

Financial Mail

Art review

Moshekwa Langa: The art of protest

BY ASHRAF JAMAL, MAY 12 2016, 06:18

[HTTP://WWW.FINANCIALMAIL.CO.ZA/LIFE/ART/2016/05/12/MOSHEKWA-LANGA-THE-ART-OF-PROTEST?PLATFORM=HOOTSUITE](http://www.financialmail.co.za/life/art/2016/05/12/moshekwa-langa-the-art-of-protest?platform=hootsuite)



ELLIPSES is Moshekwa Langa's first outing with the Stevenson Gallery after a longstanding association with the Goodman. Langa is reticent about his shifting alliance, but it is clear that while his heart may be "broken" he is reassured by the professional move. After all, Stevenson will be showing Langa's work at Frieze New York in May. And, all the more intriguingly, in July Langa and Joost Bosland will be curating a group show spanning the Stevenson Cape Town and Johannesburg galleries that is centred on K Sello Duiker's 2001 novel *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*.

Recently republished, Duiker's novel captures the turmoil of a mind in siege; it is perhaps the defining new SA fiction that embraces a broken and interrupted worldview — Duiker would later commit suicide.

For Duiker it was the Zimbabwean literary genius, Dambudzo Marechera, who would prove a profound influence. The author of *Black Sunlight*, Marechera well understood the power of bricolage, the ability to combine dissonant elements the better to reconfigure the world. A collagist, a cubist, Marechera would shatter the national narrative, liberate the sexed and tormented body, open up an uncharted path.

Something to this effect is now under way at the Stevenson. For if Langa and Bosland's group show matters profoundly it is because it champions the fragmentary and heterogeneous in a time that is becoming increasingly draconian and divisive. A civil war is in the making, there is talk of the year-long student uprising as a reverberation of the 1976 riots. What matters here, however, is the recognition that we are living in dangerously oppressive yet ungovernable times, and that the art of these times must, perforce, mirror this unsettlement, find succour in discordance.

Ellipses does just that. As the title indicates, this is a show that proceeds through omission and elision. For Langa the show evokes "a broken description". More an act of "taking notes", a hurried transcription in passing, Langa's mixed media works, using masking tape, ink, spray paint and more, are distracted descriptors for fleeting states.

As the artist casually remarks: "I might be working with ink, and so the work might look like it is sequential, and sometimes within that there is a break because I get distracted — maybe it was sunny and then it started raining."

And this fickle natural world is certainly the governing register in Langa's drenched and sodden thickets at once natural and imaginary.

The haphazard and seemingly random *modus operandi* is a key to the artist's process. And given the revival of a polemical and extremist political and aesthetic ethos it becomes all the more critical that we hold fast to creators like Langa and Duiker who viscerally and emotively have chosen to plumb the psychic discordance at the core of a disavowed, unfinished, and protracted black being. Theirs is not "protest art" but the art of protest.

All too little has been done to examine this aggrieved, frustrated, confused, and gnawing state of indistinction which we've come to call "black pain" and which Frantz Fanon termed the "zone of non-being". A zone occult, unstable, it however has proven a profound resource for creativity. Langa, who soared on the wings of our hallucinatory democracy to become an international art star, remains one of the most incisive interpreters of our interrupted state and our zone of non-being.

When I was walking about Langa's latest exhibition with Jane Alexander, the sculptor remarked: "Moshekwa has an amazing capacity to combine everything that doesn't work together." We laugh. For it is certainly true that Langa's choreography of odd or atypical materials and mediums is what has made him a global art star. The inheritor of the surrealist movement's collage tradition, Langa reminds us that what counts is not merely the amalgamation of odd materials but what that amalgamation generates psychically. A break in the weather is also a break in the mind, the heart.

An inner émigré of sorts — the artist resides in Amsterdam and has long been a part of the black diaspora — Langa has always foregrounded the rawness of displacement. By combining found objects, retooling raw materials, and by thrusting before us works as resolved as they are unresolved, Langa has never ceased to remind us of the elliptical nature of being. All that matters is immanence, the synthesis of the sensible, the intuited, some conjuring of the impossible and the ordinary, a break of light in a consuming darkness, a tug of air in a smothering world.

If Moshekwa Langa's art matters all the more today it is because we live in very dark times indeed; times in which, all the more, one needs to embrace the wonders of the improbable and, after Alexander, find ways "to combine everything that doesn't work together".

• *Ellipses by Moshekwa Langa is at the Stevenson Gallery in Cape Town until May 28*