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Troublemaker. The Confrontational Work of South African Artist, Ayanda Mabulu

“Uncle Ronnie, Jacob Zuma has raped me.” African National Congress (ANC) veteran and former South African intelligence minister, Ronnie Kasrils, recounts the phone call in *A Simple Man*—*Kasrils and the Zuma Enigma*, his 2017 memoir. Jacob Zuma, President of South Africa, avowed polyamorist and married to four women, was charged with raping Fezekile “Khwezi” Kuzwayo. In a region with the most expansive HIV epidemic in the world, Zuma sexually assaulted the HIV-positive Khwezi. Zuma casually mentioned in court that, to him, safe sex meant a post-coital shower to “minimize risk of HIV contraction.” This episode, coupled with Zuma’s abject failure as a modern statesman in charge of Africa’s most robust economy, emerged as prime motivating factors for artist Ayanda Mabulu. Born during the turbulent 1980s in King William’s Town, South Africa, Mabulu is entirely self-taught and a child of the struggle against Apartheid. His work is collected internationally by art mavens who breathlessly anticipate his vitriolic outbursts on canvas. It’s no surprise that Mabulu’s *Troublemaker* exhibition is a supersized African “J’accuse...” depicting sex, imperialism, and exploitation.

It is a big deal when The DuSable Museum of African American History presents an African artist to coincide with Chicago’s swanky EXPO art fair. The relevance of showing Mabulu’s politically provocative work at a Smithsonian affiliate in Chicago can barely be overstated. The DuSable is named after Jean Baptiste Point du Sable, the largely uncredited black man who founded Chicago in the 1790s. It is the oldest museum in the United States dedicated to African American

history. The city gave the United States its first black president, and in 2019, Chicago made history by electing an openly lesbian, black mayor. *Troublemaker* is named after Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, whose middle name in colloquial isiXhosa, the language of the Xhosa tribe, means Troublemaker.

I've met Mabulu on several occasions and have gained insight into his political arguments and artistic processes. He readily yields to the traditions of fine art, but he is not the anguished intellectual that some theorists would prefer. Mabulu leaves interpretation up to the public as he systematically deconstructs both concept and context. His work embodies Foucault's view that art assumes meaning as a consequence of the viewer's participation through emotional investment.

Mabulu works on bombastically muscular canvases allowing him space to confront historic inaccuracies by using inflammatory visuals and strident colors. He places provocative factual accounts in subjective settings, stitched together with firsthand knowledge, political disillusion, and gut feeling. The least contentious works are two colorful representations of Johannesburg's jazz scene in the 1950s, which sees Mabulu work with an exaggerated, cinematic format. Incorporated photographs, art posters, and textiles give his paintings a staged quality, which belies the brutal conflict represented. *Got 'til It's Gone*, the first work captures Friday night at the local jazz club. A black and white photograph shows a young couple in love—the photo is overlaid with textiles donated by the descendants of former residents. Mabulu's use of cloth may seem like a gimmick, but it creates an emotional shortcut, humanized by tangible evidence of people having *lived* there. The textiles act as historic anchors transferring a spirit of collaboration. Mabulu inserts part of *Reine de Joie*, Queen of Joy, the 1892 poster on prostitution by Toulouse-Lautrec, and he partly covers it with remnants of striped, gray bed linen. He refers to the rich white men with a penchant for African Queens of Joy matched only by their aversion to equal rights. Both jazz works refer to the mid-fifties and the forced removal of black residents from what were multiracial neighborhoods. They would be rounded up and taken to a distant "location," the word used for black settlements, to

fend for themselves.

Subtitled *Letter from Johnny Dyani*, the second painting feels documentary, yet remains composed and theatrical. Nostalgic black and white photographs, appropriated by Mabulu for these works, were taken by German photographer Jürgen Schadeberg for the once-de-rigueur, now-defunct *Drum Magazine*. During an interview, Schadeberg said, “Jazz became a form of defiance; it was something they could do better than the whites.” Schadeberg’s iconic visuals of Johannesburg’s black jazz scene inspired Janet Jackson’s video for “Got ’til It’s Gone,” the lead single from the *Velvet Rope* album. Despite aggressive applications, the atmosphere retains optimism, falsely implying that the artist is a pushover. He’s not.

Mabulu’s more provocative works become digestible when viewed as sequences forming part of constrained narratives. The *Lucky Star* series comments on what happens when inherited political power structures collide with distracted leadership. Mabulu approaches the three works by lining up evidence of failure around the faces of Mandela and Zuma, building a strong case for the current questioning around the nascence of South African democracy. The paintings present a thorny challenge in its direct assault on the legacy of Nelson Mandela, South Africa’s first democratically elected president in 1994. Mandela appears in two of the works, while Jacob Zuma is portrayed in the third. *Lucky Star* is notable for its dynamic use of layered text and image. Mabulu awards himself a remarkable level of freedom by avoiding verisimilar images or commenting on idiomatic issues. He references Andy Warhol’s *Campbell’s Soup Cans*, using the iconic South African Lucky Star can as a mechanism for his exploration of commercialized leadership. Ironically, Lucky Star pilchards are a staple in the South African *cucina povera* while the name is a caustic comment on celebrity in modern politics. It lines up with Warhol’s observation that “the reason I’m painting this way is because I want to be a machine.” Mabulu, in turn, makes a visual statement on complicity in our moribund-but-starstruck political machine.

Mabulu introduces drama by placing newspaper articles, reporting on the presidencies of Mandela and Zuma, around the edges of each *Lucky Star*. They form hard-hitting chronological political frameworks. Mabulu comments on each clipping, mounting mini-episodes of blistering drama on corresponding newspaper reports. He cannot resist drawing a pig's snout, tail, and ears on the face of P.W. Botha, the most reviled of Apartheid presidents. Mabulu weaves blurb and bile into potent protest that can be interpreted independently, or as linear sub-stories on African angst. Bedlam aside, Mabulu's newspaper frames are diligently composed, creating anger-containment fields limiting his emotional torrents. He is frequently compared to Basquiat for his non-conformist expressions, which combine reductive interpretations of European techniques, spontaneous sketching, and pointed comments in a graffiti style. Mabulu reflects salient talking points among South African millennials and he effortlessly plugs into spectator bias, giving his work raw energy.

The *Lucky Star* series presents Mandela in a dotting manner, layered and beefy in heavy oils, contrasting with his use of newsprint and impulsive text. Mandela's legacy is the topic of burgeoning South African discontent. Black millennials, in particular, are resentful that Mandela "sold out the country," which is the developing parlance around the 1994 negotiated settlement, which prompted Mandela's election. The impasto textures of Mandela's face remind the viewer of the artist's presence and his affection for the leader. Mabulu frequently states that he criticizes Mandela as a rebellious son would question a father, precisely because he admires him. Mandela was a fierce proponent for free speech and the first leader to endorse same-sex marriage in Africa, while the South African constitution crafted under his tenure is a model of inclusiveness. In stark contrast, President Zuma is painted with echoes of Heath Ledger's *Joker* across his smirking face. Mabulu's contempt is palpable. Zuma is lifeless, one-dimensional, and heavily distorted, contradicting his trademark maniacal laugh.

*Troublemaker* comments relentlessly on commodification, fetishization, and expendability.

Each work points at a harsh reality: that black lives *don't* seem to matter. The *Blak Lives Matter* (sic) series investigates the dramatic tonal shift of the words “Black Lives Matter” from the United States to South Africa. The works offer a bleak narrative where the phrase takes on a heftier meaning in Africa, but not for the reasons you may think. The 2012 Marikana Massacre persists as a symbol of black oppression at the hands of Jacob Zuma’s government in a post-apartheid democracy. Thirty-four protesting mineworkers at Marikana, a Lonmin Platinum mining site, were massacred by the South African Police Service. Illustrating the congestion between prejudice and profit, Cyril Ramaphosa, South African President since 2019, was a non-executive director at Lonmin Platinum, and he did not oppose using lethal force against striking workers.

Ayanda Mabulu digests all of this by constructing two works quoting the 1988 protest song, “Fuck tha Police” by the group N.W.A. The stenciled words on yellow banners, resembling crime-scene tape, start in the corners. *Blak Lives Matter* features some of Mabulu’s most accomplished figurative oil painting techniques. The atmosphere is burdensome, recalling Francis Bacon, and Mabulu works in an agitated manner, making his presence known through impatient layers. Bulky pointillist jabs in saturated browns and blacks create raised textures. The works depict unspeakable violence. Inspired by the Marikana Massacre, *Blak Lives Matter* visually cites the 1712 Willie Lynch “Making of a Slave” speech, which told slave owners the secret to controlling their chattel: turn them against each other. At the center of each painting, the larger-than-life head of a captured, tortured, bridled, and harnessed man. We are witnessing a lynching. Blood and spit pour through broken teeth, collecting at the bottom of the canvas. The words “We Can’t Breathe” are barely legible. It’s a visceral expression of the crime of blackness: an ode to Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, Philando Castille, and Eric Garner. And Atatiana Jefferson, shot in her home by a policeman, just like Botham Jean a month before, thirty miles away. A friend of mine, who happens to be a

policeman, was visibly shaken by Mabulu's *Blak Lives Matter* series. Seizing on the intimacy of the moment, I asked him how he deals with the wearing-blue-while-black paradox. "I can take off the blue," he responded. His response was pragmatic, but not pain-free. Art does that.

*Afronaut*, the final work in the *Blak Lives Matter* series, offers redemption in the shape of a spaceman, carrying a lifeless body. It is Mabulu's pietà to victims of police brutality. He focuses on serenity instead of suffering while suggesting Michelangelo's almost totemic structure. The limp, horned Christ figure symbolizes a *yakhal inkomo*, the anguished bellow of a bull, a visual metaphor for the humiliation of the alpha being subjugated. But there is an element of apotheosis about *Afronaut*, a redemptive aspect which evokes Bacon again, albeit in glowing reds this time. Mabulu leaves little room for reflection. He tells us explicitly how he wants us to respond. A "fragile" sticker, the kind pasted on boxes at airports, is applied in the top right corner. Another plea at the bottom of the painting in rough hand-drawn letters repeats a core message: BLAK LIVES MATTER.

The final painting in the exhibition, *Spear Down My Throat*, portrays a scene where race and sex are equal opportunity cudgels of exploitation. He introduces us to three characters surrounded by radiating, corpulent carnival stripes in carmine and gold leaf, emanating from a festive circus tent. Mabulu reveals an unflinchingly manipulative streak. Most artists would have expressed an act of politically motivated fellatio on a background suggesting a scintilla of decorum. Instead, Mabulu has the viewer rubber-necking through color and form, conspiring to mesmerizing effect. He knows that white viewers don't rhapsodize about subjugated black bodies as much as they ache after black skin. And when the deafening rattle of pearls being clutched subsides, you notice the burnished richness of the muscular radial gold leaf lines indicating affluence and pageant. Scraggy gold leaf application contributes a handmade quality, implying urgency. The work is an eclectic snapshot, capturing both Jacob Zuma and an unnamed white occupier. They are equals in violating the innocent woman at the center of the painting—saddled, and forced to perform fellatio on Zuma. He wears a tribal leopard

skin, laughing as he compromises her integrity. Her breasts are connected to a milk can—the inference of exploitation at the hands of a corrupt government is unambiguous. A rope is tied around her neck, and the occupier holds the loose end. Her demeanor is blighted and she is servile. Puerile ribbons hold her pigtails in place while Zuma hides a teddy bear behind his back, as her reward. She looks at him, wide-eyed and haggard, while she stands on her toes, holding on to the occupier for stability. Oh! The irony.

Zuma is rendered in slipshod strokes. The occupier tells a different story. He wears a scarlet velvet with courtly trimming in gold, holding a snifter of cognac. His head is that of a laughing hyena captured mid-motion, as Mabulu revels in reproducing the coarse fur in gray and brown. The choice of a hyena's head is typical in African art, symbolizing the white occupier's cowardice, stupidity, and animosity. Mabulu knows that a bigoted culture thrives on loaded words and laced Kool-Aid. It's an easily assembled IKEA guillotine where we subjugate ourselves, install a dictator, and complain about outrage fatigue. Mabulu proposes that the central figure represents the contemporary electorate: manipulated, deceived, tribal, and thin-skinned. *Spear Down My Throat* is a statement on engaging in the process of democracy and resisting against forces diminishing our humanity. In an interview, Mabulu sounds optimistic when he comments that "she will break free—she doesn't have to listen to the lies. She is Winnie (Mandela) and (Miriam) Makeba. She is me." I know what he means. Some of us rise, rebel, and scream, "Fuck you!"

In leaving behind second-class citizenship after the election of Nelson Mandela in 1994, Mabulu also shed the pressures of conformity. At the core of disenfranchisement is a conviction that less than white is, well, less. It is convenient for some to dismiss Mabulu's art as the ramblings of an angry black man. But attempts to minimize the consequence of this work—the achievement of it hanging on a gallery wall—represents a failure to understand the burden of free speech. It diminishes richness in sociopolitical debate when artists like Mabulu are requested to refrain from

offending. We rely on art to remix history, acting as a conduit for conflicting views, stitching it into a unified aesthetic. To talk about the work, and react, is to participate in the broader discourse. For Mabulu, the outcome is what matters. And even responses declaring that “I don’t get it,” or “It’s not my cup of tea,” are fine with him. Because even negative or unmoved statements are the result of reaching beyond the obvious, arriving at a conclusion, and compelling the viewer to engage.

*Troublemaker* reminds us to rage. Hard.