

CCAC interview with Thabang Lehobye on 23/08/2022 conducted virtually by email- transcript

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Interviewer name (and acronym): Thina Miya (TM)

Interviewee name (and acronym): Thabang Lehobye (TL)

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START OF INTERVIEW

TM: Please tell us where your interest and involvement with visual arts came about.

TL: As far as I can remember, I've always had an edge to create and make things from found materials. Since childhood, I've always loved building miniature objects such as small towns, cars and planes. Most children where I came from made objects to play with. There wasn't much money for toys, so the instinct to create kicked in from early childhood.

TM: How did you first connect with the CCAC?

TL: A friend of mine, Kim Berman told me about the CCAC. I've always had an idea that works were displayed on the court but never knew the criteria of artworks that form part of the collection. It came as a surprise to me that my work could possibly live alongside some incredible artists which I admire so much.

TM: Is there any specific piece within the CCAC that is meaningful to you? If so, why?

TL: Kim Berman's series titled '*Fires of the Truth Commission*' is one body of work that has constantly stirred so much emotion in me and remains so relevant. Emily Maurice states about the work, 'Just as fire is a symbol of destruction, it tells of rejuvenation, of arising from the ashes like a phoenix'. South Africa's constitutional democracy is one that was founded in pain. For me, these infernos symbolize this pain and of course, the hope for a new beginning. I believe it is also worth noting that the idea of burning things to have our voices heard as young people is one that is all too familiar in today's South Africa, it is the only language which most of us believe our government of the day understands with clarity.

TM: How has your work and time spent at the Constitutional Court impacted your relationship with art and architecture outside of the court?

TL: My visit has given me more depth about the Constitutional Court. There's a lot that I have learnt about the details of the whole precinct, from what inspired the typeface to more monumental elements such as the architecture and interior design of the Court itself are genuinely unique. What is even more interesting to me is the diversity of stories found in the collection. To see and learn about how we individually relate to the idea of a country such as ours.

TM: How did the idea for *Mgusha* come about?

TL: Growing up in the township, playing in the streets is one of the things we can most relate to. *Mgusha* symbolises various obstacles we encounter at different stages of our development as children from the townships.

TM: Can you tell us more about why you chose the game *mgusha* instead of another type of children's game? Please refer to the previous comment.

TL: The game always makes it into my lists of childhood memories. For this reason, I have always wanted to develop a series of works dedicated to the subject. The idea of two canvases (two worlds) connected by a string is one I thought to be visually engaging. It is also an open invitation to the viewer to 'take part in the game' as they observe the work.

TM: What was the inspiration behind the colours and style of *Mgusha*?

TL: Children at play in the streets as the sun sets is a recurring theme in my childhood memories. I wanted to depict a moment in time when one would hear their parent calling their name '...it is getting late, come back inside'. These are the colours of the township sunset as I've interpreted them in the painting. Contrasting red, orange and blue hues create a sense of anticipation and drama. It is as if something is about to happen. This is the tension I wanted to bring across in the artwork. 'it is almost time to go back inside, but we have to finish the last stage of the game, and we are waiting for you (the viewer) to jump.

TM: Do the children in the paintings reference anyone specific?

TL: I was deliberate about not depicting a specific individual. The reference here is children, and this makes the story more relatable as the two children can be anyone.

TM: Why did you decide to use a string instead of a pantyhose?

TL: My initial thought was to use barbed wire, but then again, I thought that would add an unnecessary layer to the theme. The idea of using a string is technical; pantyhose is elastic and easily deteriorate over time. This would affect the preservation of the artwork, so I chose a string as a more durable material that can still put the idea across.

TM: Why the circular canvases as opposed to other shapes or materials?

TL: It made sense to use circular-shaped canvases for a few reasons. In terms of the composition, the viewer's eye seamlessly moves around the canvas and is drawn into the figure of each child. The circular canvas also seems to blend into the environment it is placed in, instead of being a window'. I also feel that it is much gentler as a shape; this compliments the children as a subject.

TM: What would you like the painting to convey to viewers, both young and old, to those who have played the game and those who haven't even heard of the game?

TL: I use the game as a visual metaphor, to the viewer by two children standing side by side – an invitation to play. A challenge that they take a chance at the highest level of the game. They stand still in anticipation for the viewer to play by their rules.

I wish to highlight the silent plight of many children today. Many face various obstacles, especially those who are not afforded the fundamental right to play.

TM: Tell us about your working relationship with Msaki on *Blood, Guns and Revolution: Passage of Time*.

TL: Working with Msaki was an interesting experience which posed various challenges. Firstly, the visuals were created during the first wave of the pandemic, meaning we didn't have a chance to meet in person for us to brainstorm possible ideas. All the communication was done over the phone. What made it worse was that I don't work with storyboards, so I had to explain each part as we went, and we would brainstorm how each bit would play out. Another challenging aspect was ensuring that we didn't depict any gory images that reflected the horrific incidents of Marikana but to allow the viewer to interpret visuals in a way that was dignified for the people who lost their lives. With these challenges, we came up with ways to make the work happen. I believe this was the most crucial part in the beginning stages of any project. The creative process was made easier by the fact that Msaki is a visual artist in her own right. We spoke the same language and understood the tone and manner we needed to put across.

TM: Can you tell us more about how, when and why the visuals for the song were first conceptualised?

TL: Msaki first sent me a write-up about what was going through her mind when she started writing the song, the details of what inspired her writing and her state of mind. It was almost as if she was taking a retrospective look into issues at the time. One could sense a deep sense of disillusion coming across strongly in her words, the type of disillusionment that I could relate to as a South African in the backdrop of what was happening. I was incredibly moved by this sentiment and felt obliged to get into a collaboration and come up with something.

We brainstormed, came up with ideas, and most importantly, she was interested to see my interpretation of her thoughts in a song. My process doesn't include much of a storyboard. I see it as a free flow. This made it a bit difficult to explain ideas. So, I had to explain the key parts of the video, so we were on the same page.

The next stage for me was to find ways of interpreting the message of the song the best way I know how; for this, I chose to use familiar symbols most of us could relate to. For instance, a hail storm represented as a hail of bullets, referencing the work by Jane Alexander, *The Butcher Boys*, represented by the three silhouetted figures. A figure drops a plastic parcel carrying milk and bread symbolising miners losing their livelihood. I was deliberate about using symbolism in visuals; this allowed for an open interpretation for viewers to make their judgement.

This approach also allowed us to ensure that we avoid using the shock effects. It was vital that we created memorable images without being too gory. Another advantage the technique gave us was to paint visuals without being worried about Copyright infringement. In terms of style, my work tends to resemble old South African Protest art. This was a perfect fit for the subject matter and also drew parallels between Marikana and pre-democratic struggles.

The most fundamental aspect of choosing the medium was that it allowed us to do so much with what we had at the time. Painting made it easier to go 'wild' with imagery with minimal resources.

TM: What considerations did you have to keep in mind whilst creating the visuals for the song?

TL: One thing we kept in mind when creating visuals was to give the viewer headspace to unpack the story and form their narrative. To achieve this, our narrative is open-ended. We did this by creating visual guidelines and familiar symbolism that help the viewer tie those loose ends. I didn't want to make visuals feel like an afterthought for the music. The message and tone that came across with the song had to be translated consistently with the visuals. We saw the work as paying a homage to the people who lost their lives in Marikana; we didn't want to politicise the event but to ensure that the subject is presented in a way that is respectable to people in Marikana.

TM: At what point did Msaki contact you on collaborating and creating the visual art imagery for her song?

TL: We first got in touch via Instagram; Msaki briefly explained what she was working on, and sent me thought starters that inspired my thought process; this happened around August in 2020. This was at the peak of the pandemic. I was getting a lot of requests for collaboration at that time, and a lot of musicians needed to find creative ways of putting visuals out with their music. I'm very picky when it comes to collaboration, but this one felt right. The subject was right and aligned with protest art.

TM: What inspired the imagery, colour and formula in the video?

TL: A lot of inspiration for the work was drawn from Protest Art, especially posters. This allowed us to distil the visuals in lino-cut black and white print and emphasise the subject matter. There are a few references that pay homage to various artists' work; Goya's *Sleep of Reason* in the scene with a politician sleeping on an office desk, Jane Alexander's *The Butcher Boys* and Dumile Feni's *African Guernica* to name a few. This allows us to give even more symbolism to the work and give the viewers visual cues to form a narrative.

A time-based medium such as video allows for a narrative. We can give the audience an idea of unfolding events, such as moments towards the build-up to the massacre. We did this with the opening scene of the miner looking towards an approaching storm and dropping grocery packs. Video also allowed us to create tension and set a tone for the song.

TM: Can you tell us more about what the different symbolisms were meant to signify? i.e the loudspeaker, the object that reads like a cigarette but has the colours of a lighthouse, the men and animals at the end.

TL: We were deliberate about using symbolism in key scenes building up to the storm. The miner is standing still with the kopje in the backdrop symbolising all miners. There are vultures circling to illustrate mortuary vans that were summoned to the scene before the massacre. A hand with blood on the palm which is quickly then clenched into a fist. A comrade that hides blood on his 90 hands with a fist. The chimney rotated 90 degrees and resembles the one at the actual mine (note the similarities of the x5 red stripes). Instead of the chimney sitting upright, it is rotated to resemble a barrel of a gun after discharging. A miner's uniform hanging on a washing line represents a dead

corpse and references the widows left behind. It is also reminiscent of Rembrandt's 'Slaughtered ox'. The floating loud hailer is meant to symbolize the 'voiceless' miners that wanted their plight heard far and wide. The loud hailer was used to communicate and marshal miners towards the build-up of the massacre. Dark clouds resembling an approaching storm or hail of bullets. An election campaign board reads 'Batho Pele' (people first). Relates to the idea of election campaigns. A politician 'past-out' on an office desk with a bloated stomach. A protest fire burning besides him keeps him warm. I pay homage to "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters" by the Spanish painter and printmaker Francisco Goya. A politician rests asleep with his face covered as a tire burns, to keep him warm. Burning tires symbolise of protest across South Africa. The irony in this is the flames of liberty.

Police casppir drives fast in the left direction, illustrating going back in time as it morphs from white and blue to Yellow. I have also incorporated portraits of some 34 miners to pay respect, including "the man in a green blanket", Mgcineni Noki.

I was intentional in not painting the horrific scenes, but having the viewer take a closer look and engage with critique. I felt it is essential to let the viewers make their narrative about these issues and come to terms with the state of our democracy in retrospect.

These and many other symbols and visual cues create an open-ended narrative for the viewer to create meaning and ties loose ends that we encountered during and after the massacre.

The work pays homage to those who have lost their lives, the widows and children left without mothers or fathers. All in the request to exercise their right to a better live. The scene at Marikana was in many ways reminiscent of Apartheid-era South Africa where lethal force is exerted upon civilian, by those, who are supposed to protect them.

In this video installation, I collaborated with the musician Msaki, Using South African protest art style execution to highlight the plight of the miners.

TM: Why did you agree to collaborate with Msaki?

TL: The first time I heard the song, I knew it was the right project to collaborate on. Msaki's sincere voice and the message in it, leaves one with haunting thoughts of miner's plight and our daily struggles in a very profound manner. I am not sure how she does it, but she's able to lure one in with her voice in the most honest way. I was moved by the song and felt compelled to collaborate on such an iconic piece of music.

TM: Why do you believe that *Mgusha* and *Blood, Guns and Revolution: Passage of Time* are a good fit for the CCAC?

TL: I believe the two works remind us of how far we've come as a nation, one in a delightful manner and the other in a challenging way. One of the most important things that art helps us to do is to question the status quo, to step back and look at ourselves in the mirror. I believe it is important that we as a young constitutional democracy take time to reflect upon ourselves, how far we've come and where we are going as a nation.

TM: How do you feel about your contribution as an artist whose work is part of the Constitutional Court Art Collection?

TL: It is both an honour and privilege to be granted an opportunity to show my perspective at the highest court art collection. This not only mean the work will be preserved, but also allow it to be seen by future generation. This is anyone's dream, to be remembered for something. For other to know that 'I was here'

TM: What value do you think the CCAC offers to the Constitutional Court, the country, and the world more broadly?

TL: Art has played and is still playing a significant role in South Africa's strive for equality. The most important role art has played is to give people a voice. This is one of the values enshrined in our constitution. Art is at the heart of every human's plight for freedom, and I believe it is the most fundamental aspect of self-expression without prejudice.

END OF INTERVIEW