

Todd Matshikiza en Steve Biko. Politici, musici en beroemdheden kwamen samen ongeacht hun ras. Het was de Harlem Renaissance van Zuid Afrika! Steve Biko was de grondlegger van het 'zwarte denken' in Zuid-Afrika en veranderde de wijze waarop zwarte mensen over zichzelf dachten. Een van mijn favoriete korte verhalen van Can Themba is 'The Suit'. Het gaat over een man die zijn vrouw met andere man in bed aantreft. Hij geeft de vrouw een straf. Overal waar ze heen gaat, moet ze een maatpak met zich meedragen. Het zinspeelt op de psychologische effecten van onderdrukking in relaties. Deze en andere toneelstukken, romans en biografieën hebben bijgedragen aan een bepaald type vertelling en aan de ontwikkeling van de theatrale settings in mijn doeken.

RH Ik noem een groep kunstenaars die ik persoonlijk ken en die eind dertig tot ongeveer veertig jaar zijn. Ebony G. Patterson doet precies hetzelfde als ik met 'black bodies'. Ze komt uit Jamaica en werkt uitsluitend met textiel. Tijdens mijn residency in Trinidad waar ze enorm populair is, kwam ik in contact met haar werk. Ayana V. Jackson gaat in haar zelfportretten (foto's) in op haar geschiedenis als Afro-Amerikaanse vrouw. Sheena Rose, een performance kunstenaar uit Barbados, maakt bijna mystieke beelden met veel glitter over het eilandleven en hoe ze daar haar vrouwelijkheid ervaart. Ik denk ook aan Kudzani Chiurai die stills maakt over het regime in Zimbabwe, Gareth Nyandoro eveneens uit Zimbabwe, Zanele Muholi, Kayman Belahun en Ibrahim Mahama, een Ghanees. Al deze kunstenaars vertellen over hun positie, achtergrond, geschiedenis en geven hun visie op de wereld. We staan met zijn allen op de barricaden en dat geeft ons een saamhorigheidsgevoel.

SH De figuratie van Neo Rauch vind ik mooi, de wildheid van Markus Lüpertz en de wijze waarop Rubens zijn leeuwen schildert. Ferdinand Bol is een van de beste. Op zijn schilderij 'Consul Titus Manlius Torquatus laat zijn zoon onthoofden' is ongelofelijk veel gaande. Ik verslind documentaires over technologie en post- of transhumanistische dingen. Elon Musk wil met zijn bedrijf ruimtereizen mogelijk maken voor privépersonen. Neil Harbisson heeft een antenne in zijn hoofd aangebracht waarmee hij kleur kan horen. Een belangrijke bron zijn de online artikelen op MIT Technology Review en van het Future of Humanity Institute (van de Universiteit van Oxford). Ook heb ik een stuk of honderd speeches van Yuval Noah Harari bekeken over de geschiedenis en toekomst van de mens. Door Harari ontdekte ik een Japanner die een robot, een 'Geminoid', heeft gemaakt die sprekend op hem lijkt. Van het een val ik in het ander.

NJ Welk inzicht heeft schilderen je gegeven?

NM Schilderen leerde me hoopvol te zijn. Ik zeg niet dat ik een boze kunstenaar ben, maar ik had veel woede in me, veroorzaakt door onrecht en ongelijkheid. De schilderkunst heeft me geholpen die te overwinnen.



A PAINTING IS NOT A 'PIECE OF CAKE'  
- a conversation on painting with the three winners

by Nanda Janssen (NJ) with (NM) *Neo Matloga* (RH) *Raquel van Haver* (SH) *Sam Hersbach*

NJ What do you paint and why?

NM I always wondered why artists of colour have to over-explain their practice the minute they use the black community as the protagonist in their work. But what if I want to paint the same way as seventeenth-century artists did? Sure, all the characters in my paintings are black, but nobody asked Rembrandt or Michelangelo why they only painted white people. I want to be treated in the same manner. However, my work is multilayered, ambiguous, and has political undertones. The disfiguration of the physiognomy of my figures challenges you psychologically. My work transports you into new territory. I would like to offer a type of representation that is lacking in European, Western media.

RH Many different cultures and religions are found in the Amsterdam-Zuidoost district where I live. By telling new stories I want to give a better image of our society. For instance, I followed a group of boys who regularly hung out near my front door. They bred dogs in order to earn some pocket money. Because of their different appearance, names, and tattoos, they had difficulty finding jobs. I also spent time with the Area Boys gang during my recent residency in Lagos. It was one of the friendliest and most beautiful places I've ever visited. My work is not so much about skin colour, but situations in which I find myself and which become part of my



identity. That is the actual focus of my work, instead of dealing solely with the contrasts between black and white.

SH I am interested in sociological and technological developments, in particular the underlying philosophical thoughts. What is being human, what is power, what is free will? I watched a documentary in which catfish prey on pigeons. I have never before seen anything as clumsy. By means of all manner of technological developments we try to turn ourselves into walking gods. And yet at the same time we sort of resemble that gawky catfish, by doing silly things such as sending sound bites into space. These are the kinds of things that I try to capture visually, which results in scenes of snakes snatched by catfish, a snake quarrelling with a butterfly, or someone chopping off his head to put it on a statue and so immortalise himself.

NJ I am always interested in knowing how artists arrive at their subject matter. How did you?

SH That grew very slowly because my interests have to crystallise. My other option qua choice of study was designing computer games. Like some games, my paintings are narrative. Moreover, there is always a particular struggle going on. In a game you are constantly hunting for better 'skills' and weapons. In my paintings, though, you will sooner encounter a chain with eyes. Just imagine that everything the dead have seen is saved in their eyes and that you make chains of them in order to learn from the deceased.

NM In South Africa, where I come from, I became aware that there are many politics as well as socio-economic problems outside our interior space. These problems don't stop people from living. Life carries on indoors. I make socially confirmed scenes: people dancing, having dinner, or sitting and having conversations about conversations. I love to show my memories about growing up in South Africa and highlight this incredible happiness, because black families were happy too. Even though my images are based on my memory, all the scenes are invented. My pictures are not easy to grasp especially when you see the characters. It was only when I arrived here in the Netherlands that I began to address this subject.

RH When I was still studying at the art academy my grandmother gave me a book with advertisements from the 1960s and 70s. They were pretty close to being racist stereotypes. This imaging intrigued me. Not long thereafter I saw an exhibition in Medellín, Colombia, of age-old paintings from all over the world featuring non-Western people. Sometimes as slaves or plantation workers. It seemed pretty apparent that no one could accurately depict Latin-American or African people and that, in fact, they were often hidden behind a pillar or obscured in some other way on the canvas. This fuelled my irritation. How often is my group, or the group

I hang out with, represented? And even when it is, stereotyping is pervasive. Everything somehow came together and I realised this was the story I wanted to tell.

NJ What does your work convey about the society from which they stem?

NM [Laughing] Hello! I'm here! I exist! What you're taught and what you think is not always true.

RH I often find myself navigating two worlds because I was adopted from Colombia. I try to magnify elements from both worlds. Because of all of that enlarging my figures sometimes tend towards the clownish, they almost revert to being stereotypes. Once in a while I paint something about which I wonder whether it's alright to do so. Two years ago I made a painting about whores as an ode to those ladies. A South African friend became very cross with me. According to her, I had no right to depict 'black bodies' this way because my ethnic background is different. There is tremendous discord about who may paint and appropriate what. What surfaces for her is Apartheid and for me my free Dutch spirit. We didn't talk for a year. These discussions are painful, but important.

NJ How do you perceive the connection between the content and form of your work?

RH I've been struggling with that question for a long time. My research with regard to content is actually unrelated to the materials I use and my pastose and dark facture. I can see why you might think that my exaggeration and the literally thick application are bound up with my subject matter - shedding light on particular social groups, clichés, and stereotyping - but I suspect that I would still be painting in this manner even if I were dealing with a totally different theme. Going to extremes, being 'over the top', is something that suits me.

SH The books by H.P. Lovecraft and Bloodborne, a game partly based on them, can both be labelled a cosmic horror and presuppose that there are beings in this universe not in the least interested in destroying us because we are nothing more than an ant to them. You can visualise such a thought with tiny, transparent snakes facing huge, brightly gleaming pastel-coloured creatures. The light-footed elements in my pictures must be portrayed with a certain gravitas. So, not dumb-ass funny, but powerfully funny. I depict a snake stupid enough to think it can take on a much bigger creature as a silly dash with a somewhat more refined brush. But when I want to portray a mighty snake, I use a brush from the Hornbach (a DIY store) with which you can really command a certain power.

NM Before I arrived in Amsterdam I used colour in my paintings. Coming here I decided that I wanted to make monochromatic paintings with only

black, white, and grey because of their significant and ambiguous meanings. This could say many things at the same time, whether provocative or playful. Also, back home I painted figures, but not space, and they were headless too. In the Netherlands, these figures had to be given a space in which to exist. This is why I paint households, living rooms, and kitchens. Furthermore, I realised that if I want to represent these people I need to give them a face and a presence.

NJ How would you characterise yourself as a painter and an artist? What image fits you?

RH I hesitate to answer this question because I don't want to pin myself down. But since you insist, I would say that I am a socially engaged storyteller. I paint my pictures, but it is up to others to extract the political or social charge in them. My work is closely allied with our zeitgeist and the debates going on about identity and culture. But I hope that when these have faded away people can still enjoy the paintings and the story.

SH As I find many philosophical questions interesting, I could say that I'm a jester making an attempt to philosophise. But people all too readily think of themselves as being philosophical. Given all of the captivating and horrible things invented by man and that pique my curiosity, I could also describe myself as a 'truth-finding-questing-explorer.' Or, imagine that there are all kinds of different lakes. Some of my paintings swim in the lake of the 'culture spy' while others float, for example, in the 'metaphysical thought process of - is there more to life?' Are you still with me?

NM I feel I'm a vessel of a God out there. I don't have to think so much when making a painting because I'm being sent. As if there is a spine from God to me and I'm just giving out the information through the creativity. My name is Neo, which means gift. My second name is Image. [Laughing] I have a gift for creating images! When I make a painting I pray. It happens naturally: I hold a brush, get my paints, my charcoal, my collage and snap: within those seconds the praying is happening. I pray: Let it be.

NJ Tell us something about your sources of inspiration.

NM In the 1950s and 1960s there was a flourishing generation of writers in South Africa, the likes of Can Themba, Lewis Nkosi, Nat Nakasa, Todd Matshikiza, and Steve Biko. Politicians, musicians, and famous people came together despite their race. It was the Harlem Renaissance of South Africa! Steve Biko was the architect of black thinking in South Africa in terms of changing the way black people think about themselves. One of my favourite short stories by Can Themba is 'The Suit.' The storyline is about a man who found his wife with another man in bed. He gave

the woman a punishment. Everywhere she went, she had to carry a suit. It plays on the psychological effects of oppression in relationships. These and other plays, novels, and biographies informed this kind of narrative in my paintings and helped me develop this theatrical stage.

RH I will mention a group of artists in their late thirties to forty with whom I am personally acquainted. Ebony G. Patterson treats 'black bodies' the same way I do. She is from Jamaica and works exclusively with textile. I came into contact with her work during my residency in Trinidad, where she is hugely popular. Ayana V. Jackson explores her history as an African-American woman in self-portraits (photographs). Sheena Rose, a performance artist from Barbados, makes almost mystical images with a lot of glitter about island life and her experience of femininity there. I should also mention Kudzani Chiurai who makes stills about the regime in Zimbabwe; Gareth Nyandoro, also from Zimbabwe; Zanele Muholi; Kayman Belahun; and Ibrahim Mahama, a Ghanaian. All of these artists give an account of their position, background, and history, and share their vision of the world. We man the barricades together, and that gives us a sense of solidarity.

SH I really like the figurative work of Neo Rauch, the ferocity of Markus Lüpertz, and the way in which Rubens painted his lions. Ferdinand Bol is one of the best. So much is going on in his painting *Consul Titus Manlius Torquatus Orders the Beheading of his Son*. I devour documentaries on technology and post- or trans-humanist topics. With his company Elon Musk wants to make space travel possible for private individuals. Neil Harbisson implanted an antenna in his skull with which he can hear colour. Another important source are the online articles in the MIT Technology Review and the Future of Humanity Institute (at Oxford University). I have also watched about a hundred talks given by Yuval Noah Harari on the past and future of man. Through Harari I discovered a Japanese who made a robot, a 'Geminoid,' that looks exactly like him. One thing leads to another.

NJ What insight has painting given you?

NM Painting taught me to be hopeful. I'm not saying I'm an angry artist but I had a lot of internal anger caused by injustices and inequalities. Painting has helped me to overcome that.