

ARTFORUM



Meleko Mokgosi, *Bread, Butter, and Power* (detail), 2018, oil, acrylic, bleach, graphite, photo transfer, and permanent marker on canvas, twenty panels, this one 108 x 72".

Meleko Mokgosi

FOWLER MUSEUM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

In a recent essay, theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak articulates one of the double-edged cruelties of oppression. “Crimes of identity are always collective,” she writes, “although individuals suffer grotesquely.” The formulation applies broadly, but Spivak penned those words with gender—“our first instrument of abstraction”—in mind, positioning the division of the sexes as prologue to the insidious ideologies of nationalism, colonialism, and religion.

Spivak’s writing features prominently in the panoramic painting cycle *Bread, Butter, and Power*, 2018, installed at the Fowler Museum at the University of California, Los Angeles. The latest chapter in Meleko Mokgosi’s ongoing series “Democratic Intuition,” begun in 2013, this group of twenty-one canvases centers on gender, and on feminism more specifically, brilliantly interpolating quiet scenes of the everyday into the expanse of history painting. Women and girls drift in and out of Mokgosi’s canvases, but the very first panel, hung separately from the three multi-canvas “friezes” that encircle the room, clearly announces the cycle’s thematic emphasis. Standing nine feet tall, the painting depicts a shallow interior space, occupied at bottom right by two women in jet-black dresses embracing each other in a chair. Their bodies are dwarfed by a portrait of the young Harriet Tubman hanging above them, anchoring a smattering of other objects on the “wall” of the painting: a poster patterned with raised fists, emblazoned with the slogan THEY WILL NEVER KILL US ALL, adopted from a demonstration following a police shooting near Uitenhage, South Africa, in 1985; a small kitsch relief portrait from the home of the artist’s mother; what appears to be a photograph of Angela Davis but is in fact a work from the Cameroon-born Nigerian photographer Samuel Fosso’s series “African Spirits,” 2008, in which he impersonates iconic figures from Africa and the diaspora; and finally Henry Weekes’s 1859 marble bust of British Jamaican nurse Mary Seacole, now in the collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, where it is simply called *Bust of an African Woman*.

The vignette is a cryptic picture of pictures of women, some known, others anonymous, set in southern Africa but imbued with references to the diaspora. As is true across the whole of “Democratic Intuition,” the painting cycle forms a “mosaic of quotations,” to borrow a phrase from Julia Kristeva, that constitute a political and art-historical backdrop to imagined moments and characters. Such gestures of appropriation, their sources rarely obvious, alienate the viewer, making her aware of the limits of what she knows. The work’s flatness compounds the effect of its content, reinforcing a separation between the world of the painting and that of its observer.

As a result, Mokgosi’s paintings challenge and withhold as much as they give and gratify. It is a pure delight to scan the room and take in the breadth of the work, just as it is endlessly satisfying to get up close, to marvel at the thin, economical

brushstrokes that somehow conjure a form, a life, a story. Employing formal strategies that bear that bears clear political implications, Mokgosi uses a remarkable spectrum of blacks and browns, and because he works with unprimed canvases, he often removes paint to create striking highlights of reflected light that bounces off cheekbones, bare arms, skirt folds, bedsheets, and leather jackets. The virtuosity of his figuration pointedly gives way in many places to gestural brushstrokes that gently break the rhythm of narrative and signal that the work is, indeed, about painting itself—an historical practice that, like feminism and democracy, requires deconstructing and decolonizing.

Awe and curiosity pull the viewer in, but other features of *Bread, Butter, and Power* push her away: two canvases dominated by texts in Setswana, the primary language spoken in Botswana, where Mokgosi grew up; a panel of two sleeping figures veiled with a layer of black paint; and a rolled, plastic-wrapped canvas leaning against a pillar at the center of the room, revealing only a sliver of a picture. These challenges to visibility and legibility thwart quick consumption and digestion. More important, they force us to examine our own reactions to the work's demands. What might be seen by some as distancing could also be understood as an enticement to further edification, starting with the work's final panel, which paraphrases the thought of Claire Colebrook, Jacques Lacan, Kristeva, Spivak, and others, in search of a language that could describe the difficulties of democracy. (A nearby shelf lined with volumes of critical theory suggests a reading list and offers a peek into the artist's working methods.) The contradictions at the heart of democratic endeavors—between individual and society, selfhood and otherness, scale and intimacy, history and anecdote—are precisely what animate Mokgosi's paintings, giving them a complexity that refuses and rewards in turn.

—Andrea Gyorody

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