BusinessDay

CHRIS THURMAN: Some artists build myths, others must destroy them

A probe of our understanding of history by a trio of artists is being conducted at Stevenson in Cape Town and Johannesburg

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'Lime', 2019, by Paulo Nazareth. Picture: STEVENSON/PAULO NAZARETH

In Phambi Kwendlovu, Paulo Nazareth‘’s first solo exhibition in SA, the Brazilian artist gives a local twist to a preoccupation that has informed much of his work: the elephant as a symbol of memory. For Nazareth, stories about elephants also become sites of contestation over how the past is misremembered. “Official history,” he observes, is “fiction, a game of strength” in which the strong choose which facts will be emphasised, distorted or neglected. The artist is thus engaged in what Milan Kundera called “the struggle of memory against forgetting”, an activist form of historiography that seeks to uncover suppressed narratives.

Nazareth’s exhibition is appropriately paired at the Stevenson Gallery Cape Town (until November 23) with Simon Gush’s Welcome to Frontier Country, a film and print installation addressing the contestation over land ownership in the Eastern Cape. Gush, too, seeks to query received history — in this case, the mythology attached to the 1820 British Settlers, and in particular his ancestor Richard Gush.

The story goes like this. Richard Gush, a high-minded Quaker, was part of the settler community of Salem; he was a carpenter by trade, and so devout that he built a church before he considered building a house for his family. During one of many skirmishes between the amaXhosa and the settlers, Gush intervened by riding unarmed to meet his foes and negotiated a truce, ensuring that Salem was spared from future attacks.

Bus stop, Salem/Landscape, Salem, 2019.

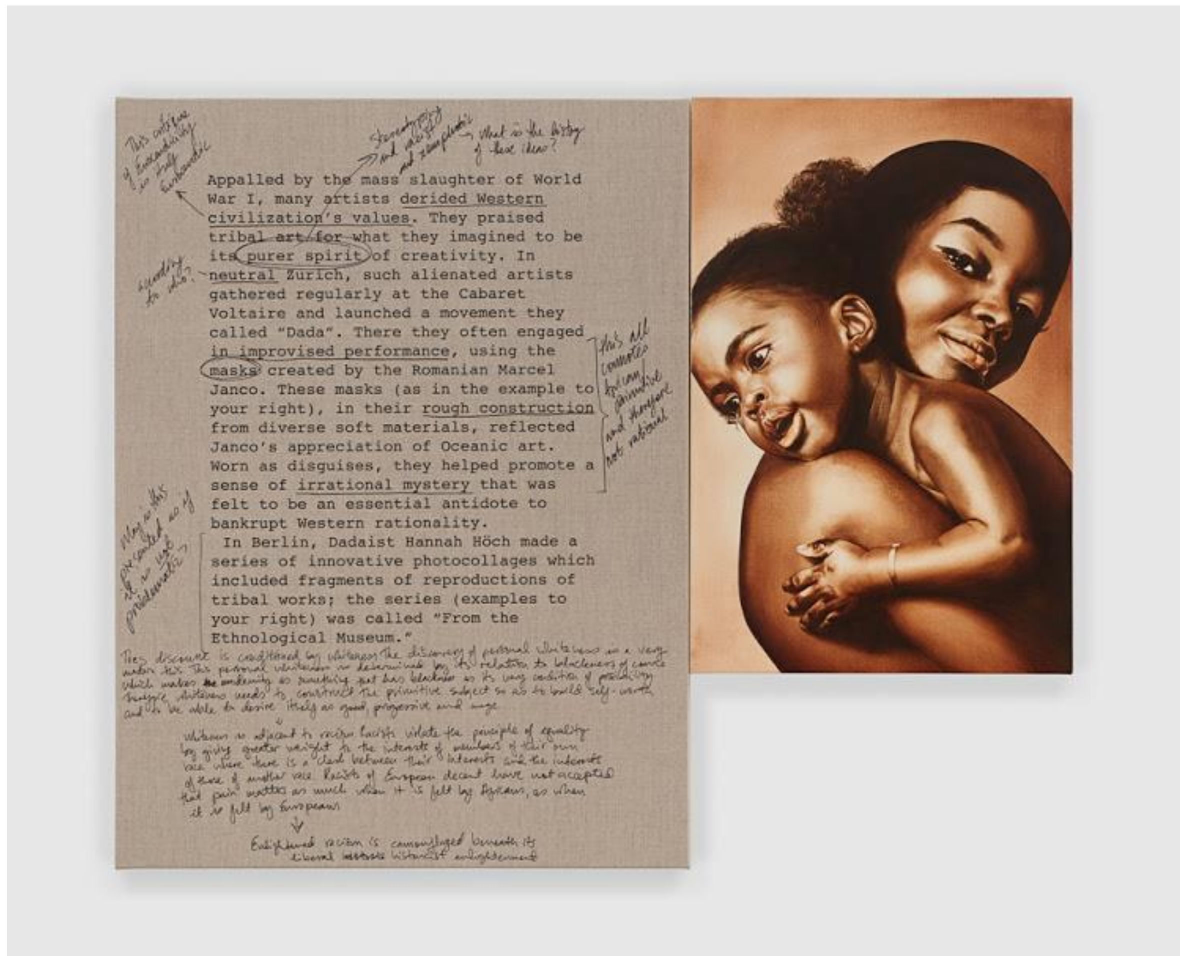
It’s a useful episode to cite if you’re looking for historical examples of white and black South Africans resolving conflict by peaceful means. This, at least, was Guy Butler’s motivation when he wrote the play *Richard Gush of Salem*, which was first performed in 1970 as part of the celebrations marking the 150-year anniversary of the settlers’ arrival.

Butler had beneficent reasons for promoting a stoical, pacifist figure such as Gush; in apartheid SA, his agreement with the amaXhosa seemed to offer a metaphor of reconciliation between the races. Yet this was only one side of the story. As Simon Gush explores in three films, *Land is in the Air*, *A Button Without a Hole* and *Working the Land*, his ancestor is not a universal hero.

In 2017, the Constitutional Court presided over a protracted land claim case regarding the Salem Commonage, an area of more than 60km² owned by white farmers. The court found that the (black) Salem community that had brought the claim had equal rights to the land. This did not resolve matters, however, and while there has been partial restitution, friction between the parties continues. In the meantime, the members of the community continue to battle unemployment and poverty.

Gush’s films are an insistent reminder that land ownership and use in SA is a messy business, and that we are ill-served by mythologising the past. His work also serves as a riposte to JM Coetzee’s novel *Disgrace,* which, set in part on a Salem farm, reduces the complexity of the land question to tired old tropes of white fear and black anger.

It falls to some artists to build myths; it falls to some artists to destroy them. The same cycle applies in art history, as critics and scholars construct narratives that “explain” how artistic traditions develop — until the narrators’ biases and blind spots are exposed, and the story no longer persuades us.



‘Objects of Desire, Addendum 4’, by Meleko Mokgosi, 2019. Picture: STEVENSON

A prominent 20th-century example is the relationship between modernism and “primitivism”, based on the binary opposition of industrialised, “civilised” but jaded Europe and numinous but barbaric Africa. From Picasso and Matisse to Klimt and Klee, from Gauguin to Braque and the Dadaists, the modernist rupture in Western art depended on the invocation of non-Western “others”.

At the Stevenson Gallery Johannesburg (until 25 October), Meleko Mokgosi’s Objects of Desire, Addendum critiques the frankly racist assumptions underlying this appropriation and its incorporation into standard accounts of modernism. In a series of diptychs, Mokgosi places annotated extracts of art historical texts alongside paintings

commonly seen in black households (the ubiquitous mother-and-child) and iconic images of the Mandelas, as well as familiar items of clothing and furniture. Paradoxically, Mokgosi notes: “It is impossible to get away from modernist aesthetics,” even in a country like SA.