

## Good Feelings

A conversation between Dada Khanyisa  
and Julie Nxadi

### I: Process 'n' Feelings

DK: Yeah so I am having a chat with Julie about -  
a lot of things, this and that -

About such and such -

This is about the exhibition *Good Feelings*. I chose  
to have this conversation with Julie because I  
respect her perspective. She is someone I chat to  
and see a lot. So it was only fitting to kind of make  
sense of things - talk about things, learn about  
things - with her. So yeah, hello Julie.

JN: How are you doing?

DK: I'm good. Just working towards the show,  
excited to finish it up.

JN: How long has this story been in your head?

DK: It's been in my head since March  
2018 - and it's been interesting. It's been a  
lot of questions and a lot of trying to figure  
out and answer the questions. Trying to be  
sassy and whatever. Give it attitude, give  
it character, give it meaning, from nothing,  
you know, from just sketching. So it's been  
interesting to see things form themselves  
and the characters take shape and wear  
eye shades and pout and shout.

JN: What is your process? Are you the kind of  
person who leaves a lot on the cutting-room  
floor, where what we see is one-third maybe  
of what you came up with? Or do you know  
exactly what you're going to be making?

DK: I think it's a mix of both. Most of the time when I revisit the sketchbook I do something from that. I guess I would describe the process as - it's very abstract, like how maybe you would rewrite your stories where you get an idea and you build on it. So it would be an image or a gesture or an attitude or a feeling or something sparks an interest, you know, and that kind of gets it going. It forms itself. I know it sounds mystical and maybe whimsical or just - I don't know, but that's the process. It's always like finding a solution:

- 'Oh, which wood is going to work with this?'
- 'What is time efficient?'
- 'What brings out the nice qualities?'
- 'What gives it life?'
- 'What gives it character?'

Thinking about all those things. Taking whatever works, but there's always room to explore an idea. It's never stopping because an idea is too big or an idea is too ridiculous, because sometimes it's just the giggles that actually work.

It's what you are going for. It's just like, oh okay, that's ridiculous, or that's great, giggles, giggles, and that's maybe just as simple as that.

JN:

In terms of the trajectory of your work, the lineage, this particular cluster of work feels as though it's familiar subject matter - a cultural temperature more than a specific instruction or idea. When I am with your work, I don't get a sense that this is supposed to be *telling* me. It's more like this is a

reflection of a time that I can relate to, an energy that I can relate to - and I don't feel alone. That sounds so sad, but I think you get a sense of what I am saying.

DK: I know what you mean ...

JN:

All of your work has always felt very collaged and fragmented and reassembled, but there's something very particular about these works ... there's a second level of fragments. I am wondering what happened? What is this process? How did you get to the disassembling and reassembling of these particular moments in *this* fashion?

DK:

I think - especially with these - they serve as storyboards. They work as singular images, but they also feed into each other. It comes back to what you said about relating - it's not just about one trajectory or one idea. I think I based this work on feelings and emotions -

JN: I was just gonna say!

It feels like a kind of socio-cultural accompaniment. It's like a score. It's accompaniment to a mood ...

DK:

Most of the time when I make work, people tell me what the narrative is. People share what they think is happening and I take a lead from that - because *your* social context will help you pin

the story together. I can't really bring out what certain gestures mean to you culturally. I base it on showing emotions and not just depicting that these people are beautiful.

For example, the portrait of Nox, it's not just showing how gorgeous she is, but also, she is in action. I guess that's what brings us back to your question about the trajectory, the growth - the collaging, it looks different now. I think the conscious decision to grow and also just follow what I am feeling was something I stuck to.

JN:

It's kind of awe-inspiring and staggering to see how intimate you get - even in these big animated gestures. The lens is very close and it's very intimate because you are a Black person and you are chatting with Black people. That's the difference, I think, between your work and some other works: it's a chat. I am wondering, how do you keep inviting people into that conversation? Is *Bamb'iphone* one thing, and then you go and start another conversation? Or does that conversation drift into another phase?

DK:

I think I try to blur where one project starts and the other ends ...

Most of the time I try to step back and listen because I've said all I can in the work. I find it very fruitful because people usually bring out something I have never thought about.

It's one of those things where through engagement it might inspire the next body of work.

I might take it in a different direction.

It all comes down to challenging yourself and just taking it a step further and trying not to have your feet stuck in mud and calling that comfort.

Things have to be functional and have to add value to the community and the people. It has to do something. So from that understanding, it's hard to separate yourself from the narrative. I focus on people. I think the reason why it's relatable is because these are gestures by people who we're around ...

JN: ... all the time ...

DK: ... all the time!

You see on the internet -

And these are the people that I am also part of - this is the community that I am also part of. I do my best to catch up with friends, argue with people, touch tongues with someone, you know?

JN:

A lot of tongue touching sometimes.

DK: It's a lot of tongue touching. I think it's important to step out of that world that you create, but also to bring back into it.

But what I wanted to touch on is intimacy, like these intimate settings. That's core, that's the foundation of these works. It's like unveiling a layer and looking at the intimate connections that thread a community, that build a community. I guess that's what I was trying to do with these people.

Depending on who you are looking at, who is next to who, it's kind of a game of broken telephone. Depending on who tells the story, it changes. It's the same principle where you can place one painting next to a totally different one and it switches the narrative. Like these women shouting at him, 'o grand joh?' - he deserves that question. *uGrand, Joe?* [are you okay, Joe?]

JN:

There's always an interface between what people are performing and what's 'real'. In that same way, you have this performance of being *okay* that's then made complex by the question. *uGrand?*

All these very fine interfaces of what we understand to be social *media* culture, that is: trying to find a way to package your reality.

Everyone complains about people being cheesy or vile and trolling on social media, but I think we've made a false dichotomy where we have framed performativity as a masking of truth or moving away from the truth, but ... sometimes the performance is a packaging of a truth.

There's a lot of those moments with these paintings or maybe like you said, it's my encounter with them.

DK:

I think it does have that, taking it a step further where someone will frame their reality based on what they *want*.

We all just curate our experiences and make it seem like our life is lit. I am trying to keep it pretty, but also keep it ... I think I am shying away from the word *real*?

JN: It's an interesting word because the fact of it feeling disjointed and feeling so unreal is what is making it ...

DK: ... not real ...

JN: Yeah, but very real.

## II: Good Ugly Feelings

JN: So ... sometimes you are making something because it makes you feel good.

DK: Exactly. It's like I am just trying to focus on the good feelings.

JN: It's admirable.

It's very easy to fall into an entrapment of trauma. There's a lot of healing moments even when you are resolving traumatic experiences. I suppose the thing is that joy is not taken seriously, even though that sounds oxymoronic. Joy is something to be taken seriously ... and feeling good is as important as combing through some very difficult and uncomfortable things.

DK: It's like our lives are not *just* characterised by our traumatic experiences because between that, even when we tell our traumatic experiences, there's some laughing ...

JN: Yes, that's the thing!

Traumatic stories don't always sound like you think they're going to sound. You don't know that *ukwinto ezo ku traumatiser ibu tshintshe ubomi bakho* [you are in a moment that will traumatise you and change your life] until you can't stop looking back at it. And so your experience of that thing - in that moment - is complex.

It's funny, it's bizarre, it's harrowing, it's soft and it's all happening at the same time.

DK: It's just like the complexities of a toxic relationship. Maybe someone's character is that they are very hands-on, they are very present in the house, they take care of things, but they also abuse you emotionally and it's confusing because there's something comforting about the fact that it's happening in such an organised space.

JN:

It's familiar.

There is such proximity between pleasure and pain. Like that thing we were watching where this woman who had been abused by her mother was sitting by her bedside as the mother was dying. She was literally kissing the hands of her abuser. A lot of the time that's where people find themselves, and it's embarrassing and it's tough but that's a reality.

DK: That's a reality, you know?

JN: Things are complicated, they are so complicated.

All we can do is tell the truth.

DK:

It's very important *how* we tell that truth.

At times it's not a moral stand, at times it's like you are telling a story about something that changed with experience. Say you talk about someone who spins *igusheshe* [BMW]. Someone else may point out that that is a hazard.

JN: And a crime, yeah.

DK: It's a crime because some of the time they spin out of control and bash into people. It's very dangerous for that to be happening. It's not wise, but the thrill ... it's mind blowing and only a few people understand or appreciate that. We were talking about *ukuchaza* [having swagger] and how it has to do with being on the edge. It's on the edge of breaking the rules and almost dying.

JN: Like train surfing.

DK: Yeah.

JN:

Train surfers have robust social lives, *ngabantu a bachazayo kwezindawo a basuka kuzo* [they are people who have swagger and status in the social groups that they are from] ... and it's a matter of life or death.

DK:

*Uyayibona* [you see]? Everyone is on the edge of something. I think 'going out' is an outlet for that. You know, that edginess, that way to release. Because we love releasing, we love escaping. It translates to the social alcoholic problems.

JN:

I think we like to instruct. There's an acknowledgement that, okay, Black life has been made urgent by all sorts of interferences. And some decisions are coming from a place of being

fugitives of an unjust system. So there's this call that 'our responsibility is to change that', because that's not a place to survive from.

But at the same time we can't pretend that there might not be a risk here of disarming and making vulnerable a hunted people and now you are just vulnerable and still being hunted at the same pace.

There's a lot of things that are going on at the same time and I think *siyathanda uku instructor* [we love instructing] and sometimes we need to take a break from the instruction and just tell the story.

DK: Yeah, tell the story.

It has to come out.

It has to exist, it has to be there, it has to be in the world. I guess *that's* the instructive element.

But as far as having to carry the load of fixing the social wrongs or social ills ...? Because there's also that thing that as Black cultural practitioners we can't just focus on fynbos. And 'they' are like, okay, we get your fynbos obsession but the hood is burning.

Where is your bucket? The hood is burning, dawg.

We are here and we are doing it. So there is also a need to celebrate that. A need to celebrate the beautiful. Getting back from work and taking off your bra and just chilling - that decompression element -

It's a point of interest to me. I understand why people go out because I go out and it's interesting the things that play out and what they say about the greater South Africa.

\* tea break \*

JN:

There's a meeting I was in where someone came in and said I must be having a good time because: 'Black Panther'.

And I was like: 'I don't understand.'

She was like: 'because Lupita is a big thing and you are, like, dark and it must be great for you right now.'

I was like: Whaaat!

But in my head I'm like, so, you are conceding that there is another side to this. That you guys are saying that Black is beautiful, but you know that you don't believe it? Because why would it not be good for me? We are in South Africa. Why isn't it good for me unless Lupita is famous?

DK: *Uyayibona?* [Do you see?]

JN:

This is why we were talking about it as *historical ugliness*, because it really has nothing to do with actuality, it is just a story you were told about yourself. And when you have heard that a lot, that theme becomes a big part of your lexicon, right? To be confronted by people and have them say, '*Umbi*' [you are ugly] - that's a very serious human experience. Especially when there's a consensus because you are black, dark, queer, fat, or experience the world differently.

And it's not a quiet thing, it's a very confrontational thing - the fact that people wish you were somewhere else instead of in front of them. And then you finally find a way to survive where you're not, like, completely overwhelmed by that,

but a lot of your decisions trip up on this one thing: the indignity of being called ugly to your face.

DK: That's why it's important as cultural producers to not *just* focus on one thing.

JN:

Because engraved in our self-concept would always be *isandla esishushu sa lo oppressor yakho* [the hot hand of your oppressor] because how else will you explain this traumatic foundation without having to etch out - with great detail - *Isandla esishushu sa lomtu ebekuqhweba* [the hot hand of the person who slapped you]?

Do you know what I mean?

I am not solely a gathering of all of the times that people have bludgeoned me. That's not my testimony.

DK:

That thing someone said to you, 'hey you must be having a wonderful time', it's like something that someone would say to a Black artist right now. *You must be having a great time because, you know, this is the focus now, Black art is en vogue.*

How do you navigate that space of jumping out of that idea of *historical ugliness* because there is that weight of where you are? Do you have to milk it because you were so ugly, now that your type is in fashion do you spread yourself thin? Do you spread yourself thin by making art based on the demands that come with it?

JN: Do you spend time grinding axes?

DK: Do you spend time grinding axes because of *historical ugliness*?

JN:

To try and compel someone into humanising me is dehumanising to me.

I must confront who *I* am in light of everything that I have experienced. Even the shameful and weird stuff, you know? Even the things I did to dispel this idea of being ugly. 'Cause we do ugly things to prove that we are not.

DK:

And sometimes you just have to ride it out.

I remember when I did a painting about intimacy and there was a finger dragging someone else. It landed up in Ghanaian Twitter and they were like, 'oh this is good art, but bad morals'. There is that kind of expectation for you to fix social ills through what you are doing because of the weight of being *historically ugly* and underrepresented. It actually takes away from your creative freedom as a cultural practitioner because you are out there with the weight of fixing all the wrong around you -

JN: And so what am I supposed to be showing? Whose fantasy must I show?

DK: Yeah, exactly!



JN:

I know that your depictions are very candid.

These are snapshots of the time and era, but do you think to yourself, 'oh shit I am gonna have to defend this'?

DK:

I've been curious about that: how provocative it can go. There are times when I know that ooh, if I do this I kind of know the response, I know who it appeals to, I know who shares that kind of stuff. Even doing that work with the -

JN: The nipple?

DK: - with the nipple ring, yeah.

There's something about sexual acknowledgement, in any form, that makes you lose innocence and kind of takes you to a level of talking about anything.

So I was like 'mmmh, it would nice to actually just explore that' because the character style I use kind of breaks away from *people*. It's a person but not a person. I think I am aware of that, but some responses surprise me, others are expected but it's never like, 'okay please stop doing this'. It's never that extreme.

I mean, there are the things we never get to really ... see because there's a lot of filtering. A lot of *making things better*.

### III: Feeling at home

DK:

Apart from the works that are interconnected and related to talking about humans, there are also works about the spaces that people inhabit. After a night out, after a long day, where do people go to rest their heads? It's a way to reimagine my own living arrangements, born from the frustration of not being able to change the colour of walls and stuff. It helps to remember the fact that there's always a negotiation for space. A negotiation for belonging - my frustration with not being able to change the colours of my walls because it's not my house, I'm renting where I am at. It's like spaces I want to inhabit. Spaces I would like my place to look like. Spaces I have seen. Spaces I know about ... but also talking about domestic issues. The art, for example, that's linked to the kitchen has to do with the politics, the things that occur in the kitchen as in *Bamb'iphone* ...

JN:

I think it's because of being disjointed from feeling like we can speak about space with a lot of confidence. We've been made to shrink. We're very preoccupied with flesh and with ourselves, but there's spatial stuff as well.

DK:

It's something I know Sam Nhlengethwa touched on with his tributes. There's a series where he did these little spaces, with people he looked up to. Moving from that kind of art reference, but also with my own personal take to it. It's quite frustrating not being able to change the colour of the wall. Or to live in a space and not call it your own. Sometimes we associate displacement with extreme conditions. A visit at an Airbnb is a form of displacement. Not feeling like you are there. The sense of impermanence. You cannot be comfortable, you cannot stay, but also while you are there, there is a lot that's happening there ...

JN: You can't be dormant ...

DK:

My work is about going out culture, but people go somewhere after that. They have to sleep. They have to plant themselves somewhere, so it's also about that. We are at that age where it's a concern.

JN: And there's this nomadic sense to how people occupy their living space. I would say *mna* [me], it's taken me a long time to know how to be cosy in a space. Because I would just be there and not really feel like I have the freedom to change anything. My responsibility is to keep it clean ...

DK: ... and keep it moving.

Leave no traces of your existence.

JN: Yeah. *Ibengathi akhomtu o hlala apha* [as if there's no one who lives here].  
Hahaha.

DK: Yeah, yeah.

I guess it's this idea of ownership. You know, we want a piece of this part of the world that we live in and it's becoming frustrating. Rental prices are high. Walls are the way you found them. Electricity is so high. No, there's just so many things that make it a frustrating experience. That desire of changing the colour of walls, it also comes from that thing where you've never had that privilege. Everywhere you go, even at school when you use a locker ...

JN: ... Yeah.

In recent years I've learned to occupy the spaces that I live in. I didn't know how to do that. Letting some things bleed out. Letting my expressions come out in all sorts of other ways so that I'm able to think - nesting! Making space! Occupying. That's not something I knew I could do until the last few years and ... it makes me proud because it means I am growing at least in some way or another. *Kukhula oko* [that's growing up].

DK: **When you find yourself in such a culturally rich part of the country, there is that desire to plant yourself in this environment ... I think it's important that I mention that. All of this is happening in Cape Town. The cultivation of ideas – it's a different flow. I mean, I grew up in Joburg. The sense of space and living arrangements – I think I got to be free here. I had some sense of independence, of having to mould a personality for myself in a different city.**

JN: **Away from all your comfort zones.**

DK: **You know what we suffer through. I think that the ability to breathe, the ability to connect with the ocean, the mountain – it does a lot for the creative process. Yeah, that's that on that.**

Julie Nxadi is a former research fellow at the Centre for Humanities Research at the University of the Western Cape and was recently awarded a Creative Artist Fellowship at the University of Johannesburg as part of the Gendered Violence and Urban Transformation project in India and South Africa. She is creative director of programmes at the Centre for Being & Belonging, a non-profit company concerned with institutional reform. She also creates for screen with Brown Flamingo Productions, a black womxn-owned production company concerned with rigorous storytelling in film and TV.