

PAINTING

Jazz and caterpillars

Private time with Colbert Mashile, an artist concerned with 'driving out' images from an interior world

TEXT JONATHAN CANE PHOTOGRAPHY GARETH JACOBS

THE INNER-CITY STUDIO OF ARTIST COLBERT Mashile is populated with ghosts and caterpillars, but inside it is warm and shy, like the artist himself. I am here for a viewing of the prints he has made as trophies for the BASA Awards.

His studio is orderly. There are four large in-process paintings on brown craft paper pinned to the walls. The walls are basically clean except for a few small traces where Mashile has painted outside the lines. The workplace is more prudent than chaotic. On the floor are tubes of acrylic paint, packs of pastels, a heater, a CD-player crooning jazz and a neat pile of discarded paintings with which he can no longer "fight". There are two government-issue chairs on which we sit and an old dentist's cabinet for material storage.

Can I see the 'trophies'? I ask. He gingerly pulls out the linocuts, checking that his hands are perfectly clean. An expert printer, he eschews new media for the immediacy and presentness of tools with an unforgiving quality. He has an attachment to materials and material processes and is somewhat infamous for using acrylic paint and painting on cheap brown craft cardboard. He explains that the brown paper is a hangover from his university days when he couldn't afford art materials. Though I am tempted, I am wary of describing his materials, or the artist himself, as down-to-earth.

We talk about the work pinned up in the studio. This is the great pleasure of a studio visit: private time talking with the artist about work that no one has really seen yet. It is an invitation into a private, internal place, a space, it seems to me, which occupies a central theme in Mashile's work. He says he is concerned with "driving out" images from an interior world, acting like a conduit.

I point out the caterpillars in all his new paintings — bright green and climbing up 'people'. Mashile is taciturn. Are they people? I ask. He says they could evoke people. He adds that yesterday, this figure on the left was a woman. Now all that remains of her is a face, wound up in a patterned cone. He works intuitively, never quite sure where he will end up, but intent that the painting will not look like anything else he has seen.

He does concede that his paintings have become much more figurative (and colourful) in the last two years. In older works he says he depicted mainly monochromatic ghostly, mysterious images that related to the human figure but were quite removed. Now realism has started creeping in and one can see hands, or a face. At least this what art critics have said, he reflects.

Mashile strikes me as an artist who likes to make art, not talk about it; and his studio is his place for making it. So I thank him for his time and leave him to his jazz and caterpillars.



Colbert Mashile, *Mma waka Montedi*

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