



Pax Kaffraria: An Interview with Artist Meleko Mokgosi

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What is most pleasing about Meleko Mokgosi's work is also what many find elusive in contemporary artwork, the combination of both technical mastery and thought provoking concept. Even as I look at his works as images on a screen, removed from the objects themselves, the rich colors, skillful draftsmanship, and inventive use of space are readily apparent. Mokgosi's art is immersed in specific historical events that carry regional, national, and global significance. The paintings in his ongoing Pax Kaffraria series interrogate colonialism, politics, power, and identity in Botswana and Southern Africa.

Mokgosi's monumental installations, which occupy vast walls and sometimes whole alcoves, allow the viewer to be engulfed by the experience of viewing much like at the cinema, or theatre. But unlike them, these still performances require an active viewer, and it is the artist's work behind the canvas that provides us with the structure from which to draw our own conclusions from, conclusions that become less concrete and tailored the more we actively engage the work. Mokgosi's use of the familiar language of cinema in his paintings (e.g. storyline, framing, fade-ins, movement through time) provides his viewers with the tools to begin their own dialogue with his art, reacting to the canvass's physical presence, from which they can gather perceptions, share experiences, and learn through its sensory cues.

One gets a sense of the scope of his installations from this video from the Lyon Biennale:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9VSGmv_ojek

Your art is concerned with issues of identity, history, memory, and perception, what formative experiences in your life compelled you to present these concepts in your art?

The work I make is concerned with southern African history and the constructed-ness of History less issues of identity, memory and perception; more so because categories such as identity and perception are philosophical and rather loose in some respects. My project-based installations deal with the relation between history and painting; and I try to deal with both terms as rigorously as I can. My schooling has been quite instrumental in formulating my position around these; more precisely, studying under the guidance of Ron Clarke at the Whitney Independent Study program. Yet my project really came together and was formed when I was Mary Kelly's student in the Interdisciplinary Studio Area at UCLA. Kelly's incredible mentorship allowed me to develop my conceptual framework and position myself effectively within a discursive field, and articulate the parameters that I think matched up with my project.

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Why did cinema become an important influence on the conceptualization of your work?

Again, this was developed to allow me to position myself in relation to history painting. I have always believed that one can only transgress the medium by working within it. Put another way, it is precisely the limits of painting that I find most productive. And I think everyone finds this in whatever medium they work in. Yes, you can throw sand at a painting or punch a hole in it, but these interventions will always be read against painting. So I use cinematic tropes (specific shots, angles, scale, and inter-titles) to develop a visual language within the field of painting. The use of cinema is also part of my methodology because I storyboard each frame and chapter, so as to formulate how I think the installation should be developed. Therefore cinema as you rightfully point out, is an important frame of reference both conceptually and methodologically, in my work.

Why have you chosen to present your work in the genre of history paintings?

Because my project cannot take the form of any other medium. The medium is indelibly tied to my engagement with the discursive site.



Can you speak to the arrangement of your installations, using varying canvas sizes and wall spacing –what you want this to provoke visually and/or narratively for the viewer?

I cannot speak on the desires of an intended viewer, rather it is up to the viewer's engagement with the material: his or her somatic response and ability to read. As an artist, and I think many will agree with me, I can only hope for the attentive viewer, who will both see and read how the work is functioning.

As an international artist, who splits his time in both the US and Botswana, how has living within and between both cultures impacted the ideas you want to elicit through your art and the format with which you present it.

I think all artists are international in many respects, so I do not see myself as separate from the regular idea of an artist. And I would say the same thing about cultures, just like being bilingual, I don't not occupy a space that is in between cultures and languages; I am as American as anyone and as much a Motswana as any, so I do not consider myself hyphenated. Just attached.

What do you believe are the biggest challenges facing artists today in connecting to audiences in a meaningful way?

Producing effective art and having a sustainable and critical studio practice is enough of challenge I think. The viewer's response cannot be spoken for because the viewer is always formed through a matrix that is coextensive yet exists outside of what the artist is producing.

What are you working on now?

I am in the final stages of completing Pax Kaffria, which I began in 2011.

Bonus: Here's a video of Mokgosi talking about his work when he was an Artist-in-Residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2011 and 2012:

* Image of Meleko Mokgosi courtesy Paul Mpagi Sepuya/The Hammer Museum. The second image is Ruse of Disavowal, 2013. For more images and information on the artist, visit his website: <http://melekomokgosi.com/>