



Colbert Mashile





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Much has been written on the South African painter, Colbert Mashile's visual interpretations of the traumatic male circumcision ritual that he, along with other young men from the Mapulana clan of the Northern Sotho group, underwent at age ten. So widespread are the deaths of initiates, it is no surprise that the procedure marked this young boy and seeped into his artworks as an older man, through psychological images of phallic towers, cowrie shells, zoomorphic and anthropomorphic forms, huddled crowds, whispers and an ominous secrecy that drums through the work. Sotho descent rules are important, and clans were often totemic, or bound to specific natural objects or animal species by mystical relationships, sometimes involving taboos and prohibitions. Major Sotho clans included the Lion (Taung), Fish (Tlhaping), Elephant (Tlounge), and Crocodile (Kwean) clans. This is part of Mashile's heritage, and the crocodile and fish forms often hover above or appear balanced on spears or columns in the work, while the cowrie shell embodies the presence of the Ancestors whom the Northern people respect as intercessors for their gods.



Perhaps the most concise example from the period of Mashile's work concerned with the initiation rite, is the mixed media work on paper, *Hlongo (The Head)* from 2001, where an anonymous group of sinister figures crowds around a dominating giant phallic form, recalling biblical images of worship—the Golden Calf or the Tower of Babel. The top of the phallus is capped by a mushroom shape covered with decorative cross hatching—possibly

a reference to roof tiles and domesticity, marking the centrality of this particular initiation rite to Mashile's home and village life. He divides the paper into three realms – a device used to separate the temporal and spiritual worlds. Figures suggesting the Ancestors are usually placed in the upper and lower thirds, while the living inhabit the central band. The figures in *Hlongo* thus

represent the Ancestors en masse, as a tacit, nameless body—their influence still forceful on the practice of a living initiation rite.

Mashile's symbols and characters inhabit a disquieting spiritual landscape in the works from this time. Crowds lining the tops of walls or encircling trapped forms recall the somber corners of Goya's madhouse yards and the interiors of Kentrige's dark early monotypes. The landscape is a metaphorical stage set for Mashile's demonstrations of ritual. It is also brought into the work physically through colour in a specific palette of leaden greys, rusts, oxides, matt blacks and burnt oranges that locates the local landscape. When Mashile first began to draw, he used cheap brown paper and charcoal owing to a basic lack of materials, but he was also seeking an authenticity and a spiritual power in the sober colour that he could not find in more flamboyant tones.

Mashile's recent work happily suggests a new-found optimism. After spending time in Johannesburg, he left the big city, disliking the townships, to set up home and studio in Buffelshoek village in the Bushbuckridge region of his birth—a rural setting where he works in peace, enjoying the local languages—Siswati, Shangaan, Mapulana and Pedi—



and the quiet and heat. Fresh, bold canvases, stripped down formally, show a change of spirit, with a confident, bright palette, and a new sense of space, without the claustrophobia and blood-coloured pigments seen in previous foreboding works. There is even humor: Josephine's Mother-in-Law, Mashile's symbol of a rural mother, the hard-working black South African woman, is confrontational and mischievous, the loose watercolour applied

in a cartoonish, comedic style— her face open, eyeballing the viewer, in contrast to the shrouded, hooded forms he painted in the past. Josephine is a local woman Mashile elevates as an example of stoicism and wisdom, and she becomes his sometime quirky muse in these homage portraits.

The same enigmatic featureless figures remain in the recent works with a simplification reminiscent of late Guston. They become sculptural and monumental, and occasionally





demonstrate the artist's love of the decorative, seen in the acanthus pattern rendered in pale teal and buff acrylic and oil pastel on the body of the right hand figure in *Mosadi-Sadi (Woman Amongst Women—Honorable Woman)*. Mashile believes that his compositions have become more contained in comparison to earlier work, and that his characteristic imagery and patterning are tending towards a harmony and lyricism that were inappropriate to the initiation subject matter. The clouds that hovered threateningly before now appear flattened into a stylised pattern in the evening sky, as this heteroclit couple calmly regard the horizon. The horned cow figure, possible the male, wears an apotropaic symbol of the ant like a badge pinned to his robe. This protective ant also appears on the proboscis-nosed figure wearing a bright pillar-box red uniform, that trumpets a warning over the empty sick bed of a possible AIDS casualty in *Lehlo la Baloi (The Eye of the Witch)*, the landscape now reduced to a wallpaper cactus pattern flanking the right-hand side, the patient's head replaced by a symbolic frog.



One of Mashile's recent paintings, *The Slave*, exhibited at the Dakar Biennale 2006, shows a return to the phallic forms. The phallic form protrudes from a mound form—perhaps a domestic dwelling—and is roped to a wooden pole by a

sadistic-looking studded black collar. An aperture form that can be read either as pure adornment or as an open mouth with pearly white teeth, gapes open at the front. Vertical striations fall to the lower picture plane, suggesting a skirt or another mammoth female form. Three giant blackbirds perch above a decorative panel evoking Sotho wall decoration, where the walls of mud houses are traditionally adorned using coloured clays, cow dung and charcoal. The directness of Mashile's painting is underscored by his brisk approach: painting directly on to unstretched canvas pinned to a wall, he does not refer to preparatory drawings, but pulls from a pool of mental





images and tokens to fashion his surreal, mysterious tableaux and their parade of characters. Mashile attempts to finish each painting in one sitting in order to maintain the freshness. There are no conceits in Mashile's work, but rather a desire for the spontaneity and immediacy he achieves in his drawings and prints. These are not precious objects. Some are painted on denim, irregularly shaped with cracked paint and scuffed surfaces. Mashile is not concerned with labouring over a sensuous surface at the risk of sacrificing his focus, and will rework and destroy with ease. He strives for a sincerity in the work, and will not soften a bizarre image to help with explanation, neither verbally nor through his mark-making. His boldness may be dogmatic, but the symbolism is wide open and ripe for interpretation.



Image: (page 3) SELLO II, 2005
Medium: Mixed media on paper
Dimensions: 50cm x 70cm

Image: (page 4) UNTITLED, 2002
Medium: Mixed media on paper
Dimensions: 60cm x 80cm

Image: (page 6) HLONGO (THE HEAD), 2001
Medium: Mixed media on paper
Dimensions: 84cm x 107cm

Image: (page 8) JOSEPHINE'S MOTHER-IN-LAW, 2006
Medium: Watercolour on paper
Dimensions: 55cm x 75cm

Image: (page 9) MOEDIMULO, 2006
Medium: Mixed media on paper
Dimensions: 63cm x 83cm

Image: (page 10) MOSADI-SADI (WOMAN AMONGST WOMAN,
HONORABLE WOMAN), 2006
Medium: Arylic and oil pastel on canvas
Dimensions: 154cm x 113cm

Image: (page 12) THE SLAVE, 2006
Medium: Arylic on canvas
Dimensions: 145cm x 106cm

Image: (page 13) OBA AND THE BRAIN, 2006
Medium: Oil on canvas
Dimensions: 148cm x 100cm

Image: (page 14) MOROALO-WA-DIBE, 2006
Medium: Oil on canvas
Dimensions: 148cm x 108cm

Image: (facing page) THE MAN, 2005
Medium: Mixed media on paper
Dimensions: 50cm x 70cm



Image: (facing page) THE BURIAL, 2007

Medium: Oil on canvas

Dimensions: 145cm x 120cm

Map - South Africa

PO Box 39
Groenkloof
0027

info@map-southafrica.org
www.map-southafrica.org

Artist: Colbert Mashile

Concept: Harrie Siertsema

Co-ordination: Abrie Fourie

Text: Kate McCrickard, Director, David Krut Projects New York

Project: Innibos Lowveld National Arts Festival

Date: 27 June - 1 July 2007

Images: (pages 2,3,4,9,13,14,16) Courtesey Gallery On The Square,
Johannesburg (pages 6,8,10,12) Courtesey David Krut Projects,
Johannesburg, New York

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