

## CHRIS THURMAN: A utopia that gives voice to beautiful outcasts

Simphiwe Ndzube's exhibition depicts a society of equals in a fictionalised Gwadana

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'Abagula Nqenqondo Abayolwanga', by Simphiwe Ndzube. Picture: SUPPLIED

We had to tell ourselves that 2021 would be better, because that was the only way of getting through 2020. But inevitably, the grim weirdness of last year has bled into the early weeks of this year — a bleak segue. Yes, Joe Biden will soon be US president and yes, we’ll eventually get vaccinated against Covid-19 and yes, SA’s economy will emerge from recession; but it remains to be seen how deeply the local and global dystopian seeds have been planted.

If you are in need of a utopian boost, make a booking to see Simphiwe Ndzube’s exhibition *The Fantastic Ride to Gwadana* at Stevenson in Johannesburg, or visit the gallery’s online viewing room. Be warned: Ndzube’s utopianism is not an escape from poverty, or ill health, or environmental degradation. Rather, his fictionalised Gwadana, populated by those he calls the “Mine Moon” people, is a place where those who have been ostracised and persecuted make their own society in which they are “finally celebrated as equals”.

The real Gwadana, in the Eastern Cape, is popularly associated with witchcraft — an association fuelled by tabloid sensationalism and gossip but driven most powerfully, Ndzube reminds us, by a history of privation and oppression (this could be traced back, if one wished, to the “frontier wars” of the 19th century; the largely forgotten Battle of Gwadana presents a very different set of associations). Accusations of witchcraft, directed mostly at elderly women, make sense in a context “where poverty leads to strained social relations” and violence is displaced onto the most vulnerable.



'Entering the House of Spirits' detail, Simphiwe Ndzube. Picture: SUPPLIED

Yet, although Ndzube offers this materialist analysis in his artist's statement, the works themselves do not eschew the supernatural — on the contrary, the “folkloric version of Gwadana” spurs his artistic imagination. Thus, while he eloquently critiques “the irrationality within supposedly post-apartheid societal structures that can turn the already underserved against each other” (creating a distraction that prevents communities from achieving the solidarity required to protest and to achieve progress), the figures he portrays embrace the numinous and the fantastical.

They are “beautiful outcasts”, occupying settings that veer from the mundane and the domestic to the spectacular and the grotesque. Ndzube has been strongly influenced by magical realism, and he translates this primarily literary phenomenon into a visual idiom, collapsing the everyday and the outlandish into one scene.

What could be more banal than Omo washing powder or yellow rubber gloves? This quotidian iconography merges with eerie symbols (a bird carrying a dismembered foot in its claws) and quirky inversions of the familiar (instead of catching a minibus taxi, two people hitch a ride on a serpent-boat). The monochrome of corrugated iron is offset by the near-psychedelic colours of the landscape; factory smokestacks loom like volcanoes or hellish towers, while bright clouds race across the sky.



'Ukhala Kwexilongo', Simphiwe Ndzube. Picture: SUPPLIED

The combination of magic and realism is reinforced by the artist's use of mixed media. Cut-out photographs of eyes, mouths and hands meet paint and brushstrokes, while found objects are employed for hair, clothes and shoes, distending or distorting the characters and disrupting the frame of the two-dimensional canvas.

In previous exhibitions, Ndzube has developed elaborate back-stories for his “Mine Moon” world. Here, he leaves viewers to imagine their own narratives. Allusions to traditional beliefs and mythologies are suggestive but not overdetermining. Two sets of symbols do, however, seem to carry a clear political message — the prominence of tongues and trumpets suggest an amplification of voices. To borrow from Gayatri Spivak: these subalterns are speaking.

In 2019, a group of women from villages in the emaXesibeni district (near the border between the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal) marched to the regional magistrate’s office to hand over a petition about their plight: constant fear of being harassed, beaten and even murdered after being accused of witchcraft. They wanted dignity and safety. “We are tired of being abused,” complained one representative. “We are killed, burned, raped.”

The people depicted by Ndzube may be maimed or disfigured; they may be therianthropes, or carnivalesque totems, and indeed there is something mysterious and magical about them. But, above all, they are never less than fully human.

*The Fantastic Ride to Gwadana* is at Stevenson Johannesburg until 22 January (online at [viewingroom.stevenson.info](http://viewingroom.stevenson.info)).