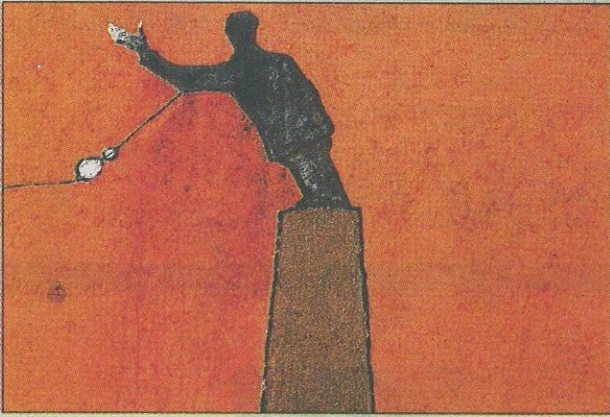


Life & Style



People need to be controlled (*The Fall*): Mawande Ka Zenzile's take on the toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue.

Cow dung rather than faeces, but it is of our time

INTENDED as a compliment when describing an artist's work, the word "timely" is an overworn adjective that can do it an injustice. The works of art that have the greatest effect on me are both very much of their time and insistently out-of-time: they respond to the world in which the artist lives but they also express a vision that extends beyond (or, to use a romantic word, "transcends") the contemporary moment.

Such works belong to the present but offer new insights to future audiences.



Chris Thurman

HALF ART

To be "timely", by contrast, is to risk being bound in time; to be relevant today, and out of date tomorrow. This form of timeliness is doomed to become moribund — like King Goodwill Zwelithini blaming xenophobic violence on a "third force", as if the Nats were still in power.

Mawande Ka Zenzile's exhibition, *Statecraft* (at the Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town) is, however, timely in the best sense of that word. A body of work begun in 2014 and completed earlier this year, *Statecraft* is in productive dialogue with some of the debates and controversies that have dominated the headlines in SA over the past month. Yet it takes a "long view" of human history and is not limited to the fickleness of the news cycle.

Ka Zenzile is, for instance, curious about statues and the forms of power they represent. Chumane Maxwele flung human faeces at the University of Cape Town's statue of Cecil John Rhodes; Ka Zenzile paints in cow dung, along with earth, gesso and oil. The #RhodesMustFall campaign ranged from sophisticated argument to clumsy sloganeering; Ka Zenzile avoids polemic, preferring instead ambiguous images and titles.

In *Dangerous Truths*, he reproduces the famous group of US Marines raising a flag during the battle of Iwo Jima in February 1945 — first a photograph by Joe Rosenthal and subsequently a statue outside the Arlington military cemetery in Washington, DC. What is the dangerous truth to which the title refers?

Is it a subversive of narrow-minded patriotism — what Tom Eaton, writing

recently about Washington's memorials, criticised as the belief "that wars are about guns and muscles rather than burnt children"? Or is it a reluctant acceptance that, ultimately, might is right.

Here it may be noted that the portrait *Makaveli*, patterned on Santi di Tito's famous painting of the Florentine philosopher, makes explicit Ka Zenzile's acknowledgement of Machiavellian theory. Another portrait, based on a well-known photograph of a humbled and haggard-looking Saddam Hussein during his trial for crimes against humanity, offers us a different view of power: eventually, even dictators are deposed.

People need to be controlled (*The Fall*), in turn, depicts the toppling of Saddam's statue in Baghdad: an iconic — or perhaps iconoclastic — image cherished by defenders of US intervention, but representing a hollow victory in light of events in Iraq since 2003. Again, the title could be read in various ways. Is this an ironic reference to the absolute "control" of Saddam's regime, or is Ka Zenzile pointing out that one regime is simply followed by others — either an unstable government or the terror of Islamic State? Violent oppression of one group by another is, Ka Zenzile insists, an ancient human story.

Symbols are contradictory signifiers — they mean different things to different people at different times (just ask a Japanese person about the US soldiers at Iwo Jima).

■ *At Stevenson Cape Town (160 Sir Lowry Road, Woodstock) until May 30.*