

# Dogs on Duty: The unsettling aesthetic of Trevor Makhoba

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by Mario Pissarra

Editorial note: *This was originally commissioned by the Africa Centre, London and published on their now off-line website, Contemporary Africa Database, c. 2001, with the title "Trevor Makhoba Profile". Apart from the correction of minor typographic errors, the essay is retained as in the original. It can be noted that the retrospective exhibition referred to at the conclusion of the essay was cancelled, due to unforeseen problems arising from negotiations with the late artist's family. A photocopied series of essays commissioned for the catalogue can be found in some South African libraries (universities and museums). Makhoba's work can be viewed in H. Proud (ed), ReVisions, SAHO and Unisa Press, 2006.*

One of the most extraordinary and powerful painters to have emerged in recent times, Trevor Makhoba was a self-taught artist who worked mostly with oils on card and (later) canvas. In 1996, the year he won the Standard Bank Young Artists Award, Makhoba was hailed in the catalogue of his exhibition (*Uma Ngisaphila/ As Long As I Live*) as "one of [South Africa's] most relevant commentators on social and political change" (Paul Sibisi), and as "brilliant" (Alan Crump). Following his unexpected death seven years later Makhoba received all-too-brief obituaries in the premier vehicles for art criticism in South Africa, namely Arthrob.co.za and Art South Africa. The former lamented the death of "one of South Africa's most important artists" and the latter perceptively described Makhoba as a "creative quagmire and treasure chest of contradictions." (Hazel Friedman)

Makhoba grew up in Umkhumbane, a site of forced removals (now Cato Manor), a traumatic experience captured in his painting *Eat and Let's Go* (private collection, USA). His family was moved to Umlazi, the sprawling township outside Durban. Having drawn since childhood, when his mother encouraged him to sketch with charcoal from the fire, he became a full-time artist in the 80s when he began hawking his paintings door to door in white areas. Despite the fact that this market would have limited his scope he also produced some significant paintings in this decade, notably *The Naked Truth* (1983), a powerful indictment of slave-like labour. Not surprisingly given its socio-political overtones this work was not publicly shown until the 'new' South Africa of the 90s when Makhoba began to produce works for galleries.

Makhoba's star rose rapidly in the 90s when he won both regional and national awards, exhibited internationally, notably at the Venice Biennale in 1993, and sold to most of the country's major public and corporate collections, as well as to private collectors worldwide.

A figurative artist, most of Makhoba's works are allegorical. Sibisi, his friend and mentor, has noted that "nothing is placed in [Makhoba's] work without a reason". The

vividness of Makhoba's paintings stems from the clarity of his vision. He told journalist Ingrid Shevlin that: "Before I start to paint I have to have something in my head. I never start until I have a vision or a feeling. That is my problem: I cannot paint commercially. When I paint it comes from inside me." ("Heart to Art", 2/9/94 news cutting, African Art Centre)

Friedman draws a line down the centre of Makhoba's oeuvre. She writes that "His subject matter was divided into two distinct parts- that which lionised traditional societies, and that which demonised urban life." Despite this apparent dual focus, there is in fact significant continuity in Makhoba's work. Friedman herself notes that "Both [his major themes] were depicted with a macabre sense of humour and a rapier-sharp edge." However the most consistent feature of Makhoba's work is that he invariably comments on social and cultural change. As Sibisi puts it: "[Makhoba's work deals with] a myriad of sensitive issues which reflect the substantial changes in his community, his nation and the continent as a whole". Even many of his 'neo-traditionalist' paintings that 'record' Zulu history and traditions are often nuanced with details (eg. clothing, buildings, behaviour) that reflect the dynamic nature of cultural change.

His prize-winning *Azibuye Emasisweni* (1991, SA National Gallery) is a deceptively anecdotal representation of the interface between the symbol of rural ('traditional') wealth (the herd of cattle) and the 'modern' (or 'development') symbolized by the tarred road. This painting can also due to the political and historical context of the time (1990) be read as iconic, representing the transition into a new age, the crossing of that which once divided the land, the reclaiming of that which was taken away. That the cattle each have their own distinctive colouring and patterning can be read as an afro-centric version of what was popularly to become known as the "rainbow nation". That they literally 'kick up dust', which in naturalistic terms makes no sense in the painting, reinforces the prophetic tone of the work. Sibisi notes the prophetic qualities of this work, noting that it "advocates the transitional political situation which our country has now experienced". Sibisi goes even further in his interpretation, suggesting that the identity of the old man herding the cattle (another departure from 'realism' as historically this was the task of young boys) is none less than Mandela himself, although there is nothing in the likeness to affirm this reading.

The ability to imbue narratives with the resonance of contemporary issues is one of the achievements of Makhoba's art. This arises again with *Inguyazana/ Caucus* (1995) which not only 'documents' a historical method of "conflict resolution within an African, cultural context." (Sibisi), but should also be read "against an environment of inter-necine strife and community elections" (Sibisi).

While works such as the *Azibuye Emasisweni* and *Inguyazana* are important, they would not, in my opinion, elevate Makhoba to the premier rank of South African artists. Arguably Makhoba's most important works are those that deal with taboo subjects, usually pertaining to sexual violence. Friedman notes that: "Deeply religious, he had a penchant for depicting sexual deviance". What makes these works powerful is not only that Makhoba took on subjects most prefer to ignore, but just as importantly the innovative ways that he treats them. Typically Makhoba would 'seduce' the eye through his vibrant colour and dramatic (as well as symbolic) use of light and dark, resulting in a kind of 'delayed shock' once the subject 'hits' you.

Friedman has also noted his “seductive” technique. She wrote that “Makhoba’s works are visually seductive, drawing the viewer into carefully plotted scenarios.” His method of ‘ambushing’ viewers works, and this is apparent from the responses that his art generates. I saw his Standard Bank Young Artist travelling exhibition at the Durban Art Gallery in 1997 (the eighth and final destination for this travelling exhibition). I am hard pressed to recall any other instance where I have seen so many people actively absorbed in looking at and discussing the works at an exhibition. That this was a regular weekday and not an opening, and that many, perhaps most viewers were black, in a country where such an audience is to say the least atypical, testifies to the compelling qualities of Makhoba’s art.

Sometimes Makhoba’s narratives are fairly straight forward, eg. *It’s Dad, Mum* (1995), where he tackles child abuse and domestic violence in an explicit way that leaves little ambiguity, as well as *Summer Friday Night with the Taxi Driver* (1996) where he documents the township phenomenon of schoolgirls exchanging sexual favours with taxi drivers for rides and pocket-money. However in many instances the ‘moral of the story’ is ominously ambivalent, denying an obviously ‘correct’ reading. At his best Makhoba leaves you hanging, letting you draw your own conclusions about his intentions. This means that while he is frequently motivated by a sense of the violation of morality he is often more challenging than didactic.

His terrifying *Dogs on Duty* (1995), which depicts gang-rape in the townships, can be read simply as a statement of male depravity. However, it also hints at the bigger (largely unspoken) notion of popular retribution in the post-apartheid situation: one of the protagonists wears a hat with the (new) South African flag on it, and the victims are notably paler in complexion than their violators. However, it is not a simple black-white conflict: the (mostly black) men also include paler members among them, which, while re-inforcing the reading of the image as representing the violation of women by men, also highlights the sometimes unexpected ‘new’ alliances that are being forged out of changing circumstances. What adds to the disturbing tone of the work is that Makhoba blurs the line between sexual violence and eroticism by sensuously depicting the rapist’s buttocks. Whether *Dogs on Duty* is simply a representation of depraved behaviour, or a cynical indictment of the ‘new’ South Africa is an open question. Do we read this as the representation of an isolated act, the secular equivalent of Hieronymus Bosch’s view of *Hell*, or as an iconic image embodying contemporary (post-apartheid) ‘values’? It is by sowing such doubts and unease that Makhoba’s vision draws much of its power.

*Dogs on Duty* can also be read as a sequel to *Great Temptation in The Garden* (1995) where a (white) suburban woman brazenly displays her underwear whilst offering her (black) gardener something to drink. The crass sexuality of the ‘madam’ can be read as an explicit offer to her ‘boy’, but can also be interpreted as emblematic of conflicting behavioural (‘cultural’) ‘norms’ as well as indiscretions that black workers were often exposed to (and expected to turn a blind eye to) in suburbia. The inequality of the power relations implicit in this encounter is rendered explicit by various pictorial elements. There are differences in drinking vessels (an enamel mug for the ‘garden-boy’ in contrast to the wine glass for the ‘civilised’ madam, which lies empty on the lawn). In addition, the head of the gardener is bowed, although this may also be because of the ‘temptation’ on show, and his

humility is contrasted by her rabid grin. Also the positioning of the two figures in the painting is telling, the servant is off- centre while the 'lady' occupies the central space. Whether this painting represents an element of fantasy on the part of the worker, or his humiliation; or whether the 'offer' is blatant or reflective of her unconscious being is, as in the best of Makhoba's works, left to the viewer.

The notion of shame, attached to sexual indiscretion, also features in a painting I only know through a photograph in the collection of the African Art Centre. In this painting there are clear suggestions of a loss of sexual innocence that takes the form of a remorseful schoolgirl while the boy nonchalantly zips up. Innovatively, Makhoba introduces the possibility of a reading with a socio-political and cultural frame. He does this by giving the (apparently 'non-white', possibly 'Indian') girl a paler complexion than her de-flowerer. The bird that flies away adds to the drama and emphasises the sense of loss. A more powerful 'Adam and Eve' painting would be hard to find.

As with the above work Makhoba sometimes 'complicates' the power relations between men and women in his paintings, increasing the work's social and cultural currency by mediating his subjects across the colour bar. For instance, *The Restoration of Virginity* (1995) does not only refer to the controversial ('traditional') practice of (Zulu) virginity-testing (of young girls), but brings a white girl (together with what Sibisi describes as a "western doctor") into the ritual, offering a provocative vision of the future of this practice.

In addition to irony and shock, satire is also in his armoury. It is often gently understated, as in wry observations of human behaviour. This is the case with *Jabula Mphumbo Uzoqwinya* (1999, Durban Art Gallery), where Makhoba provides an amusing peek into sexuality within the context of a 'traditional' (Zulu) homestead. He even brings an element of humour into what can also be described as a 'protest' painting, *No Privacy in the Shack* (1995). In other cases, his satire is fully blown. His reference to the historical gathering of women activists in China, *A Hard Blow in Beijing* (1996), is exemplary of the latter. Makhoba uses the metaphor of boxing to comment on developments in the 'battle of the sexes' and captures the moment after a (black) woman has floored a (black) man. Whereas Sibisi has read this as a representation of the power of women it can also be interpreted as a deeply chauvinistic work, reactionary in its depiction of women's empowerment, and it is not surprising that, as Friedman notes, Makhoba has been "accused of racism and sexism". The setting for this second reading is hinted at by the sign reading "Family Breakdown Area", as well as the fact that the referee is a white woman. This echoes the often expressed 'Africanist' view that 'feminism' is a white construct hoisted on black women by their white 'sisters'. This reading is supported by the evident horror on the face of one of the few black faces in the audience, also one of the few women at the ringside. In addition, the traditional view of women as sexual objects is not challenged by Makhoba in this painting. Using iconography that would have done old school misogynists like the English pop artist Allen Jones proud, Makhoba represents the referee as virtually naked, bent over with her rear displayed to a mostly (leering) male audience. Her bow tie mocks her 'smartness', and her knee length boots conform to 'sexy' stereotypes. In similar tone the victorious fighter (who has taken on the referee's whistle) has attention drawn to her sexuality. Her breasts are emphatic and unnatural, and there is an inverted heart (suggesting that love is

not in order?) placed onto her crotch. While the iconography is explicit and the satirical tone pronounced its meaning is less so. Does this work represent empowerment (Sibisi) or is it derogatory of the emancipation of women? Once again the viewer is left to interpret according to their own perspectives on gender in/equality.

Whereas the narratives in Makhoba's work usually follow a semi-realist sense of space and time, he also produced paintings that are more 'iconic' and/or 'emblematic' in that they incorporate a range of 'symbols' into a 'design'. These works include *Uhuru*, which departs from more conventional representations of pan-African unity by bringing in hints of violence into the background. *Nkosi Sikeli Afrika* also fits into the emblematic 'category', and makes the historical connection between political violence and freedom by depicting a ballot box that is also a coffin. This style of 'emblematic' painting is not reserved for heroic subjects, as in his *In the Eyes of a Paedophile* (1996), a work that perhaps more than any other warrants comparisons with Surrealist techniques, a comparison that has often been made but which is usually inappropriate.

Makhoba was also an afro-jazz musician, playing saxophone at community events, and music surfaces as a subject in his paintings from time to time. Similarly, he also chronicled cultural activities of the trade unions that he supported (COSATU).

Another contribution of Makhoba's was to initiate art classes at his home at his own expense. The untutored artist was responsible for nurturing new artists, of whom Sibusiso Duma and Welcome Danca are the best known.

Despite his achievements Makhoba's sudden and premature death attracted little media attention, and his local community had to take a collection in order to spare him a pauper's burial. Indeed, one school of thought holds that if he had been able to afford specialist care he would still be with us today. This irony, that one of South Africa's most important painters died poor, is perhaps not unrelated to the fact that Makhoba, like many artists, maintained an ambivalent relationship with his benefactors. On one hand he enjoyed support and patronage from a number of individuals and organisations, of which the African Art Centre and the Standard Bank National Arts Festival are the best known. Yet he also appears to have distrusted many of his cultural brokers, leading to a few acrimonious incidents. The most publicised of these was when he accused the Standard Bank National Arts Festival of exploiting him, a charge vehemently denied by its chairperson, Alan Crump. Other cases escaped media attention and at least one became physical. Certainly the perception of Makhoba as a 'difficult' person, (Sibisi has noted his "turbulence"), as well as of someone who sometimes drank too much did not help his career.

Paradoxically the same 'difficult' qualities were in many instances responsible for some of his finest work. Capturing and holding your attention by voicing the unspeakable, and then leaving you to make sense of his Pandora's Box was essentially Makhoba's most outstanding achievement. Repeatedly he demonstrated that his was a very individual mind, and that he had the capacity to provocatively construct visual and conceptual scenarios like no other before him. Sibisi has noted that "[Makhoba's] style is very individualistic... [and that] Makhoba has placed a unique era on canvas in an original yet challenging and thought-provoking manner."

Friedman has also remarked on Makhoba as “idiosyncratic”. No doubt about it, Trevor Makhoba was one of a kind.

A last point: it is heartening that a Memorial Retrospective is being planned by the Durban Art Gallery. Up until this point it has been deeply regrettable that the Standard Bank catalogue remains the sole ‘authoritative’ text on Makhoba. Sibisi’s text is mutilated by its production, with at least three (out of fourteen) pages ending inconclusively with text obviously missing, and the photographs of Makhoba’s vivid images are mostly out of focus. It is hoped that one day someone will do justice to this artist in producing a comprehensive monograph, a task all the more necessary in that, while his works can be found in several public collections, much of it found its way into private collections scattered across the globe, while many others sit in humble abodes closer to home.