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***Exhibition Review* | Meleko Mokgosi: Bread, Butter, and Power**

Talia Lieber

The opening of *Meleko Mokgosi: Bread, Butter, and Power*¹ at the Fowler Museum at UCLA marks the first solo exhibition in Los Angeles for Meleko Mokgosi, a Botswana-born artist who currently lives and works in New York City. The works in the exhibition, curated by the Fowler's Associate Curator of African Arts, Erica P. Jones, make up the fourth chapter of the artist's *Democratic Intuition* series (2014–present). In previous chapters, Mokgosi interrogated various facets of democracy through subjects such as love, nationalism, and post-colonial liberation. Here, the artist spotlights intergenerational experiences of feminism and of women's roles in families and societies-at-large. The artist's execution of each painting is preceded by meticulous research, which includes on-site interviews and photography, as well as an intensive storyboarding process in his studio. Although the completed works reveal Mokgosi's meditations on gendered divisions of labor within southern Africa and his self-proclaimed Marxist view of democracy, what comes through perhaps most prominently in the exhibition is his pedagogical approach to painting. Mokgosi successfully merges his realistic depictions of narrative scenes from southern Africa with his theory-driven teaching practice.

The artist, who earned his MFA in 2011 from UCLA, works as an Assistant Professor of Practice at New York University's Gallatin School of Individualized Study, where he teaches critical art theory, exhibition strategy, drawing, and painting. In addition to the nineteen large-scale paintings that lined the walls of the Fowler's Lucas Gallery and a painted canvas that was rolled and propped against the gallery's central pillar, the exhibition featured five posters with Mokgosi's handwritten annotations and an installation of forty books that he selected for display. Upon entering the gallery, viewers were transformed into students of Mokgosi's practice. Through his works' skillful realism and great detail, the artist asks viewers to look and think in any combination

of ways—without a dictated path—so they may explore the canvases’ narratives.

A few strokes of pink and white paint on raw canvas indicate the corner of a bedspread. Within the same panel, a hyper-realistic representation of beauty products sits atop a dresser—exposing the contents of a woman’s most personal space. Another canvas features a woman lying in bed, and the entire scene is rendered in black paint on a black-coated canvas—which makes the image almost indecipherable to the viewer. The darkness in Mokgosi’s work alludes to a feeling of fatigue, an exhaustion that women feel, perhaps in the privacy of their bedrooms, due to endless work and relentless struggle. Mokgosi demonstrates his mastery of painting with every brushstroke and detail, and he captivates viewers with his impeccable ability to represent reality, execute forms, and provoke thought.

Mokgosi offers supplemental texts and his own observations as sources of guidance for analysis and critique. The wide-ranging collection of books on display, primarily notable texts by authors of African descent, includes Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982), James Baldwin’s *The First Next Time* (1963), and Mariama Bâ’s *So Long a Letter* (1981). These texts influence Mokgosi’s portrayal of women within his work and render black women as powerful leaders of thought and of action. The narratives embedded within his selections also remind viewers of the inequalities that persist within democratic and feminist practices. By exhibiting these texts alongside his examinations of the southern African context, Mokgosi questions the feminist ideals that he explores in this chapter of his work, as well as the ineptitudes of democracy and of nationhood that he addresses in the larger series.

Throughout the works in the exhibition, Mokgosi underscores both the promises and pitfalls of formal education. For example, one canvas features ten school children, dressed in white and maroon uniforms, who gaze proudly from outside their school toward the direction of the viewer. Another presents a handwritten academic text by an unspecified author about the intersections between democracy, race, and gender and includes footnotes in Mokgosi’s own words that critique institutions of the state and established systems of power. This type of text-based critique continues in Mokgosi’s posters, on which he annotates poems that were penned by three black women writers: June Jordan, Nkiru

Nzegwu, and Toni Morrison. Prints of the posters were available to visitors at no cost in the museum's gift shop—an offer that demonstrated the artist's dedication to the equitable distribution of his work and its messages to the public.

Mokgosi's annotations and text-based canvases are reminiscent of *Modern Art: The Root of African Savages, Addendum* (2015), a work which he exhibited in 2017 as part of a previous chapter of his *Democratic Intuition* series at the Williams College Museum of Art. Formed of twenty-two linen panels with detailing in inkjet print and charcoal, it featured Mokgosi's handwritten commentaries on and critiques of didactic text from labels that he reproduced from historic African art displays in Western museum collections. A work that generates this type of dialogue about Western displays of non-Western art would have been a welcome addition to the Fowler Museum's presentation by placing Mokgosi's canvases in a more direct conversation with the objects currently on display in the museum's permanent exhibition, *Intersections: World Arts, Local Lives*. *Still, Bread, Butter, and Power* offered opportunities for institutional critique and analytical discourse, which are productive and necessary exercises in the context of a university art museum that holds one of the largest and most cherished collections of African art in the United States. The intellectual queries evident in Mokgosi's canvases, installations, and annotations challenge viewers to question realities that exist beyond brushstrokes and to confront existing systems that privilege certain narratives. In doing so, viewers may meet historically and institutionally overlooked narratives and images with new meaning.

Notes

¹ This exhibition was curated by Erica P. Jones, Associate Curator of African Arts at the Fowler Museum. The exhibition was open from 11 February 2018 to 1 July 2018.

