



CONTEXT: *Prologue*, 2016

A shimmering delight

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ELLIPSES. By Moshekwa Langa. At Stevenson gallery until Saturday. **DANNY SHORKEND** reviews

EASY on the eye, colourful landscapes of sorts greet one at the Stevenson gallery. And as the conversation ensues, so these shimmering surfaces pulsate with depth and colourful delight.

Moshekwa Langa, a relatively young, but seasoned artist shows deft skill with his use of various paints, mainly ink on paper.

What these colour notations actually mean is rather difficult to pin down, and one suspects that these works are meant to lure the eye, like a sunny day or retreat to wintry cosiness, rather than initiate philosophical reflection.

This is not a critique, but rather the assertion that shallowness has a certain depth, like the value of “small talk” to connect people or the simplicity of a smile.

In a number of the works (particularly in the gallery’s “first” room), one finds a sense of the coexistence of trees rising upwards – long, thin trunks becoming explosions of greenery. There is a sense of the balance between horizontals and verticals, balanced further by the foliage. However, it is his artistic flair for colour, rather than line that is most noteworthy, as the “tree theme” is iterated in ever nuanced complexity and subtlety with his wide range of colour explorations.

I am aware that this is a rather formal assessment, a kind of formalist theoretical vantage point where art is said to remove one from the realities of this world and transport one to an alternative world, relegating content and the life-world as insignificant compared to the aesthetic experience and disposition art is said to inspire.

Yet my sense is that a balanced approach is required: it is not either formalism or social critique; the pure world of art or the lack of art’s sacrosanct position. The resolution? The art-object does contain some kind of order, some refuge from the “real” world and at the same time is created within a context, neither wholly hallowed nor impervious to any other socially motivated fact. The equation is thus one of complementary, that is the paradoxical co-existence of aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties inhere in the artwork and art-world. Langa’s work is a retreat, but it also carries significant cultural and economic capital – it functions in the world.

The frenetic colouration, the inkiness if you will is thus both liberating and part of a network of social conventions, a game one might say, though without the intention of trivialising the matter.

In amongst the paintings is a curious installation. A greyish cloth hides various things, while some balls (hence my reference to “games” may not be far off the mark) are exposed. The precise meaning eludes me and I still find myself thinking and feeling: “what sumptuous folds”; “what an interesting set-up in terms of composition”; “what colour co-ordination” – as I lapse into the purist theoretical framework. But this sensuality, if you like does need or is in need of explanatory depth and I am not certain how it is related to the paintings. Perhaps I can be facetious and claim that indeed there is no relationship and then moving in a philosophical direction, claim that this is a metaphor for the fragmented nature of life itself, that one cannot always construct a coherent narrative and link things, for there is perpetual flux and sometimes things do not easily fit into one another.

But herein is a contradiction for Langa’s work is decidedly without angst or a sense that there is a chasm, a deep rift between things – one feels a certain calming tenderness. And then I am off again: his work reveals a wonderful sense of the push-pull dynamic created by colour, line and compositional unity, as if the paintings were a kind of popular

game where one is to stare at seeming dots only to cement an image at some point. The collage work is also highly adventurous as Langa explores not only shape, but again the dynamic between torn sheets of slightly different, but closely resembling colours.

All this pleasure tries to keep my philosophical inclinations in abeyance and it almost succeeds. I get lost in the blobs where a colour-shape is present and then within that a darker shade of that colour is “dotted down”. When little shapes, sperm-like in effect become trees and horizons, where little egg-likeforms seem to coagulate and well, fornicate. I still don’t know what it means and the artist’s statement presented in the gallery leaflet does not help in this regard, though that need not serve as a critique. Do we ever know? An enjoyable excursion indeed.

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