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**Koulla Xinisteris
Curator**

Johannes Phokela electrifies at Zeitz MOCAA

After a sustained pause on launching new exhibitions due to COVID-19, Cape Town's Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa recently stepped into the summer season with a major solo exhibition of work by Johannes Phokela. Titled *Only the Sun in the Sky Knows How I Feel: A Lucid Dream*, this major exhibition features a selection of work made by Phokela over the last three decades as well as new large-scale works produced especially for this show.

Phokela has established a distinguished career both locally and internationally and this exhibition asserts the artist's significance as a conceptual painter in both an African and international context. It forms part of an ongoing series of in-depth, research-based solo exhibitions by the Museum that delve into the practices of important African artists and explore the artist's continuous return to specific visual languages, histories, themes and conceptual critiques.

Much has been written about Phokela's fiercely sardonic 'mimicry' of paintings by the European Masters. In postcolonial theory, most notably in the writings of Homi Bhabha, 'mimicry' goes way beyond mere imitation and is invested with a particular kind of subversive power. 'When colonial discourse encourages the colonized subject to "mimic" the colonizer, by adopting the colonizer's cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values, the result is never a simple reproduction of those traits,' writes Nasrullah Mambrol. ¹ 'Rather, the result is a "blurred copy" of the colonizer that can be quite threatening. This is because mimicry is never very far from mockery, since it can appear to parody whatever it mimics. Mimicry therefore locates a crack in the certainty of colonial dominance, an uncertainty in its control of the behaviour of the colonized.'



Exaltation Allegory 66–33, Oil painting

This energy of parody is strongly evident in Phokela's Exaltation Allegory 66–33, which is proudly housed in the SABC Art Collection. In this powerful diptych, the backstage antics of the classical court are made strange and queer, with unexpected physical intimacy between black and white male bodies; a proximity of the flesh that is largely written out of the sanitising master narratives of history. Who is master and who is servant here? And what are the bounds of this prescribed social contract? With these two raunchy vignettes, Phokela renders these hierarchical structures absurd. He grants us an off-limits glimpse of what might have occurred backstage, beyond the official spotlight of written history. 'Exaltation Allegory 66-33 is a diptych based on Bassano, Rubens and Van Dyck, showing that although we may be assisted by "Good Samaritans" up the stairs of success, we are just as likely to be helped back down in later years. Phokela has given the job of assisting the old man's descent from grace to the only black character,' writes Paul O'Kane in the journal *Third Text*.² The same unsettling mood of parody and subversion with intent runs through Phokela's Zeitz MOCAA exhibition, which has been curated by Chief Curator Koyo Kouoh and Senior Curator Storm Janse van Rensburg, with assistance by Curatorial Assistant Beata America.

'Phokela's vision is of a world history drenched in the spoils of violence. His sardonic and, at times, nihilistic take on current affairs and the state of things holds a mirror up to us,' explains Janse Van Rensburg. 'Despite lushly painted surfaces and allegory, Phokela's medium is not the message; his painting is a subversive tool in an intellectually rigorous practice that provokes the viewer.' A deeply immersive and absorbing mood of contemplation and conceptual drama is established from the very moment you step across the portal into the midnight-blue space of the exhibition. Phokela's paintings are dramatically lit, his luminescent oils radiating outwards with full conceptual force. Organised around Phokela's obsessive engagement with pictures, the exhibition foregrounds his concern with pictorial traditions and images as tools to explore and critique social mores and skewed value systems in the aftermath of empire. It includes a riveting installation of archival material presented in sleek vitrines encompassing books, letters, photographs, visual references and drawings that provide insight into the artist's process and practice.

BIOGRAPHY

Johannes Phokela (b. 1966, Soweto) is a South African artist currently living and working in Johannesburg. Phokela began his formal art career in 1984 at the Federated Union of Black Artists (FUBA) Academy in Johannesburg. In 1987, he relocated to London, where he completed a year-long foundation course at Central St. Martins: University of the Arts London before acquiring a Bachelor's Degree at Camberwell College of Art: University of the Arts London (1988). He then completed a Master's Degree at the Royal College of Art (1993) and remained in London until his permanent return to South Africa in 2006.

Phokela played an advisory role in establishing The Bag Factory, Johannesburg (1990) and was awarded a year-long residency at Delfina Studio Trust, London (1993). He was also one of the founding members of the Gasworks Studios, London (1994 – 2005). This inspired him to do volunteer work for The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1995 and led to his participation in a residency programme in Senegal through the British Council (1997). He is also a recipient of the Decibel Award from the Arts Council of England (2004).

Phokela's prominent solo shows include an international touring exhibition commissioned by the Institute of International Visual Arts (INIVA) in collaboration with The Gallery, Cafe Gallery Projects, London (2002); Age of Enlightenment, Gallery MOMO, Johannesburg (2003); Landlord of the Lion, Stephen Lawrence Gallery, London (2005); Imagine Where You'll Be, Gallery MOMO, Johannesburg (2005); Translation, Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg (2006); Compendium, KwaZulu Natal Society of Arts, Durban (2007); I Love My Neighbours, a notable retrospective at the Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg (2009); Collateral, Oliewenhuis Art Museum, Bloemfontein (2012); and A World Sacred and Profane, Gallery AOP, Johannesburg (2015).

He has participated in numerous notable group exhibitions including the critically acclaimed 2nd Johannesburg Biennale titled Trade Routes: History and Geography, Johannesburg (1997); Personal Affects, Museum for African Art and The Cathedral of St John the Divine, New York (2004); Tremor, Palais des Beaux-Arts de Charleroi, Brussels (2004); Erase Me From Who I Am: Elvieda Quin Soy, Centro Atlantico de Arte Moderno, Las Palmas (2006); Body of Evidence, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington D.C. (2006); and Still (the) Barbarians, EVA Limerick Open, Limerick, (2016).

Phokela was represented in the South African Pavilion at the Venice Biennale (2013), and his work can be found internationally in the collections of the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington DC; in London at the Delfina Studio Trust; the London Arts Council Collection; and the South African High Commission. In South Africa, he is represented in the SABC Art Collection; BHP Billiton, Southern Collection, Scheryn Art Collection, Johannesburg Art Gallery and the Iziko South African National Gallery, amongst others. –Alexandra Dodd

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SOURCES:

1 Nasrullah Mambrol, 'Mimicry in Postcolonial Theory,' *Literary Theory and Criticism*, 10 April 2016 <https://literariness.org/2016/04/10/mimicry-in-postcolonial-theory/> (Accessed 10 November 2021).

2 Paul O'Kane (1998) 'Johannes Phokela,' *Third Text*, 12:43, 103-104, DOI: 10.1080/09528829808576743

3 Adapted from biography featured on Zeitz MOCAA website: <https://zeitzmocaa.museum/artists/johannes-phokela/>

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