Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi's fine line

The US-born painter has the penetrating vision of the outsider, with roots in four countries and two histories of exile.

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Left: Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi (left) with her sister, Lindiwe Nkosi, in front of her work, Gymnasium, in the Bronx. Photographs by Alex Jones/Photographs Supplied

"Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi speaks a lot of time painting straight lines by hand. Many painters who want straight lines use masking tape as a stencil, but Nkosi designs the dead edge left by tape. "It looks too design-y."

So she applies at least four layers of paint, even though the undercoats don't show through, to refine the lines of her architectural backdrops. "For me, using tape kills some kind of life or vibration," she says. "There is something that happens when you have to keep going back, using your eye, getting the angle as right as possible."

Nkosi thinks and speaks as precisely and unerringly as she paints. She doesn't cut corners and she looks uncompromingly at the actual shape of things, not least the warped racial geometries of South Africa and America, her two homelands. And the measured, tensile power of Nkosi's work is claiming its due: she was awarded the annual Tribeca art prize last year and her debut solo show, Gymnasium, is up at the Hermione gallery in Johannesburg, though you can only visit it online.

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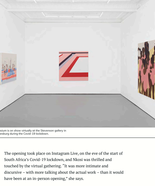
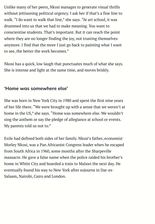


Gymnasium is on show virtually at the Stevenson gallery in Johannesburg through end of October.

The opening took place on Instagram Live, on the eve of the start of South Africa's Covid-19 lockdown, and Nkosi was thrilled and touched by the virtual gathering. "It was more intimate and discursive – with more talking about the actual work – than it would have been at an in-person opening," she says.

With a pang of unexpected relevance, the paintings document the pre-Corollian tradition of gathering in a crowd to enjoy an athletic spectacle.

The show gives us a version of elite women's gymnastics in which all the gymnasts, spectators and judges are black. It's an act of imaginative revolt against the sterile assumptions that can entrap black performances before a white audience, whether in sport, or on any other arena. The spark of the show was in a picture of a gymnast and three judges that she painted in 2011, and looked at afresh in 2017.



Team Ivan: Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi's debut solo show, Gymnasium.

"My current was in a different place. I was starting to get some recognition, and dealing with being in the public eye a little. And in that gymnast in the painting I saw something new, an analogy for the artist. Both the artist and the gymnast are called on to perform. Each is watched, scrutinised, assessed. Their performances, their perceived success or failure, happens in full view. And judgement is continually being passed."

But the paintings are also sensual and nostalgic – candy-based salaries in youth, balance, camaraderie. Importantly, there are no "action shots" of twisting dismounts. Nkosi is interested in the falls and gaps and build-ups, the drama that surrounds the Olympia.

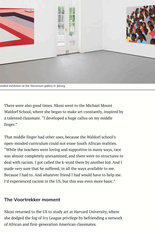
Unlike many of her peers, Nkosi manages to generate visual thrills without patronising political urgency. I ask her if that's a fine line to walk. "I do want to walk that line," she says. "In art school, it was drummed into us that we had to make meaning. You want to communicate something, but I feel sometimes that it can reach the point where they are no longer finding meaning, not treating themselves anymore. I feel that the more I just go back to painting what I want to see, the better the work becomes."

Nkosi has a quick, low laugh that punctuates much of what she says. She is intense and light at the same time, and moves briskly.

'Home was somewhere else'

She was born in New York City in 1980 and spent the first nine years of her life there. "We were brought up with a sense that we weren't at home in the US," she says. "Home was somewhere else. We wouldn't sing the anthem or say the pledge of allegiance at school or events. My parents told us not to."

Exile had defined both sides of her family. Nkosi's father, economist Mosiry Mosiri, was a Pan Africanist Congress leader who had escaped from South Africa in 1960, some months after the Sharpeville massacre. He was a friend of Oliver Tambo and had been his brother's home in White City and boarded a train to Malawi the next day. He eventually found his way to New York where someone in her ex-Salaam, Nairobi, Cairo and London.



The creative exhibition at the Stevenson gallery is plenty.

Nkosi's mother, Aristarian Joanna Karvounides Nkosi, grew up in a Greek-American community in Maine. Her ethnic Greek parents had been expelled from Turkey in 1920 and fled to the US via Greece. "My great uncles were hanged in a square in Izmir by refusing to join the Turkish army. There was a genocide of Greeks and Armenians in the region. So my mother grew up in a similar narrative, home was not where she was."

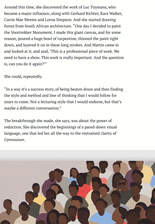
Inevitably, Nkosi became a New Yorker anyway. "We lived in Hoboken, just over the river in New Jersey, but I went to school in Manhattan, so every day we drove through the Lincoln tunnel. My mom worked in Harlem and we had to navigate parts of the city."

She felt at home amid the diversity of Hoboken – Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Italians – and the minutiness of her family sparked a deep attachment to otherness, hybridity, blackness. "I grew up in a very Afrocentric home. Our picture books were full of African and African-American characters."

The anomaly

But when her family moved to the mythical motherland of South Africa in 1992 after a three-year stay in Harare, Zimbabwe, she experienced a kind of whiplash, "feeling dislocated" in a space that "was supposed to be home".

"In there was a total sense of being alien, which then persisted. At about 14 I said to my parents, 'I need to go back to the US, because that's where I belong. Because this place will never accept me. My identity will always be in question here."



Gymnastics and judges in a version of white supremacy's geometries in a painting of Gymnasium, Johannesburg gallery.

There were also good times. She was bussed to the Michael Mount Waldorf School, where she began to make art constantly, inspired by a talented classmate. "I developed a huge callus on my middle finger."

That middle finger had other uses, because the Waldorf school's pedagogy encouraged students to express their feelings physically. "While the teachers were loving and supportive in many ways, race was almost completely unexamined, and there were no structures to deal with racism. I got called the n word there by another kid. And I made very sure that he suffered, in all the ways available to me. Because I had to. And whatever friend I had would have to help me. I'd experienced racism in the US, but this was even more basic."

The Voortrekker moment

Nkosi returned to the US to study art at Harvard University, where she dodged the leg of Ivy League privilege by befriending a network of African and first-generation American classmates.

Her pivotal moment at art school was a showdown with a lecturer, Martin Maloney, who was a star of the Young British Artists movement of the 1990s. "He couldn't understand why we weren't totally immersed in making art. He couldn't really get this liberal arts degree approach. He was really hard on us, and particularly on me. I was sick to my stomach before every class."

Around this time, she discovered the work of Lee Tuymans, who became a major influence, along with Gerhard Richter, Kara Walker, Carrie Mae Weems and Lorna Simpson. And she started drawing forms from South African architecture. "One day I decided to paint the Voortrekker Monument. I made this giant canvas, and for some reason, poured a huge bowl of turpentine, thinned the paint right down, and layered it on in these long strokes. And Martin came in and looked at it, and said, 'This is a professional piece of work. We need to have a show. This work is really important. And the question is, can you do it again?'"

She could, repeatedly.

"In a way it's a success story, of being beaten down and then finding the style and method and line of thinking that I would follow for years to come. Not a betraying style that I would endorse, but that's maybe a different conversation."

The breakthrough she made, she says, was about the power of criticism. Discovered the beginnings of a paved-down visual language, one that led her all the way to the restrained clarity of Gymnasium.

Gymnasium gives us a version of white supremacy's geometries in a painting of Gymnasium, Johannesburg gallery.

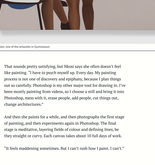
"I was asking myself: How much information do you need to understand or read this form, or figure? And what happens when something becomes so reduced that the link between the image and the source are in my mind only?"

"I started to see that when you shed detail, what remains can have this unmapped power, the power of something distilled. When backgrounds and clothes are reduced to flat colour fields, what emerges is a timeless, centreless space for the scene, which can give the scene a universality, with meaning not tied to a specific period or place."

An critic and writer Antoine Bon says, even the faces in Gymnasium are blank, a departure from Renoir, the artist of portraits that preceded it. Bon points out that this refusal of specificity closes with Nkosi's consistent refusal of the implicit pressure applied to black artists to tell an "after" story, a story that commodifies and exoticises their racial identity. Nkosi has previously explained that "letter artists are never asked explicitly to do that work or get put in the position where their work is only valid if it speaks from this very subjective point of view". That expectation, she feels, emanates largely from white audiences and is largely not felt by white artists.

The routine

Nkosi lives in Joburg with her young daughter and husband, writer and editor Daniel Brooke. He says podcasts on history, politics and culture have become her preferred background noise. Nkosi's podcasts play at a pretty serious volume. I'd even say loud. She uses podcasts the way some people use coffee. She stands at her canvas for three or four hours at a time, and moves away from it only when her stream of episodes ends and she has to click on the next one."



Changes: one of the artworks in Gymnasium.

That sounds pretty satisfying, but Nkosi says she often doesn't feel like painting. "I have to psych myself up. Every day. My painting process is not one of discovery and epiphany, because I place things out so carefully. Photoshop is my other major tool for drawing. I've been mostly painting from videos, so I choose a still and bring it into Photoshop, mess with it, erase people, add people, cut things out, change architectures."

And then she paints for a while, and then photographs the first stage of painting, and then experiments again in Photoshop. The final stage is photographed, and then she paints the last layer, and then the process repeats. Each canvas takes about 10 full days of work.

"It feels maddening sometimes. But I can't sub-hour I paint. I can't."