



Maybe if you made this video it would be more technically resolved!

BY Sean O'Toole

Mawande Zenzile recently exhibited his pop-political oil paintings and a new video work at VANSAs Spin Street Gallery. The paintings especially intrigued. Characterised by their mordant humour and confident graphic line, Zenzile's cartoonish figural studies interrogated the representation of the black body in the white imagination. As he explains in this interview, his practice is driven by the desire to "contest or subvert the politics of representation and stereotypes enforced by such images". Currently an undergraduate student at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, Zenzile, who has actively been exhibiting in and around Cape Town over the past few years, connects the dots between Batman, Mowgli, Black Panther, Sarah Baartman and Albrecht Dürer.

Sean O'Toole: On August 10, I delivered a lunchtime lecture at the Michaelis School of Fine Art. You were seated in the front row of the lecture theatre wearing a mask. Your Facebook page explained that you were "playing exotic". What was that all about?

Mawande Zenzile: This question does not surprise me... I hope it's not to settle scores regarding what you wrote on Facebook? You wrote that you "delivered my talk stony-faced"? Anyway. Earlier that day I was feeling bit depressed. I went to visit Mohau Modisakeng in his studio. He was bit depressed too, but I won't disclose why. Before I left, I took a mask that was hanging in his studio. At first it was a spontaneous act and Mohau was laughing at me. I asked him to help me fit it; he agreed reluctantly. "I don't believe I'm helping you do this," he said.

To me it was a random thing, maybe playing exotic. I wore the mask during the first two morning lectures and yours was the last one of that day. I got different reactions and assumptions that day. Maybe some people thought I was crazy, which I'm not, or maybe a little bit. At the first lecture I went to, I felt that some people were paranoid and at the same time bored by the masked man. A lecturer questioned me about the mask; he even said that if I were in Germany, I wouldn't be allowed to wear a mask in public. But to me it was not personal.

In my experience, there is nothing more suffocating and degrading than the content sometimes taught at the art school. Sometimes I even feel like it's Joseph Conrad's "heart of darkness" – but I love it. To be honest with you, the art school is the most boring but interesting place to be in. Just like Mowgli of the Jungle Book... I've opted to learn the 'laws'. Exotic is how African art is generally viewed all over the world. Exotic is how it's taught to me. Through this, African art and Africans became othered and degraded, and so do I, I guess.

SO: Responding to your performance, Mohau Modisakeng described you as "one of the bravest, creative minded brothers I know". Nice words. Let's put aside the creativity and dwell on the bravery. Can you unpack the bravery of wearing a mask for a public performance?

MZ: My first answer covers most of this. I think creativity and bravery are inseparable, if you really want to know what I'm all about.

SO: Your recent solo exhibition, 'The Autobiography of Mawande Ka Zenzile: lingcuka Ezombethe limfele Zegusha' (Spin Street Gallery, 2011), was comprised of mostly of paintings. The opening did, however, include a performance. Can you talk a bit about your interest in performance as an artistic strategy?

MZ: Performance has always been part of my creative process; I have been doing performances even before I came to the art school. I have been doing entry performances, so to speak: I stage them at the beginning, or on opening nights of my exhibitions. I did my first performance publicly during my first solo exhibition, 'Crawling Nation' (AVA, 2009). To me it was a way of taking my work off the wall, being close to the audience. I then performed at Cape 09; on the group show 'Umahluko' (Khayelitsha, 2009), curated by artist and curator Loyiso Qanya. I did a few inside the school, like the man with TV intervention piece, which was titled *Reason over Passion*. It recalled Jane Alexander's sculptural work Integration Programme: Man with TV (1995).

I use performance art as a ritualistic element, rather than it becoming self-contained and/or Eurocentric aesthetically. After all, I'm not a theatre person. Most of my performances are not rehearsed or planned, they are all spontaneous, and that's what I hope makes them authentic (aesthetically) and engaging.

SO: You've worked with Sabata Sesi, of UCT's drama department. Why?

MZ: I first got to know Bra Sabs last year through a random conversation that lasted a very long time. We haven't stopped venting ever since. It seems like we have a lot in common. In March he invited me to be involved in his play, Homebrew, to work with him and his cast as a visual artist. I have enjoyed working and engaging with him, regardless of our awareness and shared black experience, or white

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experience maybe. Just like Peter Clarke, Sesiu is a very intelligent old chap and I love being surrounded by wise geniuses.

SO: I find it interesting that you've done some work assisting Peter Clarke. Can you talk a bit about working with Peter? How did you come to meet and assist this warm and gentle man? What drew you to seek him out?

MZ: I first met Peter and Manfred Zylla in 2005, at the Frank Joubert Art and Design Centre in Newlands, where I did art as a subject during my school days. Peter taught printmaking, and a bit of poetry but as prints. That old man has a sense of humour! I used to assist Peter with his prints and he taught me printmaking, and also about art in general. We used to chat a lot about many things. Peter is lot of things: a printmaker, painter, sculptor and poet. After meeting, he used to write me those special letters that he is known for; I don't remember replying to any of them, but I do see him from time to time.

SO: Some of your paintings on 'The Autobiography of Mawande Ka Zenzile' had a striking graphic or comic book quality about them, oftentimes verging on caricature. Some works even directly gestured to US comic heroes (Batman and Superman). Can you talk a bit about the process of making the painting *Letter for Sarah Batman to Josephine Baker* (2011), which merges the figure of Baartman with Batman?

MZ: The exhibition was about my childhood memory. Who didn't grow up watching cartoons? Marvel Comics is assimilated in my memory, heroic figures such as Power man, Black Panther. My interest in blackface and blackface caricatures comes from Warner Bros and Disney. My main interest in these sources is in the "representation of blackness in the white imagination" (Wayne Martin Mellinger, 1992), something I wasn't aware of growing up watching these simulations. I have used blackface aesthetics in my work as a way to contest or subvert the politics of representation and stereotypes enforced by such images.

Batman and Baartman sounded very poetic to me and there was something ambiguous about what they both stand for. Similar to Josephine Baker's banana skirt juxtaposed with the iconographic silhouette of Sarah Baartman. That sort of creates a third persona, a fictional heroic figure. The central figure in that painting becomes ambiguous because it resembles both Baker and Baartman, and because the figure's identity is hidden behind the mask, one can't really tell whether it is Baartman or Baker. That's what I'm interested in. The central figure, which might be representing both Baker and Baartman, takes on a heroic persona in relation to these two iconic figures, who have been portrayed in history as victims or outcasts. Other than that, the material plus the painting has a lot to tell.

Baartman and Baker have a lot in common apart from the fact that they are both black women. They have been central to topics of black sexuality, black exoticism, issues of the gaze towards black women, "black is beautiful" and black pornography. They were both sexually exploited and dehumanised by white patriarchy.

SO: Your painting *Head of an Anonymous Moor* (2011) is far from self-evident. It is, however, also more than just an exercise in geometric abstraction. Can you explain to the reader what the geometric pattern represents?

MZ: Yes, the painting is more than just a "geometric abstraction" – I wasn't thinking about abstraction at all. The work references a 1528 diagram, or formula, by the artist Albrecht Dürer, who wrote a book on human proportions. He invented this formula to help one drawing a head of an African. How odd! The orientation of his motifs fascinates me.

With my painting, I hoped that the viewer would reimage the head of a "moor". I left it to the viewer to imagine and wonder. At the same time, I wanted to challenge the stereotypical formula or apparatus for rendering an "African's head". In this way I'm hoping to subvert the stereotype created by Dürer.

In this work I look into how blackness is represented in the western hegemonic art discourse and canon, mainly in painting and other forms of visual culture, and how that shapes the way we view black subjects. To my dismay, I discovered that there is a particular, or rather peculiar way that black people in general were depicted in European paintings and popular culture. That's what I was interested in.

What I'm trying to interrogate in this work is a common element throughout my work, with regard to imitating, exoticising and blackfacing; I want to, hopefully, assimilate and subvert these elements in my own work. This particular painting is also intended to challenge visual politics of the human skull or scientific ideas around beauty, race or ethnicity.

SO: Your paintings incorporate cow dung, which lends the finished work a kind of thickened impasto feel. I suspect that there is more than just a desire to evoke texture through your use of cow shit. Can you elaborate?

MZ: If I say art is shit I would be emulating Piero Manzoni or Chris Ofili, whose context or conceptual framework might differ to mine. My main intention with using cow dung, which is similar to the use of earth in my work, is to revive Xhosa art and traditional decorative materials, particularly in relation to my self, and to examine this aspect of the culture in contemporary ways of art production inside Africa. At the same time I use these materials to challenge ideologies and stereotypes associated with my identity, as well as representation and perceptions of African art and Africans by the west.

As W.E.B. Du Bois said, "it is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity". This "double consciousness" is central in my work. I had a bullfight with it, many times, even before the oil paint started a dialogue with the cow shit.

SO: Your exhibition included a video work too, *Imbongi Yomthonyama* (2011). "I am not your slave," says a man in tribal outfit. Repeatedly. The work struck me as conceptually ambitious, but technically



unresolved and compromised. By this I mean that the work seemed to neatly make explicit some of the themes underpinning your show, but it was hampered by poor technique and crappy equipment. Nevertheless. Is this an area of practice you want to explore further? The moving image, that is.

MZ: My interest in moving images, more specially found images, concerns the process of simulation. In addition to that I would ask you next time you look at my video art work to bear in mind D.W. Griffith, whose movie *The Birth of the Nation* (1915) is a source that I have in mind for my video work and some of my other visuals. I have always been inspired by moving pictures, and their discourse. The Birth of the Nation has always been an inspiration to me, not just as a cinematic spectacular, or its revival of Klu Klax Klan myths, but also its technical aspects, the look and feel of its surface aesthetically. Film, as in blockbuster entertainments, is the next thing I want to do.

When I was making the video, filmmaker Mandilakhe Yengo was next to me and he helped with some of the editing, including the final sound mixing and editing. All that he could do was to balance the sound for me, but the visual aspect I had to resolve myself. How the video looks it was how I visualised it. The loop progressively speeds up and the actor begins to sound different or peculiar, which was intentional.

I'm sure if you made this video yourself it would be different or more technically resolved! Forgive me if I misunderstood you when you used the word "crappy" to describe my "crappy equipment" but the "crappy equipment" is the one and only TV owned by my mother. It has been part of our family for sometime and therefore it is a sentimental piece of crap and it is central to this body of work.

I have used the TV in most of my previous artworks and interventions, including Reason over Passion (2010), which I mentioned previously. I couldn't use a flat screen TV for the *Imbongi Yomthonyama*, first and foremost because I'm a black man. I'm kidding! But the fact is I'm attracted to box TV sets. If I wanted to use a flat screen I would have used one – because surely some of my friends in high places own one.

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