



## Artist Mohau Modisakeng: Probing Subliminal Violence

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Those who are playing football there now are walking over dead bodies. Their euphoria and the deaths that occurred there during the hostel violence of the 1990s is a dichotomy that, even as the artist stands in his studio today, is too great to comprehend. He was a boy of about seven then, wandering around, as young children his age do, when he saw dead bodies on the ground on a football ground.

This is an attempt at paraphrasing a memory from Mohau Modisakeng's childhood. It does not make the memory any less real. My only sin is that I have made the memory exist today as opposed to the past. At the nucleus of Mohau Modisakeng's young career in the arts is the obsession to inhabit the contours of colonial and post-colonial history, deciphering its serpentine nuances, drawing out its violence, moulding them into aesthetically pleasing objects and prophesying the present and the future. The way in which he moulds the violence into sculptures, photographs and video has an almost romantic connotation to it.

"The work doesn't start off with an attempt to portray violence. The work responds elementarily to the history of the black body within the (South) African context, which in most cases cannot be removed from the violence of the apartheid era and the early 90s. I think the work becomes

mesmerizing because although we might recognise history as our past, the body is indifferent to social changes so it remembers,” Mohau explains.

It is not only violence that Mohau’s work concerns itself with, unlike performance artists who bash themselves about to no purpose at all, he understands the importance and effects of it. In 2013, at an exhibition titled Inzilo (mourning), Mohau commented that South Africa is a country caught in a state of mourning. It is caught between trying to remember, forget and move on.



‘Ditaola’, his debut solo exhibition, which runs till July 12, 2014 at Brundyn+ Gonsalves after attracting visitors almost every other day. Explaining the name of the exhibition, Mohau says, “Ditaola is a Setswana/Sesotho name given to divination bones. The practice of throwing bones is an integral part of various indigenous African spiritual traditions. The bones work hand in hand with the mysterious realm of dreams and visions.”

Mohau not only moulds the history of South Africa into artwork but often he probes his own personal history too. The work was personal, like his earliest work, in which he had made an okapi about his brother who had been stabbed to death. The exhibition featured giant sculptures made of white material, which symbolised the bones and Victorian like sculptures, which symbolised colonial history. Ditaola, says Mohau, is both personal and political. The personal is the artist attempting to interpret his mother’s dreams. His mother is a prophet. When Mohau was a youth in Johannesburg, he would quietly sit, acutely listening, muting every sound around him, and only hearing his mother’s voice, whilst she explained her dreams to him, drowning him deeper and deeper into the spiritual world. “They way she told her visions to me, she compelled me to make art from them” Mohau said.

Listening to Mohau speak about his art, one is drawn, not only into his thinking process but also into his personality. He is not, like most artists pretend to be, obscure or aloof, or even trying to be. His work emanates from a deeper place within him. Somewhere where he exposes his own vulnerability and a place, in which he attempts to, though his art, make sense of the universe. Looking at the sculptures as they sit within the gallery, in their massive presence, the large

sized photographs against the wall and the video installation loop, there is a sacred feeling that one shares with them, a feeling that is hard to explain to someone else without exposing one's own personal stories that have been hidden in the depth of their being for many years.

“To a significant extent my work has always been cathartic. Surprisingly the audience has also engaged with the work along those terms.”



Mohau Modisakeng was born in Soweto, Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1987, and now lives and works between the city of his birth and Cape Town. In 2011, he was awarded the SASOL New Signatures Award. His work has been exhibited widely, including at VOLTA NY; Saatchi Gallery, London; Dak'Art, the 2012 Dakar Biennial; Focus 11, Basel; and Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town.

Earlier in his career as a student at Michaelis School of Fine Arts in Cape Town, he trained and worked predominantly in sculpture. As a student and still now, he prefers large scale work because they allow him to work without constraints. His sculptures at the Ditaola exhibition were evidence of that view. They were as massive as they demanded to be, a process that appears to have gotten beyond his control, and one he cannot himself begin to understand beyond that he prefers them to be like that.

In a striking series of three photographs, a white dove with white dust hanging around it sits on top of an AK 47. First, the dove sat still. Second, the dove was taking off. And third, the dove had taken off. Mohau, the artist, is staring past the dove into emptiness. A country on the brink of freedom, owing its arrival there on a string of violence, whilst its citizens watch helplessly, without active participation in the process, is what I got from it.

From the Ditaola exhibition and his earlier ones, Mohau Modisakeng, not only is becoming a brave artist that probes the obvious that has been ignored but he also probes what mostly is subliminal in today's society. To feel Mohau work, one has to be tuned with something greater than themselves. It is commendable that he channels this through personal stories and uses his own body in the process. In his artwork, he offers us, in our different ways, small and large, an opportunity to face our past, interrogate it and deal with it.