

## { ART }



LOCUS: 'Comrades V', part of the Comrades exhibition, where your aunty's porcelain dogs meet other everyday scenes from Botswanan life

WHEN I was growing up in the dying days of Bophuthatswana, my Setswana textbooks were aesthetically wonderful in ways that distracted me from my failure to grasp the language.

I pored over the images of boys and girls who were not called Peter and Jane.

There were always five or six of these nameless children; unlike their counterparts in English textbooks, they were always obediently performing domestic tasks.

The creators of those books did not envision rebellious children. They saw children who counted bananas and marbles (but never ate the bananas or played with the marbles). Children who would sit listening to uncles (always uncles) telling fables about rabbits and old women.

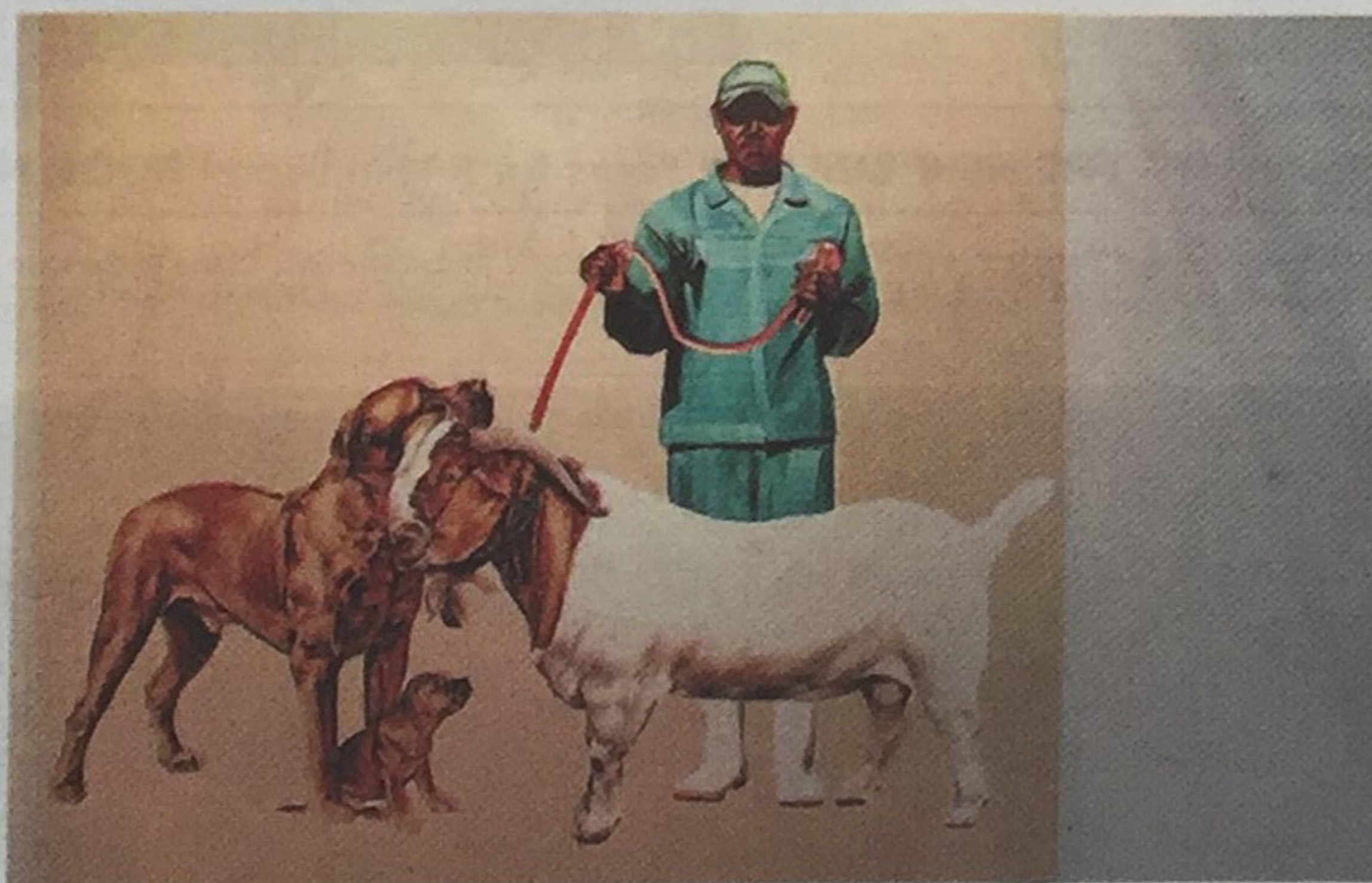
I was reminded of all of this at Meleko Mokgosi's latest exhibition, *Comrades*. He is a daunting artist to profile. Born in Botswana, Mokgosi — whose greying beard belies a youthful face — has exhibited across the world. In interviews, he cites Achille Mbembe and Gayatri Spivak. His work has drawn praise from various quarters, including critic and author Teju Cole, who declared that Mokgosi "gives us new ways to think about 19th and 20th century Southern African politics". Heady stuff.

Mokgosi hasn't exhibited in Southern Africa for a decade.

The preview of *Comrades* in Cape Town was overrun by a gaggle of Mokgosi's international students, at a time of the year when the Cape art season is slipping into gear.

## MULTI-STORIED

A fascinating text-picture tension overlays Meleko Mokgosi's latest work. By **Wamuwi Mbao**



ON A LEAD: 'Full Belly II', 2014

The show, fizzing across two rooms at the Stevenson, redraws the map of how art might speak — resisting reductive meaning while simultaneously inviting speculation. The viewer swims in a Sargasso of possibilities, wondering all the while how not to do violence to the work by wondering what it means.

It helps that the Stevenson is in Woodstock, a neighbourhood that is superficially hip and edgy. I won-

der about the artist's hip and edgy New York rootedness, and how these two spaces relate (if they do at all) to the Botswana Mokgosi hails from.

*Comrades* is the second installment of a larger series that meditates on the processes of meaning-making in Southern Africa. Its six works draw out the strange and uncanny contrasts that populate the everyday. The paintings are given just enough distance between them

to throw off my impulse to read them in sequence.

The images are beguiling oils of familiar moments and scenes: smartly dressed school children, mostly, but also everyday scenes of black life, replete with the porcelain dogs your aunt might have (*Comrades V*). Extending the lexicon of Mokgosi's previous work, each painting is a multi-panel installation featuring a mesh of image and text, which at once draws in and spurns the viewer by defeating the impulse to order them into some system.

So you have stories told in a grandmother's Setswana (exquisite, no faux words), from which meaning slips sideways. It's a magical-realist whirl that exults in the surreal lurking beneath the everyday. Mokgosi tells me that "it is only through language that we can articulate history", yet in *Comrades* he is at pains to foreground the limits of language in relation to history. Mokgosi thrusts stories from their original contexts into large-scale prominence, the better to comment on the subtle dialogue between the aesthetic and the political.

The presence of the stories is also a commentary on the historical locatedness of mother tongues. Mok-

gosi proposes that "this thing called the mother tongue is so tied to history, because it really ties our psyches to specific places". In a Cape Town gallery, viewed by people unfamiliar with the language, the estrangement of the viewer overwrites the artwork.

I'm fascinated by the text-picture tension. Do the words accompany, challenge or complement? Each panel of text is a fable told in folkloric Setswana, and the protective pride that resonates from these painstakingly bleach-etched prints betrays the artist's nostalgia for his language. Placed next to the images, they are also drawn into conceptual free play. The text is always in your peripheral vision, calling the eye's attention. My impoverished Setswana draws me further

**He foregrounds the limits of language in relation to history**

into the riddle — what is he saying about a rabbit in *Comrades II*? And what is the old woman doing? Mokgosi abstains from translating into English, making an astute point about who the assumed viewer of an artwork might be.

*Comrades* is unsettling: enigmatic and worldly yet utterly at home in its own subject matter. The six pieces ask how the ideas of democracy envisioned during the struggles for liberation have shaded the textures of the present. But they also ask how we might speak about these influences in new ways.

• *Comrades* is up at the Stevenson gallery in Cape Town until February 27