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## Comrades by Meleko Mokgosi

Stevenson Cape Town

**D**oes anyone know when the word 'comrade' lost its egalitarian - some might even say communist - slant to become this flagrantly self-gazing state-bureaucrat euphemism for relationships consumed by self-enrichment (an apparent parody of the word's selflessness among cadres during the years of liberation struggle)?

Or was this the premise all along - that some comrades are more equal than others?

Meleko Mokgosi's current exhibition, **Comrades**, explores many such assumptions through figurative and text-based works that foreground the ambiguity contained in the "successes" of struggle, as seen in the ebullient post-liberation moment.

The piece **Comrades I** portrays black children in a typical school photo. Mokgosi's use of natural light to bathe the figures gives the image a "clean", almost saintly, quality. A subversion, perhaps, of the typical portrayals of township schoolchildren and, in some way, a challenge to stereotypes of township aesthetics. The shirts, pants, skirt and tunic are of a typically black school, but one ought to be careful of assigning absolute power to signifiers, for the image is compositional, and thus what one discerns is merely one's own baggage.

Contrast it with that of **Comrades IV**, where the construct typifies that of private school: one black person among a group of white students. These paintings read as a series, although they are not hung as such. Being unable to decipher the Setswana text, one is left with the pure image, with the correspondence of colour and pose. In **Comrades IV**, one observes a depiction of post-liberation aspirations among comrades.

I've often wondered if the whites who participated in the liberation struggle intended for their children to go to the majority-black township schools of their comrades - or was democracy to be aligned with leftist liberal ideals, which, to a large extent, work to retain patterns of power and privilege, with only a handful of elitist



COMRADES IV Private school

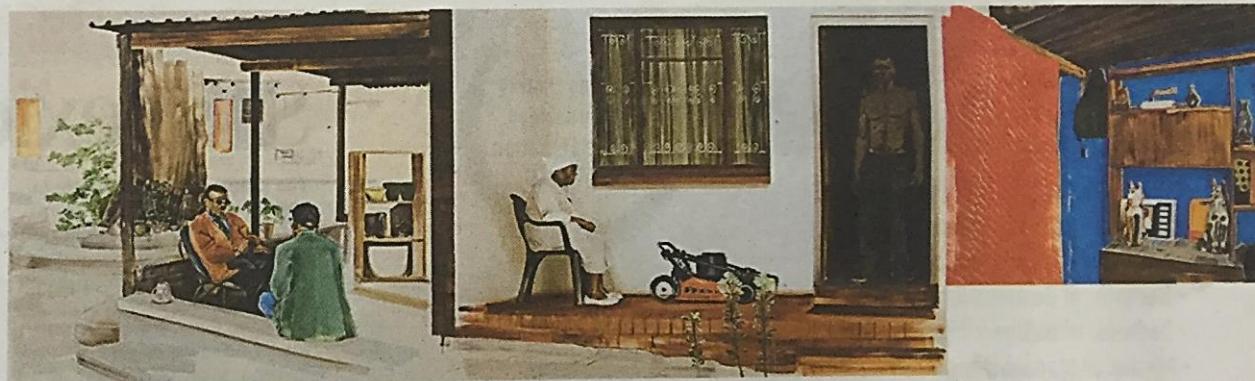


COMRADES III Post-liberation aspirations through education



COMRADES I Black children at school

# SOME COMRADES are more equal than others



COMRADES V A seemingly innocent, idyllic township scene containing a vexing metaphor of the value of black life PHOTOS: MELEKO MOKGOSI / STEVENSON

ART  
REVIEW

black comrades allowed space in the broader economic machine.

**Comrades II** and **III** operate in the same way, but **Comrades V** takes a departure in its portrayal of a seemingly innocent, idyllic township scene. What apprehends the viewer in this painting is the sheer idleness of the figures in it - the two men in conversation, the elderly woman at the window and a muscled young man at the door. The first four **Comrades** explore questions surrounding who has access to education, as much as whose education is

perceived as superior and how these ideas inform how a post-independence African society shapes itself. **Comrades V** has porcelain dogs set in front of its cool blue background. These were ornaments common in most black households in the late 80s and early 90s. The dogs occupied a sacred place in my grandmother's house. They were beautiful and fragile, and always seemed to stand guard.

Juxtaposing the image with that of the idyllic scene, one gets a sense of something worn out, tired and easy to break, as though the sinewy man at the door is an

analogy of the porcelain dogs, and thus a vexing metaphor of the value of black life even in the democratic moment.

It is in the prosaic that Mokgosi finds the most insight into the anxiety and tension of society. And perhaps it is in the ordinary scenes of our lives that power, at its most violent, festers and finds relief. In these paintings, social despair is cloaked with light, leading one to ask whether what one aspires to as "normal" is actually not the complete inverse.

The exhibition runs at Stevenson Cape Town until February 27