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Bank or Economy and Comrades: A review by Khehla Chepape Makgato

khehla chepape makgato

Bank or Economy by Meschac Gaba and Comrades by Meleko Mokgosi at STEVENSON Gallery, Cape Town

STEVENSON gallery in Cape Town presents two different exhibitions by two African born artists; Meleko Mokgosi, from Botswana, and Meschac Gaba, from Benin. Mokgosi's exhibition comprises of figurative and text-based paintings whilst Gaba's entails an installation of three large stalls made up of found objects such as banknotes, semi-precious stones, ropes, pegs, till and plastic roofs, briefcases and wood. The two exhibitions have similar narratives that are vividly expressive and both reveal inequality in Africa while questioning the science of economics.

To elucidate the main proposition of this review, it is necessary to follow not only the development of Europe and the underdevelopment of Africa, but also to understand how this development comprised a single system — that of capitalist imperialism converse with one another. “In the centuries before colonial rule,” noted Walter Rodney in his 1973 book titled *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, writing under the subtitle of ‘The Coming of Imperialism and Colonialism’, ‘Europe increased its economic capacity by leaps and bounds, while Africa appeared to have been almost static. Africa in the late 19th century could still be described as part communal and part feudal, although Western Europe had moved completely from feudalism to capitalism.’



Bank or Economy: Inflation

Gaba's work really speaks to the colonialism and imperialism which he assigned into three categories – one could easily interpret it as working class, upper and elite class, upper middle class and poor class. He further opens a discussion about Africa's position in the global art and the manifestations of culture in a global marketplace. The first artwork, a shack, entitled *Bank or Economy: Inflation* explores what looks like a dwindling African economy – that when Europe coughs, the cold is felt by and in Africa. His particular focus has been on the economy of Zimbabwe over the last decade in the 2000s. He carefully captured the socio-economic phases using a bank note of Zimbabwe. The emphasis is put on the sharp decline of currency value in that country that used to be the Africa's

bread basket. The situation of Zimbabwe cannot be isolated from the African states, even a mind not trained in economics will make attempt in telling a story of economic struggle facing many Africans in Africa.

Borrowing from our most celebrated local scholar and thinker in politics and economics, Moeletsi Mbeki, he said in a conversational interview with Alec Hogg: ‘Our economy is not performing and there are good reasons why it’s not performing. It’s an archaic economy that is stuck in the ways of the past that is still being driven. For example, our exports are driven by migrant labour – it’s driven by old-fashioned technologies and exports raw materials. Now an economy that exports raw materials can never go anywhere and we have to realise that and have to change.’

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-Moeletsi Mbeki, in conversation with Alec Hogg

Mbeki, like Gaba, questions why Africa’s economy is still largely driven by old-fashioned technologies and export of raw materials? Talking about the Africa’s reliance on raw material export, in his work titled *Bank and Economy: Transparent Economy*, Gaba uses semi-precious stones such as rose quartz, smokey quartz and carnelian as metaphors for mineral resources: that an economy that exports only raw materials will create no jobs for its citizens.



Bank or Economy: Transparent Economy

On the other hand, Moleko Mokgosi’s *Comrades* exhibition carries Mokgosi from his role as a visual storyteller, narrating ancient Batswana folklores with their encounters with the white settlers through his incantatory modal narratives into a total marriage with the modern days. It is a gracefully exciting experience for the viewer to be taken on a journey of seemingly two classes of education, notably public and private, urban and rural. His work reverberates with the all-time South African educationist and thinker, Professor Es’kia Mphahlele thoughts in 1962 when he wrote; “We are all trapped, black and white, in South Africa. Ours is a history of frontiers wars, covered wagon invasions, and racial strife. Our literature must perforce record this. Racial strife is our way of life.”



Comrades installation view

One cannot separate Mokgosi's work from colonisation and displacement, which worked to fashion entirely new prototypes, people, communities and cultures. We see complex mixtures of societies, cultural expressions, racial identities and social procedures delivered in work titled *Comrades I*. Here Mokgosi juxtaposes the contemporary with prehistoric dissemination of knowledge – where African elders sat around fire every night to tell stories of African legends to their children; whereas contemporary practise required that such knowledge be shared within the confinement of institutional classrooms.



Comrades I Installation shot

Another piece, *Comrades I*, in the exhibition depicts smiling faces of black girls in maroon skirts with boys in short pants all in white shirts. Their shoes are shining from black polish and the piece is exhibited alongside a Setswana tale inscribed on a large grey scale canvas in white letters. The tale is about African bravery of a woman whom, when her husband was so weak that he couldn't support family, volunteered to fend for family by turning herself into a lion and catching zebras for meat. In Mokgosi's work, there is a suggestion of class struggle which requires processes of thinking, analysing, discussing, defining and redefining one's attitudes and positions towards inequality in the society.

Both exhibitions create a backdrop where artists and intellectuals could gather in united spirit; where pertinent issues are tackled. Such gathering is part of the tools of building an honest socio-economic framework and surely the discussion will help generate momentum in addressing rather problematic connotations of 'armchair criticism'. Similarly, the work of art necessitates forms of travel and invariably involves informants, i.e. those people who reveal to us knowledge we may otherwise not be privy to.

The exhibitions concluded on 27th February 2016.

Khehla Chepape Makgato is a Joburg-based independent artist and arts writer, contributing articles regularly to and online publications. He works at Assemblage Studios and is the founder of Samanthole Creative Projects & Workshop, a community-based art organisation where he facilitates and coordinates arts and literacy outreach programmes for the youths.