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Dada Khanyisa



By whatever means

Dada Khanyisa is known among Cape Town's 'creatives'. He customises sneakers, makes bags and offers tattoos. His graduation exhibition at the Michaelis School of Fine Art caused a memorable ripple in the social current. During barside discussions about visibility and representation, students remarked that the familiarity of his visual language counteracted the alienating effect of that institution.

This conversation takes place in Khanyisa's studio in downtown Cape Town as he works towards *Bamb'iphone*, his first solo exhibition. The studio has digital equipment, circular saws and chisels. Materials span oil and acrylic paints, denim and rubber; combining aged and fake wood, Khanyisa splices entire sections of chairs onto a work through a mixed-media technique he calls *nakanjani* – by whatever means.

Khanyisa's work has a specifically South African aesthetic. It is reminiscent of the painted barbershop signs that can be seen in townships spanning Gugulethu, Umlazi and Soweto; it echoes the album covers of 90s-era hip-hop and cartoons in publications like *Bona*. Yet it is unprecedented in the context of contemporary art; it is a subjective translation, the direct output of personal experience. Khanyisa writes:

My focus on the human condition stems from the various spaces I have called home; these spaces create a multi-faceted diagram of my reality. I understand that I have to greet strangers in rural KZN, keep my phone guarded while in central Joburg and ask a white mate to call the agent if I am looking for accommodation in Cape Town.

The artist's multi-dimensional materiality reckons with the prismatic nature of the Black South African experience. Since early works such as *Johustleburg* (2017), *What is this patriarchy you speak of?* (2017) and *eBree* (2017), Khanyisa has taken the future and past into account when crafting his commentary on the present. The various scenes make room for the exhaustion of a matronly fruitseller and the watchfulness of a taxi-rank pickpocket. Khanyisa evenly charges all the characters in his paintings with interiority.

Slipping between vernac, isiZulu and English, Khanyisa narrates the conflicts of contemporary culture with a level of understanding that outstrips empathy and surpasses the romanticism of a tribute. One of the works intended for the upcoming show, *Squad Goals (internet friends are not your real friends)*, features a self-portrait as a gesture that reflects his embeddedness in the context he discusses. When Khanyisa provides responses such as 'it's just how things are now', he is decisive but not embittered; it's a reiteration that his subjectivity stems from an attentive observation of contemporaneity.

The open-endedness of his narration is an attempt at precision. Disparities, contradictions and incongruities are the prevailing form. His expanded view of time collapses tropes, archetypes and essentialising packages of identities. Khanyisa remarks, 'You have to understand that the bad guy is not always the bad guy. The good guy is not always the good guy' – his practice takes its departure from the limits of description. In Khanyisa's contemporary social commentary, to be specific is not to be general but to be generous.

Sinazo Chiya:

What are your visual references or influences?

Dada Khanyisa:

I enjoy going through Facebook event posts for nightclubs and stuff. And images from old *Drum* magazines. Images of people from reports about the taxi strikes. There's something about all the images that come from this country that feels like they fit in with what I want to say.

You feel very rooted here, in this country and this present?

Yeah, I feel comfortable. I feel like this is home. That's why I don't know if I have any interest in living outside of the country, or going to Europe for residencies. I usually say I don't want to go there because it's cold. Maybe I'm backwards, I don't know. Western culture bores me at times. But I'm curious about travelling upward.

Further up the continent?

Yeah. Go to Zimbabwe and learn how to carve stone, maybe live in a stone-carving village. A place like the Tengenenge Sculpture Village. Have you seen those stone carvings that are sold at markets, that shine so good? That's where they are made. You stay there, contribute towards the village, and then you get a stone along with some tools. They don't even give you a small stone – they give you a rock and say, 'Okay start, you know what you are doing? Bash into it and see what happens ...' Or I'd like to go to Tanzania and learn to carve ebony. It's illegal to cut down ebony trees – you have to get it in smaller portions. It grows freely along the north of Zimbabwe, Malawi

and Tanzania. That's where they carve most of the masks and wooden utensils. The wood is hard, almost like stone. Those are the kinds of things I want to do, like working with clay, weaving, basically working with my hands.

Despite your having studied animation?

Yes, I'm at peace when I work with my hands. It's something I learned from my brother. We would chill and he'd show me how to make hunting weapons like slingshots. At the time I was really young, about four or five years old. We used to hunt for mice and braai them. He also taught me how to make wire cars. He taught me all of that stuff. He'd make swings for me. He'd make scarecrows from TV references.

So you could hunt if you had to?

No, some of the stuff I've forgotten how to do, but I could probably still work with wire cars. He loved working with his hands, and I was always there with him. Opening batteries and taking things apart, especially the batteries with a gum-like substance inside. We would chew it like it was gum.

Hahaha, you guys would chew batteries? It sounds like a nice childhood actually.

That was before he hit puberty, before he wanted to be cool. I also knew what I was doing and I carried on drawing.

How did you get involved with sneaker and street culture?

Growing up in Johannesburg, everywhere there's a billboard. The material culture is very ...

High key?

It's very high key. It's about what you're wearing, what you're driving, what you have and who you have around you. Whether you want to play along or not, it's going to affect you. Even if you don't want to play along, you are playing along. You are very aware of brands and what they mean; what brands are associated with success, making it and looking fresh. I remember we used to watch music videos and analyse pretty shoes.

I remember Pharrell and 50 Cent videos, like *Window Shopper*.

Music videos played a part in how I saw things; they provided alternative ways of being, maybe, a Pantsula. Especially when you were dealing with the dynamics of living in the suburbs but not being white. There's that thing in Joburg where you had to write your area code on your chest. If you were from the north, everyone had to know that you're from the north. If you were from the south, people must know. The high school you went to matters – did you go to Saints? Did you go to a public school? Did you drive to school or did you take a bus? It's those things that counted. You became aware of things that don't really matter. You might not have a car, but clothing allowed you to flex in another way. Some people made a living from that. They call them 'sneakerheads' or 'cool kids'. I gravitated towards the sneakerheads, and in the process I met the people at Nike when I started making miniature versions of popular sneakers. It was an interesting time. I ended up doing an Air Max campaign. Those are the people I was around before I came through to Cape Town.

A campaign as in marketing?

Yes, it was all about contemporary culture and the collection of sneakers. It was exciting to see how this opened up avenues for some people. It's part of what's happening right now, where people don't have to have those strenuous nine-to-five jobs. I mean, there are people who love it, people who are built for it, but others are not. It's nice to see that a lot of people don't have to play by those rules. There are other ways of living.

Is it accurate to call your work social commentary?

I feel like it is.

I had to make sure.

You see these two works [pointing to the diptych '*Khawu'phinde um'tryeh*' and *Love Between Magenta Covers*]? In the panel on the left there's an image of a person who's holding a phone, trying to send a message. Maybe it's to say there is no electricity. Or he could be sending it to his sister over there, in the panel on the right, who's also holding a phone, and then she's like, 'I'm making a plan'. You see? Or he could be sending it to the father whose phone is on the table there upside down.

All the structural complexities ...

It's the classic story. Money does not reach home, and at home the grandmother and the kids are hungry. It's a recurring theme and it shows that things are still the same, with a kitchen full of kids without their parents. Are we going to cook today, or are we going to organise some *kota* [a bunny chow/gatsby-type food sold in the townships] and buy chips?

So your paintings have down-to-earth narratives?

Yeah, those kinds of narratives. But it's not so obvious, because it's also a pretty image and it's nice to look at. If you want to know what lies beyond, then that's a matter of conversation.

You're trying to tell stories with a certain level of nuance?

Nowadays, people want you to create what makes them comfortable. You are expected to filter, you can't touch on what will make someone else uncomfortable. What's the point? Why filter the reality we all have to live through? The reason why it's so difficult in the township is because you have so much to handle – there is no filter. People live unapologetically.

And they're doing the best that they can at that time?

Exactly. So you have to understand that the bad guy is not always the bad guy. The good guy is not always the good guy. You might have relatives who are messed up, but you have to put up with them because this person is the one who always cooks when there's a ceremony at home. You know? There are those characters.

There are things that redeem people – people have dysfunctions and they also have good aspects.

You see? It's those stories I'm exploring.

Have you always wanted to tell stories?

I don't think about it that way. You know, when you grow up things are planted in your head about what you want to study. And you know parents don't really take the arts seriously as a career path. My mom wanted me to be in the tourism industry.

As a tour guide?

I don't know. She just told me that she sees me in those big Jeeps and that uniform that they wear.

Hahaha, outdoors ... guiding people through lions and stuff?

But you know that's her dream, and I'm glad that she didn't persist or force me. I'm glad she supported me through my creative mission – even when she didn't see the fruits of it all. I think the storytelling is just something most of us have as Black people. We have good storytellers, someone who tells you a story and you feel like you were there in it, and you are laughing. That's why in places where there are a lot of Black people it feels like everyone is in your business, because ...

Because everyone *is* in your business.

Exactly.

But it has its purpose. It's like a vaccination against certain kinds of problems.

You cannot be alone. There are always people around. There's no time for all the things I have time for when I'm in the 'burbs or the studio. Being in my own mind. In as much as the community can be intrusive, it is a cushion for most. So it's multilayered, it's not just a painful experience. Yes, there is pain ...

But it's bigger than that?

It's bigger than the pain. You go on. It's not like every day you wake up and you are like, 'Oh snap! I am Black, I don't have

this, I have that, I owe this and I paid that.' It's not like that. You will just be like, 'Yo! It's hot, let's go to the beach.' Just like everyone else.

You mention social media a lot. It also crops up in your work, the image of someone holding a phone. What is the interest?

You hold the phone the whole day, so you can't ignore it. It's also about being true to the times, documenting the times. Here is a photo I took when I was in grade seven; it was a fun day, we were having fun and looking good. Looking at it now tells you a lot about what people wore back then. If a painting is true to its time and you look at it in 10 years' time, it will still reveal something about the time it was painted. Either how people were dressed, or how they styled their hair. I have the same appreciation when I look at Gerard Sekoto's *Yellow Houses*. It's from a time when I thought things were just black and white. I know those four-roomed houses. The composition, the houses he picked and how much he was showing says a lot about that time and how he saw it. It's like when someone reminds you of a story that happened in the past and you think about it and you laugh. Like looking at a picture and being reminded that we used to wear knickerbockers. The currency of memories. This is what connects us.

How do you see our time?

I've been taking photos when people are on their phones at parties. People checking how many 'likes' they got and seeing how many people have looked at their Insta Stories. People who go out to be seen taking selfies. It's very excessive, especially in Johannesburg. It feels like that's the culture.

Do you feel like people are alienated?

I don't think they are alienated. It's just how things are now.

Why does multimedia have such an appeal for you? I read an interview where you called the medium '*nakanjani*' [no matter what/by whatever means].

I think my whole journey, my beliefs and how I saw things, has influenced how my work has developed. So it has got to a point where I can just relax and any idea can be accommodated. There was a time in my life when I would be worried about how the work was going to be received. That does something to you, it does something to your psyche. So if I am happy with it, that's enough. I don't mind keeping things. So that when they don't buy it, I'm not crushed. It will find a way back into what I'm doing because I like it, you see. That's the thing with *nakanjani*. I started doing tattoos because there was a gap in the market. And then I started customising shoes because there was a gap, and then came the paintings. Everything has its place.

It's not about the expectation of the viewer, it's about making things that you find interesting. If it's yours it's gonna be yours, *nakanjani*.

You see, everything is accommodated. Any idea, any thought process, any visual outcome is accommodated. When I'm busy creating my work and I decide to add some grey, there's going to be something else to counter that grey so that it makes sense visually. Doubt about whether something is going to be a good idea is very crippling and limiting.

So it's about operating from both certainty and openness?

Yeah, curiosity and being open to learn. Now I want to learn how to paint with oil. I've never painted with oil.

What were you using before?

Acrylics. I'm trying to work with oils in order to understand light.

You work with clay, you do illustration, you use wood, you're trying out different paints. Do different mediums offer you different things?

I'm learning what they mean as I go, as I discover what works better, what is heavier, what is screwable, how many dimensions I can go with, what works visually and what looks good. Wood, for example, represents opulence for me. It feels royal. When your house is full of wooden things ...

It's a stately home?

You know? So I use it as a way to talk about opulence.

Your work is very detail oriented.

Your eye mustn't sit in one place, that's always the point. So that when you are looking at this, another thing over there calls for your attention. You don't have to figure it out right there and then.

Must the object always be beautiful?

I think so. Not necessarily Beyoncé beautiful, but it must be pleasing to the eye. Maybe beauty is the wrong word – I am looking for visual harmony. It can be the oddest pairing of colour

patterns that don't make sense, but if your eye enjoys the visuals, it turns into a great pairing of colours.

I saw a quote of yours where you said, 'I'd like to be so established that I can have 10 truckloads of sand dumped off at a gallery, filling the floor, and call it art.' What did you mean by that?

I was just being sarcastic. I don't want to be that person who doesn't get to touch their work.

But we live in a world where that can happen.

I was more speaking of that moment where whatever you do gets validated. When your name has so much value that you can do the most basic thing and people will turn around and call it wonderful. So established that you don't have to stress about the next deadline, or the next paycheck.

A point where you don't have to worry.

Yeah.

You just did a mural for Afropunk in Joburg that was called *The Afropolitan Tea Party*. How did that happen?

They called for proposals, so I sent my proposal through, they liked it, and I started painting in December. I was there for two weeks.

How big was it?

It's 35 metres wide and 5.5 metres high. I did it by myself, except for the first two days when my brother was helping.

Oh my. How did people respond when they saw you at work?

It's a busy site there at Constitution Hill. There's Gautrain buses, there's Metro buses, there's taxis, cars, and there's foot traffic. People were taking selfies as it came together. There were these people in the red tour buses – as the bus goes past you could see people with their cameras taking photos.

Proper tourists with their cameras?

Yeah. It was nice because the colour comes out as the sun shines directly on it, and it is big. I would get compliments from dodgy-looking guys who walked past. They would tell me that I knew what I was doing.

That's amazing – art bringing people together.

It was actually really fulfilling. People were really good, the regular people like security guards, students, people walking past. It's a dangerous spot. You could see that some of them are those people who look like they are about to go rob in the suburbs. You could see some were high on all sorts of drugs, but they would still pay me compliments about the work. If I had just been just standing there I would have been robbed.

Your art kept you safe?

It was very humbling. There's another illustration that I would like to do on a building in Joburg. So if you know any connections in Joburg, I need to do this ... [Shows images] Think of this in Hillbrow, on the side of a building.

**That would be beautiful. The old Bafana Bafana t-shirt.
And that guy looks like someone's uncle. That's amazing.
That needs to go up somewhere.**

Before my time is up on earth.

It's good to have things to be excited about.

It's going to be a good year.