

WRITERS OF HISTORY EXHIBITION (2020)

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Widely known and believed is that history is written through the lens of the victor which loosely translated refers to the fact that the truth of events and occurrences of the past are not necessarily always based on reasoned interpretive historical scholarship or factual comprehension of the past but rather are written, recorded and reordered by the political and cultural leaders who are on the winning side of history. These narratives (factional or fictitious) of the past are then disseminated through mass media, print media, textbooks, public iconography, commissioned art and movies and calcified as true reflections of historical events.

Complicated and filled with contradictions is the history of South Africa, which seems to be factually blurry until the phenomenal arrival of Jan Van Riebeeck in 1652. The late South African singer, songwriter and actress; Miriam Makeba mentions this notion in her video interview¹ (1969) in Finland where she talks about racism and states:

The conqueror writes history, they came, they conquered, and they wrote, now you don't expect people who came to invade us to write the truth about us. They will always write negative things about us, and they have to do that because they have to justify their invasion in all the countries... We don't write our history, it has always been handed down to us orally by our elders... Of course the white man came and writes history, in fact, you don't know anything about any place until the white man gets there. Until the white man comes to any place nothing lives, it's only when he comes and says poof; I have discovered you and now you exist, which is ridiculous.

A history which includes the inception and development of Apartheid² (1948 -1994) which called for separate development, living conditions, and grossing for different racial groups in South Africa, making unjust laws and restricting free movement in the country for different racial groups. During this time there were various forms of censorships and bans on information distribution and broadcasting. The Apartheid regime also declared a state of emergency (1980's) which is usually declared when the welfare of a particular nation is threatened by invasion, war, natural disaster or general insurrection as a way of attempting to restore peace and order. The declaration meant that the president would be able to rule by decree, intensifying the powers of SADF and SAP and also restricting and censoring any reportage of political unrest. With all the violence and unrest happening at that time, some

¹The video can be accessed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wONkMpbI7N8>

² Translated from the Afrikaans meaning 'apartness', apartheid was the ideology supported by the National Party (NP) government and was introduced in South Africa in 1948.

artists took it upon themselves to make artworks that recorded the vileness of apartheid in their art as a form of resistance, some of which were threatened, banned and censored and artworks destroyed by the Apartheid government.

Post-Apartheid South Africa sees the institutionalisation of the constitution which sets out rights and duties of the citizens irrespective of race, as well as the definition of structures of government of the country. Amongst these rights is the right to freedom of expression (section 16) which gives artists the rights to make any form of art without threat or possibility of prosecution. Artists such as Norman Catherine, Judith Mason, and William Kentridge are some artists known to have contributed to the resistance art of South Africa between the 1980's and now while artists such as Blessing Ngobeni, Ayanda Mabulu, and Brett Murray can be regarded more as resistance or activist artists of contemporary South Africa. The artists Colbert Mashile, Robert Hodgins, Diane Victor, Jan Tshikhutula , and Bambo Sibiya may be well regarded as making art that has its pinning's as social commentary or themes on personal explorations all of which are included in the '*Writers of History*' exhibition.

The Writers of History exhibition focuses on creating visual dialogues that foster the questioning, interpretation and comprehension of South African historical and present events. Focusing on artistic freedom of expression and advocating for the role that artists play in the overall conversations, exchanges and demonstrations that tackle the legacies of this county in the negotiation of transformation. The exhibition serves as an installation with many different artistic fragments offering various perspectives of the same story depending on the angle you are observing from.

Of the artworks included in the exhibition is *The Sleep of our reason produces our monsters- Eugene de Kock* (2015) by Diane Victor which shows a figure sleeping on a table with unidentifiable shadows/creatures arising behind him. The composition and placement of the creatures in the artworks is one representative of a dream, as if we are led into the sleeper's dreamscape while also able to see the outside environment beyond the dream. Between the shadowy creatures lies the face of Nikolaus "Klaus" Barbie (1913- 1991) who was the SS and Nazi leader of Gestapo functionary between 1942 and 1944. Klaus Barbie was regarded as the "Butcher of Lyon" for having personally tortured Jews and members of the French Resistance in prison while he was stationed in German-occupied Lyon, France, and was later held responsible for the death of up to 4000 people. Operating as either a ghost, or present in the dream is South African former police colonel, torturer and assassin Eugene de Kock (1949) who was the commanding officer of the counter insurgency unit of the SAP referred to as C10. During his tenure De Kock and his team kidnapped, tortured, and murdered numerous anti- apartheid activists between 1980 and early 1990 which earned him the name Prime evil.

De Kock was later tried and convicted on 89 charges including fraud, conspiracy to commit murder and murder. The figure of De Kock is seen outside of the background as he is brought into the foreground of the artwork, standing and staring at the sleeping figure.

The use of charcoal and ash, as the preferred medium is representative of the death of the Apartheid regime while also questioning the role or future of these men beyond their crimes, do they deserve to die too for the murders they committed? And what becomes of them now when they are dethroned of their capacity to harm. Who are they now beyond ghostly figures of a troubled past? What else can they do beyond murder?

The work takes its title and stems from Spanish artist Francisco De Goya's (1746 - 1828) plate 1 of 'Los Caprichos' titled '*The sleep of reason produces monsters*' (1799) The work by Goya similar in style to Victor's rendition reflects the artists belief in the power of reason, reason here is adopted and considered as actions that are right, justifiable, ordered, rational, an engagement with utilitarianism in the quest for a utopic world. Here Goya condemns the acceptance and employment of base instinct drives such as violence, corruption, barbarity, cruelty and war. Alluding to the notion that in the absence of reason, dark actions are to follow simply explained; the absence of reason leads to the presence of darkness.

The work by Victor interrogates these statements made by Goya through his art, questioning the crimes against humanity performed by these two figures and the reasonability of the men who performed them. In a dreamy state, history is scary and haunting, the world is haunted, South Africa is haunted by acts of vile men, are the perpetrators haunted though? Do they dream of their victims? Can they repent? Do they want to repent or are their actions justified in their eyes? Consciousness may give one the ability or power to hide inner demons, dark fantasies and morally obscured desires whereas they cannot be necessarily ignored in the subconscious.

The artwork of Ayanda Mabulu; *Butcher in Chief* (2015) however references actions more recent than that of Diane Victor. Mostly known for his grotesque depictions of powerful leaders, the included work of Mabulu does not follow his usual *modus operandi*. *Butcher in Chief* follows the artist's interrogation of the culture that resonates around the black body, where the black body is a physical manifestation of a sight and site of violence and dispossession even in the new democratic South Africa. The work cites former president Jacob Zuma holding ropes in both hands painted on the old apartheid South African flag which includes the British, Orange Free State and Transvaal flags. With a smirk on his face, blood dripping from his expensive suit, his hands are filled with ropes effectively lynching two miners on both sides.

The composition of the work takes on the form of triangle, reminiscent of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the work demonstrates that the top needs the balance and stability of the bottom in order to survive. The work serves to highlight South Africa's reliance on the mining industry for economic gain, and yet it is the miners at the bottom who are found exposed, semi naked, barely making it out alive plagued by the illnesses that may arise due to poor working and living conditions in the mines and instances of hunger that comes from their low paid wages. The work references the strikes that happened at Marikana in 2012 that consequently led to the death of thirty four miners at the hands of the police on the sixteenth of August under the presidency of Jacob Zuma.

The miners, protesting for better wages and better working conditions were mauled down in such a manner that showed no appreciation for black life, similar and reminiscent of the Sharpeville Massacre of March 21 of 1960. With an AK 47 (Mshini wam) on his neck, the artwork reminds us of the song Zuma used to sing during his political campaign that goes "Khau lethe umshini wam" (Bring me my AK47), of which one would question the use violent iconography of a gun to campaign for presidency in democratic South Africa. One could even suggest the employment of the song as an unconscious declaration that he would use whatever means necessary including violence to win over and run the country that citizens missed it in translation. The artwork comments on the remnants and legacies of apartheid that are still prevalent in the new South Africa such as cheap labour and the slaughtering of the innocent, and how the black body remains a signified of death, where the black man is still a victim, now at the hands of his own leaders who promised him peace, equality and economic prosperity. In this instance, Mabulu highlights the fact that the black person still suffers from the remnants of a racist oppressive government, twenty one years later (2015), even under a new supposedly non- racist government.

The artworks by Blessing Ngobeni, included in the exhibition compositionally takes the form of Ngobeni's unique style, but offered in expressive linocuts. Ngobeni, focusing on contemporary South Africa under a new democracy, observing and critiquing the manner in which the country is managed, knee deep in corruption, violence and the incompetence in South Africa's leading economic entities such as the SAA, Eskom, and SABC. The artwork *Musk and Struggle* (2019) references the term musk which is defined as an extremely persistent and penetrative sweet odour that is hard to ignore, Ngobeni compares that to the undeniable stench of the undesirable undertakings of South Africa that are hard to ignore such as the building of Nkandla and the Gupta saga, Ngobeni work is reflective of all these disconcerting betrayals of democracy and democratic ideals by the ruling elite for personal gain. He takes a look at the maturing democracy of South Africa, with much to celebrate

regarding how far the country has come and the developments within race relations in South Africa. While simultaneously questioning if these achievements mask the constant and consistent inequalities that still remain and are maintained beyond apartheid as the gap between the rich and poor keeps expanding.

The artist states that we brutalise ourselves and each other and perpetuate the inherited patterns of an apartheid regime, patterns of ruthlessness, violence, self-hate, and economic exclusions that we have inherited based on racial social injustice. A South African young activist, who will not be named once described South Africa as a two or three quire counter book, black on the outside and white on the inside. He used this metaphor as representative of the fallacy of the country's true governing body. The main character in the artwork is seemingly wearing a mask, like a façade and thorough this metaphor he insists, like a facade, that the decisions and choices made by the current presidents are made to suit white capital monopoly and not the majority of the country as a whole, the work may be representative of this notion where, the struggle of the majority is masked under their access to various grants while large sums of the country's money is spent lining the wallets of the already rich.

On a lighter note the recent series of artworks of Bambo Sibiyi, observes and records the emergence of a subculture that arose from the mining industry known as the *Swenka Culture*. The *swenka culture* developed as a coping mechanism for miners and a way to entertain themselves and maintain their dignity as they were trying to survive an oppressive unfavourable racist regime. The subculture developed as a unique outlet to channel their creativity and face the harsh realities of being away from home, it included the playing of board games such as morabaraba, gumboot dancing, establishment of music groups, participation in sports and an interest in personal grooming and fashion. The swenka's believed in maintaining hygiene, self-importance, unsullied behaviour and care for one another while developing a healthy competitions for the most elaborately and smartly dressed man. Their fashionable attires and masculine archetypal performances were intended at the attainment of black dignity and self-determination "*Isithunzi*".

The artwork *The Watchers* (2019) by Sibiyi features two men and a woman placed in the centre of the artwork each with an identifying object either in front of them or held in hands with a light elaborate pattern on a red background. One man is holding a bottle of alcohol and there is a radio in front of him. While the woman has a primer stove in front of her and the second man is holding a suitcase in his lap. The work serves as a capturing of the subculture that developed at the mines. The iconography of alcohol may be representative of a need to escape the harsh realities of their lived experience to the apartheid system/ regime that aimed

and often had practices of dehumanisation, where black men were treated like lesser humans to white people, and also lesser men as they were referred to as 'boy'. The three characters are sitting closely together as reflective of how they would be packed in hostels with limited furniture and appliances. The primer stove and radio functioned as one of the essential appliances as the radio not only provided them with music and entertainment, but it also served as an important relayer of information about what was happening all around South Africa including where the miners were from. Coming from various diverse rural areas around the country the radio also served as a form of communication and a connection to home as the miners were known to tune into a radio show called *Ngikhonzele* where members of the public from all over South Africa could call and send a shout out to a family member, husband or friend over the radio and tell them how they have been. The suitcase is representative of homelessness in the sense that they are living in a liminal space, where the hostel is not their home but their home in the rural areas is also not their home because most of their time is spent at the hostels. So they are always with a suitcase showing migration between the two spaces, also during this period some men never returned home to their families in the rural areas and stopped sending money home. Some of them met new partners and started new families. Nicely dressed in their Sunday best and starring at the viewer, the work shows, comments and makes a statement regarding the culture of the mines, showing that the mines and hostels were not only a place of violence, racial discrimination, tough working conditions, and appalling living circumstances but the adoption of art, sport, music, dance and creativity in the most desperate of situations shows the resilience of the black spirit irrespective of environment.

The exhibition; *Writers of History* (2020) and the works included feature not only as aesthetically pleasing artefacts but function as the visual storytelling of South Africa's difficult past and wearisome present. As we live in a time of post truth where we are always flooded with news and information that one cannot always discern or confirm its factuality. The works serve as a recorder and an archival system of sorts that effectively relays, engages and questions the history and present-day South Africa, opening up a space for effective dialogue regarding the endeavours in the country in hopes for a more inclusive, transformed economically fair South African future.