

# cast iron

DITAOLA. By Mohau Modisakeng.  
At Brundyn + gallery, until July 12.  
LUCINDA JOLLY reviews.

"I'm trying to tell a very personal story that relates to everybody," says Mohau Modisakeng.

One of the fundamental materials used in the sculptural aspect of the *Ditaola* exhibition is cast iron. In keeping with his exploration of the theme of violence, 29-year-old sculptor Modisakeng writes of referencing "various instruments of violence" which are specific to South Africa.

He revisits the material as a weapon in the form of cast iron fences used by the colonials. The poet Robert Frost will tell us that good fences make good neighbours – if you have come to the land in an equitable way.

In the colonial context, fences served in a number of ways: to keep in what was vulnerable, to keep out the many threats of the wilderness and to fix territory from the fluid approach to land by the pastoral indigenous people.

An artistic approach was totally foreign to the prevailing mindset of the colonials.

The fences may have contained pleasing decorative, ornate traceries but this was simply a smoke-screen to their true purpose – a running weapon of sharpened tips and spear ends.

Modisakeng subverts the linear design of the western fence with massive rough-hewn wooden posts painted white, a grounded contrast to the fences' apparent delicacy, turning the fence into the sickle shape of a kraal used by traditional people.

An ornate cast-iron dome, its spear-ended tips pointed earthward like some great medieval torture device, is suspended above the cracked face of a horned female therianthrope similar to Thandipa Mntambo's sculptures of Zeus or Narcissus.

*Ditaola* is Setswana for divination bones, which included shells, seeds, and fragments of horns and hoof. In a sense the exhibition could be seen as a throwing of the bones, a reading on the themes of violence, racism, gender and sexuality which permeate the fabric of society and concern the artist.

Modisakeng has thrown the bones and we, the viewers, are invited to see and interpret how they fall.

In his artist statement, Modisakeng says his work represents "violence as a mediator of history" and that he "re-enacts the symbolism of a particular kind of violence whose roots are deep in post-colonial Africa and present in the current climate.

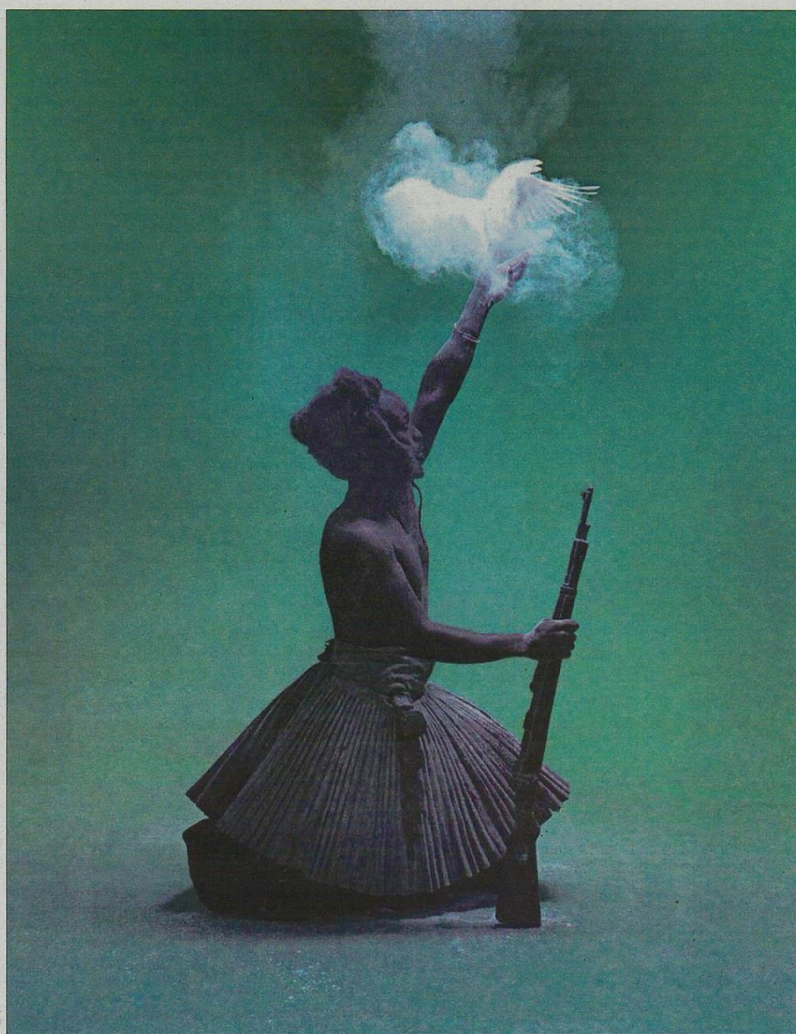
With the right intention almost anything can be turned into a weapon, and many weapons evolved from domestic or farming implements.

In the 14th century, Okinawans were forbidden to carry weapons by the conquering Japanese king, so they resorted to modifying farm weapons for protection, and a pitchfork became a sword.

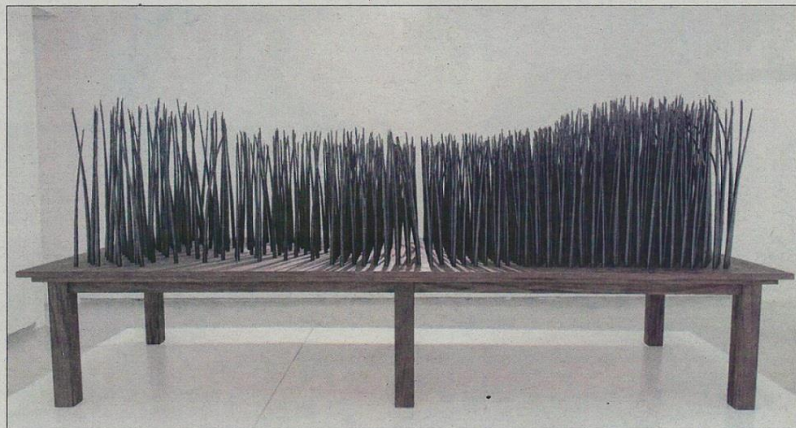
But Mohau's weapons suggest a subversion, weapons turning on their owners, spilling over and colonising the everyday.

Instead of providing fabulous sustenance, a banquet-sized meal table produces a bristling crop of sharp-tipped sjamboks originally made from hippo or rhino hide for driving cattle, and later plastic

## THROWING THE BONES



POWERFUL: Mohau Modisakeng wears an animal skin kilt and holds items symbolising peace and violence.



RHYTHMICAL: A banquet-sized meal table offers a bristling crop of sharp-tipped sjamboks.

versions used by police for crowd control. In another construction, a harvest of sjamboks oozes from the seat of an ordinary riempele or leather thong chair, a replay of Michael MacGarry's melting AK47s.

Mohau's sculptures and images are not gratuitous portrayals associated with violence. Their menace is bloodless and subtle, and the highly ritualised form of contemporary art suggestive of sado-masochistic practices, all masks and whips which we saw in the masked menacing figures of his black-and-white photographs exhibited at this year's art fair.

Modisakeng has made use of ritual in an attempt to understand, even transform, and perhaps integrate the negative energy of violence.

In this exhibition Mohau has introduced a single colour for the background of his highly burnished full-standing portrait. It's a particular green associated with traditional homesteads, but in fact it is the green screen used by contemporary film makers when introducing another element at post-production stage.

He mentions that his work is evolving towards the theatrical and we see this in these super-sized, luxuriously finished diasec photographs in which he is the key player.

He is photographed wearing a pleated animal skin kilt over a loose black wrap.

At his waist on one side hang cow bells. The outcome has the feel of an archetypal, ceremonial warrior or warrior shaman rather than a common soldier.

He poses impassively in various similar positions, holding the twin poles of the continuum of peace and violence.

In the one hand he cradles a firearm reminiscent of a Boer War weapon and in the other he releases a white dove in a puff of powdery smoke of the kind found in the flour cloud of Berni Searle's *Snow White* series.

For the west the dove has biblical implications of peace, but there are other interpretations hinted at by the artist in a video interview, of sacrificial ritual and the bird's integral place in practices known only to the initiated.

We may not be initiates but we are included, made present to ourselves, superimposed on the photograph's surface via the highly polished and crystal clear reflective surface of the diasec, from which there is no escape.

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DELICATE: Construction of an ornate cast-iron dome suspended above the cracked face of a horned female therianthrope.