



Material, metaphor and the black body

The Artist, Mohau Modisakeng, uses his body to explore the influence of South Africa's violent history and our understanding of our cultural, political and social roles as human beings

Represented through film, large-scale photographic prints, installations and performance, Modisakeng's work responds to the history of the black body within the (South) African context, which is inseparably intertwined with the violence of the Apartheid era and the early 1990s. His images are not direct representations of violence, but powerful yet poetic invocations where the body is transformed into a poignant marker of collective memory.

"Through the utilisation of my own body, I insert myself into different contexts that define and reflect aspects of our collective history through referencing my own lived experiences as a black South African. In that way, I reconstitute and rewrite my own story and, therefore, my identity on my own terms," says Modisakeng, who believes that although we might recognise history as our past, the body is indifferent to social changes, so it remembers.

"In the same way that the mind is able to store and remember information, the body, too, acts as a repository for all our experiences as human beings.

"Our bodies are marked with scars that tell a story about the wounds we have suffered. So, even in a society built on forgiveness, which goes hand-in-glove with forgetfulness, the marks that recall our past are ever evident and, indeed, indifferent to the social contracts that dictate that we forget in order to birth a 'new' South Africa," he says.

Modisakeng explains that his recent thoughts on the country's politics have been about the lack of context around issues related to the public unrest we have been witnessing, such as the numerous protests, strikes and riotous incidences that make up daily headlines.

"There is a developing culture that seems to be centred on the public spectacle and performance of grievance through the use of violence.

"These responses to the worsening economic inequality in our country are often mischaracterised by factions of the population. The narratives around these issues always seem to paint in broad strokes,

caricatures of black South Africans that often negate the long and painful history of state-sanctioned violence and suffering," he says.

Through his work, Modisakeng engages race, the militarisation of society and the deep divides of post-Apartheid South Africa and the post-colonial continent. In the current time, where racism and society divisions seem to be increasing, in order to understand how best to move forward, society needs to reevaluate and revisit the past and come to terms with the legacy of Apartheid and colonialism.

"I think the biggest hurdle preventing South Africa from becoming a more whole and more cohesive society is the fact that in 1994, we collectively disowned our experiences and memories and consented to the erasure of an integral part of our social history. While in the past, black people knew that their condition of suffering was due to the racist regime they lived under, today, there is no clear understanding of the cause of our suffering. Today, there seems to be no explanation for the landlessness of our people, no explanation for the growing inequality, no explanations for the culture of violence plaguing black communities, and no explanation for the racism," says Modisakeng.

"To compound the issue, it seems that the collective social struggle to overcome racism and economic inequality in the reconstruction of South Africa was seemingly long abandoned by the white population, leaving the project of reconciliation in the hands of black people. The current prevailing state of confusion and disillusionment is the price our society pays for consenting to forgive and forget the past without the necessary reflection," he adds.

As an Artist, he views it as his main role and duty to tell the truth about our society, no matter how bitter the past and the present might be, and to provide a space and language to unpack some of the most painful aspects of our history, in a way that restores dignity to the marginalised. In terms of culture, he says it is his responsibility to retain the memory that informs his personal heritage as an African in a post-colonial world.

What excites him most about contemporary South Africa is the establishment of new platforms to experience amazing work by local artists. "There is so much attention on African contemporary art at present, with many young African artists breaking ground on the global scene, representing their countries at the highest-level art fairs, biennales and museums all across the globe. It would appear as though things are getting better for the local scene in general, with the art world constantly descending on South Africa to attend art fairs in both Johannesburg and Cape Town," he says.

Many consider the South African art space to lack diversity, and there has always been a concern about the marginalisation or outright exclusion of black artists and practitioners on the local art scene. In recent times, there has been a wave of new art institutions springing up around the country, and such developments have been seen as a signal that the local scene is moving in a positive direction. However, Modisakeng says even with these spaces, mostly funded by old private money, there is little sign of improvement in the wholesale inclusion of black South African artists, writers, curators and institutions in the system.

"Spaces like the recently established Zeitz MOCAA, A4 Arts Foundation and the Norval Foundation are founded on private wealth and, often, these sort of spaces fail to be representative of all the facets of our society. This, perhaps, is due to the fact that such institutions tend to favour transactional relationships that maintain the status quo," he says, further stating that such spaces may contribute more to the impression of progress rather than address the various imbalances and disparities inherent in the local ecosystems of galleries and institutions.

"The power is still largely in the hands of a few white individuals. Museums, commercial galleries, academies, publications and various facets of the industry are still largely reserved for white communities; save for the inclusion of a few black players," explains Modisakeng.

"In my own experience, I have had to confront a lot of challenges related to my career. As a student at the UCT art school, I



had to deal with being one of only five black students in a group of over sixty, three of whom were from outside South Africa. In this environment, one had to navigate the institution, the curriculum, and the Eurocentric environment on their own. As far as I know, institutions like the one I attended still have not fully acclimatised to accommodate the diverse cultures and races that make up South Africa's communities," he adds.

He explains that as a practising Artist, he has been discriminated against based on personal politics and his work, experienced systemic exclusions and has been denied opportunities due to his persistence in talking about the difficult parts of his experiences as a black person in this country.

"Most recently, I was discriminated against on one of the most prestigious platforms in the art world. When I was called to participate in the South African Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, I was naturally very enthusiastic, but my experience while preparing my commissioned work and while presenting the work left me with a bitter taste in my mouth," Modisakeng tells.

"I was embarrassed for our country that on such a platform, long-held racist attitudes seemed to play themselves out for the world to see. The day before the opening, I came close to withdrawing from the exhibition due to the mistreatment I received, from both the curator and the artist I shared the platform with. It was evident that I was brought onto the project as a result of a racial balancing act," he elaborates.

He explains that upon his return from the opening of the exhibition, several journalists that had heard about the mistreatment approached him for a story, however, he had decided to remain silent to avoid such a significant moment being tainted by controversy.

"In hindsight, I see that my decision to keep quiet reaffirmed and reinforced the racist attitudes that nearly spoil the most important moment in my life as an Artist. So, although there are positive changes in the landscape of art in South Africa, which I am optimistic and joyous about, my personal experiences show that there are persisting racist attitudes towards black artists on the local art scene, especially when they are as visible as I have been," he says.

The journey to becoming a successful career Artist was not an easy one and required self-motivation, self-belief and perseverance. Raised in an impoverished household in the township of Soweto, when he matriculated in 2004, he struggled to raise the funds to study at university even though he had been accepted. Fortunately, he was offered an entrance scholarship to the University of Cape Town. So, with a few hundred rand in his pocket, he left Soweto to start his studies, completing his four



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years of undergraduate studies with the help of his family, who had sacrificed a lot in order for him to receive an education.

"By the time I graduated, my work was beginning to gain traction because I had created opportunities for my work by submitting it to platforms such as national competitions and public exhibitions. As I went through the motions, my work was becoming more and more recognised. And because I was using my own image in what has essentially been an extended self-portraiture project, I was becoming more recognised as the audience tied me to my creative work," explains Modisakeng.

"The unexpected result has been that people relate to me as a person in the same way that they relate to the work. This has complicated my life in a way that I would have never imagined, because whatever emotions might be evoked by the artwork, those very emotions are sometimes transferred to me as the maker. As an Artist who tackles difficult issues, such as racism, violence and trauma, the viewer's projection of their experience of the work onto me can sometimes obscure my relationship with them, and vice versa," he says.

Modisakeng defines art as a sixth sense—an extension of the mind, body and spirit. While at times, he will reflect on the lives of the people around him, most of his work is derived from lived experiences.

"I come from a family of spiritual healers and diviners who use dreams and visions to conduct their work. I have inherited this 'gift' in that my work also draws from my own dreams and visions. So, my practice as an Artist all centres on images; abstract, ephemeral and stirring. Therefore, my work as an artist is to study, research and meditate on whatever images come to me, and then provide a context, one that addresses the social and political realities of South Africa.

"My work is never really about something preconceived or known—each work represents a question (a departure) to my audiences and, ultimately, to myself. I let the experience of the work define the meaning in a subjective yet universal sense," he says.

Since his work comes from such a personal place, he says it is difficult to determine the beginning and end of a piece, and that working across many mediums allows for better communication of the intended narrative. "I think an artwork piece is never quite resolved. In fact, I think that even though I work across different disciplines, using photography, sculpture, film and performance, at the core of it all, there is one persistent narrative (truth) that I am trying to relay," explains Modisakeng.

"Sometimes an idea might not be best expressed as a photograph and at times, a still image might fail in conveying a particular concept, and it may have to evolve into moving images or a live performance. The art object itself is merely a sign or referent of an idea

or image. As such, the idea can take different forms. I work most freely with the combination of performance-based work and film. The lack of restraint allows me to shift between mediums in order to address different creative and conceptual challenges," he says.

The reaction to his work has been very positive and diverse and he has had many people share their experience of his work with him, his work evoking emotional responses in audiences from different walks of life. Because his work serves as a conduit through which he processes his own personal traumas as a product of a troubled society, it transports the viewer through self-reflection, pain, joy and even catharsis.

However, beyond that, there is also a cognitive experience that stirs up questions, which often lead to important conversations—perspectives on difficult debates relating to history, politics and the ongoing human experience.

"As I continue to evolve and grow, so does my work. I don't think I could have produced the kind of work I made as a student now, and I will probably not be producing the same work I am making today in 10 years time. The work reflects who I am at the particular

moment I conceive of it. It is said that the role of the artist is to reflect the times. In my work, I always try to reflect the world as I perceive it and as it perceives me. I have always tried to use every opportunity I get to make and present a work that evolves and progresses from the last work I made. I have put that sort of pressure on myself as part of my process to becoming a better Artist each day," he says.

Modisakeng cites his Passage Project, produced for the South African Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale, as his most important work so far, representing a personal triumph and a moment of immense pride. While he admires a few artists, he lists fellow South African Artist, Jane Alexander, as an inspiration, not only because of the type of work she makes but also for the nurturing person that she is.

Considered one of the leading African Artists of this generation, Modisakeng has been the recipient of numerous prestigious awards. He was awarded the Sasol New Signatures Award for 2011. He has exhibited at the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, Cape Town (2017); PERFORMA 17,

New York (2017); Tyburn Gallery, London (2016); VOLTA NY, New York (2014); Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town (2014); the Saatchi Gallery, London (2012); Dak'art Biennale, Dakar (2012); Focus 11, Basel (2011); and Stevenson, Cape Town (2010). In 2013, he produced an ambitious new video work in association with Samsung as a special project for the 2013 FNB Joburg Art Fair.

"I recall being in Grade 12 in Soweto and being interviewed for one of my first articles in a newspaper, I was about seventeen at the time. In the article, I recall saying that I wanted to someday be a well-known Artist, not only in South Africa, but throughout the world. When I said those words, I could not have imagined the journey that was ahead of me. I did not imagine that I would one day be able to earn a living as an Artist and help my family out of the cycle of poverty. Nor could I imagine that I would win the awards I've earned, or have my work acknowledged on some of the most prestigious platforms the world over. As a youth growing up in Soweto, a lot of things didn't seem possible but I believe that certain journeys



are predestined. One just has to stay the course," says Modisakeng.

"One of the things I would like to achieve in my career is establishing an academy dedicated to bringing art education to black communities. I would like to be remembered as someone who made an important contribution to the South African story," he concludes. BBQ

Shannon Manuel



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