

**PRESSBOOK**

Cinga SAMSON  
*Mail & Guardian*

*May 2017*

## The South Africans in Paris make most of 'Being There' [Sean O'Toole](#) 10 May 2017 21:11



Africans abroad: 'Reddening of the Greens or Dog Sleep Manifesto' by Kemang Wa Lehulere

One of the highlights of the Louis Vuitton Foundation's large showcase of South African art, one of three exhibitions devoted to Africa currently on view in an attention-grabbing Frank Gehry building in Paris, is a suite of 16 portraits by Johannesburg painter Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi. Installed at eye level along two walls in a darkened space, between two contrasting films by Sue Williamson and Bogosi Sekhukhuni, Nkosi's washed-out portraits depict mostly women, many of them public figures.

A 2013 portrait of exiled writer Bessie Head, her eyes glancing sideways, sits comfortably next to a 2013 portrait of American civil rights activist Betty Shabazz, her mouth ajar and eyes trained elsewhere. There is also a 2017 study of American poet and pioneer of intersectional feminism Audre Lorde, who is seemingly caught mid-question, and a 2015 portrait of the Afro-German poet and activist Maya Ayim wearing a red headscarf.

All of Nkosi's portrait subjects, including the Khoi emissary and translator Krotoa, are depicted in a frontal, head-and-shoulders format. Nkosi paints flatly and uses a reduced colour palette. Her sallow style draws influence from Belgian painter Luc Tuymans, best known for his 2000 series of paintings on Belgium's misrule in the Congo.

"Tuymans was very much part of my painting education, especially his portrait of Patrice Lumumba," said Nkosi, who was born in New York to an exiled South African father and Greek mother. Her father was a regional leader of the Pan Africanist Congress under Robert Sobukwe.

Like Tuymans, Nkosi's portraits are based on photographs. Some lives, though, are lived beyond the purview of photography and our current digital surplus.

Two portraits reinforce this. Nkosi's 2013 study of Anene Booysen, the 17-year-old Bredasdorp teenager who was raped and murdered that same year, references a threadbare identity photograph that has come to represent the teen. Similarly, a 2013 portrait of the artist's grandmother was based on a single photo in Nkosi's possession.

Even when she represents the famous, meaning the often-photographed, Nkosi prefers lesser-known references. Her pallid study of Thomas Sankara shows the Burkinabé military captain-turned-proletarian revolutionary wearing a peaked cap, not the red beret he is more commonly associated with. Painted in 2012 using mostly brown and white, Nkosi's study of optimism denied — Sankara was ousted in a 1987 coup and assassinated — sits next to a similarly minimal 2013 study of Chris Hani, who was assassinated in 1993. There is a backstory to these two paintings.

In 2013, after more than a decade's commitment to the medium, Nkosi held a solo exhibition at the ROOM Gallery, then still based in Braamfontein. The tiny venue included a concurrent solo show by Nkosi's pal, artist Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum, whose portrait also forms part of the 16 faces on view in Paris.

The pair collectively titled their solo presentations *Before Being Asked by the Machine*, a backhanded reference to the “lack of upward mobility” the two artists had encountered in a scene dominated by career-making dealerships such as the Goodman Gallery and Stevenson.

Nkosi unexpectedly found an appreciative audience in artists Kemang wa Lehulere and Kudzanai Chiurai, who are currently showing work with the painter in Paris. Lehulere bought her Hani portrait, and Chiurai, who recently moved back to his native Harare, took the Sankara study.

“I only knew them peripherally so it was super encouraging,” said Nkosi, who received her master’s in fine art from the School of Visual Arts in New York. Her painting tutor was British painter Martin Maloney.

She took heart from the sale and kept on painting more faces. Now her work is on show in Paris. But for an acrylic and pastel work on paper depicting three dogs by veteran painter and draughtsman David Koloane, Nkosi’s portraits are the only paintings in a showcase featuring 16 artists.

The South African exhibition at the Louis Vuitton Foundation is titled *Being There*. A team of in-house curators led by Suzanne Pagé, the foundation’s artistic director, organised the exhibition. “Our choice here is based primarily on the action of the artists themselves, on their engagement with the current economic and social situation, their awareness and conviction that they can act and play a role,” explains Pagé in the show’s accompanying catalogue.

She is not voicing anything out of the ordinary. South African art, especially when it is made to travel across borders, has long been treated as illustrative of our social life. It is why South African photography is so popular abroad.

Being There, which could well be subtitled “a South African threnody”, includes a robust selection of photographs. David Goldblatt is represented by an idiosyncratic selection of career work, including five black-and-white photos related to the 2015-2016 student protests.

There is also an excerpt of Zanele Muholi's *Faces & Phases* (2006-), an open-ended portrait archive focusing on black lesbians, which interacts well with Jody Brand's lavishly scaled colour photos of black lesbians. Unlike Muholi, whose portraits share with Nkosi a detached formality, Brand uses camp to seditious effect.

The South African showcase is augmented by an additional mini-exhibition, titled *About a Generation*. It is composed of portraits by Kristin-Lee Moolman, Musa Nxumalo and Graeme Williams. Moolman and Nxumalo are interested in the pageantry and joyfulness of youth, Williams the sobriety that enfolds it.

At a press conference, Pagé thanked Goodman Gallery and Stevenson for their input, describing them as “legendary” and “mythical” galleries. Of the 16 artists on *Being There*, five are with Goodman (Chiurai, Goldblatt, Koloane, Williamson and William Kentridge) and five with Stevenson (Wa Lehulere, Muholi, Sekhukhuni, Nicholas Hlobo and Moshekwa Langa). That's a lot of deal flow.

The disequilibrium is compounded if you take into account that Brand and multimedia artist Buhlebezwe Siwani, who is a distant cousin of Nkosi and last year presented a striking exhibition of sculpture and performance portraits at Whatiftheworld, both had work on a Stevenson exhibition devoted to K Sello Duiker's 2001 novel *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* last year.

What I'm trying to highlight is how visibility — and all the economic rewards that flow from it, particularly internationally — demand strategic alignments and powerful agents. Nkosi is an outlier in this economic system, as is Jane Alexander, the latter by choice.

Although many artists prefer to enlist dealers as career managers, Alexander has long shunned commercial representation, preferring to circulate her sculptural work in museum settings. *Being There* opens with Alexander's sculptural installation *Infantry with Beast*.

The piece is an amalgam of two pieces, 27 erect dog-like figures made in 2009-2010, and a small sculpture of a stout mongrel called Beast, made in 2003.

Dogs are a recurring subject on the exhibition. Koloane's animated short film, *The Takeover* (2016), uses jittery black charcoal drawing to describe how a pack of dogs kill a woman on a township street.

Upstairs from the oldies — or “masters” as they are deferentially referred to by the host institution — Wa Lehulere is showing a new wall drawing alongside an installation titled *Reddening of the Greens or Dog Sleep Manifesto* (2015), on loan from the New Church Collection in Cape Town. Composed of open suitcases with earth and grass inside, bits of wood from salvaged school desks, blackboards and mass-produced porcelain dogs, some of them smashed, this allusive installation was inspired by RRR Dhlomo's 1930 short story *The Dog Killers*.

“Even the dog is grey,” quipped a director from Paris-based dealership MAGNIN-A to the Sierra Leonean draughtsman Abu Bakarr Mansaray of Alexander's installation. The pair didn't break stride as they passed the work.

Mansaray is best known for his imaginative drawings of speculative and violent technologies. He is represented by MAGNIN-A, which is named for the Madagascar-born Frenchman André Magnin.

Much in the way dealers Liza Essers and Michael Stevenson represent the lion's share of artists on the foundation's South Africa show, so Magnin's artists dominate its other Africa-themed presentation.

*The Insiders* showcases 15 artists from the collection of Jean Pigozzi, the Paris-born socialite and heir to the Simca automobile fortune, whose holdings of African art numbers about 10 000 works.

Pigozzi is well known for his preference for African artists with no formal training and for his robust bargaining methods.

Magnin has been a key ally. Pigozzi's eureka moment dates back to 1989 and an encounter with curator Jean-Hubert Martin's exhibition, *Magiciens de la terre (Magicians of the Earth)* in Paris. "It had a profound effect on me," Pigozzi has said of this controversial show, which pitted grandees of Western contemporary art against unknown outsiders from the periphery.

Congolese painter Cheri Samba, who is represented by a fine selection of his narrative paintings on the foundation's show devoted to Pigozzi's collection, appeared on that earlier show. So too did local painter and muralist Esther Mahlangu, who decorated a replica of her homestead in one of the grand halls of La Villette.

The influential Swiss-born Cameroonian curator Simon Njami, who lives in Paris, also saw *Magiciens*. He once told me how seeing a forlorn Mahlangu outside her "hut" had affected him. As with Pigozzi, *Magiciens* was a bracing encounter, one that determined the focus and heft of Njami's future curatorial activism.

"Africa has always been subject or object," remarked Njami in a March interview with the French weekly *Le Point*. "Everyone has their opinion on this continent that has long been defined from outside."

Njami's comments are useful in thinking about the site chosen by Bernard Arnault, the luxury goods impresario behind Louis Vuitton and France's richest man, for his cultural centre. The foundation is located on the northern tip of the Bois de Boulogne parkland, next to the Jardin d'Acclimatation, a sprawling children's amusement park.

Founded as a zoo in the mid-1800s, hard times soon after saw the animal displays plundered and cooked. In 1877, the Jardin contracted a travelling show that included 14 "Nubians," very likely Sudanese people, as part of the animal display.

The displays belonged to Carl Hagenbeck, a merchant whose speciality was furnishing "interesting specimens to the zoological gardens of Europe".

The show was a hit and for the next decade the Jardin's displays showcased

gauchos from Argentina, Kalmouks from Russia, Native American, and, from South Africa, “Hottentots” and Zulus. “At other world’s fairs for the next 25 years the importance of people as objects transcended the significance of the manufactured goods on display,” wrote historian Richard W Flint in a 1996 essay about the Jardin.

There is a direct relationship between this musty history and the 2017 season of Africa show at the foundation, which are corralled under the rubric *Art/Afrique, le nouvel atelier (Art/Africa, the new workshop)*. *Magiciens*, the show that inspired Pigozzi and launched Samba’s career, was explicitly pitched as a counterstatement to a colonial exhibition in 1931 Paris that featured human zoos.

Things have, of course, changed since 1877, and indeed 1989. The picture of Africa, as told to the world, has shifted. As Njami told *Le Point*, curators such as Bisi Silva in Nigeria, Koyo Kouoh in Senegal, Elise Atangana in Paris and Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung in Berlin are “constructing a discourse from themselves and the Africa from which they stem”.

The foundation’s show is not part of this optimistic history. It forms part of a different legacy of institutional shows, many of them well meaning, but often compelled by different metrics and legacies of display. One noticeable aspect of these shows, particularly when it comes to the post-apartheid bearing witness to South Africa abroad, is the relative absence of painting.

In 1948, the same year white nationalists came to power with a programme of radical political transformation, London’s Tate Gallery hosted an exhibition of contemporary South African paintings, drawings and sculpture.

The line-up included JH Pierneef, Alexis Preller, Gerard Sekoto and Irma Stern, who is now ranked among the top 10 most collectable female artists globally based on 10-year auction statistics (2005-2015).

At the time, though, the South Africans were meekly introduced. “There is

as yet no reason to speak of a South African school of painting: the main influences have come from European art,” stated Geoffrey Long in the introduction to the accompanying catalogue. The bias endures.

There has been no thorough examination of the drift and meaning of post-apartheid painting internationally, despite the emergence of serious talents such as Zander Blom, Carla Busutil, Rory Emmet, Dorothee Kreutzfeldt, Georgina Gratrix, Jared Ginsberg, Cinga Samson and Mawande ka Zenzile. Painting endures, despite the expanded meaning of art in the present tense, but is also ignored.

It is lonely being a painter in South Africa, conceded Nkosi, “but lonely in a way that is not sad, and rather productive. I’m dying, though, for some kind of real conversation about it.” That may just happen, thanks to Paris.