

UMMA Commissions

Meleko Mokgosi: Pan-African Pulp

2019–2021



Storytelling is at the heart of Meleko Mokgosi's artistic practice, which comprises painting, drawing, text-based pieces, sculpture, and installation. With careful consideration of narrative styles employed across cultures, Mokgosi investigates political and social issues such as colonialism, history, and identity. His process involves considerable research evidenced by the range of diverse references to scholarly books, music, film, art exhibitions, oral traditions, politics, and popular culture, and he adopts a distinct perspective drawing from psychoanalysis, cinema, and theory (primarily post-colonial).

Directing each project's narrative (he frequently works in multi-layered projects that can span several years and encompass a variety of series and sub-series) Mokgosi's paintings are deliberately staged in engrossing installations—he often hangs several canvases butted up against each other without any gaps, which heightens the cinematic effect—featuring vibrant scenes of fictional (and occasionally living and/or historical) figures. The paintings are frequently complemented by sculpture, drawings, prints, and text-based works, enriching the narrative with additional cultural references. Two recent projects exemplify his ongoing interests and processes. The sequence of figurative paintings in *Pax Kaffraria* (2010–14), for one, uses Botswana, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe as case studies in a narrative probing topics from colonial history, globalization, and trans-nationality, to whiteness, 'African-ness,' and post-colonial aesthetics. *Pax Afrikaner* (2008–11), a companion project to *Pax Kaffraria*, delves into the notion of nation-state identity. Produced in response to rampant xenophobia in southern Africa, the two projects explore (mental and physical) violence towards black foreigners in southern Africa. A more recent series, *Democratic Intuition* (2013–19), unfolds over eight chapters, and includes paintings and sculptures looking at common, everyday experiences and the roots and implications of democracy in southern Africa, on an individual and public level. The series also addresses issues such as art history, history, gender, labor, protest, power, and literary and visual narrative strategies, such as allegory.

For the project, *Modern Art: The Root of African Savages* (2012–16), Mokgosi questions the established narratives of western institutions by analyzing and responding to issues of power and cultural bias revealed in the labels and interpretive texts from the exhibition *African Art, New York, and the Avant-Garde*, presented at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2012. Similarly, with *Walls of Casbah* (2009–14), he focused on interpretative labels for the exhibition *Walls of Algiers: Narratives of the City* (Getty Center, Los Angeles, 2009). While deeply critical, Mokgosi's questions and comments are not only poignant and spot on, they also demonstrate his dry wit and sense of humor.

Responding to the location and context, Mokgosi conceived of a new series for his UMMA commission entitled *Pan-African Pulp*. Inspired by the history of Pan-African groups in Detroit, *Pan-African Pulp* comprises four parts—a vinyl wall work, a text piece, a painted mural, and reproductions of a manifesto and several vintage posters. The overall project investigates the global development and impact of Pan-Africanism—the international movement aiming to unite ethnic groups of sub-Saharan African descent and its links to African liberation movements. Responding directly to the history, work, impact, and legacies of organizations such as the Black Nation of Islam, The Republic of New Afrika, Shrine of the Black Madonna (Black Christian Nationalism), Pan-African Congress, and United Negro Improvement Association, Mokgosi's research drove him to reconceptualize a link between Pan-Africanism in the U.S. and on the African continent. And while he previously considered the Pan-Africanist approach to be limiting and reductive, this endeavor provoked him to reevaluate the movement and how it was manifested both across the globe and locally in Detroit.

For one element, Mokgosi turned to popular African photo novels—also called "look books"—from the 1960s and 1970s, a genre often considered as a precursor to African cinema. *African Film* (Drum Publications), for example, follows Lance Spearman, a private eye in the mold of James

Bond, on his crime-fighting adventures. Set in a modern environment, young Africans could easily relate to the hero and his stories. The photo novels—a less expensive alternative to filmmaking—are composed of staged shots of action scenes and follow a script conveyed with speech bubbles (in English), combining elements of comic books, films, and magazines. These commercial photo novels mostly avoided overt political issues, focusing instead on aspects of fantasy and fiction in hip, contemporary language. The Spearman stories never addressed apartheid directly, even though Drum Publications was based in South Africa. However, several issues subtly acknowledge the political and social context at the time of their production, with references to the diamond trade in South Africa or the Cold War. *African Film* and others were hugely popular across the continent, even for those who were unable to read English, because the pictures steer the narratives. The publications also provided a platform for a new generation of African writers and actors. The UMMA commission features a massive, 42 1/2-foot wall of blown-up panels from issue 117 of *African Film*, for which Mokgosi has replaced the original texts in the speech balloons with his own dialogue. Introducing this relatively obscure piece of African popular culture to an American audience, and at this scale, emphasizes the broad appeal of detective stories, while illustrating the universal language of photo novels, comic books, graphic novels, magazines, and cinema. On an adjacent wall an enlarged reproduction of the manifesto from the 1969 Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algiers has been annotated with Mokgosi's notes and edits addressing the rationale and notions of "Africanity," African unity, and Pan-Africanism. The ideas put forth in the manifesto were influenced by the recent publication of Frantz Fanon's 1961 book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, which analyzes the dehumanizing effects of colonialism. In a similar fashion to his critiques of institutional texts for *Modern Art: The Root of African Savages and Walls of Casbah*, here Mokgosi highlights the complexities of liberation movements and their respective propaganda. The manifesto

shares a wall with a selection of posters from Pan-African movements founded in Detroit and Africa in the 1960s as well as a few designed by Mokgosi, which demonstrate a shared promotional strategy and visual language.

Drawing on the rich history of mural painting as a form of expression and its role in promoting the cause and messages of liberation movements, Mokgosi's mural looks at the complexities of the notion of blackness and how it's (mis)understood from European and non-European perspectives and contexts. Painted in the social realist style, the picture is anchored by an image of a monument to independence, the Zambian Freedom Statue (1974), a burly man breaking free of the chains of colonialism. The heroic monument is complemented by a cast of characters plucked from seemingly disparate sources including a pair of wrestlers, a boy holding two dogs by their collars, and two seated men in suits—all under a hopeful sunburst and rainbow.

Finally, stories from Setswana literature, in the Setswana language, reflect the tradition of oral storytelling, another aspect of Pan-Africanism, in texts displayed around the ribbon of the balcony. Mokgosi told the tales to students, who were then filmed retelling them in English, in their own words, and those videos are accessible via a QR code. As in the game of telephone, the stories morph and evolve with each interpretation.

Through stories told with images, objects, and texts Meleko Mokgosi evaluates history and cultures through narratives that are both personal and deeply universal. He challenges established traditions and roles within these different cultures and from the distinct perspective of an artist, philosopher, scholar, and member of the African diaspora. In a climate of increasing division and disparity, the ideas and subjects addressed here are more relevant than ever.

Ali Subotnick
Guest Curator

Pitso o ne
loetsa gore
a gore a fe
enkgwe se.

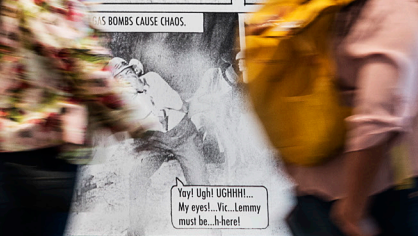
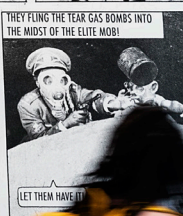
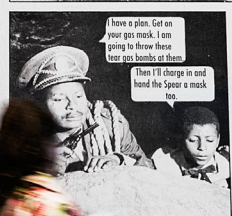
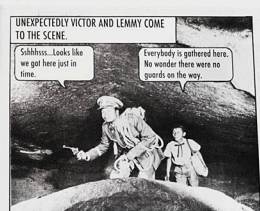
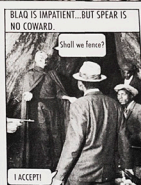
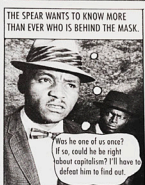
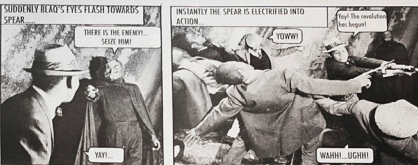
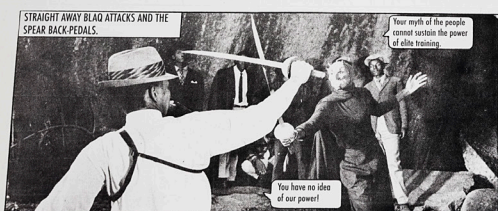
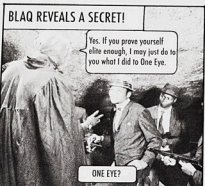
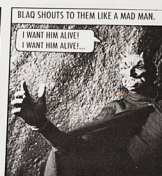
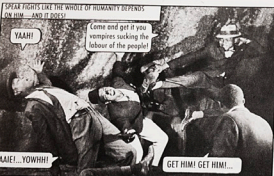
Monnamogolo a kgaoganya senkgwe ka bogare, mme a neela Pitso b
butswang a re: 'Tsamaya o ye kwa lefatsheng la bodimo, o ba rekisets
sepe fa e se ka letlapa le le kwa motsheo ga ntlo.' Mme Pitso o ne a
ba mmona ba re ba e reka ka madi a gana mme a re o e rekisa fela ka
ka yone. Bana ba bodimo ba lela ba kopa borraabo gore ba mo neye l



bontlhangwe jwa sone. A ba a naya Pitso nama e e sa
se nama e, mme o se ka wa ba wa dumela ba e reka ka
n dira se se boletsweng ke monnamogolo. E rile bodimo
a letlapa le le kwa motsheo ga ntlo, e seng jalo o bowa
letlapa, mme a le tsaya a boela gae.

Fa Pitso a tso
dilo tse. O ne a ro
Motlhanka o ne a boletse
la ga Pitso. Ba fitlhetse go re
tswala mme la gana, go fitlhelela





...tla go itse gore o tsaya kae...
...saya kae khumo ya gaqwe...
...go ba ya go utswa letlaba...
...entsi. Ba ne ba leka go le...
...o le santse le le letswai!

Go tse e nile bogol...
...a na le bana mme...
...a ye go kopa ma...
...mmane senkg...



THE SPEAR MAKES AN IMPOSSIBLE MOVE TO STOP BLAQ'S BLADE!

RIGHT HERE!

Where is your people power now, my enemy friend? We know how to play cat and mouse with your kind!

HE WHIPS AT THE SPEAR'S LEGS, MISSING HIM BY INCHES.

TRUE DEMOCRACY IS A LEAP OF FAITH!

HOW DO YOU KEEP EVADING ME, YOU PLEBIAN!

ONE EYE AND BLAQ'S HENCHMEN WATCH WITH GREAT INTEREST.

I used to think like the Spear.

Spear will see the truth now.

The Elites know best!

28

...tjo le diaparo di le dintsi. E rile fa mogolowe a bona a huma, a batla go itse gore o tsaya kae...
...nthe ka fa ntle ga ntlo ya ga monnawe, a tle a bone gore Pitso o tsaya kae khumo ya gagwe.
...peng le le bulwang. Ba ga Ngame ba ne ba tsaya mokoro go le bogiso ba ya go utswa letlapa
...a ba boa. E rile mo tseleng ba le bula mme la ntsha letswai fela le lentso. Ba ne ba leka go le
...mokoro, o bo o nwela. Le lapa lone la ntshetsa letswai ruri 'le gompieno le santhe le le letswai.'



search for a dilettante culture leading to unproductive and decadent aestheticism. We should therefore take systematic and appropriate measures to imbue our youth with African culture so that the young people of our continent may understand its profound values and be better armed to resist certain demoralizing cultural manifestations, and be better prepared to become integrated into the masses.

In this way, African culture, true to itself and drawing strength from the deep sources of its wealth and of its creative genius, not only intends to defend its personality and its authenticity but also to become an instrument in the service of the people in the liberation of Africa from all forms of alienation, an instrument of a synchronized economic and social development. It will thus bring about the technico-industrial promotion of the African, and also a living and fraternal humanism far removed from racialism and exploitation.

(Culture) as a decisive force in economic and social development, constitutes the surest means for our peoples to overcome their technological (i.e. economic) handicap and the most effective force in our victorious resistance against imperialist blackmail.

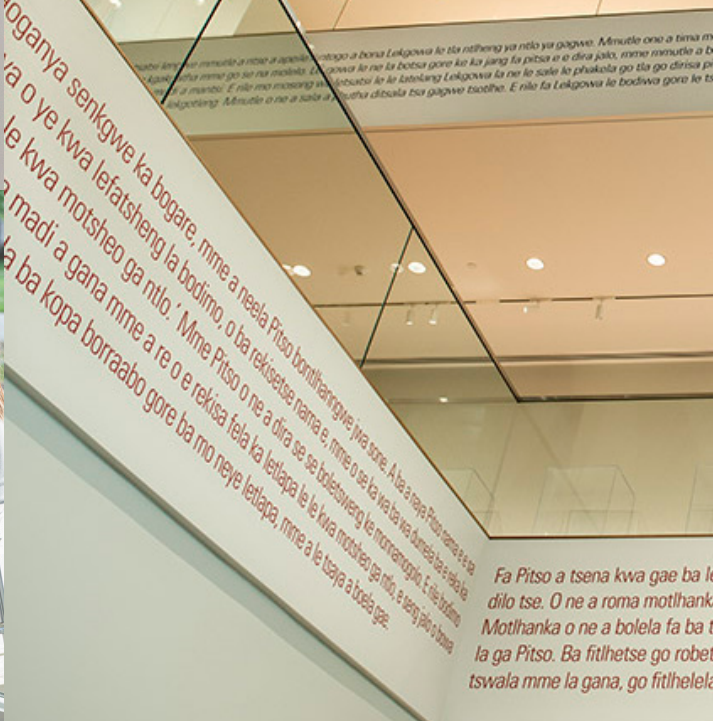
Race as a discourse founded on history is that which is currently used to stigmatize through the dominant - to perpetuate the work of slavery and imperialism.

Race is best understood as a discourse constructed by thought and language that responds to concrete conditions of cultural difference.

material disenfranchisement

cultural goods depend on: ideology, taste, education, class
cultural goods are made to meet cultural needs - are therefore products of socialization, social origin, and education!

The concept of race and lived experience of race are thus entwined in a discourse of visibility that enables subsequent forms of hierarchy or, in



UMMA Commissions invites makers to create site-specific works inside and outside the Museum's walls as it seeks to bring the practices and concerns of artists in direct contact with the Museum's spaces, collections, and public.

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Meleko Mokgosi,
Pan-African Pulp, 2019.
Artwork © Meleko Mokgosi.
Photography: Jeri Hollister
and Patrick Young

**ALL
WELCOME
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