

Affirmations of humanity: Sfiso Ka-Mkame's dialogues with himself

This essay was originally published online by ASAI in 2016 [\[LINK\]](#)

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[Unpublished text for opening speech at opening of Sfiso Ka-Mkame's 'Dialogues with myself' solo exhibition at the African Art Centre, Durban, 2016. It was originally published on Ka-Mkame's page on asai.co.za in 2016.]

I wish to thank the artist and the African Art Centre for inviting me to open this exhibition. I am indeed honoured to have this opportunity to share some thoughts about Sfiso ka-Mkame, an artist who I hold in high esteem.

I first became aware of Sfiso in the late 1980s. His *Letters to God* was one of the most widely published artworks in that period, and I came to learn that it was not a work that was produced in isolation. Rather, it was part of a series of "letters". Formally, these works consisted of semi-autonomous images, combined to form a dense composition. Notably, when many works from this period were large and imposing, Sfiso's *Letters* were intimate works, modest in scale and requiring you to look at them closely. The series was also remarkable for having been produced with oil pastels, a medium usually associated with preparatory rather than finished works. Thematically, the work of this period related directly to what was happening in the artist's environment, noting that this was a time of mass resistance to apartheid.

Although I didn't see many more of Sfiso's works until 2003 his *Letters* left an indelible imprint on me. I was thrilled when he exhibited at the AVA in Cape Town, as it gave me an opportunity to meet him, and I published two articles on him shortly afterwards. The AVA exhibition comprised mixed media works with pastels still prominent. These works differed significantly from *Letters* in that they were much larger, and there was an extravagant, even sumptuous use of colour. Compositions were unified, and unlike the claustrophobic intensity of *Letters* the images featured both deep and shallow space. The predominant theme was women, with some works touching on sensitive subjects such as abortion, virginity testing, and HIV aids. It was an extremely strong showing, but as I noted in a review the Cape Town art market was indifferent. The works from this show were subsequently exhibited at the African Art Centre, where they were favourably received.

Fast forward another thirteen years and here I am reflecting on a new body of work. Unlike the earlier works with which I am familiar, these new pieces operate within a more restrictive compositional range. Pictorial space is shallow, and all images represent individual subjects, adopting the frontal gaze, head and shoulder format commonly associated with identity photographs. Technically there is a consistency in the choice of pastels and mixed media, although the works are more textural, more physical. Certainly these works can be admired for their experimental use of media.

This exhibition is titled *Dialogues with Myself*, and yet it is clear that these images do not depict the artist. The dialogue the artist is having with himself concerns the pervasive challenge of HIV/Aids, a theme that runs through his work all the way back to the early 90s. It is a theme one cannot avoid in contemporary society, not least in KZN, the province with the highest statistics in the country.

And yet, perhaps contrary to expectations, these are not portraits commemorating specific individuals. While some of these figures may be modeled on real persons, the artist has chosen to create imaginary portraits, each expressing something unique.

This exhibition features two distinct but related series. In the one series the artist has included written text. In these works identities are partially erased and reconstructed through gestural, random, markings. In the other series the images are sliced vertically, at equidistant spacing, and then reassembled.

It is in reflecting on the content of these works that one begins to identify consistent concerns in Sfiso's career. Perhaps the most obvious is violence. Violence has been a theme in much of Sfiso's work. It has been there in scenes of political, social and domestic conflict, but it is perhaps more pronounced here. All these images manifest an enactment of violence on the part of the artist. The acts of erasure and slicing are destructive, violent. But following this violation there is a regrouping of identity, a reassertion of humanity, an affirmation of being that restores dignity.

There is some irony that the sliced portraits began with photographic portraits of Mbeki's cabinet ministers. From the perspective of HIV/Aids activists Mbeki represents a period of denialism. Sfiso comments that some of the Ministers were depicted with red ribbons pinned on their jackets. He has not retained traces of these portraits but I think it is revealing to acknowledge the origins of this series because it reveals something of the artistic process. It is within the intuitive, contemplative spaces of creating that artists struggle and produce 'meaning', and it is this usually unseen process that constitutes another level of dialoguing with oneself. The creative process can be a lonely space, followed by public exhibitions where the best an artist usually gets is 'nice work'.

And yet in that solitary space the artist makes choices that reflect a profound engagement with his art. When one body of work includes systematic slicing it brings up questions of violence as institutionalised, as impersonal. Whereas when the gestural and random dominate it highlights the unpredictability and arbitrariness of violation. When one body of works adopts the language of Aids education, inserting phrases and slogans commonly identified with posters this highlights the ongoing necessity of didactic campaigns, whereas when one excludes written text this introduces a comparative silence, highlighting the secrecy and taboo that often comes with infection. Thus, through what may appear to be a limited range of formal devices, a whole spectrum of ideas and thoughts are activated.

In conclusion, on returning to the theme, *Dialogues with Myself*, it becomes clear that this exhibition represents a journey of reflection, and of critical engagement with contemporary social realities, specifically HIV/Aids. The theme also introduces questions of the role of the artist in society, in not only addressing social challenges

but of empathising with the everyday struggles of 'ordinary' people. The artist is part of his community and the people's pain is his too. By visualising the atrocity of violation, and defying the destructive impulses towards disintegration, Sfiso presents a new wholeness, scarred, damaged even, but with dignity restored.