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Thokozani Mthiyane: Patching up the male psyche

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[Meditating on alienation: Thokozani Mthiyane explores the 'mental states' of men ground into Jo'burg's rough streets.](#) Photo: Oupa Nkosi

On Thokozani Mthiyane's walls, among photographs, heirlooms and works in progress, is a series of almost life-size oil portraits on canvases. They are faces without bodies, their heads sometimes slightly bent, the faces elongated like rugby balls on kicking tees. Blotches of colour section off fragments of the faces, with yellow emerging often as the dominant layer.

Mthiyane has variations of these works around his Doornfontein studio.

“It’s about mental states,” he says. “It’s most of the mental states you can contemplate in a place like Johannesburg. Take from Maboneng to Carlton Centre. Those people are all hallucinating on some chemical, so that’s how I interpret that. It also has to do with madness.”

He points out that the portraits are mostly of men, as they deal with the greater “visibility of destitute males”.

“I’m not saying that there aren’t women. There are plenty. But in my everyday experience, I walk out and those are the faces I see. But also they have a particular thing I relate to because I am a man. I walk out and think, ‘This could be me. This could be somebody I know’. And it goes and it goes. Basically it’s about alienation.”

One face could represent four or five states of mind, he says.

Alienation is a state that Mthiyane, a Johannesburg resident on and off for about the past 18 years, has come to embrace. Increasingly, he spends his days in his studio, or on the move, often getting into a bus to find a different locale to work from.

The portrait series, titled A Million Faces, had its inauspicious beginnings in Cape Town.

“At first I was focusing on immigration. I was interviewing immigrants, based on my experience of being an outsider. Here, in Cape Town and in Nigeria or wherever I would be.”

Mthiyane’s works, it seems, have rounded into a language that allows them to speak to each other across formats, themes and locales.

A conversation about his obsession with documenting the male condition leads to the hollowed-out promises of the City of Gold, this time represented by a contorted, grubby hessian sack framed by a gold-painted wooden frame. It’s an evocative if simple metaphor representing the lure of success against the prevailing conditions of the city.

The more I look at it, the more I pity the sack. It is hardened by the residue of acrylic and enamel paint. There are liberal sprinklings of ground coffee and, possibly like the other work surfaces that populate the room, left to be stamped on, collecting all manner of Johannesburg pavement residue.

Like his finished works, months or years in the making, Mthiyane has seemingly evolved a language that viscerally translates the broken promises and dislocated dreams of the urban experience.

“Hessian is like the least of materials. But not only hessian — rotting wood and such.”

Like a mad cat whisperer, with silver bowls of leftovers collecting in a corner, Mthiyane’s works, be they unfinished hodgepodge sculptures or canvas, hessian and wood patchworks held together by safety pins and other adhesives, evoke not only the grime of the city (his immediate environs) but also the human scars born from people’s interaction with it.

“If you look at the hessian work I am doing [now], there’s more patchwork and bandaging. The bandaging of myself, my friends, even if they don’t know, I think on such mending but meditatively. I’m mending the brokenness that we have as people but as friends.”

The symbolism Mthiyane draws on seems to represent a yearning for healing but also in a different sense — of how a traveller becomes a compendium of his experiences and a confluence of beliefs.

On a wall opposite the mangle- faced portraits is a row of stitched-up canvases, the dominant motifs being imperfect circles, bands of hessian and ground coffee stains embedded across their midsections. In some cases, the canvases have been spliced into fours, held aloft and together only

precariously. Lines appear in threes and, in some cases, numerical-looking squiggles put in fleeting appearances.

Diagonally opposite is a pair, perhaps a trilogy, of similarly composed, larger-format canvases. Where the circles ought to be, however, is an exploded centre.

“Soul Songs, the last show I had at Art Eye Gallery last year, had these motifs,” he says, referring to circles and geometric scribbles. “I had these [circles] structurally but the motifs are slightly different, because today’s masquerade is not the same as yesterday’s or tomorrow’s.”

Back across the wall, another triptych of tablet-sized canvases features such painstakingly treated surfaces that they appear luminous and alive, like a cross-section of volcanic rock or a chunk of Mars’s surface. A motif of sorts arises, with thick slabs of pen-like oil paint jutting across the surface at right angles while rock-like charcoal surfaces emerge like landscape from the lower ends.

As if alluding to their almost easy, commercial appeal, Mthiyane says: “These are abstraction of thoughts, almost like meditating. But when you meditate, what should be the outcome: a commodity, a tangible thing?”

In all our conversations, we have almost been skirting the subject of collective male responsibility that has brought about the #MeToo movement. It is a subject that Mthiyane has obvious strong feelings about, often alluding to it in his work and stridently evoking it in conversation.

Earlier in our exploration, he had framed the conversation mostly in terms of migrancy. Towards the end of the discussion, Mthiyane unfurls a series, perhaps six or seven pieces, of life-sized canvases, brightly coloured, crooked and textural in figuration.

They are of men, sometimes solo, in communion with their nudity. Others “contemplate their erections”, a phrase he throws up to account for their nakedness and compromised states.

The men are at once casual and somehow seem asphyxiated by their nakedness. They are gilded in dripping red paint, as if murderous. Even though one evokes Saint Sebastian, with a dagger to his ribs, Mthiyane says that, rather than aiming for homoeroticism, the images were inspired by the #MenAreTrash movement and his reflection on it.

“I don’t think it’s a comfortable space to be a man, particularly in South Africa. You can’t really say much and if you do you are damned. Nobody is standing up because we know our collective conscience, our collective guilt. You think to yourself, ‘I know somebody who has done this and I didn’t do anything about it so I can’t really say much about it.’ So you start to acquiesce to something that sooner or later will turn against you.”

Mthiyane’s says his point is that he believes that society as a whole is responsible for society’s ills.

“If you go to ekasi now, we know which house sells drugs and everybody is quiet about it, right? We know which uncle is doing what but we are quiet about it. Why do some people react in an extreme way when you are saying your opinion, about things that affect you? And also, what role are you playing to perpetuate or stop that?”

For now, Mthiyane has his solitude, something of a prized possession, and an art practice that, for all its stops and starts, seems to be gaining momentum. He, for better or for worse, refuses to adopt the language of political correctness but at the same time is not running away from his complicity and that of his male peers in the way society treats its women.

His obstinance, in some way, is probably an expression of his willed isolation. Those bandages, fragments, cuts, coffee stains and rubble come from a deep and perhaps, self-explanatory place.



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