



A Learner Resource on the art of

Mohau Modisakeng Standard Bank Young Artist 2016 *LEFA LA NTATE*

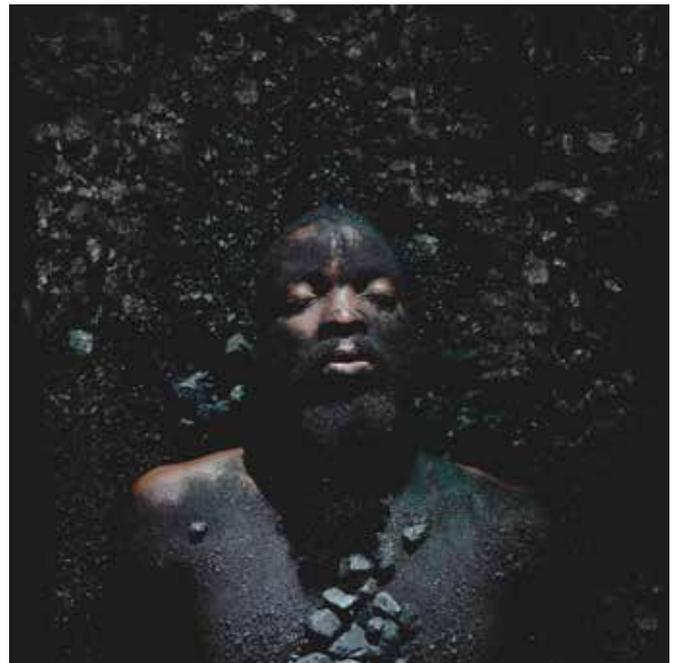
Exhibition: *Lefa La Ntate*
Artist: Mohau Modisakeng
Venue: Standard Bank Gallery
Dates: 2 June – 8 July 2017

You are visiting this exhibition during a time that many people view as a moment of 'national crisis'.

Do you see or experience South Africa in this way?

It may be worth reflecting on your personal 'connection' to South Africa's current political and economic situation.

Does it seem directly related to your day-to-day life? Or is it far removed? Do you feel you can do anything about it? Do you want to? Some art critics have suggested that the work of Mohau Modisakeng offers us an alternative to the violence and exploitation, the corruption and greed, that we read about so often in news headlines. By asking us to acknowledge South Africa's past – and perhaps develop a vision for the future – the artist gives us the chance to be involved in, or to imagine, a process of transformation.



Lefa 4, 2016, Ink-jet print on Epson Hot Press Natural, 200 x 150 cm, Edition of 6 + 2 AP



Lefa 5, 2016, Ink-jet print on Epson Hot Press Natural, 200 x 150 cm, Edition of 6 + 2 AP



Lefa 6, 2016, Ink-jet print on Epson Hot Press Natural, 200 x 150 cm, Edition of 6 + 2 AP

STILLNESS, MOVEMENT AND TIME

In South Africa today, we often hear the word "transformation". But what does it actually mean?



Untitled, 2017, Resin sculpture, 140 x 60 x 90 cm, Edition of 6 + 2 AP

One way of thinking about the process of transformation is to consider what happens in Mohau Modisakeng's photographs. The artist's photographic practice emerges, interestingly, from his training as a sculptor. In fact, the *Untitled* resin sculpture displayed as part of this exhibition is a useful starting point – not least because it shows Modisakeng's skill in this medium.

When he started experimenting with a camera, he discovered that placing himself in the frame not only cast his body into a particular space but also into a moment "frozen in time". This is effectively conveyed in Modisakeng's *Inzilo* (2013) and *Metamorphosis* (2015) photographic series.

Comparing the sculpture itself (which we can study from different angles, each offering a new perspective) to the photographs above, it would seem that something is lost in the shift from three dimensions to two. But for Modisakeng, the two-dimensional surface of a photograph does more than just provide a frame for an image of a person or a thing – he is interested in how an object or body "functions within a given space".

The visual arts scholar and curator Ruth Simbao picks up on Modisakeng's wish "to bring time to a halt", suggesting that his self-portraits produce "moments of stillness" that anticipate movement: in this anticipation, the artist and the viewer are "poised to radically transform". The "frozen moment" in Modisakeng's work is a pause, an in-between, "a state of limbo situated between the horrors of our apartheid past and the ideals of the future which we have failed to obtain".



Untitled Detail, 2017, Resin sculpture, 140 x 60 x 90 cm, Edition of 6 + 2 AP



Lefa La Ntate (Performance 7), 2016, Site specific performance, Duration variable



Lefa La Ntate (Performance 6), 2016, Site specific performance, Duration variable

Fact File

Mohau Modisakeng came across Ndabeni by chance. One afternoon he was travelling to his studio in Maitland (to the east of Cape Town's city centre) and he "caught a glimpse of black hilltops peaking from behind industrial buildings":

I visited the site for a closer look and happened upon what became the location for my shoot. After I had made the film I decided to research the history of the location where the work was realised. Ndabeni (meaning "place of debate") comes with a dark and weighted history.

It was established in 1902 by the civil authorities as a field hospital and isolation camp for victims after an

outbreak of plague in Cape Town which spread after Argentinian horses were imported by the British military during the course of the South African War. It was this outbreak that justified and made way for the mass removal of black people from Cape Town's urban centres to what became the first permanent location for the black labouring class.



To Move Mountains, Video Still 3, 2015 – 16, Four Channel HD Video, 10:02 min

BETWEEN HEAVEN AND HELL

The religious associations of the word “limbo” are appropriate here. There is something saintly or priestly, perhaps even something Christ-like or divine, about the figures that Modisakeng portrays. Yet, covered in coal or carrying weapons associated with violence, they also seem to be part of a dark underworld.

Art critic Ashraf Jamal, writing about the 2016 four-channel video installation *To Move Mountains* (in which the artist is dwarfed by imposing black hills of coal in the industrial zone of Ndabeni, Cape Town), argues that Modisakeng takes us into an “infernal” (hellish) and “unforgiving” landscape in order to “perform an exorcism” – to free us of the ghosts or demons of our country’s past by confronting them head-on.

Ndabeni, Modisakeng affirms, is thus

linked to “the genesis or the origins of the segregated settlements of the apartheid system”. It is also, in its present industrial usage, associated with the coal and oil prominent in *To Move Mountains* and the photographic series *Ndabeni* (2015).

For Jamal, this imagery represents “the despoiling of our earth, the lust for its hidden resources, the enslavement of the black body to that resource, the despair and

Definitions

transformation (noun): a marked change in form, nature, appearance or character; an act, process or instance of transforming or being transformed.

Synonyms: alteration, conversion, evolution, metamorphosis, variation, modification.

limbo (noun):

1. an uncertain period of awaiting a decision or resolution; an intermediate state or condition.
2. (in some Christian beliefs) a place in the afterlife that is neither heaven nor hell.

binary:

1. (adjective) composed of two things; having two distinct parts.
2. (noun) two concepts, beliefs, qualities, attitudes or ideas that are seen to be opposites and thus cannot be reconciled or fused.

violence that stems from such exploitation”. The figure that Modisakeng enacts in this environment “has internalised a poison to inoculate himself”; that is, he has immersed himself in South Africa’s traumatic and traumatising past in order to attempt some form of revelation or transfiguration (a change of form or appearance – a spiritual transformation).



Lefa La Ntate (Performance 1), 2016, Site specific performance, Duration variable



Lefa 1, 2016, Ink-jet print on Epson Hot Press Natural, 200 x 150 cm

Mohau
Modisakeng
Lefa La Ntate

PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

The title of this exhibition, *Lefa La Ntate*, has been translated into English from Setswana as “my father’s inheritance”.

The phrasing in English is usefully ambiguous, because it could refer both to those things inherited by previous generations (the unchangeable past) and to those things passed on to the artist (language, cultural and racial identity, material circumstances, world view).

This implies a combination of inevitability and agency; there are some facets of our identity that seem to be decided for us, but we are given some choice in defining who we are.

The notion of heritage or legacy – things passed on from one generation to another – can be applied to collective and shared experiences as well as to individual and personal experiences. These are complementary forms of memory. Modisakeng, for instance, mentions that as a teenager he visited the Johannesburg Art Gallery and encountered artists whose work shaped his vision: figures as diverse as Jackson Hlungwani, Dumile Feni and Jane Alexander. Social historian Hlonipha Mokoena, for her part, describes how watching *To Move Mountains* vividly reminded her of her childhood in Soweto – which is also where Modisakeng grew up. Wearing blinkers and caked in coal dust, the artist seems to recall both the “coal boys”, delivering fuel for thousands of stoves to be lit across the township in the late afternoon, and the horses drawing their carts. This human/animal fusion is one of various



Lefa La Ntate (Performance 5), 2016, Site specific performance, Duration variable

binaries that Mokoena sees Modisakeng breaking down. He also challenges distinctions between the colonial and the postcolonial, between the ‘traditional’ and the ‘modern’, and between oppression and resistance.

Weapons feature prominently in Modisakeng’s work, including the rifle, axe, sjambok and panga. Yet these are juxtaposed with alternative symbols. In the *Ditaola* (2014) series, for instance, the rifle meets the dove of peace.

Just as the title, *Ditaola*, refers to the divination bones that would be used by a sangoma, Modisakeng’s artistic vision is prophetic: it is future-oriented, forward-looking. Mourning the past is a necessary process, without which an individual (or an entire society) is ‘stuck’, unable to move forward.



To Move Mountains, Video Still 2, 2015 – 16, Four Channel HD Video, 10:02 min

MALE AND FEMALE/MASCULINE AND FEMININE?

Modisakeng adapts the practice of grieving in his 2013 series *Inzilo*, which refers to the “mourning weeds” worn by a Zulu woman who has been widowed. A male artist performing the role of a widow in this way challenges another binary: that of gender. Modisakeng resists the opposition of male to female, of masculine to feminine, undermining fixed gender categories. The figure he portrays is in an in-between state of transition or becoming, neither what (s)he was nor what (s)he may become.

The various garments and ‘props’ that Modisakeng employs in his photographs and films also disrupt and challenge gender binaries. The isidwaba or leather skirt, for example, is typically worn by a married Zulu woman; in *Untitled* (2014) the



Lefa La Ntate (Performance 4), 2016, Site specific performance, Duration variable

artist has it around his neck and in *Ditaola* (2014) he wears it ‘conventionally’ but with a cattle-bell as accessory (again, this can be understood simultaneously as a challenge to human/animal distinctions and as a gesture that celebrates the significance of livestock in Zulu society).



To Move Mountains (Video Still 6), 2015 – 16, Four Channel HD Video, 10:02 min, Edition of 10 + 2 AP



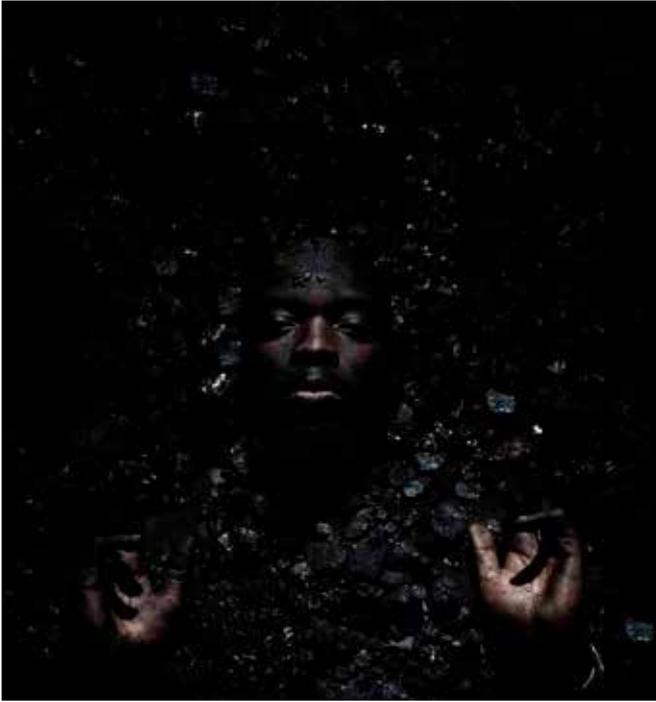
Lefa La Ntate (Performance 3), 2016, Site specific performance, Duration variable

Questions to think about

One of the consequences of race as a defining feature in South African history is the view that a person’s race brings with it a shared set of experiences and beliefs. Reflecting on your own racial background, do you feel that this is accurate? If so, what makes this collective identity possible? If not, what are the factors that undermine a shared sense of racial identity? Gender? ‘Class’? Another consideration may be age; another may be geography (for example, the references above to “coal boys” and to martial arts films might be specific to growing up in a certain generation in Soweto).

Fact File

As part of its cultural onslaught, the apartheid state not only delayed the arrival of television in South Africa until the 1970s, it also imported mostly martial arts films and manga and anime cartoons and broadcast these on television and screened the films in cinemas. Thus, at iconic township movie houses such as Eyethu in Soweto, where mostly young men would go, there were constant re-runs of Bruce Lee films. Every township kid therefore grew up surrounded by wushu and samurai fantasies.



Lefa La Ntate (Performance 5), 2016, Ink-jet print on Epson Hot Press Natural, 200 x 150 cm, Edition of 6 + 2 AP

FROM VIOLENCE TO PEACE?

In exploring the personal associations raised by Modisakeng's work, Hlonipha Mokoena also mentions that the 'skirts' he wears could be seen as similar to the hakama worn by characters in the martial arts films to which young black movie-goers were continually exposed under apartheid. She writes:

Making the connection with the stylised and exotic onscreen violence of martial arts and samurai movies has a double effect. On the one hand, it challenges assumptions about 'black experience', 'black history' or 'black culture' in South Africa. On the other hand, however, it echoes forms of violence in the world immediately outside the cinema: "Black people didn't only experience violence as a physical threat," states Modisakeng, "but also on a political, economic, psychological and spiritual level." So his work is framed as a response to "the complexities that have come from such a history."

We have seen that Modisakeng shows us how progress into a (peaceful) future is enabled by thoughtful engagement with a (violent) past. This 'movement' is made possible by 'stillness' – insight emerges from tranquility, such as in the momentary pause of a photograph. While video installations such as *To Move Mountains* unfold in time, there is also a sense in which they convey endless repetition of the same actions – peeled wax or poured oil return to their earlier state, recorded actions are played in reverse. Actions are no sooner completed than they are undone. This seems to suggest that an artist's labour is never-ending; like Sisyphus, who (according to the ancient Greek myth) was punished by eternally pushing a boulder up a hill, only to have it roll down again, Modisakeng is condemned to perform the same motions over and over. But there is value in this repetition; it becomes a form of ritual. As citizens, as viewers and 'consumers' of art, we can learn from such a patient, reflective – even meditative – practice, taking its insights with us when we leave the gallery.

Try it yourself

There is one aspect of Mohau Modisakeng's work that you have missed out on – live performance. While these performances may be recorded in videos and photographs, something is lost in this process.

Try staging a few minutes of performance art in a small group. First, think of an idea or experience you would like to communicate. Then think of a way of expressing this: in words, through movement, using costumes and props, or simply 'being present' in a particular space. Your performance may be scripted or spontaneous; it may or may not include an audience; it may require a specific setting.

Arrange for someone to film or take photos of the performance.

Once you have completed your performance, discuss it with your fellow group members – and with your audience, if you had one. What was the experience like?

Then look at the video or photographs taken. Do you feel that they reflect the performance? What elements are missing? Has anything unexpected been discovered? Has new 'meaning' been added?

Definitions

Manga is a particular style of Japanese comic books and graphic novels; anime is the same style employed in film and TV animation. Wushu is a term used to describe Chinese martial arts (similar to kung fu). Samurai warriors were the military nobility in medieval and early modern Japan and are the subject of a number of cult films.

About these worksheets

This educational supplement accompanies the exhibition *Lefa La Ntate*, a survey of the work of Mohau Modisakeng. In it artworks are explored through analysis, thought-provoking questions, fact files, word/concept definitions and practical projects. Discussion topics help learners to develop a critical attitude to art, rather than just a grasp of media, styles, subject matter and themes. These worksheets are designed primarily for grade 10-12 learners, but are easily adapted for younger learners. Together with the introductory text, they are a stand-alone educational resource on the works on this exhibition.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Barbara Freemantle of the Standard Bank Gallery and the contributors to the exhibition catalogue for their insights. Published by the Standard Bank Gallery, 2017.

No part of this resource may be reproduced without permission of the publisher. Standard Bank Gallery, Corner Simmonds and Frederick Streets, Johannesburg. Phone: +27 (11) 631 4467

www.standardbank.com/sponsorships