

mohau modisakeng

Ditaola

29 May - 12 July 2014



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© 2014 for text: Ruth Simbao and Adrienne Edwards
© For all artworks held by Mohau Modisakeng

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(Cover) Mohau Modisakeng
Ditaola (Frames VIII)
2014
Inkjet print on Epson UltraSmooth
200 x 150 cm

(Above) Mohau Modisakeng
Untitled
2014
Inkjet print on Epson UltraSmooth
150 x 200 cm

BRUNDYN+ is pleased to present, *Ditaola*, Mohau Modisakeng's debut solo exhibition at the gallery.

A central tenet that Mohau Modisakeng's work responds to is the issue of violence and the role it plays and continues to play in colonial, as well as postcolonial African societies. His current body of work engages several discourses related to racial segregation, institutionalised/systemic racism, militarisation, and civil unrest in South Africa and the African continent at large. The work engages both individual and collective narratives informed by the realities of living in South Africa. The constructed narratives engage the black body as a site of fragmentation, distortion, and degradation.

Modisakeng's previous sculptural work grappled with notions of conflict, aggression and the threat of physical violence. The work often directly references instruments, tools and symbols of violence that are significant to the South African political and historical context. The objects are taken out of their original frame of reference as mere functional objects and repositioned in the hyper-conscious exhibition space, thus revealing a multiplicity of subtexts. His work reaches in and exhumes the complexity that percolates at the surface.

The exhibition highlights the relationship between narrative, form, nuance and what lies beneath. The results are a multidimensional creative process wherein a constellation of imagined places, stories and mythologies combine and assume physical and primarily sculptural form. The artist posits: "My current work exists as several physical 'bodies' in the form of autonomous sculptures, each assuming an individual role within an allegorical network of signs and symbols comprising the larger constellation. The characters, moments (performative, live elements), and setting on a visual level correspond to the very ideas and concepts – political, philosophical, theological and historical – that are at the root of my practice on both a symbolic and material level."

Each object functions as a metalanguage. Through description and analysing visual codes, conventions and structures, Modisakeng works towards revealing a metonymic sculptural environment. The material representation within the framework of this body of work reconstitutes a concrete 'text' into various abstract subtexts. The underlying connotations of his work are directly informed by the artist's personal biography and is infused into the collective narrative of black African subjects within the framework of (South) African social, political, and cultural politics.



Dit is vir BRUNDYN+ 'n voorreg om *Ditaola*, Mohau Modisakeng se eerste solo-uitstalling, in ons galery aan te bied.

'n Sentrale beginsel en grondliggende vraag waarop Modisakeng se werk antwoorde soek, is die vraagstuk van geweld en kwelpunte rakende die rol wat dit in koloniale sowel as postkoloniale Afrika-gemeenskappe speel en voortgaan om te speel. Sy huidige versameling beeldhouwerke verweef verskillende temas wat betrekking het op die politieke ekonomie van rassese segregasie, geïnstansionaliseerde/sistemiese rassisme, militarisme en openbare oproer in Suid-Afrika tydens apartheid in die besonder en die kontinent van Afrika in die algemeen. Die werke betrek sowel individuele as kollektiewe narratiewe, aan die hand van die werklikheid van die lewe in Suid-Afrika. Die gekonstrueerde narratiewe beeld die swart liggaam as 'n terrein van fragmentering, verwringing en degradering uit.

Modisakeng se vorige beeldhouwerk het die konsepte van konflik, aggressie en die bedreiging van fisieke geweld aangedurf. Die werke bevat dikwels direkte verwysing na instrumente, gereedskap en simbole van geweld wat betekenisvol binne die Suid-Afrikaanse politieke en geskiedkundige verband is. Die objekte word buite hul oorspronklike verwysingsraamwerk geneem, asof hulle bloot funksionele objekte is, en binne die hiperbewuste uitstalruimte herposisioneer om 'n menigte onderliggende tekste bloot te lê. Modisakeng se werk delf diep om die kompleksiteit wat aan die oppervlak perkoleer, bloot te lê.

Die uitstalling belig die verhouding tussen narratief, vorm, nuanse en dit wat onder die oppervlak skuil. Die resultaat is 'n multidimensionele, skeppende proses waarin 'n konstellasie van denkbeeldige plekke, verhale en mitologieë kombineer om fisieke en, in die eerste plek, skulpturele vorm aan te neem. Die kunstenaar stel dit so: "My huidige werk bestaan uit verskeie fisieke "liggame" in die vorm van onafhanklike beeldhouwerke wat elk 'n individuele rol vertolk binne 'n allegoriese netwerk van tekens en simbole wat die groter konstellasie uitmaak." Die karakters, oomblikke (uitvoerende, lewende elemente) en plasing op 'n visuele vlak stem ooreen met die idees en konsepte – politiek, filosofie, teologies en geskiedkundig – wat die kern van my werk op sowel 'n simboliese as materiële vlak uitmaak."

Elke objek funksioneer as 'n metataal. Deur die beskrywing en ontleding van visuele kodes, konvensies en strukture streef Modisakeng daarna om 'n metonimiese skulpturele omgewing bloot te lê. Die materiële verteenwoordiging binne die raamwerk van hierdie groep beeldhouwerke omvorm 'n konkrete "teks" in verskillende abstrakte, onderliggende tekste. Die onderliggende konnotasies van sy werk word direk beïnvloed deur die kunstenaar se persoonlike biografie en is deurdrenk met die kollektiewe narratief van swart Afrikane binne die raamwerk van (Suid-)Afrikaanse maatskaplike, politieke en kulturele politiek.



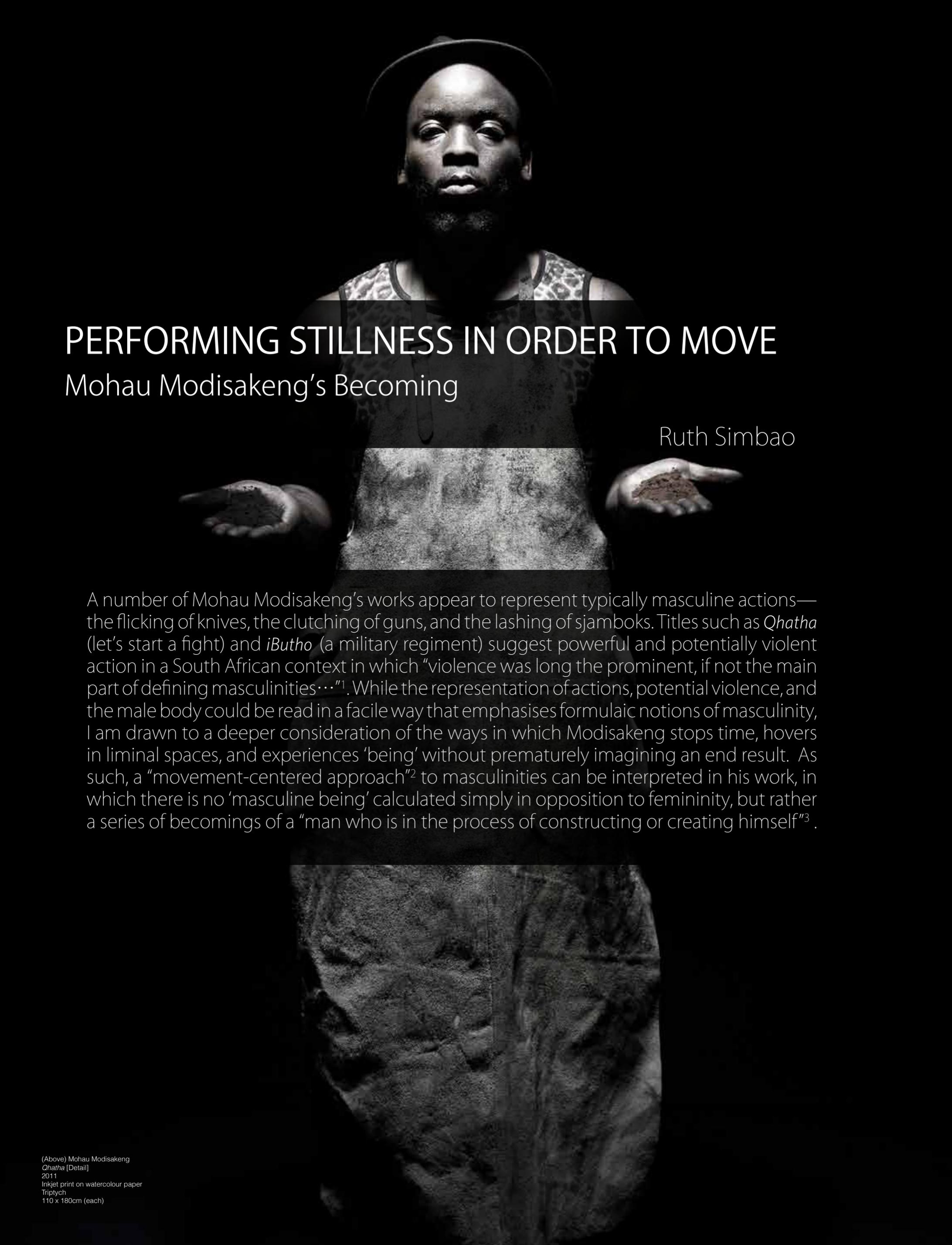
Kuluvuyo kuBRUNDYN+ ukubonisa i*Ditaola*; umboniso owodwa kaMohau Modisakeng apha kweliziko lezobugcisa.

Imbono engundoqo okanye umbuzo osisiseko ophendulwa ngumsebenzi kaModisakeng ngumba wobundlobongela kunye nenkxalabo malunga nendima obuyidlalayo nendima obuqhubekayo nokuyidlala kuluntu lwase-Afrika olulawulwa ngabasemzini nasemva kolawulo lwabasemzini. Ingqokelela yalomsebenzi wakhe iquka ukungavisisani mayelana nezozoqosho, politiki nocalucalulo ngokohlanga; ubuhlanga obubethelelwe kwezomthetho, ukusetyenziswa kwemikhosi, kunye nokuvukelwa kukarhulumente woMzantsi Afrika wocalu-calulo ngabemmi kunye nelizwekazi lase-Afrika ngokubanzi. Lo msebenzi ubandakanya namabali omntu ngamnye kunye noninzi asekelwe kwiinyani zobomi babo eMzantsi Afrika. La mabali aqulunqiweyo abandakanya umzimba womntu omnyama njengendawo eqhekekileyo, ekhutshwe ubunyani neyonakeleyo.

Umsebenzi oqingqiweyo wangaphambili kaModisakeng ubuqubula iingcinga zongquzulwano, ingqumbo kunye nokugrogriswa ngobundlobongela enyameni. Kumaxesha amaninzi lo msebenzi ubhekisa kwizixhobo kunye neempawu zobundlobongela ezibaluleke kakhulu kumxholo wezopoliti nembali yoMzantsi Afrika. Ezizinto zikhutshwe kwingcamango yazo yoqobo njengezinto nje zokusebenza zaza zabekwa kwindawo yomboniso ehleliyo ngokwasengqondweni. Ngalendlela ziveza iimpembelelo ezininzi. Umsebenzi wakhe ungena ngaphakathi uze ukhuphele ngaphandle ukuntsokotha okuhluzwayo apha ngaphezulu.

Lo mboniso ubalula ukudelelana phakathi kwebali, ubume, ifuthe kunye nokusithakele phantsi kwako konke oko kumntu. Iziphumo yinkqubo yoyilo evelwa kwiinkalo zonke apho ingqokelela yeendawo, amabali kunye neentsomi eziyimifanekiso-ngqondweni zithe zahlangana zenza izinto ezibambekayo ikakhulu eziqingqiwe ngezandla. Eli gcisa lithi: "Lo msebenzi wam wangoku uphila njengeqela lemizimba ebambekayo emile njengemifanekiso eqingqiweyo ezimeleyo, ngamnye uthatha indima yawo kwesi sacana sonxibelelwano lweempawu ezenza ingqokelelo enkulu. Abadlali, amaxesha adlalwayo, anendawo eziphilayo kunye nolwakhelo olubonakalayo bahambelana nezizimvo neengcamango – zepolitiki, zefilosofi, zezenkolo kunye nezembali – ekusekelwe kuzo umsebenzi wam ngokweempawu nangokubambekayo."

Into nganye isebenza sabulwimi. Ngokuchaza nokuhlalutya iinguqulelo ezibonakalayo, izivumelwano kunye nolwakiwo uModisakeng uzama ukuveza ubume-meko bemifanekiso eqingqiweyo ebizwa ngezacana. Umelo ngezinto ezibambekayo ku le nkqubo-sikhokhelo yalomsebenzi wakhe lubuyisela amazwi kwezizinto zahlukileyo zingathethwayo. Iintsingiselo ezifihlakeleyo nezisisiseko somsebenzi wakhe ziqhutywa ngqo yimbali ngobuqu beligcisa kwaye zixutywe nengqokelelo yamabali ngemxholo yama-Afrika amnyama kule nkqubo-sikhokhelo yezentlalo, ezipolitiki nepolitiki yenkcubeko yama-Afrika (aseMzantsi).



PERFORMING STILLNESS IN ORDER TO MOVE

Mohau Modisakeng's *Becoming*

Ruth Simbao

A number of Mohau Modisakeng's works appear to represent typically masculine actions—the flicking of knives, the clutching of guns, and the lashing of sjamboks. Titles such as *Qhatha* (let's start a fight) and *iButho* (a military regiment) suggest powerful and potentially violent action in a South African context in which “violence was long the prominent, if not the main part of defining masculinities...”¹. While the representation of actions, potential violence, and the male body could be read in a facile way that emphasises formulaic notions of masculinity, I am drawn to a deeper consideration of the ways in which Modisakeng stops time, hovers in liminal spaces, and experiences ‘being’ without prematurely imagining an end result. As such, a “movement-centered approach”² to masculinities can be interpreted in his work, in which there is no ‘masculine being’ calculated simply in opposition to femininity, but rather a series of becomings of a “man who is in the process of constructing or creating himself”³.

This emphasis on a movement-centred approach plays a critical role in opening up readings of “racially tagged”⁴ bodies that tend to be fixed in terms of gender due to false assumptions that certain ‘races’ have particular quantities of masculinity or femininity. The black male body, for example, is often stereotyped as hypermasculine⁵ (Brown 1999:28), and as bell hooks⁶ points out, this assumption is largely driven by white-supremacist, capitalist systems that posit white men as possessing the ‘right’ quantity of masculinity—strong enough, but not too bodily.

Through representations of subtly becoming masculinities that agilely flow from militant exploits to the embodiment of women’s widowhood, Modisakeng moves beyond stagnated, racialised notions of gender. While in relation to Modisakeng’s ‘becoming figures’, this notion of perpetual movement can be viewed as transformational. Movement itself is a complex concept, for facile movement that proceeds too fast usually ends up going nowhere.

In this brief reflection on Modisakeng’s work, I read moments of stillness as measured attempts to move forward. By comparing a movement-centred approach to gender, to Modisakeng’s interrogation of South Africa’s socio-political efforts to move beyond apartheid and the everyday effects of a discriminatory system and society, I argue that Modisakeng’s moments of stillness are poised to radically transform. In my analysis I interpret his video titled *Inzilo* (2013) and engage with his own opinions expressed in various interviews.

STOPPING TIME

I want to bring time to a halt.
--Mohau Modisakeng⁷

People seem more committed to keeping things as they are, as opposed to opening...space up to more diverse people, with more diverse ideas and influences. The level of complacency...has reached the point where it smells immoral.
--Mohau Modisakeng⁸

In the above two statements, Modisakeng refers to two very different forms of stopping time. In the latter, he critiques fine art academic institutions in South Africa, arguing that inertia in this case is a form of stagnation in which people appear to be actively committed to upholding the status quo, as if afraid of meaningful diversity. Stopping time in this sense is a resistance to change, whereas Modisakeng’s own desire to stop time is a quest for radical change; a quest to go back and reconsider the past that “has been left behind by all of us...[but] has not been dealt with properly”⁹. Through representations that allude to “conflict, aggression and disorder”¹⁰, he attempts to dig up the “suppressed trauma that people are forgetting about”, pointing out that the media pushes certain ideas about ourselves that encourage us “not to pay attention to the past”¹¹.

“It was Maya Angelou” says Modisakeng, “who set it straight for me when she said prejudice is a burden that confuses the past, threatens the future and renders the present inaccessible. The prejudice of apartheid and colonialism has effectively espoused our collective histories and left whatever remains severely distorted”¹². In attempting to reclaim history for himself, Modisakeng realises that his “memory doesn’t exist on its own...but is also controlled [and] mediated to a large extent”, and he argues that an idea such as nationalism “basically encourages people to forget certain things”¹³.

As a way of remembering, we need to hover, to spend time considering how we have failed. This is the frozen moment in much of Modisakeng’s work; a state of limbo situated between the horrors of our apartheid past and the ideals of the future which we failed to obtain. Writing in 2010 about our lack of significant transformation in the South African artworld, I relayed Gordon Metz’s lament: “it is sad that twenty years later there is even a need to talk about transformation, but as he suggests, little has changed and we are left in a state of limbo in which our ability to grapple with real social and political issues exposes our efforts as merely quaint”¹⁴. It is this limbo that Modisakeng recognises as he wrestles with ways to go back into history in order to proceed, and it is through the work *Inzilo* (meaning widowhood) that he effectively captures this liminal state.

HOVERING

As Mamphela Ramphele¹⁵ writes in “Political Widowhood in South Africa: The Embodiment of Ambiguity”, a widow, particularly a political widow, is in a “liminal status”. Still considered to be married, she is forced to hover, perpetuating the idea that “Women and children mourn and men carry on”¹⁶ (Kotzé, Els and Rajuili-Masilo 2012:747).

In *Inzilo*, Modisakeng uses his own body to engage performatively with the limbo of widowhood. What does it mean for a male artist to use his body to represent a woman’s ritual in which her body is marked, sometimes by smearing ground charcoal on her body, or by her dress and demeanour, and in which she is considered to be contaminated and dangerous¹⁷ (Rosenblatt & Nkosi 2007:78)? What happens to the male body as the figure ‘becomes woman’ in a ritual context deeply divided by gender? A woman mourns for longer than a man, and she is bound largely to the home. A man, on the other hand, may engage more freely due to the belief that he “belongs to the public arena by virtue of his manhood”¹⁸. The widow incorporates loss broader than her own, becoming the “embodiment of loss and pain” as she “becomes a metaphor for suffering”, rendered as both object and subject of the mourning ritual¹⁹.

In *Inzilo*, the male/female figure begins seated, as if performing a ‘sitting’ during the observance of *ukuzila*. During this ritual the furniture is often removed from the house and the widow sits on a mat or mattress facing the wall and is not supposed to stand unless absolutely necessary²⁰. In *Inzilo*, the subject is surrounded by emptiness. There is no clear-cut distinction between foreground and background and the white ground begins to shift, creating the perception of a floating figure, emphasising the liminality of this state. While fellow mourners usually “rally around to lend support and share the pain and grief”, as mourning “rituals are, by their very nature, collective processes”²¹, the figure in *Inzilo* is isolated. This seclusion is emphasised by the vacuous background, creating an image that Modisakeng says is deliberately stripped of “unnecessary signifiers”²².

Connecting the process of mourning to our socio-political context, Modisakeng explains, “I decided to perform these gestures in front of the camera and when you piece them together they reveal a narrative about mourning and the process of starting over... As soon as the reenactment of something that is supposed to be very private and personal...is reenacted publically it becomes a

a political issue".²³ In order to start over, this figure peels back what looks like charred, cracked layers of scarred skin from his (or her) crusted hands. Slowly, as if with spiritual power, the discarded pieces then float back to the subject and are drawn in via the feet, which are planted firmly on the white ground covered with charcoal marks. These marks hover midway between traces of violence and beautifully sketched gestures. Eventually the figure stands up, shaking off the charcoal pieces, and the charcoal dust that marked the mourning body now magically rises up as if in a puff of smoke.

For Modisakeng, there is still a need to mourn; to grieve that which apartheid robbed South Africans of. Despite the fact that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission attempted to deal with our past, "that past is still very much haunting us ... we see it in the horror stories in South Africa and all the things that happen in the news"²⁴. The ambiguity in this video reveals what Modisakeng views as a current state of limbo—the figure can be read as being at once male and female; the body is physically grounded in a gritty way yet is intangibly spiritual, and the background and foreround merge. This ambiguity makes straightforward explanation hard to pin down. There's no singular cause; no singularly identifiable moment of pain, for the violence and violation symbolised in Modisakeng's work is insidiously pervasive: "The violence that threads through most of my work is deeply personal and largely symbolic. This is because black people in this country didn't only experience violence as a physical threat, but also on a political, economic, psychological and spiritual level. My work responds to the complexities that have come from such a history".²⁵

In relation to the ambiguous process of mourning, Modisakeng says, "The narrative of the video reveals an ambiguous transitional process ... it's a process you are stuck with for a period of 6 to 12 months. In that process there is no real result, there is no result you can imagine, it's just a process you have to go through. If you think of where South Africa is or where South Africa has been in the last 20 years, it's stuck in this process where it's supposed to be transitioning, but we cannot imagine to what end".²⁶ Judith Butler²⁷ suggests that "perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say submitting to transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance". It seems as if the reason we are still in limbo is that as a society at large we have not readily submitted to transformation through a process of mourning.

MOVING

While Modisakeng states that his "work deals with a number of issues which revolve around questions of violence as a mediator of history"²⁸, it becomes evident in *Inzilo* that his body becomes the mediator of the pain of this history. As Ramphele²⁹ explains, when a widow mourns, her body becomes "the channel for the expulsion of the polluting elements through mourning". She becomes a dangerous being, and her body is marked with charcoal, items of clothing and sometimes the shaving of her head, partly to warn others of her 'contaminated' status. Taking on this role of a conduit for pain is no easy task. "It's a sacrifice I am making to make these images of myself" says Modisakeng, "because they are not comfortable to me".³⁰ The journey back in time comes with no guarantee: "Often I get there, and sometimes I don't ... and even when I don't it's still a victory because it speaks to me. It speaks to me of the far reaching facts of politics".³¹

Reflecting a movement-centered approach to gender that goes beyond simply moving up and down a line between the dichotomised poles of masculinity and femininity, this journey into history is far from linear, and a restorative future is never certain. Through a moment of stillness, though, it's an attempt to move; to render the present accessible so that the future can be imagined as less threatening. This movement is not a rushed glossing over of pain that Modisakeng suggests tends to mark our post-apartheid society, but it is a considered performance of stillness in order to move.

Ruth Simbao is Associate Professor in Art History and Visual Culture at Rhodes University, South Africa and the founder of the Mellon Humanities Focus Area *Visual and Performing Arts of Africa*.

Notes

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3. *Ibid*, 123.
4. *Ibid*, 164.
5. Brown,
6. hooks, bell. 2004. *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*. New York: Routledge, 13.
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8. *Ibid*.
9. Mohau Modisakeng in conversation with Theminkosi Goniwe. FNB Joburg Art Fair Artists Talks 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=upsc9A-SFs>. Accessed April 2014.
10. "VOLTA NY: Impressive New Works by Emerging Artists" in *Arts Observer*. 2013. www.artsobserver.com. Accessed April 2014.
11. Mohau Modisakeng in conversation with Theminkosi Goniwe. FNB Joburg Art Fair Artists Talks 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=upsc9A-SFs>. Accessed April 2014.
12. Mohau Modisekeng. 2011. *An Odyssey of a Confused Past*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LBC5T4FdJ4k>. Accessed May 2004.
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18. Ramphele, 100.
19. *Ibid*, 99.
20. Kotze, Els and Rajuili-Masilo, 253 - 254.
21. Ramphele, 105.
22. Mohau Modisakeng in conversation with Theminkosi Goniwe. FNB Joburg Art Fair Artists Talks 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=upsc9A-SFs>. Accessed April 2014.
23. *Ibid*.
24. *Ibid*.
25. Mohau Modisakeng in conversation with Percy Mabandu. 2011. "Chit Chat: Mohau Modisakeng", *City Press*, 9 September 2011.
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29. Ramphele, 103.
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(Above) Mohau Modisakeng
Inzilo [Film Still]
2013
Single channel video installation
4 min 57 sec



(Below, Left) Mohau Modisakeng
Untitled (Table)
2014
Sjamboks, wood
175 x 149 x 400 cm



(Below, Right) Mohau Modisakeng
Untitled (Bust II)
2014
Bronze, mahogany, mild steel
Bust: 150 x 50 x 50cm
Plinth: 220 x 78 x 85cm
Edition of 3 + 1 AP





Beyond the Frame

Thinking-Feeling Mohau Modisakeng's Space of the Body

Adrienne Edwards

This essay considers the resonances between Mohau Modisakeng's (b.1986 in Soweto, South Africa) three bodies of work—*Qhatha* (2011), *Untitled (Frames I-XIII)* (2012), and *Inzilo* (2013)—which traverse themes including South African history, politics, and culture, that are explored through aesthetics of minimalist beauty. Modisakeng's use of captured, isolated movements is rendered as still, suspended acts of mediated performances that are later realised in photographic and video forms. In all of these works, Modisakeng creates characters that he takes up in front of the lens, exploring the multiple facets of his own body. Experienced as a creative process, the images have a lush saturated and exposed quality in which his black subjectivity is explored with an unrelenting, permissible openness despite and because of its taking place in the long shadow of ethnographic photographs of Africans, a capture of the colonial gaze. Much like a number of contemporary African artists, Modisakeng approaches this history through performance self-portraiture to redress this past and because, as he articulates, "I've tried to make images that are honest to me, things I can recognise".¹

I proceed from the injunction that social theorist Stuart Hall names and understands as a *politics of reading*; that is, to be insisted upon in engaging images as the necessary work aimed at and through the pursuit of knowing them in their multiple historical contexts, including their systems of classification and functions in the world. The political imperative to read images with a knowledge of and orientation toward their ethical, moral, and social actability is precisely to "read beyond the frame," which is to pursue what is both present in and absent from the image, the subterranean and encrypted affective, experiential before.² A profoundly performative gesture, this process occurs through material affects, which resonate well beyond the parameters of the image itself.

As art historian Tina Campt has noted, black studies theorist Fred Moten has argued for a way of looking that is "attentive to the whole sensual ensemble of what is looked at."³ In particular, Moten's writings have elucidated the sonic capacities of objects, or the "*unheard sound before the image*."⁴ For Moten, "the sound of black mo'nin," which is also to say "black mourning," of the unspeakable is because of its unimaginable, excessive, and odious testament of the black experience.⁵ Moten's poetic theorising of the phonographic substance of the image insists that it is to be found not in the photograph but rather understood as its immanent sense and its aftereffects, which precede the image and go beyond it.

I want to follow Moten and Campt's lead, albeit in a different direction, to pursue the imperative of reading Modisakeng's mediated performances through their suspended acts in space, or rather as imagistic space bodies. I am suggesting that to comprehend Modisakeng's images, we must go back to the thing that is entirely visually absent, yet encoded in these self-representations. In so doing, we must read the historical, social, cultural, gendered, and racial patterning in the images, the subtle articulations that register as "meaningful or evocative, effective or affective, representational or expressive."⁶

To read Modisakeng's images is to enact what philosopher José Gil usefully conceptualises as the space of the body, which is imbued with imperceptible forces that attain varying feelings in relation to the artist's body. The body is what Gil calls a meta-phenomenon, "simultaneously visible and virtual, a cluster of forces, a transformer of space and time, both emitter of signs and trans-semiotic."⁷ It is "a body – inhabited by – and inhabiting – other bodies and other minds, a body existing at the same time at the opening toward the world."⁸ The immanent body Gil refers to exists both in space and is becoming space. It is a question of desire, of the desire of becoming, of the desire for immanence. Modisakeng's works of immanence empty out the interiority of form (while being formalist), the accumulation of subjectivity (race, gender, class, disability) in order to pursue a desire for experimentation, to necessarily wrest his being from the apparatuses that work to organise and thus delimit him. The radical possibility of immanence is its capacity to free the artist to be engaged in a process of creation realised as a consequence of and provocation from sensible events in the world.

This potential, as immanence "is a way our body has of being able to relate to the part of the world it happens to find itself in at this particular life's moment ... a lived relation."⁹ The imperative is to be in the "in-ness of (the) moment."¹⁰ Thinking-feeling the gaps between the images and in time insists upon a thinking-feeling of movement through the space of the body. Gil's space of the body is useful in thinking Modisakeng's mediated performances in which "the skin no longer delimits the body proper, but it extends beyond, across exterior space: it is the space of the body," the "becoming matter-body-skin," that is the image.¹¹

In *Qhatha* (2011), a series of photographs the artist shows in triptychs, Modisakeng is seen standing in the center of the frame utterly without emotion and adrift in a black abyss, dressed in a leopard-print polyester tank shirt overlaid with a work apron, a black bowler hat sitting astride his head. The minimalist aesthetic of the images renders the colour photographs in the binary tones of black and white, which occasionally coalesce into sprays and smudges of gray—the result of their amalgamation. The artist is seen performing different gestures in each of the three images, a progression of acts. In one he has his arms bent at the elbow, tightly aligned to his waist, hands outstretched and open, filled with dirt; in the next image, we see him in the midst of an action, hands now clasped, afloat in a billowing cloud of dust; and in the last photograph, its visually disruptive force subsides, leaving a mere remnant of its former presence. The gestures Modisakeng performs relate to modes of resolving conflicts without direct violence that he and others did in their youth.¹² If there was to be a fight between two people, a third person would intervene by taking two handfuls of soil and position them between the other two young men in a game of intimidation: the one who slapped the soil out of the hand first would become the victor.

For Modisakeng, symbols and signs that are present in material objects, even if they are not readily apparent in the work, suggest a narrative. The stories that he abstractly conveys are usually drawn from personal sources and experiences. *Qhatha* exemplifies such an approach



(Above) Mohau Modisakeng
Ditaola [installation views]
29 May - 12 July 2014
Brundyn+

inasmuch as the artist, having reviewed a series of family photographs from the 1960s and '70s, was struck by what he refers to as a "forced detachment" in relation to constructions of African masculinity as expressed in the blending of black South African "ethnic" garb, worker uniforms, and Eurocentric clothing that his male family members wore in the images he discovered.¹³ In this body of work, Modisakeng employs the personal to attend to a larger social narrative about the black male's experiences throughout the history of South Africa through this combination of the bowler hat, factory apron, and leopard-print tank.

Thus, through *Qhatha*, Modisakeng explores in general the black person and in particular his father's social position in the context of apartheid South Africa and its systems to elucidate inherent antagonisms its colonial apparatus structured. Because he came of age at the end of apartheid in 1994 and also because of his chosen profession is that of an artist, he accordingly seeks a position informed by this past and to use it as conceptual and actual material, working along the contours of its historic formations.

Such historic formations and their contemporary resonances inform Modisakeng's preference for isolated, fragmented captures of movement. His desire is a resistance to the presenting of flowing, smooth, and virtuosic gestures that take on quite real meaning and significance in the context of past limitations on mobility, movement, and individual choice for black people in South Africa. A cursory review of juridical manipulations and judicial restrictions of black movement reveal the precarity of spatial navigations during apartheid. Thus movement as a fugitive act is a vital element of the conceptual immanent material for the artist's work. The Native Land Act of 1913 disenfranchised the black population by legalising the dispossession of land, rendering a paltry percentage available for ownership by the majority of the South African population and limiting where land possession was possible. Methodically moving the population from their home territories, the Act is the *raison d'être* for the elimination of traditional farming and its manifold consequences, namely enforcing the black population into overcrowded townships and urban areas that proliferated in the midst of capitalist industries such as mining. In addition, black South Africans were required to carry "pass books," a kind of passport, which limited when, where, and for how long they could be outside of their designated areas. Their movements were subjected to excessive policing not only by authorities but also by white citizens. In this context, movement is not merely a matter of desire in the modern scenario but rather takes on a profound sense of relating to the fundamentals of personhood. Indeed it is in South African cities and townships, like Soweto, where the country's myriad ethnic groups co-mingle, as well as where people encounter immigrants and their cultural forms from around the world. It is in this context that Modisakeng came of age, in a space and time of tremendous flux that coincides with pivotal political movements for the abolition of apartheid in 1994. It was a profound shift for the country, leading to increased economic opportunities and a surge in immigration, particularly of those from other African countries. The impetus for the movements of people, both migrants and immigrants, is for a multitude of reasons. However, their causes are typically the result of forced economic and political pressures such as land displacement, environmental causes, lack of employment opportunities, ethnic and civil wars, and the incessant repercussions of European colonisation and modern capitalism.

While the worker's apron recalls the enforcement of the black population into overcrowded townships and urban areas that proliferated in the midst of capitalist industries such as mining, the leopard tank references the artist's Zulu cultural heritage (his maternal grandfather's ethnic group) and its rites of manhood.¹⁴ However, Modisakeng's sly, ironic selection of leopard print on polyester, a mass-produced product from China, illumines the impossibility of a singular and essentialised African identity, and especially so in the vortex of global capitalism. The artist equally remarks on the Zulu ritual in which a warrior marks himself with his conquered animal by wearing its hide, indicating his manhood and proving bravery and status within their social structure. This manifold signification in the work points to the alienation not only within assumed stable ethnic and gender identity constructs, but also as a profound outcome of the system of capitalism in which the exploitation of culture occurs through its commodification.

Another studio-based work, similarly composed, is *Untitled (Frames I-XIII)* (2012): Modisakeng stands in front of a white background, wearing a traditional black mourning robe, a bowler hat (as he did in *Qhatha*), horse blinkers, carrying whips or machetes; all well-known symbols of civil war, violence, agriculture, and land ownership disputes not only in South Africa but also throughout the entire continent. The artist is situated in the center of the frame under a single light, which stark symmetry and formalism bring to mind a sculptural object on display in a vitrine of a museum installation. The blinkers, narrowing the artist's range of visibility, remarks on the lasting effects of apartheid's psychological and social conditions, and the extent of their remainders post-apartheid.

The spectre of such conditions, which point to the artist's attempt to unsettle the past in the present, suggest why violence is menacing to these beautiful images. As Modisakeng explains, "images come from a dark place," as experimentations with recollections of the violence and struggle for power that proliferated as apartheid was being toppled.¹⁵ This violence was not always directed at the colonial oppressors, but also took place along ethnic lines, which the artist experienced throughout his life. Thus, Modisakeng has developed a "soft approach to the subject. It's seductive to engage the eye and then the questions will naturally emerge."¹⁶ Coincidentally, a few months after these images were made, the Marikana miners' strike occurred, in which approximately forty workers, dressed and attired uncannily similarly to Modisakeng in this work, working at a platinum mine were killed by police officers after demanding higher wages. Nevertheless, these images once again take up the inherent contradictions explored in *Qhatha*—specifically the irresolution of class conflict, the so-called traditional and modern, the exploiter and the exploited, aspiration and defeat.





A more utopian perspective emerges in Modisakeng's first video work, *Inzilo* (2013). Just under five minutes long, it begins with the bare-chested artist sitting in a black armchair with an overflowing black skirt dropping to the floor, his arms tautly outstretched. The camera glides around his still body while a generically ominous soundscape imbues the piece. Following an occasional twist of his head, the artist begins to curl his fingers, which release the black oxide wax covering his hands like broken, un-nourished earth. Both visually and sonically manipulated to ensure the greatest sensorial effect, the camera reveals a hyper-close shot of the artist peeling the wax from his hands. The soundscape haptically resonates as we hear the wax extrapolated from his skin bit by bit. We witness a similar process, although in reverse and with his feet, such that what has been formerly shed is coalesced. In the final frame, the artist stands, and in so doing, casts out his black sail, throwing the bits and pieces of black wax into the air, which the extreme slow-motion shot reveals individually in every dimension as they fall to the ground. *Inzilo* is a Zulu word for mourning, and with its use Modisakeng marks a moment of transition that is symbolic for the ever-sought new beginning in South Africa.¹⁷

Modisakeng began inserting his own body in the photographic frame from the very beginning. His interest in self-portraiture was evident in his art school graduation exhibition at Michaelis School of Fine Art, Cape Town in 2009, which also included objects and props.¹⁸ Art curator and critic Okwui Enwezor has observed a transition in African photography that is relevant to understanding Modisakeng's practice. Enwezor, noting the importance of photography in African art for over a century, assesses a qualitative aesthetic distinction that occurs between the modern and the contemporary in African photography. I understand from Enwezor that the latter is a specific formation, which concerns "analytical judgments and interpretations [artists and photographers] bring to bear on the conditions and experiences of contemporary Africa."¹⁹ Modisakeng's performance photographs and video are aesthetically locatable somewhere between the two, employing a liminal sensibility that is buttressed by the formalisms of modern African photography, particularly the studio portraiture practice, while also engaging conceptual, or what Enwezor calls analytical, dimensions that proliferate in contemporary African photography. Modern African photography, for Enwezor, perhaps best depicted by studio portraiture as evinced in the works of Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé, captured

African individuals as they wish to present or rather imagine themselves, a radical departure from colonial ethnographic photography, which tended to position the African being as an object by subjecting the Eurocentric gaze that has historically rendered her or him as the "other" through the apparatuses of visual and discursive fields.²⁰

As it relates to Modisakeng's images, the turn Enwezor locates is perhaps best exemplified in the works of Samuel Fosso and Rotimi Fani-Kayode, who enact a self-reflexive, experimental, and performative swerve in their photographs.²¹ Modisakeng's imagistic works paradoxically have less to do with what is presented in the frame. Rather, his self-portraits point the viewer in a different direction, which is toward all that is immanent to the photograph. This immanence pertains as much to aesthetic sensibilities as it is about a body's capacity and ability to relate to the world in which it exists in any given moment. The immanentive stance is one that recognises and realises the potential of sense as a kinetic determination, which is also to say a lack thereof, in the work of art and its relational possibilities. By pointing to the processual aspects of the work, Modisakeng illumines his aesthetic choices of subtraction and reduction, the disjointed and fragmented, the withheld and foreclosed, the gaps between things, beings, and forms, which necessitate a complex sensorial encounter that is the thinking-feeling of the image as space of the body.

Modisakeng's mediated performances are a pointed confrontation with the fact that we cannot say that a work of art exists solely and completely in the object itself, that is, in its form. This immanent quality, precisely its conceptual sensibility, displaces the work of art, returning the viewer again and again to the act of its proposition.

Adrienne Edwards is associate curator at Performa and a PhD candidate in Performance Studies at New York University.

Notes

1. Mohau Modisakeng, interview by author, New York/Cape Town, South Africa, April 20, 2014.
2. Hall, Stuart. "Reconstruction Work" in *The Critical Decade: Black Photography in the 1980s*, eds. Bailey, David and Hall, Stuart. *Ten-8*, no. 16, 1984: 106-113.
3. Moten, Fred. *In the Break*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003: 210.
See also: Tina M. Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013: 125-127, 134-136.
4. Campt, 134.
5. *Ibid.*, 134-135.
6. *Ibid.*, 136.
7. Gil, José. "Paradoxical Body" in *Planes of Composition: Dance, Theory, and The Global*, eds. Lepecki, André and Joy, Jenn. London: Seagull, 2009: 94.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, 42.
10. Massumi, Brian. *Semblance and Event*. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2011: 64.
11. Gil, 102.
12. Mohau Modisakeng, interview by author, New York/Cape Town, South Africa, April 20, 2014.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.* 19. Enwezor, Okwui. *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography*. New York: International Center of Photography, 2006: 25.20. See: Enwezor. 21. *Ibid.*

(Left) Mohau Modisakeng
Untitled (Frames XX)
2013
Inkjet print on Epson UltraSmooth
200 x 150 cm

(Right) Mohau Modisakeng
Untitled (Frames XXI)
2013
Inkjet print on Epson UltraSmooth
200 x 150 cm

mohau modisakeng

Curriculum Vitae

Born 1986, Soweto, Johannesburg. Lives and works in Johannesburg and Cape Town.

EDUCATION

- 2014 Master of Fine Art, Michaelis School of Fine Art, Cape Town (in progress)
- 2009 Bachelor of Art in Fine Art, Michaelis School of Fine Art, Cape Town

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2014 *Ditaola*, BRUNDYN+, Cape Town
- 2014 LOOP Barcelona, Hotel Catalonia Ramblas, Barcelona
- 2014 VOLTA NY, BRUNDYN+, New York
- 2013 *Inzilo*, Video Art Powered by Samsung special project, FNB Joburg Art Fair, Johannesburg
- 2013 VOLTA NY, BRUNDYN + GONSALVES, New York
- 2012 *Untitled*, A solo exhibition in recognition of his Sasol New Signatures award for 2011, Pretoria Art Museum, Pretoria
- 2012 *Sera*, Master of Fine Art exhibition, Michaelis School of Fine Art, Cape Town
- 2010 *Ibutho*, Side Gallery, Michael Stevenson, Cape Town
- 2009 *Ugufa Unezindaba*, Graduate exhibition, Michaelis School of Fine Art, Cape Town

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2014 *!Kauru 2014: Rerouting Dialogue 1994 - 2014*, UNISA Gallery, Pretoria
- 2013 *Ceci n'est pas une Summer Show*, BRUNDYN+, Cape Town
- 2013 *Personal and Political*, 21c Museum, Louisville, Kentucky
- 2013 Biennale International d'Art Contemporain (BIAC), Fort de France, Martinique
- 2013 *Am I not a Man and a Brother? Am I not a Woman and a Sister*, James Harris Gallery, Seattle
- 2013 FNB Joburg Art Fair, BRUNDYN +, Johannesburg
- 2012 *NEWSFEED: Anonymity & Social Media in African Revolutions and Beyond*, MoCADA, New York
- 2012 *Material Representation*, BRUNDYN + GONSALVES, Cape Town
- 2012 FNB Joburg Art Fair, BRUNDYN + GONSALVES, Johannesburg
- 2012 Dak'Art Biennale, Dakar
- 2012 *Unevenness Exhibition*, National Gallery of Zimbabwe, Harare
- 2012 *Out of Focus: Photography*, Saatchi Gallery, London
- 2012 *Exuberance Project Exhibition*, Mandela Rhodes Gallery, Cape Town
- 2011 *Implemented Environments*, Brundyn + Gonsalves, Cape Town
- 2011 Business Day, FNB Joburg Art Fair, Johannesburg
- 2011 Focus 11, Basel
- 2010 *A RE FANON*, with Lerato Bereng, Blank Projects, Cape Town
- 2010 *This is our time*, Brodie/Stevenson, Johannesburg
- 2010 *Greatest Hits*, AVA, Cape Town
- 2010 MTN New Contemporaries Award, Durban
- 2010 Spier Contemporary, Cape Town
- 2008-2007 Spier Contemporary, Cape Town

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

- Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg
- IZIKO South African National Gallery, Cape Town
- SAATCHI Gallery, London
- 21C Museum Hotel
- University of South Africa (UNISA)

PRIVATE COLLECTIONS

- Piet Viljoen (New Church collection)
- Zeitz MOCAA
- Wendy Fisher

AWARDS / RESIDENCIES

- 2013 Visiting Artist, San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco
- 2013 Video Art Powered by Samsung, FNB Joburg Art Fair, Johannesburg
- 2011 Winner, SASOL New Signatures Art Competition, Pretoria
- 2011 IAAB - International Artists Exchange Program, Basel
- 2010 Finalist, MTN New Contemporaries Award, Durban
- 2010 Spier Residency Award, Gyeonggi Creation Center, South Korea
- 2009 Merrill Lynch Scholarship, University of Cape Town, Cape Town



(Above) Mohau Modisakeng
Untitled
2014
Inkjet print on Epson UltraSmooth
200 x 150 cm

mohau modisakeng
Ditaola
29 May - 12 July 2014

Mohau Modisakeng was born in Soweto in 1986 and lives and works between Johannesburg and Cape Town. He completed his undergraduate degree at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, Cape Town in 2009 and worked towards his Masters degree at the same institution. He was awarded the SASOL New Signatures Award for 2011 and has exhibited at VOLTA NY, New York (2014); Saatchi Gallery, London (2012); Dak'Art Biennale, Dakar (2012); Focus 11, Basel (2011) and Stevenson, Cape Town (2010). In 2013 Modisakeng produced an ambitious new video work in association with Samsung as a special project for the 2013 FNB Joburg Art Fair. His work is included in public collections such as the Johannesburg Art Gallery; IZIKO South African National Gallery, Cape Town; UNISA, Johannesburg; SAATCHI Gallery, London as well as significant private collections such as Zeitz MOCAA and the New Church Collection.

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