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CHRIS THURMAN: Food fights: nourishment and destruction on a global scale

Stevenson gallery's latest group exhibition draws attention to the conflicts underlying patterns of migration

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Paulo Nazareth, 'MAZE' (2021), installation view. Picture: STEVENSON GALLERY

I'll never forget the first and only time I got involved in a food fight. It was at a function after a primary school sports match – a few kids throwing boerewors rolls at each other. This lasted for about 20 seconds, because my mother was there and rapidly intervened. I received, as the saying goes, a royal bollocking.

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I don't associate any feeling of fear or humiliation with this public chastisement. Instead I recall only gratitude for a lesson learned: you don't waste food, because millions of kids go hungry every night. Subsequently, scenes in movies and TV series set in US high school canteens in which preening teenagers yelled "food fight!" and upended their lunch trays always turned my stomach.

That visceral response returned when I walked into the Stevenson gallery in Johannesburg and watched, on a large screen, a grainy recording of an actual food fight featuring actual snotty adolescents. The footage is part of a reel collected and stitched together by Monilola Olayemi Ilupeju for her video work *Stampede of Champions*, which features prominently in the exhibition *My Whole Body Changed Into Something Else*.

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This group effort, curated by Sisipho Ngodwana and Sinazo Chiya, is split across the Stevenson spaces in Johannesburg and Cape Town. The participating artists, whose biographies and subjects extend across multiple geographies and national contexts, lend the exhibition a transnational flavour. It is not, however, an easy cosmopolitanism; instead, the works on display draw attention to the conflicts underlying global patterns of migration and exchange.



Wura-Natasha Ogunji, 'Faster' (2020), Picture: STEVENSON GALLERY

All of which brings us back to food fights. As visitors to the Johannesburg leg of the exhibition walk from room to room, the soundtrack of Ilupeju's film follows them: that combination of panic and intoxication, of groupthink and mob behaviour, that can overtake a crowded place when the mood turns desperate or reckless. With the food fighting scenes in mind, this discomfiting background noise creates an atmosphere of violence – the violence of consumption and excess and indulgence, counterpoint to the violence of privation and poverty and hunger.

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Stampede of Champions thus prepares us for a later encounter with Paulo Nazareth's *MAZE*, which makes explicit the relationship "between nourishment and destruction". Five rows of maize plants, growing in yellow buckets previously used to ship sunflower oil, represent the intertwined histories of conquest, trade and colonialism that have shaped the international food industry. These colourful tubs are starkly offset by simple charcoal drawings of ritual masks, bringing attention to cultures and practices of West Africa that were eviscerated as part of the Atlantic slave trade.

The consequences of centuries of resource extraction, ecological damage and exploited labour are also acknowledged in works by Simon Gush and Precious Okoyomon, warning against a humans-versus-nature binary that places our species in a kind of master-slave relationship with its environment.

Always, in the end, these works collectively suggest, the violence of such cycles of contestation are visited upon the black body. Wura-Natasha Ogunji depicts two silhouettes of running figures; her title, *Fast*, is simultaneously "a command, descriptor, warning and aspiration", and this ambiguity tests the viewer's assumptions – do we see in these figures "criminality, athleticism, freedom or play"?



Kaylin Moonsamy, 'Bhuvaneshwari Kali' (2021), Picture: STEVENSON GALLERY

If stereotypes regarding black identity are part of the foundation of "racialised modernity", to borrow the phrase used by Kaylin Moonsamy in his artist's note, then they are challenged by a rebellious form of blackness. Moonsamy mother-figure who is also an avenging destroyer of evil forces. Moonsamy's trio of paintings portraying Kali in different guises combines the realms of ideas/ideals and action, foregrounding the deity's radical incitement to oppose "regimes of racism and white supremacy".

By contrast, three artists in the exhibition have produced works that to some degree resist a systemic, collectivist or materialist view. Farah al Qasimi's photographs focus on the struggle of the individual in the private, domestic sphere; Simphiwe Ndzube creates new mythologies to transcend or escape an "immediate reality" determined by "institutional racism"; and *Dancing Girls Yoruba* by the late Ben Enwonwu (1917-1994), an anomalous but welcome inclusion in an exhibition of otherwise contemporary pieces, focuses on the joy of movement rather than the political conflict of pre-independence Nigeria.

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