

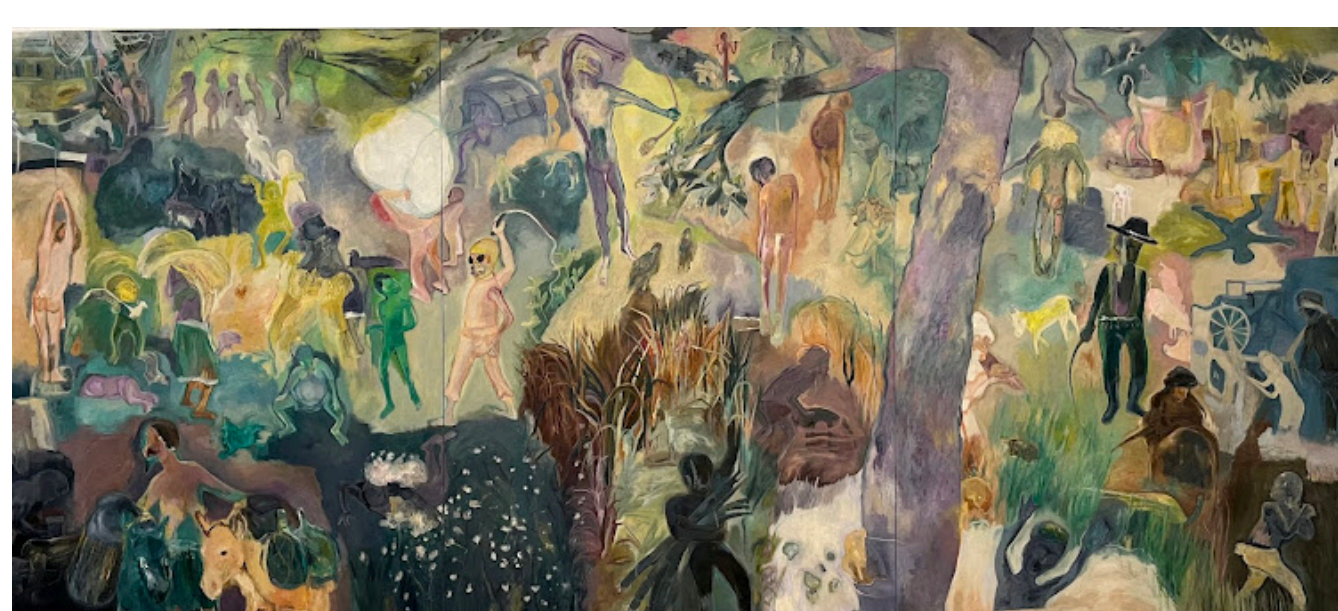
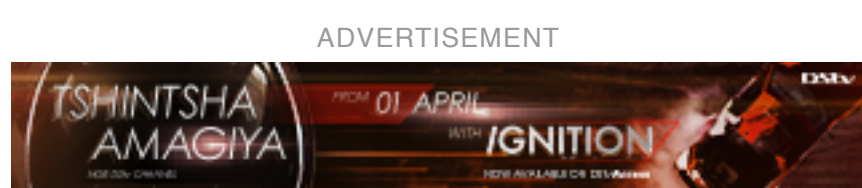


OPINION / COLUMNISTS

CHRIS THURMAN: Moments of courage and dignity rescued from oblivion

Sosa Joseph's exhibition is an attempt to reimagine the lives of people who were subjected to the Indian Ocean slave trade

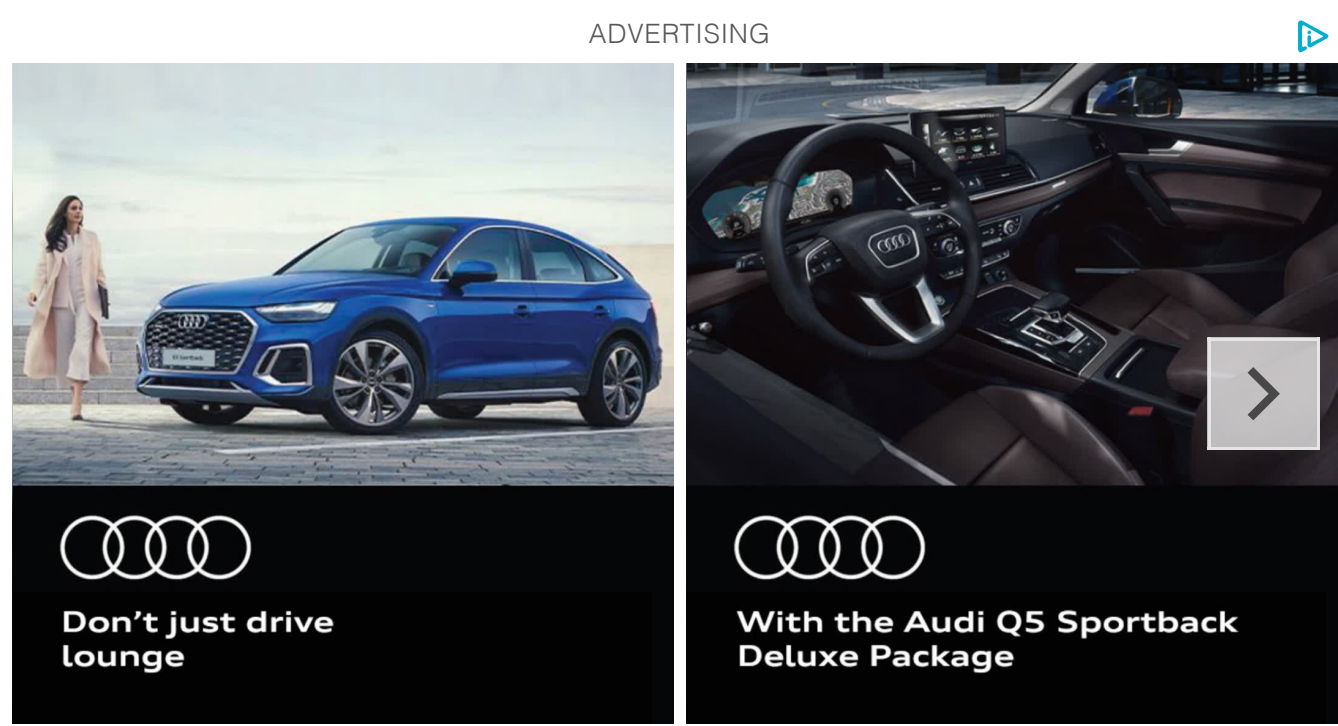
BL PREMIUM | 12 MAY 2023 - 04:59 by CHRIS THURMAN



Sosa Joseph's large-scale triptych calls to mind the hellscapes of Bosch or Bruegel, PICTURE: Stevenson gallery

Two new exhibitions at Stevenson gallery in Cape Town challenge us to dwell in the paradox that beauty and brutality not only coexist but are often mutually enabling – a truth that is by turns terrifying and comforting.

Indian artist Sosa Joseph's *The Hushed History of Oblivion* is an attempt to reimagine, and to redeem from history, the lives of people who were subjected to the Indian Ocean slave trade. The germ of the work was Joseph's recognition of geographical echoes between her own movements across the coastal region of Kerala and those of a slave girl, known only as Anima, some two centuries previously. This expanded into a global visual narrative of slave life, from Southeast Asia to the Cape Colony and Central America.



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The scenes that Joseph paints have the quality of surreal dreamscapes in their colouration and composition, even though a number of them depict banal activity or moments of respite from the toil of everyday life. There is a sense in which the whole is suffused with the violence and exploitation of the system of slavery – yet these are not, formally anyway, entirely grim or bleak images. The artist has previously affirmed that, though her subject matter is “evidently political”, her primary aims are “painterly” and “aesthetic”. This is evident in the present exhibition.

Their elusive mood is complicated by their allusive gestures towards traditional representations of biblical scenes or invocations of Christian symbolism. Two babies in baskets being sold by their mother hint at Moses in the bulrushes. To the viewer familiar with gospel images signifying miracles (fishing boats, the empty tomb), there is a troubling counterpoint in slaves being ferried to a galleon waiting out at sea, or a woman trying to flee her captors.

The historical correlation between Christianity, slavery and colonialism hovers in the background here. It is made explicit in works like *April van Cochin and others being detained in a defunct church* and *Lucia striking a crucifix*. Yet the representation of some slaves (Anton de Goa, Catarina de San Juan) also blurs with the iconography of saints – indeed, the figures merge because the practice of allocating slaves surnames based on their putative origin echoes formulations like “St Teresa of Avila” or “the Madonna of San Sosti”.

The large-scale triptych that gives the exhibition its title calls to mind the hellscapes of Bosch or Bruegel, with gruesome images of whipping and lynching. Nonetheless, Joseph insists that this cannot be the sum of our understanding of slave life; she provides, for Amina, April, Anton and the others, moments of dignity and courage that must also be saved from oblivion.

Running simultaneous to Joseph's *Hushed History* is the second instalment in Stevenson's *Juxtapositions*, a series of exhibitions placing the work of two artists in unexpected but productive dialogue. In this case, Unathi Mkonto's wood and cardboard sculptural installations, collectively titled *Returnable*, are twinned with a selection of David Goldblatt photographs from the 1970s and '80s. The comparison is instructive.

Along with a handful of other seminal artists and journalists, Goldblatt's black-and-white images have become so central to the way in which the medium of photography is understood and employed in a South African context that there is a risk of his work becoming so recognisable, so familiar, as to be taken for granted – as if it reproduces (when in fact it co-constitutes) a particular style, genre and photographic approach.

Goldblatt's engagement with what he has called “structures of dominion”, both in socioeconomic terms and in terms of the urban environment, resulted in stark images that convey both the brute force and the aesthetic ambitions of SA's colonial and apartheid governments. The modernist geometries of apartheid architecture were no less a part of segregationist ideology and its cruel implementation than the dompas, sjambok and the Casspir.

Viewing Goldblatt's photographs alongside the circles, swoops, blocks and towers of Mkonto's imaginary cityscapes emphasises the grand but ultimately mad visions that lay behind our country's fascist past. Likewise, admiring the detail, depth and height of Mkonto's designs alongside Goldblatt's stark images – not forgetting that the sculptures are driven by the artist's ethos of “anti-architecture” – one is reminded of the fine line between utopian and dystopian urban planning.



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