyses, the artist interspersed his paintings with appropriated texts on the use of the word primitive in library cataloging and MoMA's Primitivism wall labels with his annotated commentary.

The missing chapter of the series—Bread, Butter and Power, which consists of a single-room, 20-panel painting installation that explores the theme of feminism in the context of southern Africa—is on view at the Smart Museum. In one panel an attractive, young black woman sits nobly in a throne-like chair while reading a letter and in another part a group children break ground with shovels, as if they are starting the foundation for a new education building.

Installation view of *Acts of Resistance*

At Shainman's New York City spaces, Mekgosi is premiering two new projects.

"The social revolution of our time cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the poetry of the future," which takes its title from a Karl Marx text about disavowing the past in order to achieve a revolutionary state, offers 12 paintings that are paired with texts taken from the writings of women from either Africa or the African Diaspora. A painting of a young black bride in her wedding gown is juxtaposed with a text from Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, while a black boy on a horse is ironically set off by roughly typed text talking about the disappearance of fish from Uganda's freshwater lakes.

Four blocks north, at Shainman's other city site, Pan-African Pulp appropriates the imagery of an African pulp photo-novel about a black crime-fighter to present a story about Pan-Africanism with Mokgosi's inserted dialogue, which changes the plot to highlight the aspirations of Africans to self-determination and self-governance. Presented in 31 canvas panels with some added commentary here, the graphic novel is displayed as jumbo vinyl works attached directly to the wall in the show at the University of Michigan, which commissioned this new body of work.

Capping off the artist's string of exhibitions, PAMM brings Mekgosi full circle in the exhibition Your Trip to Africa, which features a series of newly commissioned large-scale paintings that together function as a single, unified work dynamically investigating his central themes, while gigantically storyboarding Africa like it has never been seen before. ■

From left: Meleko Mokgosi. *Pan-African Pulp*, 2019 inkjet on canvas with permanent maker, a series comprised of 31 panels; *The Social Revolution of Our Time Cannot Take Its Poetry from the Past but Only from the Poetry of the Future*, 9, 2019

IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND RESPECTIVE GALLERIES

GARAGE

November 10, 2019
By Siddhartha Mitter

Meleko Mokgosi Is Going Big

The artist shows a series of works in all of Jack Shainman's New York spaces that are simultaneously timeless and urgent.

The Social Revolution of Our Time Cannot Take Its Poetry from the Past but Only from the Poetry of the Future, 10, 2019, 2 panels. Courtesy Jack Shainman

Meleko Mokgosi, the Botswana-born painter, whose depictions of daily life in Southern Africa are underpinned by political history and critical theory, has exploded on the U.S. museum scene. He's had recent solo shows at the Baltimore Museum of Art, the Fowler Museum in Los Angeles, the Smart Museum in Chicago, and has another, beginning next February, at the Pérez Art Museum in Miami.

Meanwhile, this fall, he has taken over all three spaces of his New York gallery, Jack Shainman, with a monumental presentation of three bodies of work that draw on his appetite for research and showcase his political and aesthetic range.

At Shainman's building—itself museum-sized—in the Hudson Valley, The School in Kinderhook, N.Y., Mokgosi presents 42 mostly large-scale works, mainly oil on canvas, that make up *Democratic Intuition*, a series he has worked on for nearly a decade.

He has new work in Shainman's two spaces in Chelsea. One is showing *The Social Revolution of Our Time Cannot Take Its Poetry From the Past But Only From the Poetry of the Future* (the title comes from Karl Marx), a series of large-scale figurative paintings paired with texts by African and African-American writers, to which Mokgosi sometimes adds his own annotations on the canvas.

The other—seemingly in a totally different vein—has *Pan-African Pulp*, a single work in 31 immense panels in which Mokgosi has rewitten the text of a 1970s photo-novel to turn it into a biting attack on those who subvert and get rich off revolutionary struggles.

Mokgosi, 38, is based in New York City. He has lived in the U.S. since 2003, earning degrees from Williams College and UCLA, not to mention stints in the Whitney's Independent Study Program and as an artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem. As of this year, he is teaching at the Yale School of Art.

It's a heady resumé, but his political bite is as sharp as ever. So is his eye for the ways in which U.S. and South African society, in particular, share challenges and traumas; and his sense that no one has a monopoly on truth, and no victory is permanent.

Your "Democratic Intuition" series represents your take on history painting. What does history painting mean when it's applied to post-independence histories, in countries that experienced colonial rule?

Up until the struggle, history was understood and conceptualized from the West. And history painting was a genre that tried to encapsulate the vision of the colonial empire in Europe. So as to say, these are our values, hopes, dreams, wishes, and this is our conquest.

My way of engaging is to fold in the histories of post-Independence southern African nations, which, as with most independence struggles, are very patriarchal. These movements seem to be always about what the singular male historical figure achieved, and so forth. A lot of times women are left out, the working classes are left out. So yes, it's good that a country got independence, but under what terms was independence achieved? Who benefits? It's about folding in these complicated, bittersweet effects of the struggle for liberation.

In the process, you end up painting a panorama of the different facets of life: work, education, love, socializing... So in a way it's also a counterpoint to ethnography.

Pretty much. In the West, history painting was supposed to capture a very specific, big historical event, and it tries to depict important historical figures. It's all about privilege and prestige. So I kind of removed that too. I don't depict any monumental events or figures. It's kind of a conflation of genre painting and history painting—to introduce specificity to historical discourse, to undercut ethnography and anthropology in the Western context, and say that history is a very expansive and expensive thing.

The idea of a "democratic intuition" opens up the potential gap between the idea of belonging to society, and the idea of belonging to a particular political system.

Absolutely. And in all the frames or panels, that idea of the democratic is really about an intersubjective relationship between two people. Like, democracy cannot function with someone in a vacuum. It's a relationship: how do you work with another subject in a way that does not antagonize and counteract your own freedoms, but also where what you want to do, how you want to work towards whatever you think is self-determination, does not hinder another person's freedoms? So at a basic level, it's about a certain kind of relationship based on mutual recognition.

Because all of these facets of life —work, love, etc.—can be marshaled into ideologies. Any full-fledged ideology has its conception of each of these things.

Absolutely, and the unconscious is a very important thing. Even looking at something like xenophobia in South Africa—I had a five-year project, a long time ago, that tried to look at xenophobia. I tried to figure out, how does it come to that? Having worked hand in hand with people from Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, all these countries united and working towards liberation, and 30 years later there is violence pointed towards other Black African nationals. It's a really important question that has to do with the unconscious and psychic investments.

Is it your feeling that social trauma is generationally passed on?

Oh, totally. In the South African context, when the apartheid regime ended, there was intergenerational trauma from the people who benefited from the apartheid regime and now feel ostracized and targeted, the white Afrikaners. And then you have the intergenerational trauma from those who were targeted by the racist regime and suffered greatly.

Frantz Fanon teaches us that the torturers were also traumatized.

They were all traumatized. I believe it was James Baldwin, who said he felt really sorry for white Americans, because they really don't understand how dehumanized they have been made by racism. All the parties involved are damaged goods.

The Social Revolution of Our Time Cannot Take Its Poetry from the Past but Only from the Poetry of the Future, 2, 2019, 2 panels. Courtesy Jack Shainman

When you exhibit these paintings, you often place them right next to each other, so it creates a strip – like a cinematic effect, as if this were a conceptual documentary.

That was one of the things I was interested in from the beginning. I was trying to figure out how to add to the discourse of painting, not just with the content, but also the formal aspects, and try to combine history painting and cinematic studies.

The works are framed in relation to how cinema shots are framed. I don't do long shots or close-ups. In cinema, the long shot is the establishing shot, which gives just a certain kind of context, and the close-up is a kind of perverse look at something very specific. I want to keep at a medium shot. To kind of obscure, and to highlight the idea that there is no way of encapsulating everything at once and having a full understanding.

And that way, you also offer everyone their space.

Totally. And allow the viewer to enter the space. Just as cinema uses the pause, in the long cinematic frames or "film strips," I use negative space as a device that allows both reflexivity and entry into the work—to allow the viewer to kind of step in, not to produce an overbearing composition where the viewer does not feel like there's room for them.

We've been talking about your figurative work. But you work a great deal with text as well—combining paintings with text, and text-only works, sometimes adding your annotations to someone else's words. What's the draw of text?

It's a thing that began in 2007, I think, when I saw a museum show on African beaded artworks. And I guess I was very taken by how the artwork and cultures and people were historicized in the museum context. I started interrogating museum wall labels. It was another way of engaging with the politics of representation.

Almost all the texts in the show – some paired with paintings, some on their own – are by African or Black American women writers. What's behind that selection?

I wanted to highlight the role that the African female subject has played in the struggle for liberation. I do it also with the images—I have a lot of images of Albertina Sisulu, Winnie Mandela, and so forth. In liberation movements the Black female subject tends to get left out.

Though you also have a text by Frederick Douglass, whom some would argue is seen as a great patriarchal figure.

That one is bending the rules a little bit. It seemed like the most appropriate text to talk about the Black male subject. And he was a patriarch, yes, but what a lot of people know now is that he was the only Black person invited to the Seneca Falls convention.

The Social Revolution of Our Time Cannot Take Its Poetry from the Past but Only from the Poetry of the Future, 8, 2019, 2 panels.
Courtesy Jack Shainman

In one work, you have a poem by the South African writer Mavis Smallberg, about the murder by the apartheid regime of a young boy named Willie Nyathele. And the painting is of what appears to be a Black middle-class couple on the porch of a township home. It's left to the viewer to infer any connections.

Yes.

Good answer.

The image and the text is not a one-to-one relation. I think it's a powerful poem, and an image too. It's a way of injecting human emotions and affect into things that don't necessarily get that kind of investment. Even in America, where there's story after story of Black boys killed for no apparent reason, it seems like there's no reckoning of the fact that this is someone's child, who has a name and parents and people who care for them.

Then you have a work that consists of a poem by June Jordan, with your annotations. It's a poem of solidarity with the struggle, but you're correcting some of the information in the poem. It feels like you're welcoming solidarity, but also making clarifications.

I guess it frames the relationship of sisterhood, and how it cannot really cut across a lot of issues and ideas. The march of Black women that the poem celebrates had to happen on a certain day, for instance, when the women, who were mostly domestic workers, had the day off… The annotations are kind of putting into perspective that there shouldn't be just one idea of historical facts.

Pan-African Pulp, 2019, Inkjet on canvas with permanent maker. Courtesy Jack Shainman

Jack Shainman's on 24th Street branch is showing "Pan-African Pulp," which is your take-off on a genre of graphic novel that seems like it was iconic.

Yes. They were photo novels—in the South African context they were called "look books." These ones were published by Drum Publications. This was in the 1960s and 1970s, and they were very popular. They were a precursor to African cinema, and they're very under-recognized. They follow a kind of James Bond storyline, and they were important, because they gave Black people not just access to the kinds of representations they could envision themselves, outside the political climate, but it also gave them reading material, because there wasn't a lot of popular culture produced for the Black subject. In the research I did, a lot of people would say, "I would travel the whole day just to go to town and get this one thing that was published that month."

It was a kind of nourishment.

Absolutely, intellectual nourishment—again, at that point, Black people were just thought of as being bred for manual labor. So this kind of cultural content allowed people to imagine things differently. It also allowed me to talk about Pan-Africanism. The way they were produced, they were shot in Swaziland or Lesotho, and published in Britain, Kenya, and Nigeria. There was a whole host of people putting it together.

Did the typical story have any politics in it?

It couldn't. The producers wanted it to be distributed without any censorship, and enter the field of popular culture. So it's about, oh, Dr. Evil is going to do this thing, and Lance Spearman is going to save the day, and it was totally apolitical.

But you've turned them into a highly political story, in which Lance Spearman, is fighting against the people who are taking advantage of the revolution—the Black capitalists and others who are trying to co-opt the struggle. Did you work with the original images, and just write new text bubbles?

Yes. I just changed the dialogue.

So you had to come up with a storyline to suit the photographs.

It was a lot of work! But I also worked with a close friend who is a great writer.

Pan-African Pulp is huge—a single work, made up of 31 large panels that fill two large rooms. What would be a good long-term home for it?

A public institution would be ideal, I think. That's why I try to work at the scale that I work—I really try to think about the work living in a public institution that can engage a wider public in a kind of critical framework. If someone is a collector and thinks they can acquire it and take care of it, I'd be happy too, but ideally it's a public institution.

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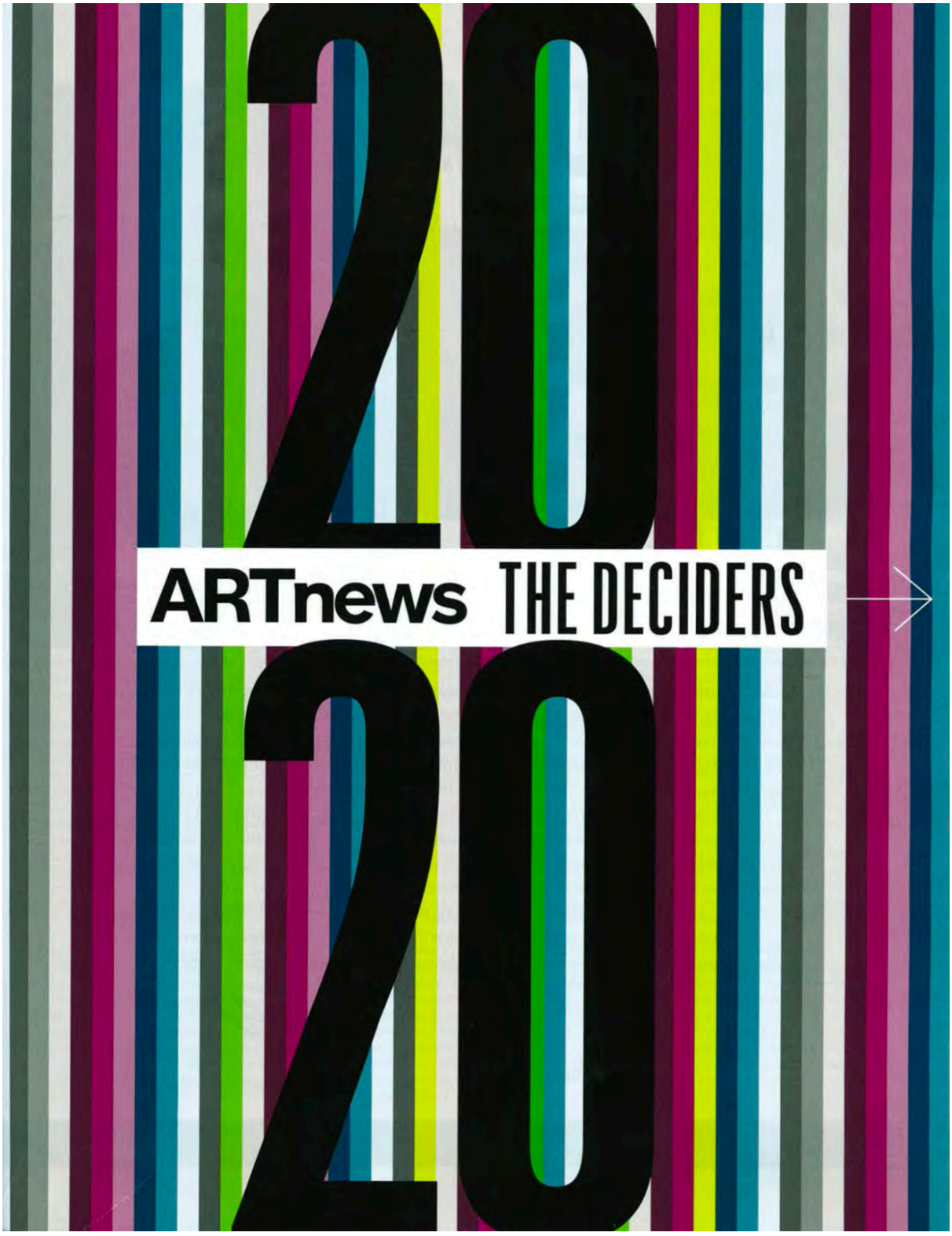


Mokgosi's *The Social Revolution of Our Time Cannot Take Its Poetry from the Past but Only from the Poetry of the Future, 4*, 2019. Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery

MELEKO MOKGOSI

With a bevy of solo shows taking place across the United States this season—at the University of Michigan Museum of Art in Ann Arbor, the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago, the Pérez Art Museum in Miami, and other institutions—painter Meleko Mokgosi is quickly becoming a force to be reckoned with. This past season Mokgosi's works dealing with colonialism, democracy, and life in southern Africa (Mokgosi was born in Botswana and moved to the U.S. in 2003) spanned Jack Shainman Gallery's two New York spaces, as well as its sprawling outpost Upstate. A winner of the Hammer Museum's $100,000 Mohn Award and the Vilcek Foundation's Prize for Creative Promise, Mokgosi has been recognized in numerous high-profile forums. He has recently ensured that his influence will be felt in another way: In July, he joined the Yale School of Art as an associate professor in painting and printmaking, and he became a cofounder of the free Interdisciplinary Art and Theory Program in New York.

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.

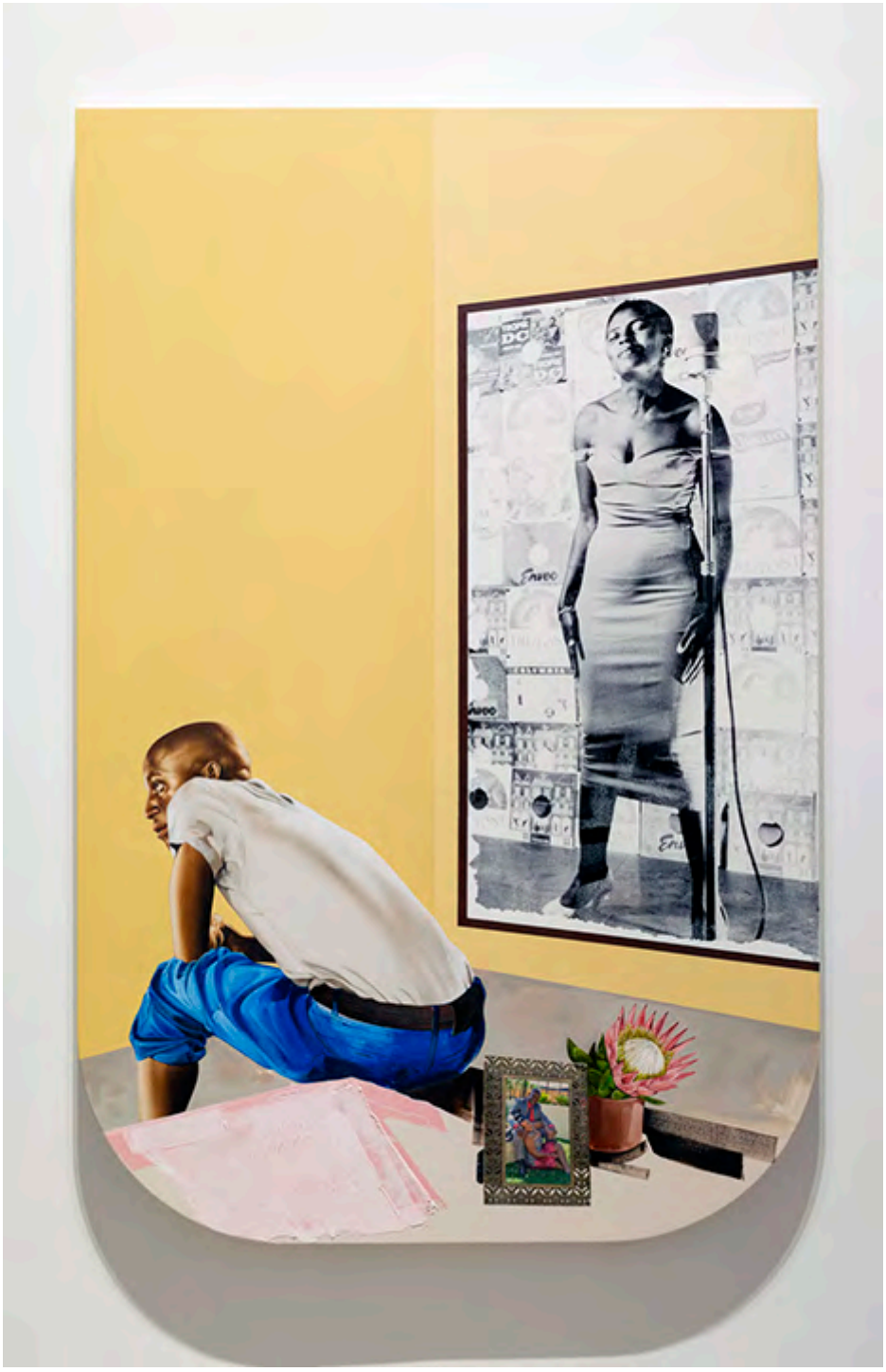
C&: Why do you think "identity" (in the broad sense of the word) is a recurring topic with artists from Africa and the Diaspora across generations?

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. 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

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.*

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"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

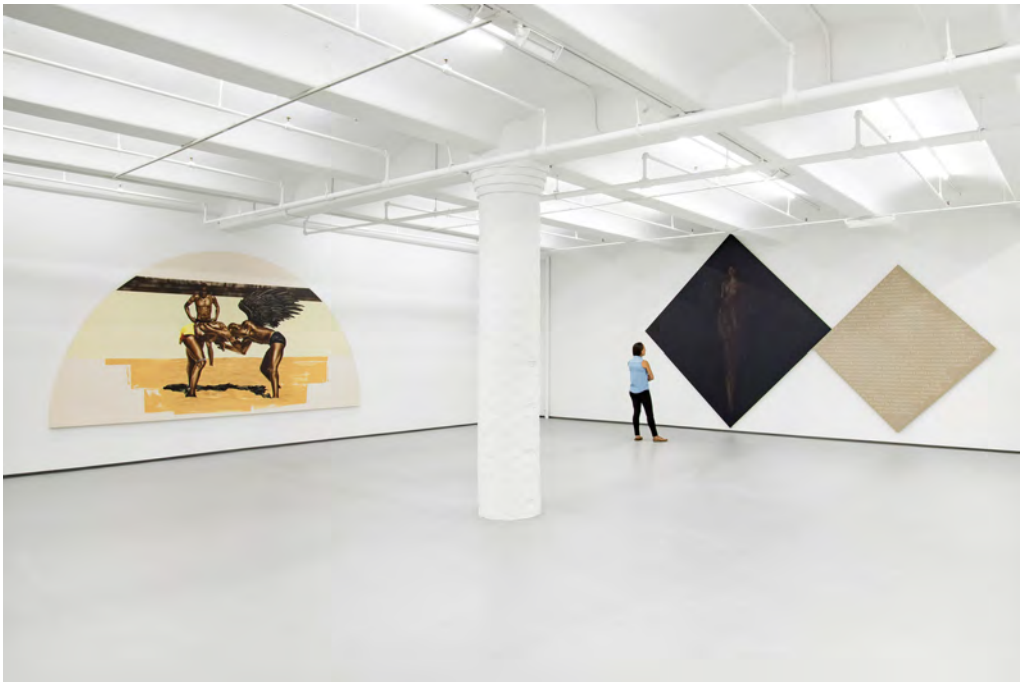
restoring this violence to the image, Mokgosi cannot create a determinate meaning, but he can shift the terrain of meaning that appears in the original image. He can call up the original's colonial unconscious. Thus, his paintings are not just about the impossibility of communication as such, but about 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]

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

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

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.

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?

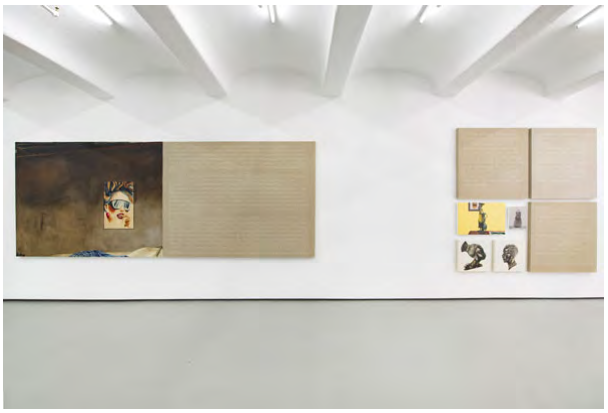
Mokgosi: This body of work was produced over a two-year period and developed around ideas of allegory and *lerato* (love). The impetus here was to experiment with visual and narrative strategies that did not depend on sequential expectations. In my readings, I found what I had felt for a while but was 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

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

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.

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.

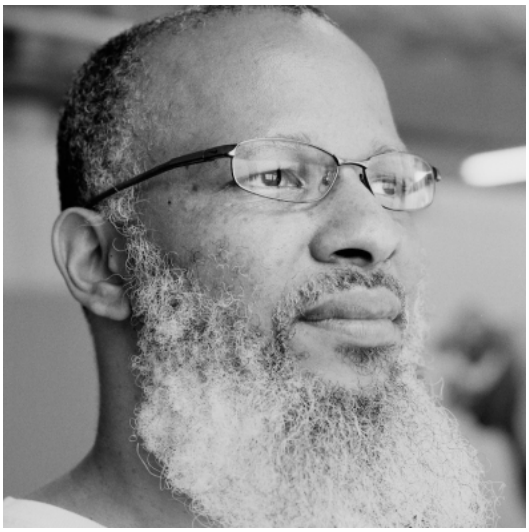
Interview

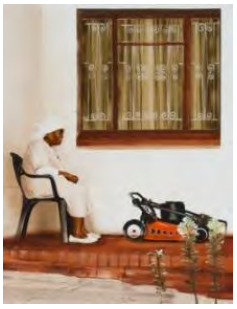
ART

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.

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 | 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.

HYPERALLERGIC

GALLERIES

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

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

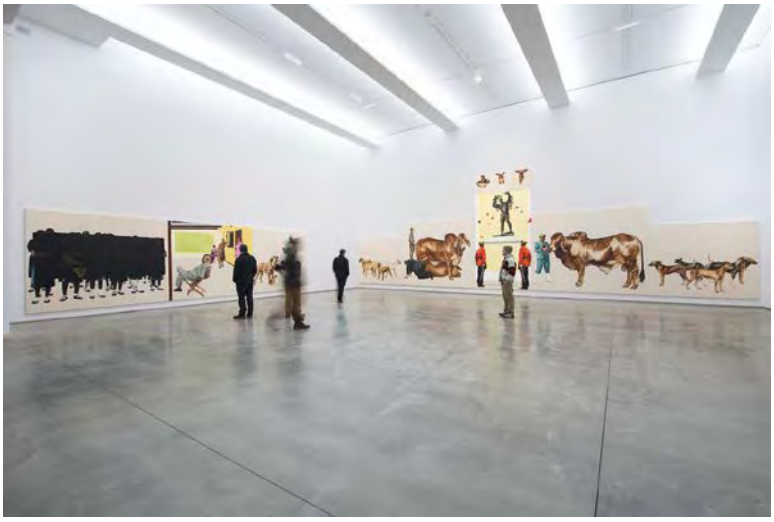
Detail of "Terra Pericolosa" (2013) by Meleko Mokgosi (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

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.

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."

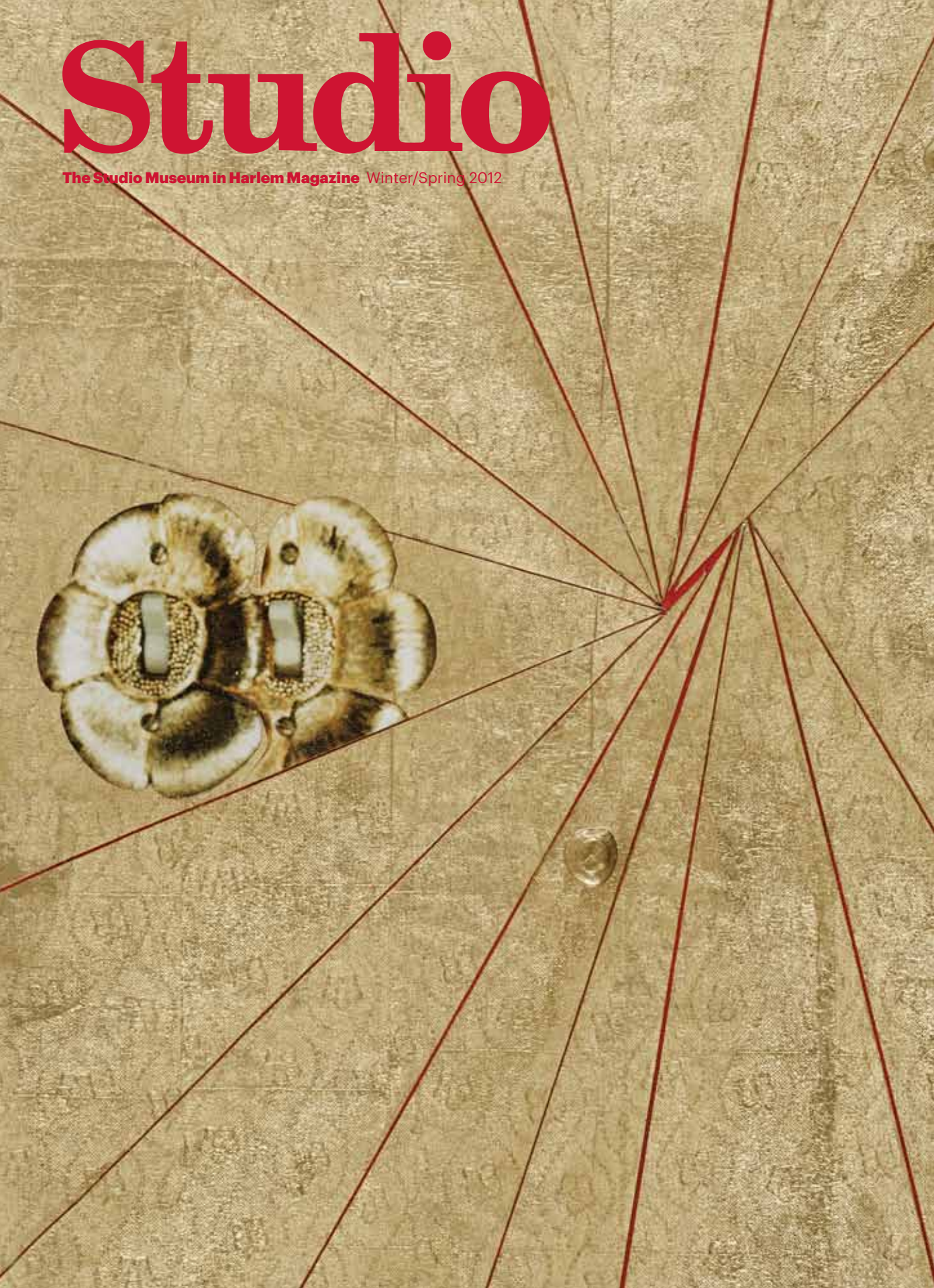
Sikhueselo Sembumbulo, the gargantuan work at the Hammer, is the seventh chapter in the Kaffraria series. Its title, a Xhosa word meaning "bulletproof," is a reference to the so-called "Xhosa cattle killings" of 1856-57, when the Xhosa people in Cape Colony (formerly part of Botswana, Cape Colony is 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.