

Negotiated Spaces – Opening Speech by Gabi Ngcobo

Early this year I co-curated an exhibition for the Centro Mordeno de Arte CAAM, a museum in the Canary Islands, Spain. The exhibition titled *Erase me from who I am* featured 14 South African artists working at home and abroad and was accompanied by a catalogue with engaging essays. One essay, written by art historian Thembinkosi Goniwe is titled *Negotiating Space: Some Matters in South African Contemporary Art*. In this essay Goniwe starts with a well-known quotation from artist and writer David Koloane. Let me read it:

*Apartheid was a politics of space more than anything. If you look at the 1913 and 1936 Land Acts they are all about space, and much of the apartheid legislation was denying people the right to move. It's all about space, restricting space...Claiming art is also reclaiming space.*¹

David Koloane

Goniwe consequently begins his essay by saying:

Negotiating space in South African contemporary art is opening up history for examination in order to re-write its complex and contested subjectivities and desires—both included and omitted, embellished and distorted. This re-writing is not singular but more than plural or multicultural. It involves creative processes of critical engagements that make post-apartheid South Africa unpredictable thus exciting and worrying. Exciting for better life for all and worrying about remitting or revision of inequalities. Both these considerations matter for they affect human interactions and relationships in the social space of every day life.

I therefore find it interesting that this evening I stand here opening an exhibition whose title *Negotiated Spaces* is in a way a response to Koloane's statement articulated eleven years ago. It is also a great pleasure that this negotiation is happening in Durban, my birth city and involves 2 artists I consider extremely talented and interesting.

¹ David Koloane and Ivor Powell, "In Conversation," in *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa*, ed. Clementine Deliss (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1995), 265.

I first encountered Bronwen Vaughan-Evans' work in 2004 when she held her first solo show *One Zero One* here at KZNSA. In this exhibition Bronwen interrogated her personal past in a way that was seeking a reconciled relationship with it. I found that exhibition one of the most resolved shows of that year. As I stand here I am encountered with yet another great exhibition which now marks the artist's movement from the personal into more collective aspects of identity. I have also known Nontobeko Ntombela for a couple of years, as an active and daring student experiencing the daunting experience of entering the public realm as an artist with both personal challenges and a fraught political climate. Nonto and I have been involved in workshops and also shared stages in exhibitions held here in Durban and Cape Town.

Bronwen and Nontobeko come from backgrounds that can be seen as poles apart, a black woman and a white woman on equal footing, which makes this exhibition a rare moment in the history of visual arts in the country. With this exhibition both artists have equally negotiated their spaces so as to meet at more than one point, a space where a language that delves into an area that creates opportunities which promote something different, new and previously unidentified has been formed.

The work seen here bares witness to the process both Nonto and Bronwen have been engaged with for a couple of months. In this exhibition colour has been used sparingly, which in turn has transformed the KZNSA gallery space into a neutral space.

The exhibition brings out a concept of a 3rd Space, a space in between or what is has been termed **the grey areas**. 3rd space here can be viewed as an opportunity or a process that opens up and broadens horizons. It symbolizes a break from sharp contrasts that are perceived as clear-cut. 3rd space however does not mean that the differences are denied instead, it most means the inevitable reciprocity of any pair of definitions. In such a case both artists leave a mark on the other. It is a question of both- and – how each of the pair influences the other.

Here the artists' issues have been dealt with using materials that also form part and contribute to the visual language articulated by the exhibition.

Vaughan-Evans's main material is black and white gesso, (gesso is an Italian word for chalk) which has been layered, black beneath the white and sanded to both reveal and hide surfaces. This creates a controlled surface alluding to a metaphorical weight beneath the surface of things. In her work, Bronwen has used animals and humans, landscape and cityscapes to wield agency through metaphors... whose outcomes is the building of roads, towns and cultures. Landscape can be regarded as places where social, historical, and geographical conditions allow different voices to express themselves. City spaces are therefore constitutive of many different voices and living spaces that have relations between them. With titles such as *Portrait of a city* *a city as a young man* Vaughan-Evans calls on a western patriarchal model of becoming. She profiles a city as a young man coming of age, denoting tones where women negotiate spaces within a city built on patriarchal foundations. Here the mundane aspects of city spaces have been used to suggest a place of possibility with heightened feelings of surveyed isolation.

Nontobeko on the other hand has mainly used isishweshwe, also known as German print, a material that has a long and rich history in this country but which arrived with German protestant settlers in the mid 19th century and was appropriated as a cultural commodity in South Africa, used by South African women and now appropriated to contemporary fashion and worn by both young men and women. The metaphor of this colonial cultural commodity has been used to suggest identity as a concept that is a perpetual state of flux. Nonto's practice is what I can refer to as a notion of being "Ghetto fabulous" This notion has also been explored by scholar of masculinities Kopano Ratele in the Agenda journal themed Urban Culture. Here Ratele has stated that "most young African professionals who grew up on farms, villages, townships, or squatter camps have at least two lives, two stories that run side by side, two audiences they present themselves to and address. One story is that of where they come from, the other that of their new lives, the professional selves." Ratele continues to say "...culture, and more so urban

culture, always concentrates, intensifies, re-ruptures, widens, and distends the story of double lives... where a member from one audience may get a sub-text intended for members of the other."

It is this duality that is most apparent with Nontobeko's work. Her use of sewing and embroidery explore and manipulate feminine stereotypes attributed to such modes of working. By working in this way Ntombela in a way elevates this art into the realm of respectability.

In both artists work ideas of visibility and invisibility, the once seen and the unseen is heightened by the presence of a continuous silhouetted female figure representing Ntombela and Vaughan-Evans.

Whilst recent surveys reveal that there is a rape park in almost every city. Women's fear and vulnerability in public space is universal and a subject of society. To a large extent both Nonto and Brownen are asking; "who is the city for, by whom is it created by and what shall we as women do there?"

The artists explore space as both a material and an interpretive quality. The exhibition compels us to ask how do we as individuals and collectives make and take culture in the production of public spaces in the cities, with particular emphasis on how they use and assign meaning to public spaces within unequal relations of power in an effort to "make space." I urge you to engage the work on a closer one on one bases, let it talk to you.