Dr Aneta Pawłowska
University of Łódź

Some Remarks Regarding Contemporary South African Art in the Context of Political Changes and Stability of Artistic Principles

Resumé

L'article présente un aperçu général des changements qui sont intervenus dans le domaine des beaux-arts dans la République de l'Afrique du Sud, après l'abolition de l'apartheid en 1994. Plus de détails a été présenté dans l'affabulation concernant l'utilisation par les créateurs modernes des chefs-d'œuvre de l'art européen ancien (par exemple Rubens et Michel-Ange). Les oeuvres naissants à ce cours montrent des rapports clairs à une nouvelle et compliqué réalité de l'Afrique du Sud au cours des dernières décennies. Cette problème entreprend les artistes du XXIe siècle tels que Johannes Phokela, Wim Botha, Andrew Putter.

Keywords: South Africa, contemporary art, apartheid, aesthetic, historical contexts

Motto:
It is for the poet and the artist to tell us about the real Africa
Herman Charles Bosman[1]

The history of South Africa is unusually colourful as a result of various strong influences provided by different and conflicting cultures. These opposing cultures come into direct contact and collision with each other, fighting for supremacy and domination. This problem of collision concerns mainly the traditional African

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[1] Herman Charles Bosman (1905-1951) – South African short story writer.

cultures – the Bantu culture of the black majority of population and the Khoisan minority versus the white foreign culture of the Boer population and the culture of the economically dominant English community. Additionally, the political history of South Africa is also characterized by domestic violence (Curtin et al. 2003; Thompson 2001; Saunders 1994). Similarly complicated situation exists in South African art which has adopted varied forms in distinct historical contexts.

While many of the international trends broadly apply in the South African context, the visual arts system in South Africa largely evolved around the interests and aspirations of a minority of the population. As is the case in most other parts of the society and economy, the institutions, discourse, commercial activity and attendant networks of the visual arts zone have historically been dominated and shaped by the white population, with black artists and organizations being consigned to a largely marginal role in the development of the sector. During the apartheid period, black artists were accorded a secondary status in relation to mainstream practice, and – in the case of those artists that pursued an overtly politicized practice – actively suppressed and persecuted. The mainstream of creative practice was shaped by an aspiring white culture which sought to follow trends in Europe and North America, usually with a significant time lag (Berman 1983: 1-15). The visual arts nevertheless also served as an important domain for critical and dissident voices among both black and white artists, and while much of this work received some exposure internationally, the economic dimensions of the visual arts remained largely undeveloped domestically.

Until the mid –1980s the South African art world was largely divided along political lines (Williamson 2004, Peffer 2009). Government-funded institutions and organizations avoided production and exhibitions of overtly politically critical artworks that would antagonize these institutions' relationship with the apartheid government. State funded museums focused on the works of white artists, often within the modernist idiom. Artists and organizations which aligned themselves with the democratic struggle defined the

artist as a cultural worker, and focused on art treated as "a cultural weapon" (Peffer 2009: 73-98). The African National Congress and the United Democratic Front successfully lobbied for an international boycott of South African art not supportive of the struggle, and for funding of struggle artists and organisations. One of the major hurdles and handicaps for ambitious young black artists was the inaccessibility of university training. As a result several arts centres, like the Polly Street Center, Community Art Workshop, Johannesburg Art Foundation, Katlehong Art Centre and the Community Arts Project opened new avenues for the training of upcoming African artists, or a location for revolutionary production. Several organisations and projects evolved around the empowerment of black artists, e.g. the Thupelo International Artists' Workshops and the Federated Union of Black Artists (Peffer 2009: 129-171). During the latter part of the 1980s, a number of exhibition projects and publications were developed which sought to produce a richer picture of creative production in the country. Many black artists, including several rurally based ones, such as Jackson Hlungwane and Noria Mabasa, were included in the 1985 Tributaries Exhibition at the Johannesburg Art Gallery, curated by Ricky Burnett, while the 1988/1989 exhibition and publication *The Neglected Tradition*, curated by Steven Sack, represented the first significant attempt to document the history of black artists production and reflected a dynamic arts world which sought to transcend boundaries of race and politics (Sack 1988). Albie Sach's influential paper *Preparing Ourselves for Freedom* (1989), sought to redraw the role of creative production in South African society in anticipation of political change (Sachs 1990). Although many cultural workers objected to Sach's seeming dissolution of the link between art and politics, the views in this paper sought to establish a new and independent ground for creative work in a post-apartheid context. In 1994 the international boycott was lifted and many artists in exile returned to South Africa, or cooperated in exhibitions that included their works[2].

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[2] During the apartheid era many South African visual artists such as Gerard Sekoto, Ernest Mancoba, Madi Phala, Durant Sihlali, Louis Maqhubela,

Since 1995 a significant event was instigated in South Africa: the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)[3], which was constituted to investigate human rights violations committed during the apartheid era (1948-1994). While some parts of South African society supported the process (including, most notably, Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu), sceptics from various quarters of the South African society dismissed the commission as simply a witch hunt against the former adversaries or merely a show of pomp that would accomplish none of its objectives.

In this period, many South African artists, such as Minnette Vári, William Kentridge, Sue Williamson, Judith Mason and Kendell Geers, have devised productive ways to deal with South Africa's traumatic past. The focus falls specifically on works that were

Gavin Jantjes, George Hallett, Peter Magubane, Manfred Zylla or Thamsanqa "Thami" Mnyele decided to emigrate. Similar situation concerns popular South African musicians such as the acclaimed Miriam Makeba, Hugh Masakela, Abdullah Ibrahim and Vusi Mahlasela, who became internationally recognized after they emigrated from South Africa. Also many writers who chronicled or satirized state-enforced racism and explored the possibilities of resistance, emigrated from South Africa. The most celebrated South Africa's writers on exile are: Dennis Brutus, Lewis Nkosi, Breyten Breytenbach, Athol Fugard, Es'kia Mphahlele and Albie Sachs.

In the 1960s, the international movement of solidarity with the struggle for freedom in South Africa (The Anti-Apartheid Movements) began to campaign for cultural boycotts of apartheid South Africa. Many British American and Franch artists were requested not to present or let their works be hosted in South Africa.

[3] The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up by the Government of National Unity to help deal with what happened under apartheid. The conflict during this period resulted in violence and human rights abuses from all sides. The TRC was set up in terms of the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, No. 34 of 1995, and was based in Cape Town. The hearings started in 1996 and ended in 2001. The TRC's emphasis on reconciliation is in sharp contrast to the approach taken by the Nuremberg Trials after World War II and other de-Nazification measures. The TRC took an approach based on concepts of restorative justice (in hopes of acheiving reconciliation), while the Nuremberg trials were based on the approach of retributive justice (based on the idea of the necessity of introducing punishment for committed crimes). This was the main difference (Doxtader et al. 2007).

produced in the mid to late 1990s, in the aftermath of apartheid, when white South Africa was forced in various ways to face up to the country it had partly created. Some artists of the younger generation (e.g. Minnette Vári, Kendell Geers, Lisa Brice, Jodi Bieber) having grown up during the final years of apartheid, and have created works that represent an act of witnessing as well as a performative response to the traumatic events that mark South Africa's history. Their creative output was performed in a climate where the horrors of apartheid were revealed and analysed on a daily basis by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Many of these white artists found various ways to respond to these traumatic times in a productive manner trying actively to articulate and negotiate white responsibility in a new dispensation. In 1997, the second year of the TRC hearings, Minnette Vári produced a small sculpture of a rubber tire, moulded in white porcelain. In South Africa rubber tires have become almost emblematic of the struggle against apartheid in their immediate reference to both protest and the practice of so-called necklacing murders, a notorious method employed in the black townships in the 1980s to kill blacks suspected of being police informers. A tire soaked in fuel was placed around the presumed traitor's body or neck and then put on fire. In the piece, entitled *Firestone*, Vári's employment of the name of a popular brand of rubber tires becomes piercingly ironic in the South African context[4]. But it is her decision

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[4] In the 1980s in South Africa there was a quite famous and common method of punishment for blacks suspected of being informers collaborating with the "white" police and it consisted of putting on fire a tire soaked in fuel and placed around the presumed traitor's neck. What is so ironic about this piece? First of all she deliberately chose the name Firestone as the title of her work, which directly implies how these tires were used in the apartheid era - they were placed around the necks of the victims and put on "fire". For this reason the name of a well-known tire brand which consists of two words: "Fire" and "Stone" seems perfect and obviously a much better choice than other names of well-known tire brands, such as: Pirelli, Michelin, Continental or especially "Goodyear" – which could bring to mind much better and happier days. Other ironic moments of this art piece concern the color and the material which was used for its production. Vári decided to use white porcelain to mold the tire, whereas usually tires are made of rubber and almost always in black color. Connotations and allusions implied by

to mould the tire in white porcelain that makes this work conceptually so compelling. In a South African context, the radical revisualizing of this everyday object by using the white colour becomes an icon resonating with racial allusions and implications. According to Liese Van Der Watt, a South African art historian: "Vári has quite literally 'made whiteness strange' and the image speaks succinctly of white complicity in what was regarded and publicized as black-on-black violence in the black townships (Van Der Watt 2005: 30)."

In the post-apartheid period, South African contemporary artists have increasingly participated in an international and continental arena for presentation and debate, fuelled by a global interest in the complex history and contemporary realities of the country. The contemporary art scene in the country has positioned itself increasingly as a leader rather than a follower in the international contemporary discourse on the visual arts, supported by the proliferation of a number of print and on-line art critical platforms that explore the philosophical and political complexities of contemporary art practice in a postcolonial and post-apartheid context. A significant number of major exhibitions and catalogues have been concerned with challenging and breaking down preconceptions about South African people and art, exploring the ambiguities, diversity and dynamics of this context, both in their form and content. In 1993, South Africa, after decades of cultural isolation, was invited to the Venice Biennale. This was followed by the first Johannesburg Biennale in 1995, which gave an overview of current trends of both South African and international art. As it was quoted in the letter of Biennale invitation, "(…) it will celebrate Africa's long overdue re-entry into the international visual art arena" (Danto 1995: 24). In addition, many South African art works have started to be acquired by collectors abroad (Williamson 2009: 16-20), such as works done by Jodi Bieber, David Goldblatt, William Kentridge, Thabiso Sekgala and Sue Williamson, all of them featured

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this white, porcelain tire are quite obvious to most South Africans, both black and white.

in the exhibition *Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Photography and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life* at the International Centre of Photography in New York[5].

Within South Africa, exhibitions and conferences have also offered opportunities for reassessing almost two decades of renewal and assertion within the African context. For example, the Sessions eKapa project of the Cape Africa Platform brought galleries, artists, academics and writers together around a range of issues in contemporary African art practice (Gurney 2006). However, the latter event also demonstrated the persistence of the legacy of apartheid, and included heated debate on the slowness of transformation in the art world and the wider society (Gurney 2006). The post-apartheid period has also seen a new generation of largely university-trained young black artists such as my favourite Mary Sibande (born 1982), who questions the traditional role of black women in South Africa and other countries with a history of black servitude[6].

Although many South African artists are certainly followed by aesthetic considerations, the understanding of art seems to be heavily influenced by social and political concerns. Or in other words the notion of art for art's sake has a lesser tradition in South Africa.

In my article I have decided to present some of the more important contemporary South African artists who are devoted to making links between modern and classical art and who employ various means to make use of recognizable Western visual art. Their borrowings present viewers with the opportunity to reconsider, question, and revisit both the original works and their South African

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[5] Curated by Okwui Enwezor with Rory Bester, September 14, 2012 – January 6, 2013.

[6] Mary Sibande is a South African artist based in Johannesburg. Her most interesting and ambitious series *Long Live the Dead Queen* was featured within Johannesburg on the side of buildings and other structures as large, photographic murals of black women depicted wearing extravagant Victorian dresses in vivid colors. http://www.africandigitalart.com/2010/11/mary-sibande/ (11.07.2013)

re-creations. These artists utilize the familiarity and visual power of the Western original images, while at the same time altering artistically these images in order to serve their own means, sometimes with regards to the political situation. Such intentions could be traced in the works of Wim Botha (born 1977), Andrew Putter (born 1965), Johannes Phokela (born 1966), Minette Vári (born 1968) and many others.

In the postmodern and post-apartheid era some South African artists have utilized the Western canon of art history as a central theme in their work. These artists have borrowed a great deal of imagery from recognizable Western works, appropriating certain elements in order to serve their own critical purposes. Some of them re-fashion essential parts, others parody canonical works. Other artists create simulacra, others combine elements to create montage, while still others borrow recognizable styles while infusing works with contemporary resonances. By changing certain aspects of the original works, the reimagined works' diverse meanings become quite clear.

My exploration of contemporary African artists who use some elements of the Western canon seeks to document the stability of artistic principles guiding them and simultaneously to discern the diverse motivations for cultural exchanges between the West and Africa via the visual arts. Through close analysis, I would like to show how this selection of works of today's South African artists critique contemporary and historical understandings of the global relations, the art world, and show particular histories that reverberate and echo still today.

Personally for me one of the most intriguing of the 21st century South African artists is Wim Botha, a Johannesburg-based artist – I will analyse a selection of his works, which skilfully re-fashion well-known Renaissance religious sculptures. In a seminal and influential postliberation South African work, entitled *Commune: Suspension of Disbelief* (2001), Botha carved a cross-less, crucified Christ from stacks of Bibles bolted together with a threaded bar. The Bibles are printed in the eleven South African official languages (Brodie 2004). Despite the work's obvious iconoclasm, it in fact had

deeper layers of meaning. Catholicism distinguishes itself from other strains of Christianity chiefly through its insistence on transubstantiation, the central belief that the wafer and wine in the Eucharist ceremony actually become the Body and Blood of Christ. In religion, as for creative endeavours, the notion of transubstantiation holds far more compelling possibilities than mere symbolism ever could.

Considering the notion of transubstantiation, Botha's *Commune* becomes an aesthetic paraphrase to the Biblical sentence 'the Word made flesh'. Language is present yet muted in this work; the medium through which the Christian message is communicated, the printed Bible page, becomes the base unit for the sculpture. One form of existence gives way for another, as a very real transmutation takes place. Botha takes this idea a step further by setting up closed-circuit television cameras directed on the sculpture, progressively defocusing and cropping the images. In their now visually abstract state and thus drained of content, these images are shown on monitors elsewhere in the available space at the art venue. The subversion of the Christian imperative of 'the Word made flesh' is evident.

In a similar way, Botha's work *Mieliepap Pietà*[7] from 2004 switches the very essence of Michelangelo's original, hallowed marble, for a typical African maize meal mixed with epoxy resin. Maize is a staple food for much of South Africa's lower working class, and in Botha's work, the *Pietà* embodies the agony of deprivation and poverty in the wake of decades of social and political inequality. By choosing a material such as mieliepap, Botha also draws parallels to complex South African history. By changing the sculpture's medium, the artist accomplishes several things. First, Botha has replaced a durable, expensive, historical artistic medium with a cheap, local food source. In doing this, Botha has called for a reinterpretation of the artwork's meaning. Botha states: 'I was drawn

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[7] Wim Botha uses the symbol of the Madonna also in the works entitled *Carbon Copy* (*Madonna del parto col bambino*) from 2001 and *Apocalumbilicus* from 2006.

to the material for its rich implications, and was pleasantly surprised at its effectiveness in simulating marble, for one, and the conceptual implications of using a staple food to simulate an expensive, elite material, of using something of essential value to simulate a medium that is largely useless apart from its decorative functions' (Moon 2008: 53). Maize meal is very cheap to purchase but incredibly valuable, as it meets the basic dietary needs of millions of people every day. Marble, on the other hand, is expensive but quite frivolous in that its only use is superfluous decoration. And because marble occurs only in natural quarries, it is often only available at a great cost. Historically, this valuable stone has been reserved for elite patrons or projects, due to its expense. As far as meeting the everyday needs of the masses, marble is quite trivial. Maize meal, on the other hand, is inherently precious as a useful commodity, as it can physically nurture.

Although Botha conceived the work *Mieliepap Pietà* already in 1999, the sculpture was not realized until 2003. It was first displayed in the exhibition *Personal Affects: Power and Poetics in Contemporary South African Art* (Enwezor, Farrell, Perryer 2004)[8]. This exhibition was organized by the Museum for African Art and covered two venues: the Museum's gallery space and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York. Botha chose to exhibit *Mieliepap Pietà* at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in order to demonstrate their similarities. First, the status of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine as the world's largest Gothic cathedral rivals St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, where Michelangelo's *Pietà* resides. Both *Pietàs* were housed in alcoves to the right of the entrance. Botha's

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[8] The exhibition's curators brought together the following artists: Jane Alexander, Wim Botha, Steven Cohen, Churchill Madikida, Mustafa Maluka, Thando Mama, Samson Mudzunga, Jay Father, Johannes Phokela, Robin Rhode, Claudette Schreuders, Berni Searle, Doreen Southwood, Clive van den Berg, Minette Vari, Diane Victor, and Sandile Zulu. Utilizing a variety of media, including drawing, video, sculpture, dance, and installation, these seventeen artists investigate subtle intricacies of identity and agency in a post-apartheid world.

simulacrum parallels the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in that they are both 'colossal fraud[s]' (Enwezor, Farrell, Perryer, 2004: 12). Botha simulates a canonical Renaissance work of art and the Cathedral appropriates a style of architecture, Gothic, that derived several hundred years before the Cathedral's construction. Both the cathedral and Botha's *Pietà* are imperfect and unfinished and even possess scaffolding. In Botha's comparison, 'In some ways my *Pietà* perfectly aligns with the cathedral, both being imitations that have a more universal function, where St. Johns is multi-denominational in approach (…)'[9] (Botha 2010). The relation between Botha's *Mieliepap Pietà* and its original exhibition location, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, can effectively be read in order to expose their mutual similarities.

In Michelangelo's *Pietà*, Mary is holding the lifeless body of her son, Jesus, after crucifixion. This imagery echoes the iconic South African photograph of Hector Pieterson being carried away during the Soweto uprising. When considered in light of one another, *Mieliepap Pietà* begins to shed its specific religious context and becomes instead a universal icon for tragic human experiences. Mary's son's death represents a far greater cause, as did Hector Pieterson's. These tragic and unjust deaths were both motivators in spurring change. It is thought that Jesus died on the cross for our sins and as a result, we have eternal life. After Hector Pieterson's death in 1976, the apartheid system was finally dismantled in 1994. The image of his death is forever a symbol of what the brutal violence of the apartheid system can cause.

Significantly, Botha's *Pietà* is not a direct copy of the original but a precise mirror image, a reversed reflection. Presented as it was at St. John's Cathedral in New York for the 2004 *Contemporary South African Art* exhibition, it became a strange order of doppelganger or a paranormal double. The work represents a quietly

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[9]https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?original_referer=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.emptyingdom.com%2Ffeatured%2Fwimbotha%2F&text=Wim%20Botha%20%7C%20EMPTY%20KINGDOM&tw_p=tweetbutton&url=http%3A (23. 01. 2010)

anarchic achievement, a subtly yet crucially altered version of one of Catholicism's most revered works.

In his recent works Botha also reinterprets other Renaissance works to fit a local context. Botticelli's *Portrait of Dante* (1495) re-emerges as the *Generic Self-Portrait as an Exile* (2008), reflecting upon Dante's thwarted desire to return gloriously from political exile. Again, books – this time, learners' dictionaries in four local languages (a nod to the *Self-Portrait* in the title) – have been bolted together to make a carving block from which Dante's beaky face and a laurel wreath emerge in sharply cut planes. The incised pages preclude any attempt at linguistic cross-pollination. South African art historian Liese Van Der Watt commented on the artist's work in general: 'It is this constant scrambling of givens, this interrogation of conventions that finally marks Botha's practice as extraordinary' (Williamson 2009:196).

Another artist who, like Botha, employed the Virgin Mary/Madonna to engage with such diverse issues as personal identity, sexuality, patriarchal idealism is Conrad Botes (born 1969). Botes explains that he uses religious imagery and the Western canon of art because it is so easy to appropriate and manipulate. His interest is mostly in creating political allegories, and he notes that from his earliest memories politics and religion were intertwined due to his Calvinistic Afrikaans upbringing. This framework of patriarchal conservatism and religious morality gave him an appreciation for the ability of certain images to cause disruption and shock. As Botes says: 'I definitely want to confront people, and combining certain things with religious imagery does that. That is why religious imagery is so powerful [although] I am not making a direct comment on religion' (Von Veh 2011: 132).

In 2007, Botes also parodies Michelangelo's *Pietà*, by replacing the Madonna with a gorilla in his *Pietà*. The *Pietà* group is centrally set against painted curved blue lines that create a framework for irregularly placed and sized painted glass roundels, like vignettes or stained glass windows, that can be related in some way to the sorrowing 'mother' and her son. The gorilla/Madonna is both humorous and darkly satirical as it could evoke the early

colonial categorisation of the African as the missing link between primates and human beings.

One of the most celebrated black South African artists, Johannes Phokela was born in Soweto in 1966 and studied art at the Federated Union of Black Artists (FUBA) in Johannesburg during the turbulent 1980's. Phokela completed his studies at the Royal College of Art in London and lived there for many years, returning to Johannesburg in 2007. Much like a satirist looking for material, Phokela consumes political and cultural imagery and iconography from a variety of sources and, though he replicates these signs and symbols, he places them within reconfigured contexts that destabilize their meaning. It is always a subtle subversion, one that can only be gleaned from a close study of his paintings and the art canon – said to be his favourite source. Until now, local art critics have associated his aesthetic with the traditional Dutch genre of painting. He appropriates scenes from the Baroque masterpieces of Pieter Breugel, Peter Paul Rubens, Jacob Jordeans, Jacob de Gheyn[10]. He pares down their palettes to that of an under painting or inserts black figures or African masks into scenes. By doing so, he is more than thumbing his nose at the colonial master: Phokela often adds the very geometrical grid that underlies Cartesian logic and modernist notions of autonomy, precisely so as to undermine its imposition of order onto experience. In 2002 the influential art magazine – *Absolute Arts*, wrote on his art: "Phokela links these re-interpretations of Dutch Golden Age painting…with the colonisation of the African continent. Whilst Phokela's work weaves a personal history into the canon of Dutch and Flemish old master painting (masterpieces), his practice stands as an examination of the violent actions of the Dutch in South Africa, as much as an inquiry into the history of painting' (Absolute Arts 2008).

In a conversation with Bruce Haines the artist stated:

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[10] One could easily find a similar approach in the works of Andrew Putter entitled *Hottentots Holland: Flora Capensis* 2008/9 and *African Hospitality* 2009/10.

I grew up thinking that the so-called Old Masters only existed as religious or iconic knick-knack prints, particularly those by the likes of Leonardo da Vinci or William Blake. They were or still are very popular and are often used domestically in Soweto. I have always been curious about what these prints were actually made for, apart from making money. Besides their religious or popular value, what possible effect can they have on those who own them? As for Dutch genre painting, they portrayed a certain European lifestyle coinciding with a period in history that saw the arrival of Europeans in South Africa. This was the only visual reference available, utopian in many ways, the harsh realities of war and famine left out. The subsequent cultural collusion is significant and becomes an essential source for my ideas. (Haines 2003)

The most recognized of Phokela's painting, *Apotheosis* of 2004, is based on the style of Peter Paul Rubens, is characterized by voluptuous bodies, heightened emotion, dynamic compositions and dramatic colour schemes. However, Phokela's alterations charge this seemingly generic Rubenesque painting with contemporary allusions such as portraying a Rubanesque female nude with a G-string tan-line. In *Apotheosis* instead of Christ presiding over the frenzied scene, Phokela has depicted a male figure suspended in a glass box. Although rays of light radiate from the box, it does not overtly appear to be a figure of Christ. Instead, Phokela has identified the glass box as a contemporary allusion to the controversial American magician, David Blaine. In some ways, the ambiguous figure can be read in multiple ways, in light of many different situations. It can speak to society's tendency to idolize people, holding a person up in great esteem, even for trivial reasons. It might speak to the perceived lack of any authentic saviour. In Phokela's words (Murinik 2004: 120), 'When you look at my work, there's no straightforward answer.'

The composition of Phokela's *Apotheosis* resembles Rubens's *The Last Judgment*[11] rather than Rubens's *Apotheosis* (*Apotheosis of Henry IV, The Apotheosis of James I, The Apotheosis of the Duke of*

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[11] Another painting by Phokela that directly utilizes the theme of the *Last Judgment* is *Fall of the Damned* (1993).

Buckingham) or Rubens's *Assumption of the Virgin*. Phokela depicts a myriad of souls as if in a *Last Judgment* scene. Some are falling to their fate of an eternity in hell, while others are rescued by winged angels. The mass of painterly human forms falls away from the Christ-like figure, suspended at the top centre of the composition, enclosed in a glass box. Rays of light radiate from this male figure, who raises his arms and surveys the scene before him.

Phokela has inserted an Italian inscription along the bottom of the canvas, which reads: 'Tyrannidi Benevolae de Grata Clientela Triumphus'. This phrase can roughly be translated as: 'Due to grateful patronage, there is a triumph for the benevolent tyrant'. However, if the phrase is loosely translated into modern English, then the phrase seems to describe an ironic occurrence, where the oxymoronic 'benevolent tyrant' succeeds because of his indebted supporters. This peculiar phrase could describe the difficult political situations involving tyrant-like leaders, which occur in some parts of Africa.

Aside from the artist's style, unlike many modern artists, Phokela employs a traditional Western artistic medium: oil on canvas. Moreover Phokela's *Apotheosis* is arched at the top, a shape that resembles some altarpieces. For example, Rubens's *Assumption of the Virgin* altarpiece from Antwerp's Cathedral of Our Lady also has an arched top. The painting itself is also quite large, measuring 270 x 241 cm. Both the size and shape of Phokela's work echo conventions of 17th century Flemish and Dutch altarpieces. But unlike finished monumental Baroque paintings, Phokela's *Apotheosis* resembles preparatory sketches or the style of Delft tiles.

Phokela's works are represented not only in the South African National Gallery and the Smithsonian National Museum for African Art (USA), but also at the South African High Commission in London, among other collections.

Through their works contemporary South African artists such as Minnette Vari or Yuill Damaso often shock the public. Some artists re-motivate these images to refute Eurocentric fictions, while others complicate conventional notions and ideologies. The young design team from Johannesburg – *Strangelove* (Carlo Gibson and

Ziemek Pater) employs a particularly widespread image of a well-known Western work, such as Michelangelo's *David*, to challenge viewers to rethink the original work in light of this contemporary re-imagining. Some artists borrow elements, styles, narratives, or images from canonical works of Western art. This 'borrowing' can be understood in terms of pastiche.

The most scandalizing artist, Yuill Damaso (born 1968) in his painting dating from 2010 decided to shock the viewer by showing a figure of a half-naked dead Nelson Mandela (the beloved leader and former president of South Africa), lying on an autopsy table. Mandela's body on a the table is surrounded by famous contemporaries, such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu, President Jacob Zuma, former presidents F.W. de Klerk, Thabo Mbeki and politicians Trevor Manuel and Helen Zille, all wearing 17th century costumes. South Africa's youngest AIDS activist, 12-year-old Nkosi Johnson who died in 2001, uses a scalpel to tear into the icon's lifeless body. This controversial picture is a direct quotation and reference to the Rembrandt masterpiece – *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp*. Damaso's choice of the subject matter is considered a taboo in South Africa, where depicting the death of a living person is considered disrespectful at best, and possibly even as an act of witchcraft. The ruling party, the African National Congress, said in a statement: 'In African society it is an act of *ubuthakathi* (witchcraft)[12] to kill a living person...This so-called work of art...is also racist. It goes further by violating (Mandela's) dignity by stripping him naked in the glare of curious onlookers' (Daily News 2010). However Damaso stated in a BBC interview that he is trying to make people confront death. 'Nelson Mandela is a great man, but he's just a man. The eventual passing of Mr Mandela is something that we will have to face, as individuals, as a nation'(Daily News 2010).

Some of the modern South African artists re-fashion essential parts, others parody canonical works; yet others create simulacra, while some combine elements to create montage. Still other artists borrow well-known styles infusing their works with contemporary

[12] See Berglund 1976.

resonances. In the wake of the Johannesburg Biennales, a new generation of contemporary South African artists has emerged, and many of these artists have shifted both their aesthetic criteria and artistic strategies from those prevalent during the early years of the post-apartheid system, when it seemed that the Mandela-inspired rainbow nation would become a bottomless mine from which to extract the ore that would ornament the various organs of the multiracial and multicultural worlds of contemporary South African culture. Today that model is in tatters, and the evident simplification that attended the reception of post-apartheid art has shifted to the scepticism of a new century. Younger artists, like Moshekwa Langa (born 1975), Robin Rhode (born 1975), and Mikhael Subotzky (born 1982) – all three of whom have achieved in a relatively short time remarkable international visibility – are extracting a different sort of material from the debased mine that served to inoculate the mind with the empty pieties of the rainbow nation. Diane Victor (born 1964) comments on this situation in a series of 16 small drawings called *Disasters of Peace*. She presents every horrendous perversion of South Africa: taxi violence, poverty, drought, street kids, woman abuse, AIDS, government, court and prison corruption, family murders, hijacking, incestuous child abuse and baby rape (Matthews 2003). There is no rainbow here because today South Africa is riven by an internal struggle against both an emerging totalitarian democracy and a debilitating amnesia that seeks to return the country back to the comforts of segregated lives.

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