

## ART AND CAKE

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# Studio Visit: Simphiwe Ndzube, A Journey Through the Theater of the Absurd

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Simphiwe Ndzube. Photo Credit Gary Brewer.

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By Gary Brewer

“If a man has his eyes bound, you can encourage him as much as you like to stare through the bandage, but he will never see anything.”

“Illusions are more common than changes in fortune.”  
Franz Kafka, *The Castle*

“How thin and insecure is that little beach of white sand we call consciousness. I’ve always known that in my writing it is the dark troubled sea of which I know nothing, save its presence, that carried me. I’ve always felt that creating was a fearless and a timid, a despairing and hopeful, launching out into that unknown.”

Athol Fugard



Simphiwe Ndzube. Photo Credit Gary Brewer.

Through metaphor and myth we seek to express themes that speak not to the particulars of a time and place but assert the conditions of life in universal terms; it is a need to depict the everyman and woman as players in this tragicomedy of life. From the Tarot deck, the fool steps off of a cliff his eyes bright and looking with certainty at the horizon to begin the fool’s journey. Two vaudevillians wait in an empty landscape for the all-knowing Godot, to give meaning to the absurdity of the emptiness that envelope them. Lady Macbeth cannot cleanse her hands of the blood from the primal murder – absolution is not possible for this grim deed. These images speak to us outside of time, race and gender, they reach to the heart of the matter – into the heart of darkness, of our communion with oblivion – the dance of life performed against the void.

Bhabharosi is a figure from a mythic realm that Simphiwe Ndzube has created. ‘Bhabha’ refers to the word barbarous, meaning “uncivilized; wild; savage; crude”, ‘rosi’ is Simphiwe’s addition, creating an improvised language representing this alternate universe where the ‘fools journey’ is unfolding. Bhabharosi climbs and jumps, falls and stumbles through a netherworld that is a theater composed of random bits of the world we know. Some elements contain a narrative intent, a car or a boat for transport to reach the other shore, others are the things Simphiwe may see walking to his studio in DTLA. His works have a playful spontaneity that is grounded by a sinister undercurrent that infuses these environments with a feeling of disquiet; a sense of foreboding pervades the spaces that his figures journey through.





The paintings are large – the paint is applied loosely with richly worked surfaces. There are passages with strident patterns that are created using both brush and paint from spray cans, the patterns are in striking colors that generate an optical energy in the images. Lavender is a dominant color recurring as the backdrop to these wildly haphazard compositions. They teeter and collapse the figures scurry and dance through the stark stage sets of this fleeting world. Headless with legs that become whips, dangerous tools of pain and, simultaneously, they are tentacles reaching and grabbing, climbing, exploring the world. In many paintings Simphiwe stuffs clothes, pants and shirts whose appendages end in knots, sometimes adding a material or rope that becomes the whip like extensions in his paintings.

The paintings freely move from image to object and sculptural objects fill the studio as well. The sculptures have a lighter feel, the playfulness of the figures freed from the chromatically expressive force of his painted environments. Painted canvases on the floor create a ground for these sculptures; lights, fans and umbrellas add an eccentric circus like atmosphere. Freed from the stark light within the paintings Bhabharossi is dancing in the air, doing flips and somersaults.

Headless, genderless and race-less Bhabharossi represents both everyman and women, and also represents Simphiwe himself embarking into an unknown world rich in possibilities but always with the existential facts on the ground; the capriciousness of fate, of who is born when and where, and of the unknown forces that shape our world and the circumstances we find ourselves in.





Simphiwe Ndzube. Photo Credit Gary Brewer.

Simphiwe was born in Cape Town, South Africa. As a child he and his siblings and friends would build small chairs and furnishing out of wood and mud, cars were made from wire, elaborate worlds were created with a hierarchy of superior status based on age. This was the early beginning of his life as a creative artist. Later, he and his friends found old thrown out mattresses and piled them together to jump on and do flips, they also placed them under trees from which they would jump doing somersaults, from this they developed skills that led to dance. From the age of 16 to 18 he was street dancing and thought that he would become a professional dancer. But all the while he was drawing, creating images based on Japanese anime and other sources that he saw on television. When he was thirteen he drew an elaborate anime character above his mother's bed. When she came home at first she was upset, but latter realized that he was driven to create and bought him his first paints. He latter went to Michaelis School of Fine Art, one of the most prestigious schools on the continent.

He said of Cape Town and the world where he was raised, "There was an intensity that people put into everything that they did. Mainly involving extreme and dangerous activities that could end life in a snap. In the West there is an optimism that gives one a sense of luxury with time, in some parts of South Africa you knew you may not be here tomorrow, so everything was done with an intensity like it might be the last thing you do."

As we spoke I mentioned Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot', saying that the space the figures inhabited with the cast-off refuse of the pedestrian world, and the strange barren light, felt like a stage set for Beckett. Simphiwe smiled and said, "The title of this series is Waiting for Mlungu, or 'Mungu', a reference to the god of creation and bureaucracy, one who is remote and detached from man and living beings, in the beliefs of the Yao people of Mozambique and the Bantu people of Sub Saharan Africa. The word Mlungu was latter altered to refer to white people as the dominant ruling class, and now it is used on the street among black south Africans to mean that your are doing well financially, that you are making some money."



Simphiwe Ndzube. Photo Credit Gary Brewer.

Simphiwe is working on a series of screaming heads, a reference to Francis Bacon whom he loves. He said of these, “ The scream in my paintings is something more than Bacon’s existential terror, I want it to convey the burden of carrying the weight of this body in the world. I want the pressure of the world to force a different kind of air from the lungs of the screamer.”

There is a haunting otherness to this world that the figures strive to understand, it is part Dr. Seuss inflected with Francis Bacon in a narrative drawn from Franz Kafka. Mlungu is an unattainable authority, one they will never reach, like “K” in Kafka’s ‘The Castle’ – there is no path that will take them to the authority they seek’ just an endless labyrinth. Simultaneously Bhabharosi expresses exuberance, a celebratory dance of life in which these figures, knowing the terms of their condition, are undeterred from their search.

Simphiwe mentioned that while in school there was pressure on the black South African students to focus on the political realities, to make work that addressed the history of Apartheid and the current racial tensions in their society. Of this Simphiwe said, “It is a critical conversation that is needed as the majority of poor black South Africans lives remains harsh decades after the end of Apartheid. But I felt that it was limiting me, I did not want my work to be temporal in nature, to speak about social conditions that would lose meaning in time. I wanted to speak in broader terms, in a way that was universal. I made Bhabharosi without race or gender so that it would speak for all people, not to entertain ‘post-black’ or ‘post-gender’ ideas, but to make the figures I create travel through wider narratives. Bhabharosi’s journey is on a mythic level and expresses the conditions of life that we want to escape, and of the desire to recreate ourselves.”

These paintings in part represent his journey of rebellion and renewal, not to leave behind your origins, but to strive to create and explore ones potential and not be trapped within the arbitrary conditions of history and fate. On his own terms, Simphiwe Ndzube is exploring a mythic realm in which discovery and renewal are possible, but the weight and pressure of history will always be a factor shaping the outcome, alternately forcing a scream of despair or a cry of rejoicing.





Simphiwe Ndzube. Photo Credit Gary Brewer.

**Upcoming exhibitions:**

September 9, opening at Nicodim, Los Angeles

Group show in Cape Town, South Africa with Whatiftheworld Gallery 2nd September.

Moma PS1 book fair, New York, 23 Sept

Solo project, Shanghai Cc Foundation, March 2018

