

An abstract painting featuring a dominant blue background with expressive brushstrokes. A vertical stroke of yellow and green is prominent on the right side, and a dark vertical line runs down the center. The overall texture is rich and layered.

Forward Trajectory of a Positive Black Self

By Nolan Stevens | Photo Essay

'Fairer skin has been in favour for what, the last couple of hundred years? But now the pendulum has swung back. Black is in fashion!' – Get Out: the motion picture.

It is said that the future of black art is bright. The truth is the future of blackness in any context can only ever be promising. The past fails to provide a representative depository of positive black excellence. It is with this in mind that the present and more specifically the future are the only spaces where blackness can hope to aspire for more. Simply put, positivity connected to blackness can only ever truly exist as a futuristic endeavour. The Asisebenze Art Atelier (AAA) artist studio and dealership is an apt case study for this argument.

The newly formed AAA space in downtown Johannesburg houses a collection of artists who each personify the realities of the black art experience present within the Johannesburg and South African landscape. If the artists currently occupying the Asisebenze building are indeed an illustration of the effects of South Africa's dark political past, then it stands to reason that they are but a small sample size of the contrasting divide that exists between black artists and those of their white counterparts. As most of the resident artists in the building are either self-taught artists, technically sound but inexperienced in theoretical understandings of art, and are first-generation artists within the context of their families or communities, they have not had the luxury to draw from the same pool of resources their peers have. Many of whom are only recently being exposed to the reservoir of conceptual and intellectual frameworks which supports the technical skills they now explore. All of which subliminally suggests that they have had to learn the nuances of the industry whilst simultaneously grappling with their practices.

At present, this crop of artists each engages with ideals of futurist blackness in very specific ways which manifest in one of two means: the first method taking on an aspirational approach, which is mostly conveyed through the subject matter of their work; the second method of incorporating an outlook of futuristic selfhood as illustrated in the artist's process itself. To unpack this idea, I will use a variety of both the Asisebenze residents and those artists affiliated to the space as examples, in the hopes of depicting how

a sense of positivity aligned to a futuristic view of the black self is cultivated.

In the case of Samson Mnisi, the most senior artist at Asisebenze, it is not the past violent experiences during his youth as part of the African National Congress' military wing that are focal points, nor does he tap into his foray into crime thereafter which, as he puts it, was a natural progression due to his familiarity with firearms. Instead, his artistic practice is one which does not seek to engage with what once was. Rather, he uses his abstracted work and process of transforming life to its most fundamental point as his true vehicle of expression. A portrait study is fine-tuned into a collection of lines. His abstractions exist not as minimalist renderings of a past lived experience but rather thrive as visual meditations of the present which aid him in better understanding that which is yet to come.

Print-maker, painter and drawer, Treatwell Mnisi, is in some ways the ying to Samson Mnisi's yang. This is glaringly evident in the works each artist creates. Treatwell's gestural figurative works and the over two-generation age gap are the most obvious differences between these two. It is in Treatwell's ballet dancers where we are most directly confronted with imagery which feeds off ideas of futuristic aspirations of blackness. His dancers did not fall into his canon of subject matter because he had at some point witnessed a ballet performance. It's surprising to learn that this young artist has never been to the ballet, and chose to depict ballerinas because a childhood crush of his danced. It isn't difficult, however, to imagine how these statuesque dancers could become personifications of attainable black excellence which may not exist in the present, but akin to the dancer who hones her craft in the pursuit of future greatness, works towards a better version of herself. Treatwell's dancers appear to be signifiers not of the humble beginnings he has surpassed but of the possibility of greatness yet to come.

Themba Shabala's pyrography on woodworks see him deconstruct, burn and texturize the wooden surfaces he works on in an attempt to wrestle with the effects of physical trauma. But rather than thrust to the forefront the trauma of the injury that cost him his right eye, he fashions and moulds it, fusing it into the core of his process, while allowing his subject

matter to take centre stage. These subjects which speak of future hopes and not past failures become a staple element of Shabalala's work. As is the case in his *Layers of Self* triptych, a depiction of his partner and their son. The work which revolves around the promise of things to come, muses on the life he and his partner created and alludes to a continuation of his own lineage from this to the next generation. Even though the three panels are depictions of his son, his partner and of her carrying their child, he is an invisible ever-present presence breathing amidst the crevices of the wood. These are depictions that suggest that Shabalala himself will live on in some way through the man his son will become.

Samantha Maseko's prints and paintings are visual soliloquies which speak of black femininity in its most natural state. Her fixation on black hair, more specifically with the aesthetic of the afro as a proud and authentically black aesthetic, is central to her work. Maseko's practice is one which pushes back against a long history that sort to sell a synthetic version of beauty to black women and girls, teaching them through years of indoctrination that the beauty associated with blackness was not good enough. Maseko's vibrantly painted portraits and detailed prints aim to destabilise these notions, by presenting the black self in all the crowning beauty associated with black hair. The undeniably alluring process she employs is purposeful in her desire to one day make the natural state of blackness an ever-present element in popular visual iconography.

Vivien Kohler, an artist affiliated to AAA, presents a darker view of the African condition in his *Pieta*, a work which draws inspiration from the iconic Michelangelo sculpture of Mary cradling the dead Christ. In the same way in which Michelangelo's *Pieta* serves as a reminder of the connection between a mother and her child, reminding us of the loss a mother feels at the moment she loses her child, Kohler's *Pieta* attaches those same emotions to a work which speaks to the scourge of xenophobia. The painting asks us to remember that which connects us as sons and daughters of Mother Africa. This painting simultaneously draws from an expansive gallery of imagery central to the South African political arena, as connections to the iconic June 16 image of Hector Peterson can be made. Whilst this piece asks pivotal questions of the prevailing powers that be, as

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indicated through the use of ANC election posters, it poses sterner questions to us as Africans as well – daring us to take responsibility for the future we wish to collectively create. The cautionary tale presented by Kohler is rooted in the past as well as in the present, but if its message is heeded, the future created can only be positive.

Mashir Kresenshun's mixed media pieces exploring Indian culture offer a much softer presentation of multicultural unity. His works serve as subtle reminders of the complexities at play within these narratives by not holding true to a binary black and white viewpoint. The charcoal and ink works which make up his *Indian Trade Series* function not only as a means of speaking about a heritage of the commodification tied to cultural exchange, but also seek to broaden the understandings of non-whiteness, which often finds itself automatically being equated to blackness. Kresenshun addresses this in his use of colour. Here the use of black charcoal, white ink and the brown of his cardboard, each representing black, white and brown peoples, aim to represent a broadness to the African understanding. His work acts as engagements which wrestle with the assumed understandings of identity, as they pose hidden questions such as 'If I'm not white does that automatically make me black?', or 'Is my contribution valued less because I'm not your kind of black?' Mashir Kresenshun's works do not fit easily into the scope of this essay but therein is the reason for his inclusion. He offers an alternative to the black self-conversation; an alternative which hopefully encourages a furthering of understandings

to the narratives surrounding blackness within the cosmopolitan environment that is Johannesburg and South Africa.

The selection of artists aligned with the Asisebenze Art Atelier studio and dealership present a diverse, complex and varying perspective on the positive trajectory of the black self-conversation. It is

undeniable, however, that the AAA finds itself in a unique position as studio space and dealership – to not only guide the swinging of that pendulum as it swings forcefully into *in vogue* blackness, but simultaneously to ensure that it does so in a manner which impacts history and the art world in a positive light.



Samantha Maseko
"Rebellion"
Oil on canvas
100 x 60cm
2021



Samson Mnisi
The golden under the pink sky
Acrylic on canvas
1800 x 700cm
2022



Treatwell Mnisi
"Unforgettable"
Charcoal on incissioni
70cm x 100cm
2021



Themba Shabalala
"Layers of self"
Pyrography on wood
240,4 x 120,3cm
2022



Vivien Kohler
 "Pieta"
 Campaign posters,
 acrylic and oil on board
 182 x 193cm
 2019



Mashir Kresenshun
 "There is always knowledge learnt
 at the end of the day"
 Archival Cardboard, turmeric,
 masala, charcoal and Ink on canvas
 135 cm x 120cm