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HALF-ART

CHRIS THURMAN: Stitching up wounds after a chainsaw massacre

Sewing Saw refuses straightforward interpretation,
writes Chris Thurman

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Iconic: UmBhovuzo: The Parable of the Sower Here. Picture: SUPPLIED

Nicholas Hlobo's work is not easy going. It is striking, certainly, in its range of materials and textures, its mismatched surfaces and colours. It is visually intricate, and

the stitching that has become a trademark of the artist is testament to painstaking labour. To some eyes, it may even be beautiful – but it is not pretty.

Conceptually, Hlobo piques the viewer's curiosity but the riddles he poses are not readily solved. His quirky installations bear the vestiges of past performances; standing in the place of now-absent audiences, lacking the convincing immediacy of the artist's presence, we are left puzzling over the meaning of it all.

This is certainly the case with *Sewing Saw* (at Stevenson Cape Town until January 21), in which Hlobo sets the iconic Singer sewing machines frequently associated with his practice against the sharp teeth of a Bosch power saw. The notes accompanying the exhibition explain that the artist is "uprooting and expanding his personal mythology", and it does feel that we are privy to a moment of reflection on Hlobo's part that remains at least partly opaque to others.

It is accessible, however, insofar as the artist is meditating chiefly over questions of creative method: the necessary balance between – in fact, the interdependence of – forces of construction and destruction. For the Singer to sew, you might say, the Bosch must tear asunder.

Such reciprocity is a basic principle of the natural world. Fire and fertility are unexpected twins. Landscapes appear to be killed off, blackened, by sweeping blazes; then the slow, greening rejuvenation begins. The rich soil of tropical islands was once molten lava. Floods, freezing, desertification — these deadly processes, by turns chaotic and infinitely slow, have shaped the ecosystems that inspire, protect and feed us.

The problem is that they have also decimated animal and plant populations, making untold species extinct. And in the Anthropocene age, when these natural forces are aggravated or even caused by human behaviour, our own species may well become – may, in some parts of the globe, already be – a casualty of the creative-destructive cycle.

Popular culture

So it is important that we raise into this brave new world a generation that understands, intuitively and scientifically, not only the "impersonal" forces of planetary creation and destruction but also the very "personal" (individual and collective) responsibilities they bear. The scientia, the knowledge, comes with age. But if you want to get them while they are young, myth and archetype, narrative and character are most effective. Call it popular culture. Or, in a metonymical word: Disney.

Now that my kids are of movie-going age, a whole new big-screen universe has opened up to me.

The brightest star in the family firmament is *Moana*, a film with an eponymous heroine who — although she comes from an indistinct pre-industrial, precolonial Pacific island — offers some distinctly 21st-century guidance.

Moana is a feminist, eco-critical example of bravery and responsibility. She exists outside the paradigm of "western" and "nonwestern"; she exists, you might say, only in a reimagined history. Yet her fantastical story of demigods and monsters culminates in a vivid depiction of violence transmuted into fecundity: the ferocious lava demon Te Ka is restored as the nurturing earth goddess Te Fiti.

Moana may seem, to adult eyes, too obvious as a parable about climate change and the part that humans can play in maintaining a stable "Gaia effect". But perhaps not all artistic messages need to be complicated. The film is easy on the eye; exquisite animation produces some astonishingly picturesque scenes. And what, after all, could be wrong with a direct and positive moral?

However, as islanders from Tonga to Hawaii have pointed out, while the conclusion of Moana may not be objectionable, the portrayal of the peoples and cultures of the Pacific remains worrying in some aspects. No artistic enterprise, no storytelling venture, can really be simple.

So here, reluctantly, I find myself returning to the inexorable complexity that is presented by an artist such as Hlobo. Sewing Saw refuses straightforward interpretation.

It demands patient imaginative engagement; it makes no promise that this will ultimately be rewarded with clarity and insight. This difficulty, too, is valuable.

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