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FOLKLORE, PARABLES

Mokgosi's 'Comrades'

COMRADES. A solo exhibition of paintings by Meleko Mokgosi. At the Stevenson gallery, Cape Town until February 27. **DANNY SHORKEND** reviews.

MELEKO Mokgosi's paintings and text-based works are impenetrable, but marked by a technical swagger. This is based firstly on the text written in Setswana, a language spoken in Botswana that accompanies most paintings, while some stand alone in some cases.

Not knowing the language, it was difficult to know what to make of it. Secondly, the paintings themselves: rendered in photographic realism, it was difficult to know what the subject matter, the highly figurative and literal documentation if you will, actually meant, and indeed how that tied in with the theme – comrades – with its obvious communist overtones.

So a little bewildered, peering into the text and speaking with someone at the gallery, I was to learn that the text refers to certain folklore stories, wisdoms and parables (again what this actually meant in detail eluded me) that would have resonance for both children and adults alike.

This might explain the fact that the paintings in the main deal with school children, happy in their innocence and painted with a sense of

dynamic aliveness and illustrative detail that renders each individual character.

What is perhaps most pleasing is that even in the photographic likeness of personalities, clothing and possible narrative content, there is a decidedly conscious use of bare space, of canvas yet to be filled, almost book-like illustration.

Yet these are large oil works and one senses in the "omissions", a kind of meditation or dialogue with history, or more specifically, of where things are going, what the past leads into.

In this sense, the alluring combination of detail, that is the pinpoint accurate shoe or article of clothing and so so forth combined with "vacuousness", broad brush marks that one can sever from its descriptive deployment, portraits disconnected from any specific context or time or place.

This incongruence was perhaps the most telling clue. It is as if history cannot be documented for in the very documentation thereof there is always the bias of he or she that documents.

As philosopher Degenaar once wrote: "Man is a meaning-giver who cannot disengage the meaning he creates from the process which brings it forth."

In other words, the very process of trying to tell stories and history



ANCHORED: Meleko Mokgosi's *Comrades V*. His work employs a conscious use of bare space, of canvas yet to be filled.

is already within the very history one tries to account for.

In other words: there is no Archimedean point that is transhistorical or transcendent. Of course, that argument is itself self-defeating, for implicit here is already a viewpoint that claims an overarching transcendence of sorts.

These paintings appear to anchor the possibility of real historical documentation, while simultaneously meditating on the impossibility of a singular narrative meaning.

The paintings, offset by the text that is placed alongside seems to justify this position, in the very disjunction of text and image.

Even so, I never felt there was enough to go on to speak to Southern African politics and history and its relationship to any communist agenda – the purported "task" of this artist.

In the sheer scale of the paint-

ings, Mokgosi's obvious technical skill and the almost surface happiness of the subjects, the viewer is likely to feel buoyed by the paintings and the text, albeit on a greyish background that does nothing to detract from the aesthetics.

Yet how does this related to history and politics in a southern African context? The *3rd of May* by Goya obviously documented a particular event – that much is clear. As do innumerable portraits of royalty by artists down the ages.

Perhaps Mokgosi's choice of unknown people or historical narrative is in itself a conscious attempt to remove from history the power of those usually said to cause and make change, that is, to create history.

Or is history created by those who write it and those who make art merely add to the objects that are to be then later defined as the aesthet-

ics of that historical time-and place?

In that case, these paintings will probably be assigned as mere curios, although like chaos theory and the indeterminate butterfly effect one never knows what is ultimately causative, in which case these works by Mokgosi could in fact be pivotal?

Is that right comrade?

Mokgosi was born in 1981 in Botswana and moved to the United States in 2003 to pursue his tertiary education. He has exhibited at venues including the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA; Botswana National Gallery; Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art; The Studio Museum in Harlem; Hammer Museum at UCLA; Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Lyon.

The Stevenson gallery will exhibit at the *Cape Town Art Fair* at Booth C1, at the Cape Town Interna-



LINKED: *Comrades 1*.

tional Convention Centre this weekend from Friday to Sunday. Their showcase will reflect the increasingly international nature of their programme.

● 021 462 1500, www.stevenson.info Art fair info: www.capetownartfair.co.za