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Meleko Mokgosi



A sequence of events

The painting installation *Full Belly* (2011) from Meleko Mokgosi's *Pax Afrikaner* project comprises four panels of oil and charcoal on canvas. From left to right, form is given increasing levels of detail and colour transfigures from tinted washes to solid fields of pigment. Pairs or groupings of people are engaged with the unfolding activities of waiting or marching, of guarded visitation and intense discussion. The third and fourth panels are both composed around the act of conversation.

In the third Mokgosi has constructed a meeting between two seated figures, surrounded by three times as many uniformed guards who stand in shadowy silhouettes, encircling the interlocutors with their formal postures. Under such conditions one might imagine the conversation between the two protagonists as a measured exchange, with words chosen precisely for their ability to convey meaning to multiple listeners simultaneously, without betraying the speaker. It appears as if some grave consequence might result from a word placed out of turn. Their hands are raised and apparently cuffed, rested palms up on a void.

In the final panel attention is drawn to two men in business suits. They sit on chairs drawn around a rectangular dark-wood table, with a bunch of yellow flowers centred on a white cloth. Both men rest elbows on thighs, their backs leaning forward to allow their faces to align at close proximity as they speak directly to one another. Their attention is immersed in the conversation, their interaction energised by gestures. The speakers use their bodies to shield and direct their speech. Here again conversation takes place under stressed circumstance and this time the silent bystander is overtly excluded from the exchange.

Mokgosi methodically researches, conceptualises, aesthetically organises and historically grounds all of his project-based installations, and in both his figurative and text-based works he continually explores processes of meaning-making through language. Mokgosi has concerned himself with understanding the confines and possibilities of narrative, and expressed that he has 'always approached making a painting as if writing a sentence'.

Sentences, in the written form, are elemental to his practice, and when invited to exchange ideas through conversation he chose instead to forego spoken words and privilege the written. In *Full Belly Mokgosi* depicts conversation as an event in time, demarcated by the physical proximity of two people face to face, both intent on sharing information. In each scenario the element of risk in verbal exchange is palpable.

For Mokgosi time is central to narrative, its construction and deconstruction, and time unfolds at differing speeds within acts of writing and speech.

Whether or not we are dealing with linguistic or semiotic language, we always try to convert data into narrative format because our experience of the world is dependent on temporality.

The slippery transience of speech allows for immediate reception and loops of feedback between participants; it is both consequence of the moment and contained by it. Writing, however, offers a more stable structure, allowing contemplation through a slowing down of the exchange and the formulation of composite propositions. This methodical pace is integral to Mokgosi's art-making and was applied here in our sharing of ideas which materialised in written form, developed over a number of days.

Hansi Momodu-Gordon:

You describe your work in relation to its engagement with nationalism, democracy, post-colonialism, globalisation, whiteness, Africanness. These are all very large and complex topics of significance on a macro and micro scale. How do you reconcile the magnitude of such topics with the aesthetic concerns of the works themselves? What do you perceive to be the role of the artist in

engaging with these topics and why it is important to you to take on such discourses through your work?

Meleko Mokgosi:

Indeed these are large and complex topics with plenty of unwanted baggage. The projects really come from a personal and intuitive working through of multiple interests, and trying to articulate a set of questions around the things I am invested in. So, for example, *Pax Afrikaner* developed from the horrific 2007-8 xenophobic attacks in South Africa. The project was not aimed at providing any answers or personal perspective but rather at trying to find tools that could help me understand and articulate the manner in which xenophobia exists in relation to regional specificity and national identification. Extensive research on these ideas was coupled with the discourse of history painting and the specificity of objects, images and other forms of representation in southern Africa. So the work comes from a personal, conceptual and socio-political investment, and it is only after I have established the framework that the project is placed within already existing discourses as a way to make it somewhat legible. Put otherwise, I began the project with specificity; thereafter the work places itself in various fields that circumscribe the ways in which the questions are formulated. Or to rephrase again, the work is focused on these large and complex topics mostly because of how I have come to understand the idea of the project and how the project is situated around discursive

sites. 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 African nationalist movements in both their emergent and subsequent forms. Because the African nationalist movement functions as the discursive site, my work will always be informed by post-colonial studies and Marxism; and the rules are generated by history painting, cinema studies and psychoanalysis.

To return to *Pax Afrikaner*, the question of nationalism was framed by psychoanalysis and post-colonial theory. Here I used the tools that I already had available, even though some might say these tools are quite Eurocentric and may not actually work well when they travel to other regions. In any event, psychoanalysis was a key part in trying to figure out how individuals invest intense emotional energy into objects, otherwise known as cathexis. In other words, what could explain this thing called national identification – which in many ways looks and smells like fascism? I have talked about this elsewhere so I do not mean to rehash that old argument. But very briefly, I was drawn to the idea that national identification relied on how groups of people organised and invested meaning in particular forms of enjoyment and simultaneously projected their inevitable experience of the failure to experience complete enjoyment onto an outsider; so here a narrative is constructed such that the outsider becomes the cause of the failure to experience full enjoyment. And the really interesting part is that this

production of the narrative is a mere symptom of much bigger things that are tied to the structure of the psyche and the experience of enjoyment and dissatisfaction. But to get back to the question, the way I reconcile the relationship between the complexity of these too-grand ideas and aesthetic concerns is through specificity, used with the hopes of doing two things at once: to render these specificities within the rubric of history painting and therefore give them a particular form of representation, and also to use specificity in such a way that it allows a kind of abstraction that gives the viewer a bit of space for projection.

Why do all this? Or what is the role of the artist? I cannot really say I have an answer out of fear of saying something that is too easily universalisable. I came to art with the central concern of teaching. Becoming an artist, as anyone would say, is totally accidental. Even in college I did not think of myself as an artist, I just made political paintings. So instead of saying something like ‘the role of the artist is to try to give representation to that which cannot be captured through language’, I prefer to 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. To account for my view of culture then, I would point to one defined by Gayatri Spivak at a recent lecture, where culture is, and I quote, a set of widely unacknowledged assumptions held by a loosely defined group of people mapping negotiations between the sacred and the

profane, and relation between the sexes, with sexual difference unevenly abstracted into gender, and gendering as the chief semiotic instrument of negotiation. I think this is a very useful definition of what we now understand as culture, and one that I can commit to. No matter whether one likes it or not, every artist always already has a definition of culture within which they imagine their artwork to participate in, and defining this thing has become an important aspect to my production.

You have said previously that you are asking the question ‘what is narrative?’ How have your reflections on this changed across your projects and towards your new painting installation, *Democratic Intuition*?

Narrative has definitely been an important factor both in the construction of the composition and installation. As an idea, narrative functions in a way that allows the subject to get some kind of closure because most narratives are constructed so that there is suspense and predictability. Specific information may be different from narrative to narrative, but it is pleasurable to know that at some point there will be a climax, the resolution of a conflict and the ending of the narrative. These points mark the narrative as something that shows details about the psychic and emotional structure of the human psyche. To the most part narrative structures are diachronic; that is, narrative literary structures can only be diachronic (linear) because of the conventional

structure of the sentence. A sentence is structured around a subject and a verb, a specific movement of time or progression of information that can only be diachronic. Where the syntax tries to counter this diachronic system, it will nonetheless be read within the register of the diachronic because this is the only way for the information to register cognitively. Whether or not we are dealing with linguistic or semiotic language, we always try to convert data into narrative format because our experience of the world is dependent on temporality. So my experimentation with narrative is focused not so much on the idea of the narrative, but on the active part within the movement of the narrative, namely narration. To this end I developed the idea of a localised narrative, which tries to contradict and negate established and taken-for-granted grand narratives that have the privilege of not competing. I have defined the localised narrative elsewhere as a way to deviate from the connotations of the local, thus ‘localised’ is used here to stress the diegetic process happening within a culturally and geopolitically specific matrix. Therefore the localised narrative is meant to highlight how a narrative structure is always under negotiation and construction, putting emphasis not on the narrative itself but on the witnessing behind narration. The localised narrative allows for a constant and careful analysis of one’s positionality in narrative structures within which one is implicated directly and indirectly, as well as how one takes stock of and utilises established and untracked histories.

More recently, I have used the concept of metalepsis

in forming various narratives. Here, the rules are quite simple, to construct a narrative by stringing along multiple metaphors, and sometimes you can create a metaphor for a metaphor. I have become more interested in this way of building a narrative because of another growing interest in the use of allegory as a way to examine history.

By engaging with the genre of history painting you are in a way reasserting the role of painting in the narration of historic events. What do you feel is the significance of using the medium of painting to retell the history of southern Africa?

I cannot say that I am retelling any history really; this would presume a kind of stability and authority in the kind of information I am conveying. Rather than retell, I try to focus on trying to articulate questions that are meaningful through specificity, and therefore produce representations of things that would otherwise not be given any attention. What all this reveals is a mistrust in histories as well as the processes that author and legitimise them. Why painting? Again this I do not know. One of the enjoyable things about being an artist is that we can produce things that are closely connected to our desires and demands, even though these can never be known in their entirety. Another way to think about it is that there will always be an unspoken-for element in relation to any art object, and this unspoken-for is conditioned by the author's desire.

Your painting installation projects, developed over a number of years, are structured using cinematic and literary devices such as chapters and scenes and character 'types'. What is your experience of drawing on these inherently narrative art forms in the formation of your painting projects?

I have always approached making a painting as if writing a sentence, so the link between painting and these other fields seemed to be an ideal fit. Cinema was more about finding a way of programmatising the studio process, so finding avenues that can be used to house the conceptual framework. I think these are also devices that have continued to negotiate and undermine how we understand narrative in productive ways.

How has your perspective on the narratives of southern Africa shifted through your experience of living in America?

I am not entirely sure how it is has changed. Living in the US has certainly given me some distance to formulate my thinking, in addition to continuously working within an academic setting. These elements have definitely given me a particular approach, which certainly stresses Eurocentrism but also provides useful tools. Before attending specialised education, my ideas of 'home' and history were narrow and obviously not conceptual enough. So perhaps I should say it was not so much living in America but rather the opportunity

of developing in an academic setting that allowed me to experiment with thinking and making. This kind of training could have happened anywhere, but it is true that resources and training in America are plentiful and quite good. I will say that it took living in the US to appreciate and actually have access to many African writers, artists, musicians and so forth. I highly doubt that I would otherwise have been reading Achille Mbembe and Gayatri Spivak, or listening to Thomas Mapfumo and Feliciano Gomes, for example.

How do you gather your source material and what different forms can it take?

In the past I mainly used physical sources, which was limiting but necessary. I still use physical newspapers, magazines etc from Botswana and South Africa, but I have broadened my sources to academic periodicals, online databases and other published material. There is something wonderful about buying books and going to the library, but it also means I must frequently scan hundreds of images, which is necessary too. I have also used ethnographic data, so collecting sand samples as geographic and colour references, as well as other cultural paraphernalia. At this point, I use anything I can get my hands on, including taking pictures of myself when there is a pose that I need. The nature of the pose is so culturally specific, and sometimes these are not captured well in photographs, mostly because of the lens. So if I see a photograph I like, which mostly

has to do with the pose and framing, then I am more likely to copy the pose and find a way to construct the other details.

In *Fully Belly* (2010-14) from the *Pax Kaffraria* project a number of the figures are floating upside down at the top edge of the canvas. What do you feel is the role of this inversion?

This installation was really inspired by Max Beckmann's 1938 painting titled *Death*. This is one of my favourite paintings, and for a while I had wanted to make something in relation to the composition – the idea of using an illogical spatial format within a narrative. Another painting to use the upside-down figures is an altarpiece from 2015. Here, the challenge was compositional but different because it had more to do with the format of an altarpiece, which is necessarily always broken up into at least two spaces. Because the altarpiece space is tall and does not mimic how we experience space, I found it to be a productive challenge to make representations of contemporary life (as opposed to religious allegories) but still use the format of the altarpiece. The inversion is somewhat a metaphor too, but it began with the composition.

In *Pax Afrikaner* your brushwork is looser and large areas of the canvas are left open, sometimes with just the outline traced in pencil or the bare canvas showing through. There are also areas

where you overpaint with a transparent colour or whitewash. To me these areas imply possibility, ambiguity, revision or nuance. These spaces for reflection are also present in *Pax Kaffraria* but they feel more contained and stylistically unified with the other areas of the canvas. Can you describe how you apply different painting techniques in these two projects and how this may have evolved across your projects?

This is a great question. The spaces in *Pax Afrikaner* are a lot more experimental and less stylised, they are much messier, but in *Pax Kaffraria*, I think I became obsessed with a particular kind of touch that presented itself as refined. In the end, it also had to do with time and the space to allow myself to experiment. But with experimentation comes the possibility of failure, so in creating an installation out of ten 275 × 365cm canvases I became less inclined to experiment for the sake of experimentation. I also became less interested in how looseness always connotes expression, freshness and experimentation; rather I experimented with the more rigid abstract mark that references modernism and minimalism. Doing this also meant that the nature of the tool changed. So in *Pax Afrikaner*, major marks were made with a 10cm brush or a 90cm squeegee or a 90cm broom; and now I am using these tools plus more, but also using them in different ways. Yet it all comes down to an evolving examination of painterliness and figuring out the best way to fake it.

The role of pedagogy and the transmission of knowledge seem central to your position as a professor, to your engagement with the history painting genre which is definitively aimed at inspiring or educating a public, and to your text-based interventions into museum interpretation material. Can you talk a bit about how you see the role of pedagogy in relation to your broader practice?

I am uneasy saying that what I do can educate anyone in any particular way, but what I can say is that my work as an artist and educator tries to concern itself with closely re-examining already established knowledge systems and things that are taken for granted, and simply trying to figure out how we are implicated and participate in all of this. Even though we might not want to admit it, we all participate in capitalism and globalisation and racism and imperialism and sexism and so forth; so it makes sense to me to begin with the simple gesture of admitting our complicity and then finding a way to engage ethically. So perhaps this might be the role of pedagogy at any given point: an ethical engagement in the ideas of others even if these ideas might contradict yours.

Your approach to art-making has developed through working closely with American artist Mary Kelly – are there any other artists or art forms that you feel your work is in dialogue with?

As mentioned before, Max Beckmann has always been an important influence. I have also been influenced by artists like Richard Hamilton, Leon Golub and Kerry James Marshall (who have in different ways challenged the techniques and practices related to the convention of painting, as well as renouncing and putting into question the already accepted and institutionalised semiotic approach to visual signifiers); Harun Farocki, Isaac Julien and Fernando Ezequiel Solanas (who seem to insist on the plasticity of cinematic tropes and hence conceptualise the moving image beyond camera angle, frames, shots, etc).

Your body of work has unfolded over a number of strands – the text-based works, and painting installation projects that develop over a number of years. How did you come to these formats? What it is about the specific structures that best allow you to express your ideas?

The question of time is a central one because it reveals something about one's practice. All my work is project-based and relies a lot on research. There is a specific method that is involved in conceptualising the projects, organising them aesthetically and grounding them in historical and cultural specificity. Ultimately, the method also serves to slow down the process of thinking. I believe I am a slow thinker, so it takes time to filter ideas and arrive at something that I want to commit to.

The unpacking of terminology seems to play a significant role in building a framework for your projects. For example the title *Pax Kaffraria*: the word 'pax', which you have explained is taken from the original phrase, 'we Romans have purchased the pax Romana with our blood', and 'kaffraria' which you identify as a British adaptation of the word 'kaffir', which was used by the Dutch or Boers in South Africa as a derogatory term. Why focus on individual words and specific terminology?

Most of my work comes from the texture and history of words. In some sense, this is an approach closely related to Bakhtin's idea of dialogism. The basic premise is that a dialogic text concerns itself with being read against a multitude of other texts in the past and present. Dialogism, in terms of language, also has to do with the social life of language and is not exclusively tied to the life of the text. Another way to put it is that a dialogic space is invested with the specific lived history of a given text so that that history also informs how the text accrues meaning. Since we depend so much on language, my projects are structured around language. For example, the first stage in making any painting is the formulation of the project title and the titles for all the chapters. And from here, other texts then inform the paintings – everything from theory to fiction.

Your new project *Comrades* examines the historical, aesthetic and conceptual links between

southern African liberation movements and communism. Both necessitate a level of collective consciousness geared towards political gain. What is your understanding of how this group identity and shared consciousness have impacted on the history of the region and is this something that you feel is important to manifest in your work?

I am in the early stages of understanding this work so I do not think I can provide a productive answer here; the work and ideas are still evolving and I hope to be able to articulate these well and more concisely. But as you rightly point out, I am interested in these ideas of a collective movement towards political goals, or more specifically, towards national liberation. So a question one might ask is: how was collectivity structured and how were the goals towards freedom and democracy articulated during the fight towards independence, and how are these different now? I suspect that the way people were organised and united during the struggle is actually not what can work towards achieving a democratic state today. I am not suggesting that that history should be negated but simply pointing out that forms of action, solidarity and mobilisation during a nationalist movement inevitably seem not to work in constructing a democratic state, especially given the painful history of the colonial enterprise and the fact that those who were oppressed were denied access to resources, education and had previously not been able to practice freedom, justice and equality at the level

of modern institutions of governance. To return to this chapter, if we take the word ‘comrade’ – sources tell us that following the French revolution, the term always had political resonance and was developed as a form of address between socialists and workers. In other words, the word was meant to always refer to egalitarianism, and thus became a demonstrative form of address that was supposed to cut across gender, racial, ethnic and class lines. Yet in South African politics, ‘comrade’ has come to mean something specific and demonstrative of both the history and evolution of the struggle toward freedom and democracy.

How does it feel to be exhibiting your work in southern Africa for the first time in a decade?

Perfectly ambivalent.

This conversation took place via email over a number of days in December 2015