



DETAIL FROM PAX
AFRIKANER: GOOD BOY
(1-2), BY MELEKO MOKGOSI

"YOU SEE
BONGOS, PEOPLE
SHAKING... I DIDN'T PICK
THAT UP. IN EACH COUNTRY
[IN AFRICA], THEY'RE DOING
THEIR VERSION OF US MUSIC"
- 50 CENT TO VIBE, WHO
ASKED IF AFRICAN MUSIC
INFLUENCED HIM

MAKING A SCENE

Meleko Mokgosi creates something between installations and paintings, long tableaux that explore issues of identity, abstraction and trauma of postcolonialism in southern Africa. His works position him among the new generation of African artists redefining contemporary art. Botswana-born, US-based Mokgosi is showing his epic, almost cinematic works at Los Angeles' Hammer Museum, as part of the gallery's Made In LA biennial. He's also showing at the Studio Museum in New York, where he is an artist in residence (previous alumni include Wangechi Mutu and Kehinde Wiley).

How did this Hammer Museum show come together?

It began with studio visits and later they invited me to the show. They gave me a lot of freedom. They'd seen my work and knew it was installation based and large scale. They gave me about 70 feet of wall space for 10 panels, which I hadn't expected. They were like "Tell us what you need"

Was it a challenge to work with so much space?

I would have liked more! But when I found that out there were 60 artists [taking part in Made In LA] I thought that I was very lucky to have the space they gave me. I spent seven to eight months drawing and drawing and drawing and figuring out the installation.

Tell us about your works for the Hammer Museum and Studio Museum.

They are part of an eight-part project called Pax Kaffraria. At the Hammer I was looking at anti-colonial sentiment in Botswana - where I'm from - South Africa, Zimbabwe and a bit of Zambia and seeing how people in the region reacted to outside influence and the South African BEE [Black Economic Empowerment], a program that kicked off post apartheid, in the 1990s. It gives a lot of money to young, educated, aspiring black entrepreneurs, which gave

rise to the Black Diamond phenomenon. So it's looking at how people identify and dis-identify with the region. The Studio exhibition was Terra Nullius, which means no-man's land. I was looking at how white southern Africans identify themselves. Do they fit as Africans? I didn't want to do the clichéd stuff - racism, apartheid.

Do you find any inspiration from that concept of the Black Diamond?

My work isn't autobiographical but it's personal. I'm kind of from a middle-class family. There's something a bit disgusting about being middle class, something perverse.

How would you describe Botswana's art scene?

There is good art being made in Botswana but not enough. I generalise but there are a lot of African countries that depend on tourism for part of their income. And with the tourist industry you get tourist art. I think that Botswana opened up its first-ever art institute only two months ago - and it's not really fine art. It's more like design, technology.

Do you find even those first steps encouraging, having grown up there?

It is encouraging that things are being done in terms of art and design. But again I was educated half in Botswana and half in America. I want things to go much more quickly.

You say the work is neither biographical nor autobiographical. What inspires you to paint?

Inspiration sounds too clichéd to me. Why do I do what I do? I think it's the only thing I know how to do. I think art is important, although it's useless. When I go back home they are still like, "when are you going to get a job?" Seriously. It was not a career option for me. I didn't want to be an artist, I just did it. It only became a real career thing when I went to UCLA [University of California, Los

Angeles]. Now I'm being an artist, now I'm professional. There needs to be more African artists because we have a unique and particular way of seeing things, of making images, of interacting with textures, of dealing with language.

What do you think the future is for African artists?

I would say that the future really hinges on non-artists, the African curators, writers and critics who not only share the same kind of history but also the same kind of sensitivity to materials, to culture and to language. I think it is those people who will be able to pick up the slight nuances that need to be picked up and then place them within the bigger art community. And curators must put shows on in Africa. Not come to New York but curate a show in Namibia, in Mozambique, in Kenya, in Nigeria. We need big shows there.

What's next for you?

I just keep working. When I make work it's not for a show. I have my projects. I've already completed two parts and I have six more parts to do. So I'm looking at 40 more paintings that I need to make in order to understand what I'm trying to get at, because the whole project looks at nationalism and what to do and how to think about that in southern Africa. So I need to read more, write more, maybe do something with text and publishing because I work in chapters. I know I'm saying that we need go back home but right now if I go home I'm going to disappear. I'm just going to chase my goats and not paint anymore. Ideally I want to go back home and teach. Part of being an artist for me is not just to make work but to teach.

□ Made in LA 2012 until Sept 2. www.madeinla2012.org;
Primary Sources, until Oct 21. www.studiomuseum.org



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