

# caa.reviews

A Publication of the College Art Association

Concise, critical reviews of books, exhibitions, and projects in all areas and periods of art history and visual studies

February 13, 2018

Jonathan P. Binstock and Malick Gaines *Meleko Mokgosi: Pax Kaffraria* Exh. cat. Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2014. 119 pp. Cloth \$92.00 (9780991635696)

UCLA Hammer Museum, June 2–September 2, 2012; Grand Gallery at Memorial Art Gallery, Rochester, NY, February 19–May 7, 2017; Rochester Contemporary Art Center, February 3–March 19, 2017

Heather Layton

[CrossRef DOI: 10.3202/caa.reviews.2018.46](https://doi.org/10.3202/caa.reviews.2018.46)



Installation view, *Meleko Mokgosi: Pax Kaffraria*, UCLA Hammer Museum, June 2–September 2, 2012 (photograph © Brian Forrest; provided by the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles)

The exhibition *Meleko Mokgosi: Pax Kaffraria* consisted of a series of mural-size paintings that interwove historical narratives of postcolonial southern African countries with cinematic contemporary scenes from the daily lives of the individuals who uphold, live within, resist, define, and embody the nation-states. Mokgosi, born in Francistown, Botswana, and living in New York City, presented the project in eight nonlinear chapters, each one composed of three to eight canvases, with the exception of the first chapter, *Lekgowa*, which consisted of a single circular canvas. Six of the eight chapters of *Pax Kaffraria* were installed in the Grand Gallery of the Memorial Art Gallery in Rochester, New York. A seventh chapter was installed at the Rochester Contemporary Art Center along with a selection of Mokgosi's drawings, making this the most comprehensive exhibition of *Pax Kaffraria* to date. The only missing chapter, *Terra Pericolosa*, was not installed with the others due to the unavailability of a wall that could accommodate its size (168" x 540"). It was instead represented as a print.

Mokgosi started this project by determining its title, which offered a framework for understanding the work as a whole. *Pax Kaffraria* is an amalgamation of *Pax Romana* and *British Kaffraria*. The period of relative peace at the height of the Roman Empire denoted by the first term was made possible only by military domination, pacification, and the erasure of conquered people. The British Kaffraria was a colonial administrative entity once located in current-day South Africa. The word *Kaffraria* also became a racial slur that white Afrikaners used against the Xhosa people who inhabited the land. In addition to the exhibition title, Mokgosi introduced each of the chapters of paintings with a carefully calculated intitle, a term most commonly used to describe segments of filmed narrative text in motion pictures. *Lekgowa*, the intitle of chapter 1, for example, refers to a light-skinned person or a person in power, and *Terra Pericolosa*, the intitle of chapter 3, means "dangerous land."

Upon entering the Grand Gallery, viewers had to decide whether to walk right or left, a decision that determined their starting point in the complex, psychologically charged, and chronologically

fragmented narrative. The scenes, exquisitely painted on a monumental scale, revealed themselves as they might in a film. The clusters of canvases extended beyond peripheral vision, making it difficult to passively view the paintings. Exhibition visitors had to physically move through the semi-fictional world created by the murals, a world populated with life-size figures dressed in culturally coded clothing, animals with luminescent hides, and household objects that signified cultural and political content. Even the smallest of details—the ones that might be dismissed as mundane in another context—revealed the labyrinth of influences that exists beneath the surface of our individual and national identities. For example, what do we hang on our walls? A portrait of Jesus, a president, a military general, a family member, a pop star, or a king? *Pax Kaffraria* suggested that these choices are not arbitrary but rather physical manifestations of the national circumstances into which we were born. The seated woman in chapter 4 wore two necklaces—one of white pearls and another of large, assorted colorful beads. She was, literally and metaphorically, carrying the history of her nation on her body. The local African and foreign colonial influences that once pressed from the outside in were now manifesting themselves from the inside out through her act—not necessarily choice—of selecting both necklaces in the morning.

Mokgosi began storyboarding *Pax Afrikaner* (2008–11), the prequel to *Pax Kaffraria* (2010–14), after the outbreak of xenophobic violence in South Africa in 2007. These events, combined with Mokgosi's extensive research into psychoanalytic theory and postcolonial studies, provoked a significant shift in the artist's understanding of his positionality and what it means to be a person tied by birth and choice to the cultures, politics, and histories of Botswana and the United States. The *Pax Afrikaner* project placed emphasis on the representation of overarching postcolonial narratives playing out in contemporary events. *Pax Kaffraria* locates those narratives within the lived experience, demonstrating the extent to which our language, our access to power, and our social loyalties are predetermined by the tiny patch of dirt upon which we first walk.

Mokgosi's technical painting process also reveals a faded colonial footprint. In American art schools, students are often taught to paint skin by adding titanium white to create highlights. As a graduate student, Mokgosi rejected this technique, and the idea that black skin could be best represented by whitening it, and developed, alternatively, a reductive painting process. He paints the darkest shadows first and then, using brushes or rags, creates highlights by removing pigment from the canvas while the oil is still wet. Mokgosi does not prime his canvases with white gesso. As he subtracts paint, it is the warm, earthy color of the raw canvas that shines through. Mokgosi's painting process is particularly unforgiving, as there is no way to go back once an area has been painted. To prevent errors, Mokgosi makes all formal and conceptual decisions in advance. He spends six to twelve months meticulously storyboarding and composing each chapter before he starts to paint.

As in real life, this exhibition provided no opportunity for simplified explanations. Any chance visitors had at finding a linear story required a level of subjective editing and personal prioritization of clues. One viewer of chapter 7, *Fully Belly II* (2010–14), for example, might associate the pain evoked by the schoolchildren, the forms of whom have been scratched out by roller marks of black paint, with the portraits of military dictators depicted in previous chapters. Another might see the blacked-out schoolchildren and alternatively wonder what or who else is being concealed or erased. The children of *Fully Belly II* might be linked to the men in suits in chapter 6, who have also been rolled over with black paint. Likewise, the elusive children might be associated with the maid in chapter 5, *Graase-Mans* (2010–14), who is partially hidden behind a semitransparent, white lace curtain, a relic of colonial presence.

Standing at the center of the Grand Gallery, it was also possible to read the chapters horizontally. For example, a viewer could mold a narrative about postcolonial southern Africa by reading only the female figures—the brides, students, servants, soldiers, wives, and children. What stories would the woman in the military uniform tell as opposed to the self-assured bride being escorted by an entourage of suited men? And who is the lone woman on her hands and knees, bowing to the smugness of an upper-class, contemporary male character wearing a peculiar headdress? In chapter 2, *Terra Nullius* (2010–12), a scarcely noticeable white child is hugging a black nanny from behind. Or is the child choking her? Already there is a temptation to veer from the narrative of women, but that is the point: our national, cultural, religious, ethnic, and gender identities are

inseparable. With his masterful use of semiotic language, Mokgosi has created a world based on logic, but one where truth can also evaporate and re-form at any moment.

Mokgosi's politically relevant body of work is weighted with the consequences of misused power. The most tragic story line appears in chapter 4, *Sikhuselo Sembumbulu* (2010–12), an intertitle translated as "Bulletproof." It depicts a scene from the Xhosa cattle killings of 1856–57. The exhibition plaque read: "Prophecies led the Xhosa people to believe that by slaughtering their cattle and destroying their grain they could drive away invading colonial powers and simultaneously revive their ancestors back to flesh and blood." This story is echoed in chapter 8, *Ruse of Disavowal* (2010–13), in which a white tourist on a hunting safari kneels for a photograph behind a majestic lion he has just killed for recreational sport. A young boy stands next to the older man in a state of confusion, skepticism, and/or disgust. As with many of the figures, the boy's facial expression is difficult to read, which places the onus of responsibility on viewers to insert their own bias. Along with the indeterminate stares, the expansive stretches of unpainted canvas in Mokgosi's works invite viewers to apply their own narratives. The American viewer might well insert parallel stories based upon her or his own experience of living in the United States; visual metaphors might extend to discussions about the Black Lives Matter movement, the chasm between the political left and right, or the increasingly apparent influence of church upon state.

The fact that Mokgosi has exhibited *Pax Kaffraria* to a predominantly Western audience guarantees failure in interpretation. Presumably few of the exhibition's viewers had enough preexisting knowledge and experience to identify all the historical and cultural references, such as how the particular breed of each represented dog correlated to a specific aspect of colonization. Even a viewer equipped with extensive knowledge about southern Africa would have to create subjective interpretations of the visual objects that Mokgosi has invented, such as the lampshade-shaped headdress worn by the man in chapter 4, *Sikhuselo Sembumbulu*. When asked in an artist talk at the Memorial Art Gallery to explain a particular sequence of paintings, Mokgosi responded by saying that he could not determine that for anyone else, because "we all bring our own baggage." When asked at a second artist talk at the University of Rochester to read a segment of text in Setswana, a language that Mokgosi speaks, he explained that he would not, because the intention of the language would not translate. In the first case, he maintained the idea that histories are a messy combination of all of our retellings. In the second case, he maintained integrity for language by declining to participate in the mistranslation of history for the purpose of entertainment or curiosity. *Pax Kaffraria* brings to the fore the temptation to commit one of the great insults of the West: to assume one has the ability and the right to tell another person's story.

It is refreshingly difficult to decipher fact from fiction in Mokgosi's tableaux or to know where his intentions end and the viewers' interpretations start. A full appreciation of the work is gained only through multiple viewings and tangential research, as the content of the chapters will undoubtedly expand and transform each time they are read. Mokgosi's paintings expect, depend upon, and have certainly earned this level of extended investment. Fortunately the exhibition catalogue, allows for endless revisiting of all eight chapters, which are illustrated in full. The book also includes "Phantom History, Phantom Nation," an essay by Jonathan P. Binstock, the director of the Rochester Memorial Art Gallery; "Metalepsis," an artist's statement by Meleko Mokgosi; and a conversation between Mokgosi and Malik Gaines. The multisite exhibition in Rochester offered far more than a memorable visual experience; it offered gateways into discussions about desire, disappointment, and the causes and casualties of nationalism.

**Heather Layton**

Senior Lecturer of Art, Department of Art and Art History, University of Rochester  
Please send comments about this review to [editor.caareviews@collegeart.org](mailto:editor.caareviews@collegeart.org).

[http://caareviews.org/reviews/3288#.Ws3\\_\\_PkrUK](http://caareviews.org/reviews/3288#.Ws3__PkrUK)