

# Friday



Nostalgia and stasis: *Comrades V* evokes a disconcerting nostalgia and depicts lives fallen through the cracks

## Quiet violence of fading to white

Artist Meleko Mokgosi explores the ruse of democracy and the agency of individuals within it

Kwanele Sosibo

In the winter of 2014 I accompanied a man who was in search of a Cecil John Rhodes statue that had been removed from an old train station in his hometown of Mahikeng in the North West.

We drove for more than four hours, from Mahikeng to Kimberley, to fulfil his aim of confronting the men he believed had stolen public property and moved it to the Kimberley Club, their elitist enclave, away from public view.

Thinking now about the interaction between heritage activist and farmer Galefele Molema and then Kimberley Club secretary Randall Bruce, I realise that Molema's quest was probably more symbolic than physical. Perhaps this was a cathartic journey of reassessing his notions of collective history.

Perhaps he knew, somewhere in his mind, that the Rhodes statue would never be returned to Mahikeng, where it had marked a pivotal stop in Rhodes's ill-fated cross-continental rail project. Postcolonial bureaucratic intransigence had found perfect bedfellows in Rhodes cultists hellbent on safeguarding a piece of imperialistic nostalgia.

The North West Provincial Heritage Resources Authority displayed no sudden urge to facilitate the return of the statue, this time to a refurbished museum in Mahikeng, as Molema wished. And as for the Kimberley Club and their newly acquired property, they wore the self-satisfied look of impunity and the smugness of reunited kinsmen.

Driving back to Mahikeng with Molema, I wondered whether he would appreciate anew the bloodied bonds that tie the colonisers and their descendants to those who must inherit their edifices.

The colonised, despite being a numerical majority, remain, to all intents and purposes, a cultural minority, ensnared by monuments to their conquest.

Meleko Mokgosi's solo exhibition *Comrades* is so powerful that in a matter of a few panels of paint-



Meleko Mokgosi (below) focuses on education in this series of paintings, including *Comrades I* (above)

ings and ancillary text, it brings into sharp focus all the violence of capture and the muted horror of the past 22 years of "flag freedom".

Currently showing at Cape Town's Stevenson gallery, *Comrades* forms the second chapter of the artist's *Democratic Intuition* project. This in turn comes on the heels of his eight-chapter installation project *Pax Kaffraria*, in which Mokgosi looked at postcolonial aesthetics alongside issues of national identification, globalisation, trans-nationality and whiteness.

The series title is apparently a reference to United States academic and theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who, according to a note on the website of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston in the US, "suggests that to recognise the ability of other individuals and their children to think abstractly and take part in civic life is inherently democratic. Mokgosi is interested in the pursuit of recognition as both a primary goal of suppressed peoples and the essence of artistic expression."

Mokgosi's oeuvre is carefully considered work that respects form, only to sub-

vert it. Like *Pax Kaffraria*, *Comrades* is nostalgic, if only in a discomforting way.

The Botswana-born, US-based artist's use of history painting to depict subjects in unaffected poses forces us to look at histories taken for granted. His series of panels depicting schoolchildren, for example, comprises eloquent interrogations into both the continued neglect of education and the ruse of the concerted, quiet violence of assimilation.

It is no accident that in Mokgosi's depiction of students in multiracial schools, the black children are not only outnumbered but by implication are slightly shielded from prominence.

His *Comrades II* panel depicts three smiling matriculants of a model C high school. They stand in an inverted triangle, with the head boy flanked by his two deputies. The fact that the black student is in the minority in this painting, as is the

one depicted in *Comrades IV*, harks back to a time when black students were first allowed into government-subsidised white schools.

By depicting them as minorities, Mokgosi seems to acknowledge the assimilation into whiteness they had to endure and ponders the pitfalls of imagined exceptionalism they may stumble into later in life. The artist, born in 1981, may have a personal recollection of the epoch.

The panels in *Comrades II* and *Comrades IV* may be viewed as complementary to the images of schoolchildren attending black schools depicted in *Comrades I* and *Comrades III*.

Mokgosi's almost photographic painterly precision means that "fiction" is starker than fact when it comes to pondering the contrasts between these two groups.

The lack of uniformity of the schoolgirls' uniforms in *Comrades I*, the state of their shoes and their varied facial expressions speak of the precariousness of black life. The image evokes a sense of foreboding for their future.

Their high school counterparts, clad in an assortment of pullovers, plain blazers and rolled-up sleeves (*Comrades III*), brim with pre-adulthood swagger. These are the same smiles that will be cut short as they fail to complete their degrees, hamstrung by financial woes and the alienating environment of tertiary

institutions that deny their intellect and humanity.

But although Mokgosi acknowledges the structural pitfalls and their dehumanising impetus, his subjects have an indelible humanity. His painting technique and use of colour, for example, go a long way towards rehabilitating the portrayal of black figures in popular discourse, returning to them a dignified individuality.

If the panels of folkloric text accompanying the paintings are taken into consideration, one is forced to reckon that patriarchy is no less an evil than the systematic beast of racism.

It is especially poignant in the wake of the current controversy over the "maidens' bursary", which provides funding for young women in KwaZulu-Natal's uThukela municipality as long as they undergo regular virginity testing.

More so than the paintings, these text panels force us to consider a completely new Africa that can jump "black into the future", as it were, thereby circumventing the perpetual stasis depicted in the three panels that make up *Comrades V*.

By refusing to translate them, Mokgosi dons a futurist's hat, transmitting secret technology from the confines of a gallery.

Explaining the role of the texts, Mokgosi says: "In my reasoning, they are paintings since the written texts were done by carefully painting into the portrait linen with bleach, then neutralising the surface so that the bleach does not continue to react with the fabric. So instead of adding pigment, I am removing it from the actual support that usually houses painted images. And the fabric is also specific because linen has very different academic and connotative qualities to cotton-duck canvas."

Mokgosi says he wanted to use the texts as a way of providing already existing tools that "some might say are not Eurocentric, that can allow us to think about various things from capitalism to power to greed and an engagement with the ethical".

With this instalment in the saga of *Democratic Intuition*, Mokgosi is beguilingly instructive and interventionist — not only asking the questions but suggesting that the answers were with us all along.

*Comrades* is on at Stevenson in Woodstock, Cape Town, until February 27. Visit [stevenson.info](http://stevenson.info)