



Meleko Mokgosi *Comrades I*, 2015. Two panels, oil on canvas; bleach on portrait linen.

A Comradeship of Stillness: Meleko Mokgosi's 'Comrades'

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In some very significant ways, 'Comrades' by Meleko Mokgosi is the time machine you most dread going into; time is savage in its circularity.

But it is deceptive in its packaging. There is a habit among exhibitions to sell the tenuous and ineffable. Titles feature words like silence, death and memory, often combined with adjectives like 'close to', 'underneath' and 'beyond' and so the promise is of proximity. The offer is of totalising insight. And so with its two syllables, 'Comrades', contained in two rooms, appears fully-digestible. This is where we would be wrong.



Meleko Mokgosi *Comrades II*, 2015. Two panels, oil on canvas; bleach on portrait linen.

Consider *Comrades I* and *Comrades II*, positioned in opposing ends of the room. Both use a realism reminiscent of Gustave Courbet. The assembled youths bring to mind *Burial at Ornans*. Large and looming, there is something historic about their depiction. But in the former, composed purely of preadolescent black girls in varying degrees of readiness and dishevelment, the deprivation is clear despite their shiny faces. The background is in the off-whites of maas and paraffin-stove-yellowed walls. While only one is wearing shoes without laces, the maroon red uniforms suggest a school in a township. In the latter, there are fewer characters, sharing identical Aquafresh-advert smiles. The boy in front is the most decorated. Thick-necked and blonde, he exudes nourishment and abundance. The man to the right, is unremarkable – intermediate in every way – and behind them, without adornment is the archetypical ‘Sipho’ or ‘Thokozani.’ His good grooming appears almost like an allegory for the ‘sanitization’ of his blackness.

On an adjacent wall is *Comrades V*, a painting in three parts, comprised of exteriors and interiors. The uniformity of the building is uncertain but the cohesion of the scenes is unquestionable. In the first part, two men sit in a backyard engaged in tense conversation. The next features the front of the house, where a bare-chested man stands in a narrow doorway. On the porch an old woman is seated behind a lawnmower, her eyes unassailable. The last part is a room divided by a curtain; newspapers are the tablecloths for the sparse wooden furniture, while the presence of lamps suggests there is no electricity.

In all these images, who the comrades are is ambiguous. It would appear that the word has connotations of complicity rather than comradeship. Despite the age differences, the images belong to the past, present and future simultaneously. The black students in all these images have feasible links to the sprawling scenes of that sparse home. It is within the scope of possibility that that home is where they grew up and/or it is where they are destined. The talking men reflect a communism that is lost in its own verbiage while their material circumstances are frozen in place. The suggestion is that here is nothing very new about the dispensation.



Meleko Mokgosi *Comrades V*, 2015. Three panels, oil on canvas.

In ‘Comrades’, therefore, time does not heal all wounds because the wound is a part of the anatomy. Essentially, even with ebb and flow, (up)rise(ings) and fall(isms), there is no change. There is a seamlessness in these images that denounces hope for the future but is too-factual to be called Afro-pessimism. Painted in 2015, the images would be as relevant in the 80s. In that room, in a time of a revived revolutionary spirit, in a time where the wording of things cannot overlook its own linguistic weight, the pace of the narrative that unravels is a stillness that embodies the transcendence of movement. It is a post-post-cliché wherein every reiteration and utterance is dizzying in its freshness. Everything counts so much more because-of, not in-spite-of the fact that its been said before. What was once made over-visible into a norm is again poignant. Mokgosi crafts a beauty out of an unredeemable ugliness. The viewer is set free from disappointment because there is nothing to anticipate or expect.

