the installation becomes a metaphor for morality and we learn the hard way how, within Islam's 'moral economy' of consequences, a covetous or disrespectful gaze can also return to burn. Sabera Bham's deceptively simple show has abstracted and translated some of the complex facets of an issue which is ironically often subjected to narrow vision. It deserves to be seen more widely.


Johannes Phokela

Paul O'Kane

Postmodern thought supposedly liberates us from dominant white western male perceptions and from the myths of a one-sided, linear history. Since the 'Enlightenment Project' began, the West has made observations through a grid of rationalism and, while subjugating other cultures, has imposed this matrix over indigenous belief systems. Now in a neat inversion, the West observes the same grid or matrix (the stigmatised modernism) through the 'chaos' it currently embraces as the shapeless shape of truth. Furthermore those cultures subjugated by the West, including the West's own subcultures, now apply their own matrix of beliefs onto a view of the dominant culture. Therefore, all that was marginalised may now enjoy its own myth of centrality while marginalising that which was previously central.

Johannes Phokela's show at Lorraine Kordecki's fledgling Rack gallery neatly illustrates such theories while using them as a foundation for a more personal mission. Phokela is a black South African working in London. He makes highly skilled oil paintings which appropriate from European art history, particularly Rubens. This sounds like a familiar strategy, reminiscent of Achille Bonito Oliva's 1980s trans-avant-gardists who sought to "escape the burden of art history by using it as a resource base for their elaborations of myth...". But if Phokela's strategy appears similar it is primarily to dispet the enduring ghettoisation of black art as an exotic or patronisingly tolerated primitivism.

It has been said that flesh was the reason oil paint was invented, but Phokela's craft brings home the unpalatable fact that the entire great tradition of nudes in oils was a 'white thing.' Two obvious points which distinguish his work from previous history appropriators are his insertion of black figures into white-only scenarios and his strange use of a painted grid to overlay the final image. Phokela's grid attracts many questions and interpretations. Why, having taken pains to render a large canvas in the style of Rubens, should an artist then subject it to this fragmenting screen of white lines? It could be that this super self-conscious reference to composition paradoxically negates any formal reading of the painting, thus forcing us into a political or philosophical reading.

As was said above, a grid is indicative of western attempts to master the world, but when Phokela applies it over a painting called Fête Champêtre, containing revelling 16th–17th century North European villagers (drawn from Bruegel and Rubens), it confirms the theory that we now live on the other side of a paradigm shift in our relationship with history. Phokela points out that Rubens' revellers may be typical of the first settlers to colonise and exploit South Africa; they are in the right place, time and social bracket to qualify and it is just such ethical considerations (on grounds of both race and gender) that motivate thorough revisionism of the Enlightenment's lofty ideals and questionable achievements. Hence we no longer share the same 'age' as the 17th century but live at the start of a wholly new age which, in order to be born, has to rip up the old rule book, including the rules of a processional history. Phokela's grid sequesters us from a past, drawing an emphatic line between then and now. Time is manifested as space so as to manipulate it in the service of a new picture of an old world.

The first work in the show is titled Candle Bathing and re-interprets Ruben's Samson and Delilah with Samson as black, Delilah as naked and the servant who trims Samson as bald. Phokela's title, although suggested by the old servant-woman's candle, refers to the way white people sunbathe to darken their skins while implying black skin needs very little light to beautify it.

Composition I shows two figures, one male, one female, chosen from far apart in art history (Corinth and Rubens) because of the coincidental similarity of their poses. They are set on either side of a tree branch from which a monkey proffers bananas. Both lean backwards and hide their hands as if afraid to be tempted by this alternative 'serpent' and its forbidden fruit.

Humid Basement re-presents Ruben's Cimon and
Pero (Roman Charity), which depicts St Peter imprisoned and suckling from the breast of a young Roman woman sympathiser during the persecution of early Christians by Nero’s Romans. In Phokela’s version the woman has been undressed and given eroticising red shoes. Meanwhile St Peter has been Africanised (or perhaps de-Europeanised, as biblical characters were after all Middle Eastern). The resulting pair attract interpretations based on Africa’s enforced charitable dependence upon Europe since colonisation.

Exaltation Allegory 66-33 is a diptych based on Bassano, Rubens and Van Dyck, showing that although we may be assisted by ‘Good Samaritans’ up the stairs of success, we are just as likely to be helped back down in later years. Phokela has given the job of assisting the old man’s descent from grace to the only black character. Percussion Piece On Mount Serious is a superbly amplified detail from Rubens’ The Worship Of Venus. Six dancing figures are gracefully arranged beneath Phokela’s grid and twist and turn their luminous, almost translucent bodies to the sound of a tambourine held aloft. The final work is Fête Champêtre — described earlier — in which characters from Rubens and Bruegel have been fused together in a single scene of festive villagers.

All of Phokela’s works are extremely highly finished and completed with a uniformly matt surface giving them a classic, seductively dry quality. While using art history for political/philosophical ends his work also educates us in the functions of histories like art history and simultaneously informs us of the techniques of a painter like Rubens. The work’s physical resilience and mastery of technique can satisfy the most traditional markets yet it also baits postmodern interpretations to feed the alternative trade in more avant-garde cultural capital.