Your Trip to Africa

Meleko Mokgosi (b. 1981, Francistown, Botswana; lives in New York) harnesses the traditions of Western European painting to deliver sharp political critiques relating to the postcolonial condition. Combining a high degree of painterly skill with a poetic, open-ended semiotic approach and a penchant for deep archival research, the artist shines light on some of the complex socioeconomic dynamics that animate contemporary southern Africa. Mokgosi typically employs hyperrealistic figurative imagery on a large scale, depicting mysterious, unidentified personages loosely linked to one another in implied storylines, sometimes spanning multiple timelines within the same composition. The format of Mokgosi's work references murals and cinema as well as the conventional European artistic genre known as history painting. Associated primarily with the Neoclassical period of the 18th and 19th centuries, history paintings portray events drawn from history or mythology in ways that valorize contemporaneous political figures and forces. Whereas traditional history paintings feature lofty subjects—military battles or climactic scenes drawn from ancient legends—Mokgosi elevates everyday, anonymous persons and common objects, settling them against mundane domestic contexts while inserting pointed references that establish an array of subtle yet powerful suggestive effects.

Pérez Art Museum Miami presents a newly commissioned work by Mokgosi created for the museum's distinctive 30-foot double-height project gallery. The project centers on the 1966 film Unsere Afrikanerise (Our Trip to Africa) by the seminal filmmaker Peter Kubelka (b. 1934, Vienna; lives in Vienna). Kubelka is widely recognized as one of the progenitors of the Structural film movement, which attempts to distill the cinematic experience to its purest material form. The film came about when Kubelka was invited by a wealthy Austrian family to record their safari trip through Africa. As the strange, intense, grotesque world that resulted defies description. As the Europeans engage in various leisure activities (swimming, sunbathing, teasing their native attendants, and, of course, hunting), the action is intercut with fleeting glimpses of tribal African passively engaged in their daily labor (carrying water, pounding a mortar with a pestle). Kubelka punctuates these sequences with the repetitive, gruesome spectacle of the Africans killing and skinning an elephant, a zebra, a lion, a giraffe, and other wild animals. In the words of film critic Catherine Russell, "The film was commissioned to be a mirror of sorts by the Austrian hunters whom Kubelka accompanied to Africa, but it becomes a fun-house mirror, horrifically distorting their image." Kubelka compressed hours of footage into a 13-minute barrage of imagery with no apparent through line, no sense of cause and effect, and no beginning, middle, or end, providing the spectator with no easy means of cognitive entry or exit. As in previous works, Kubelka disrupts the synchronization of sound and image, repeatedly employing the sound of cackling laughter at incongruous moments. At times, this laughter has the effect of belittling the African subjects, while at others it interacts with the scenes of violence against the animals to generate a cloud of sardonic irony.

The disconcerting dimensions of Unsere Afrikanerise have often been cited, together with Kubelka's stated disgust with his bourgeois patrons, to support the claim that the work serves as a critique of European colonialism and tourism in Africa. Mokgosi adds layers to this critical perspective, citing Kubelka's insistence that his true intention was to "try and tear the emotions loose from the people, so that they would gain distance to their emotions, their feelings." With this new cycle of monumental paintings, Mokgosi infuses the film's imagery with a new emotional force, counteracting the desensitized tone that often accompanies modernist aesthetic treatments of non-Western subjects. At the same time, Mokgosi takes aim at the tendency of Western media to represent African people as anonymous figures inhabiting a mythologized realm outside of time. As he has often done before, Mokgosi drives this critique through the heart of the Western art historical canon, subverting conventional representations of Africans and Africans by laying bare the real-world, contemporary impacts of modernization under colonial and postcolonial regimes.

Rend Morales
Director of Curatorial Affairs and Chief Curator

2 Peter Kubelka, interview with Uros Mitrof Film Culture 44 (Spring 1967).
Meleko Mokgosi: Your Trip to Africa
February 28, 2020–May 30, 2021

Meleko Mokgosi
b. 1981, Francistown, Botswana; lives in New York

Your Trip to Africa, 2020
Oil on canvas
11 parts, 84 x 84 inches, each
Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Meleko Mokgosi: Your Trip to Africa is organized by PAMM Director of Curatorial Affairs and Chief Curator René Morales. Ongoing support for PAMM’s project galleries from Knight Foundation is gratefully acknowledged.

Biography

Meleko Mokgosi completed the Independent Study Program at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and received a BA from Williams College, Williamstown, Massachusetts, in 2007. He received an MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), in 2011. Solo exhibitions of his work have been presented at the Fowler Museum at UCLA; Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown; Jack Shainman Gallery, New York; The School, Kinderhook, New York; Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; and Honor Fraser Gallery, Los Angeles. His work has been included in group exhibitions at the California African American Museum, Los Angeles; The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; New Wight Gallery, UCLA; National Library of Cameroon, Yaounde; Whitney Museum of American Art; National Gallery, Gaborone, Botswana; and the Augusta Savage Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst. His work is included in the collections of The Studio Museum in Harlem; Hammer Museum; Alford Collection of Contemporary Art, Rollins College, Winter Park, Florida; Colby Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine; and Pérez Art Museum Miami, among other institutions.

Images


2–3 Peter Kubelka, Unsere Afrikareise, 1966. 16 mm, color, sound. 12½ min. © Peter Kubelka. Photo: Austrian Film Museum. Stills selected by Peter Kubelka.

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