

LIVING HISTORY JASON FARAGO

'My project cannot take the form of any other medium,' Meleko Mokgosi told the website *Africa Is a Country* in 2014, when an interviewer asked him to explain the attraction of history painting.¹ It may sound like a surprising statement at first from the Motswana artist, now based in my hometown of New York, who has spent the last decade engaged in an impressive effort to rethink and reconstitute the models of representation that emerged from a European art tradition and that now govern a supposedly global art discourse. Mokgosi trained at New York's notoriously painting-phobic Whitney Independent Study Program, and then went on to UCLA, where he studied under Mary Kelly, a revered feminist conceptual artist whose art transcends distinctions of media. Yet Mokgosi - a young artist, well versed in contemporary philosophy, and keen to conceive of new models of creation - insists not only on painting as his only possible medium; he insists on the atavistic genre of *history painting*, most associated with the 17th to 19th centuries, and almost wholly abandoned with the development of modernism.²

Why would an artist like Mokgosi, so eager to reconceive the way we narrate and transmit history, insist on a format of the past? The answer, I suppose, is a quintessentially modern one: because the medium and the message, the subject and the support, cannot be divorced. History painting

in Europe was more than a style; it was a summation of western moral and aesthetic principles, and the medium via which early modern society saw its ideals in images. Those ideals included knowledge, reason and honour, but also bellicosity, the sovereignty of elites, white supremacy and the dominance of men. You can criticise those ideals from the outside, but if you want to unwind their enduring power the best way out is always through.

History painting - or narrative painting, if you prefer - had already flowered in Italy in the 16th century, but the formalisation of history painting as a genre of European art dates to the 17th century, as painters began to forsake the lower status of guilds and adopt the humanistic airs of the academy. The conversion of painting from a craft to a fine art did not take place overnight, however; it required theorisation, argument, and no small amount of marketing. Its shrewdest publicist was the French academician André Félibien des Avaux, who in 1669 codified and ranked different kinds of painting according to Renaissance principles: still life at the bottom, then landscape, then genre scenes, then portraiture, and at the very top paintings that 'move on from the representation of a single figure to that of a group, [that] deal with historical and legendary subjects, and [that] represent the great actions recounted by historians'.³

History painting's ambitions of (or pretensions to) European Renaissance humanism were fundamental to the creation of art as we understand it globally today: that is, as a creative, rather than craftsmanlike, enterprise in which an artist expresses truths via images.

It was a hybrid medium, in which human figures were intermeshed with the natural world, and yet which permitted far more poetic licence than portraiture or landscape. History painting only sometimes depicted historical events; just as often the term applies to mythological scenes or Biblical tableaux. Yet as early modern Europe moved into its imperial age, 'history' came to have a darker and more propagandistic meaning. By the late 18th century - when Joshua Reynolds, the first president of the Royal Academy in London, reaffirmed history painting's supremacy among the arts - oil on canvas had become the preferred medium for celebrating European conquest. Rather than depict the realities of imperial subjugation, history paintings served as carefully staged glorification tools for generals and colonists, depicted sometimes as gods, sometimes as martyrs.⁴ The figures in imperial history paintings could be blends of the real and the imaginary: Thomas Jones Barker, in 1863, depicts a frigid Queen Victoria bestowing a Bible on a fictional African prince, decked out in a cheetah skin and kneeling before the very Germanic-looking monarch. (The painting bears the unsubtle title *The Secret of England's Greatness*.) Sometimes empires themselves were rendered as archetypes: in Edward Armitage's once popular, now preposterous *Retribution*, of 1858, a Britannia with biceps of steel prepares to stab a baying tiger, while the Taj Mahal rises in the background.

So painting history today - and not only for an African painter - means passing through the medium's own complicity in the imperial past, and coming to terms with the endurance of earlier, prejudicial schemes of imagery

even in our contemporary, putatively global conception of contemporary art. A tall order. But the history of modernism teaches us that there is no other way out; try denying the past, deluding yourself that you can make art from nothing, and still the hellmouth of history will gobble you wholesale. So when Mokgosi says that history painting is the only possible medium for his ambitious project of excavating the past and refashioning the present, he is making a claim that the past cannot be reconstituted without also reconstituting its system of representation. Mokgosi's art is an auto-reflexive one, engaged not only with history as such, but also with the means and methods used to embody it. (Those methods include not only 19th-century painting but its 20th-century successor: the cinema.) Far from rejecting western modes of painting as a foreign imposition, Mokgosi feeds the history of southern Africa back into the system of representations that pictured it on first a European, then a global scale - a system that, as we shall see, includes not only images but also words - such that the very media by which conquest and injustice were represented get reconceived.

Exordium, the first segment of the series *Democratic Intuition*, which was seen at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Boston in 2015, continued Mokgosi's rendezvous with the schemes and semantics of history painting. A white hunter, seemingly a tourist, smiles before slain wildcats; schoolgirls dig a hole in the ground while a suited man watches benignly; in the most troubling canvas, a black soldier in red dress uniform carries a sword while children kneel, and two bare-chested 'natives' embrace, one with a chain dangling from his wrist. The anxious concatenations in the *Exordium* series, across time and space, cohered into history paintings of a much more fraught sort than usual - paintings of a history that is roiling and unsettled, beyond the easy narratives of colonial propaganda and counter-imperial score-settling. And one of the five tableaux in *Comrades* is

also in that vein: a hushed, wide-format scene of a house in the countryside, featuring a dapper gent in shades and an orange lounge suit, a hunched old woman on a plastic chair, and a shirtless man standing silently in the doorway.

But in the four principal diptychs that constitute this segment of *Democratic Intuition*, Mokgosi's usual historical sweep has been replaced by cleaner methods of depiction, more compact than in *Exordium* but no less disquieting. The paintings depict groups of schoolchildren, of different ages and races, and seemingly of different classes if one judges from the variety of their uniforms. They pose formally, as if for a school photograph, and mostly smile. Eleven black girls in unmatching maroon skirts and tube socks stand close together; one's shoelace is untied. Four wealthier-seeming teenagers, three white and one black, smile on Sports Day. Nine teens pose for an informal portrait, the one young woman among them feistily cocking her head as she leans on a friend's shoulder. And a gawky white adolescent and a more relaxed black one stand behind a head boy with soft blond hair and a born-to-rule grin, decked out in unlovely school blazers. Mokgosi has rotated the last of these paintings 90 degrees, the better to emphasise that these school pictures are not only images of particular unnamed students, but also signs in a network of representations, allegories even: portraiture routed through history painting. (Recall Reynolds' cunning – and, given the Georgian market for portraiture, self-serving – aggrandisement of portrait painting when done by history painters: 'If from particular inclination, or from the taste of the time and place he lives in ... he is obliged to descend lower [*ie, from history painting to portraiture*], he will bring into the lower sphere of art a grandeur of composition and character that will raise and ennoble his works far above their natural rank.'⁵)

Conjoined to each of these four group portraits is a second painting, done not on primed canvas but on untreated

portrait linen. They feature nothing but text, seared into the linen via the use of bleach; after writing the texts with the highly alkaline liquid, Mokgosi then applies a neutralising agent to keep the bleach from reacting further. Painstakingly lettered in a serified typeface, rather than written in the artist's own handwriting, the bleach-on-linen paintings feature texts in Setswana, the official language of Botswana and the sixth-most-spoken language in South Africa.

At first appearance the graphic disjunction of these diptychs – absorbing, near-photorealistic imagery alongside cold, impassive text; intense colour complemented by bleached-out lines of white – might mislead you that one is subordinate to the other. The texts, for those who do not speak Setswana, may seem to be inscrutable captions for the images they hang alongside, and thus easy to ignore. But it would be a category error to classify the textual panels of Mokgosi's diptychs as secondary. For one thing, the artist has had a long engagement with text as a painterly subject. In his series *Modern Art: The Root of African Savages* (2012-14), Mokgosi reproduced on canvas wall texts from the Metropolitan Museum of Art's recent exhibition on African art and the American avant-garde – then ringed the printed lines with handwritten emendations that attacked their seemingly neutral rhetoric. For another, the text paintings continue and deepen Mokgosi's auto-reflexive project of historical reconstitution, and insist on the implication of words as much as images in the misprisions of the past and the straitjacketing of the present.

For while history painting may be Mokgosi's compulsory medium, history itself is, by definition, a written affair. History takes place through language; and as Frantz Fanon and a thousand successors have insisted, mastery of language goes together with mastery of people.⁶ The use of Setswana, a language Mokgosi speaks natively but has never presented in painted form before, sets these works apart from his

earlier text paintings. And Mokgosi's recourse to written Setswana, no less than his recourse to the tropes of history painting, bespeaks an ambition to rethink and rewire the most basic codes undergirding our historical memory.

Like so many African languages, Setswana was given written form by European missionaries in the mid-19th century. But it entered the realm of European philology as early as 1806, when the German scientist Hinrich Lichtenstein - who, incidentally, would become the founding director of Berlin's Zoological Garden - left Jena for the Cape of Good Hope, eventually serving as the governor's private physician. His multi-volume study on southern Africa includes dozens of pages of vocabulary and grammar of a language he called Beetjuana, and which he praised as 'full-toned, soft, and pleasing to the ear'. (He incorrectly classified it as a Xhosa dialect.) The words he compiled and translated into German are of a piece with his naturalist, even Romantic approach to Cape societies: *man, woman, pregnant woman, virgin, lion, land*, and the simple sentence *Ke makua*, or 'I am a colonist'. In a blunt footnote to that phrase, Lichtenstein avers, 'This was the noun by which they heard the first white man called that ever came into their country, and they now designate by it all foreigners who are not Hottentots or kaffirs.'⁷

By mid-century, the Scottish missionary Robert Moffat had formalised Setswana orthography and produced a translation of the Bible - the very first to be published in a complete version in a sub-Saharan African language.⁸ If Lichtenstein's forensic interest in the Setswana language feels of a piece with the German naturalist tradition, in which the collection of Setswana words appears more or less like collecting plants and rocks, Moffat had blunter and less Romantic aims. The introduction to his Bible, published in 1857, explains that a written Setswana was necessary to 'produce sound Christian teachers who ... preach the

gospel, cope with white men, understand elementary business transactions and the value of land, and evangelise Bechuana'.⁹ It is a revealing catalogue of aims. Recording the history of the Batswana, if Moffat could even conceive of such a thing, is not on the list. Written language has other functions: proselytisation, of course, but also colonial affairs.

Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of structuralist linguistics, presumed that writing was nothing but a technology for the signaling of language.¹⁰ On the contrary: the passage of language into written form was not a value-free development in knowledge, but rather an act freighted with imperial intent. And it is this intent, and its endurance in contemporary southern African education and politics, that Mokgosi excavates and activates in *Comrades*. Speakers of Setswana may recognise the old, somewhat off-kilter short stories, recited in the past both for entertainment and as a means of moralising instruction: a woman provides for her family during a drought by turning into a lion, or a hare tricks a white man into buying a putatively magic pot. Yet by choosing to convey these stories through writing, Mokgosi foregrounds the passage of (Setswana) oral tradition into (European) academic recording. Not only education but language itself, as it passes from spoken to written form, becomes a straitjacket for coloniser and colonised. As the renowned anthropologists Jean and John L Comaroff explain, 'those who chose to peruse the Setswana Bible learned more than the sacred story, more even than how to read. They were subjected to a form of cultural translation in which vernacular poetics were re-presented to them as a thin *sekgoa* [European] narrative - and their language itself reduced to an instrument of imperial knowledge'.¹¹

Me, I'm just a New Yorker; I cannot tell you exactly what these bleached paintings say, and only know their meaning through the artist's good favour. Art audiences being what they are, the vast majority of those seeing Mokgosi's

paintings will not be able to read the written halves either. (He does not provide translations, wary that the bridging of two languages always relies on assumptions and preconceptions which his entire painterly project attempts to revise.) Nevertheless, Mokgosi's use of Setswana has a particular historical character that goes beyond a mere critique of the depressing sociological makeup of the world of contemporary art. The written form of the language, as much as the scratchy polyester school uniforms, defines and delimits the lives Mokgosi evokes through paint. To revalorise the language takes more than just writing it on a piece of stretched cloth and putting it in a white cube. It has to be reconstituted into a new and more efficacious narrative structure, routed through the past and the terms that structured it.

You can only just grasp the narratives in Meleko Mokgosi's paintings. They take form through collision and metalepsis, in which disparate parts are strung together and crash into one another - different images on a single canvas, or different registers, images and words, on canvases lashed together. Recently the artist explained that he concentrates on individual words and images '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'.¹² That last word is key. Modernist abstraction tried to do away with history, but you'll never outrun it, no matter how hard you hustle. It will chase you down and pounce on you; flee from the past behind you and it will clobber you from the side. The kind of abstraction enacted in the lacunae of Mokgosi's paintings is one in which the past exceeds our misreadings of it, and what really took place in the interstices of history becomes just barely, evanescently, beautifully visible. It is the only kind of abstraction worth defending.

- 1 Emily Wood, 'Pax Kaffraria: An Interview with Meleko Mokgosi', *Africa Is a Country*, 28 April 2014. Accessed at [<http://africasacountry.com/2014/04/pax-kaffraria-an-interview-with-artist-meleko-mokgosi>].
- 2 On history painting's loss of favour in mid-19th century France, see Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism: Or, the Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), especially pp 168-176.
- 3 André Félibien des Avaux, "Conférence de l'Académie royale de peinture et de la sculpture" [1669], reproduced in *Art and Its Histories: A Reader*, ed Steve Edwards (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p35.
- 4 See *Artist and Empire*, ed Alison Smith (London: Tate, 2015).
- 5 Joshua Reynolds, *Seven Discourses on Art* (1770), reproduced at [<http://www.authorama.com/seven-discourses-on-art-5.html>].
- 6 See in particular 'The Black Man and Language', chapter 1 of Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* [1952].
- 7 Hinrich Lichtenstein, *Reisen im südlichen Africa: In den Jahren 1803, 1804, 1805 und 1806*, vol 2 (Berlin: C Salfeld, 1812), p631.
- 8 For more on the history of Moffat's Bible and its contemporary significance in Botswana, see JJ Lubbe, "'By Patience, Labour and Prayer: The Voice of the Unseen God in the Language of the Bechuana Nation": A Reflection on the History of Robert Moffat's Setswana Bible', in *Acta Theologica*, vol 29, supp 12, pp 16-32.
- 9 Cited in Thapelo J Otlogetswe, *Text Variability Measures in Corpus Design for Setswana Lexicography* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), p24. Otlogetswe, who is the author of several Setswana dictionaries, offers a fascinating history of the standardisation of Setswana from the colonial era to the present. The first Setswana-English dictionary was *Lokwalo loa Mahuku a Secwana le Seeneles*, compiled by John Brown in 1875.
- 10 'A language and its written form constitute two separate systems of signs. The sole reason for the existence of the latter is to represent the former.' Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (Chicago: Open Court Classics, 1998), p24.
- 11 Jean Comaroff and John L Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa*, vol 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p311.
- 12 Interview with Hansi Momodu-Gordon in *9 Weeks* (Cape Town: Stevenson, 2015), p157.

Jason Farago is an art historian and critic based in New York. He is the founding editor of *Even* and US art critic for *The Guardian*.