

Madi Phala: what place in 'our' art history?

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I am honoured and pleased to have this opportunity to share with you some of my thoughts on Madi Phala, particularly on his contribution as an artist to our art history.

I say 'our' art history, conscious that most who have included Madi in their books have placed him within the frames of very particular art histories. Madi first features in an emerging inclusive South African art history (Ricky Burnett's *Tributaries* in 1985). This is followed by his location within African art (Matsemela Manaka's *Echoes of African Art*, 1987). He appears as a township artist (Gavin Younge's *Art of the SA Townships*, 1988). He is included as a black South African (E.J. de Jagers *Images of Man: Contemporary black South African art & artists*, 1992). Ultimately where Madi has not been overlooked, including ironically *The Neglected Tradition* (Steven Sack, 1988) he has been situated within a myriad of qualified arts. A recent, possible departure from this may be found in his international debut in John Peffer's soon to be published manuscript. Judging from an excerpt which appears as a tribute to Madi on the ASAI website, Peffer appears to be primarily situating Madi between discourses of Negritude and black consciousness, whilst simultaneously acknowledging the influence of western Modernism.

It is indeed a mark of colonialism's legacy that we only drop the qualifications and talk about art and artists when 'our' artists are validated by prominent curators and exhibitions in the West. Success in Venice, Kassel or New York acts to elevate 'local' artists to 'international' standards. Yet the question of how we, as individuals and members of various 'communities' decide who are 'our' most significant artists is an important one, since it highlights the values that we uphold.

In recent years I have attempted to unpack this question of how do we recognize a successful artist? My current understanding is that there are several, what I call complementary systems of validation, and that the question of who is recognized as successful is largely determined by the value one ascribes to each of these systems. In other words if we were to attempt to evaluate Madi's success as an artist we would base our opinions on systems of validation that we ourselves attach importance to. So for example if we were to look for evidence of participation in seminal international exhibitions; or for high profile solo exhibitions; for prominent visibility in countless public and corporate collections; for monographs, bulky catalogues, or detailed studies; for multiple, high profile public commissions; or for Swiss bank accounts; then we would conclude that Madi Phala was a minor artist.

On the other hand, if we were to consider his influence on younger artists, and the deep respect with which he is viewed by many mature artists, then I think we would have a hint of his importance.

Even more so, if we were to look for a coherent body of work that compels engagement, where an artist understands the difference between size and scale, and who can command our attention because of his attention to detail, and not simply because s/he has created something so large or loud that we can't miss it, then we are getting closer to valuing Madi's contribution as an artist.

And again, if one shuts out the slick PR of our leading commercial galleries, and all who take their cue from them, and instead ask: what are the important narratives within world history and how do artists engage with these narratives, then I think we will be getting even closer to recognizing Madi's contribution to art history.

Certainly we would do so if we were to recognize decolonization as one of the central themes in recent world history. By referring to decolonization I do not limit myself to the struggles for freedom from settler rule and the rituals surrounding these. I refer to the challenges faced by the historically colonized to overcome the overwhelming baggage of colonialism and to redefine the self in a contemporary, globalized reality.

Indeed if decolonization is a central narrative, and if Africa has born the brunt of colonialism, then the artists grappling with these themes are not peripheral to world history, but are in fact integral to the discourses on modernity and contemporaneity. So what does this have to do with Madi?

Madi's work can easily be situated within a critical trajectory in art produced in Africa, i.e. the synthesis of 'indigenous' and 'imported' sources and materials. It is a theme that is often associated with the period preceding and following political independence, but in fact it represents an ongoing struggle to be of one's time.

Many of Madi's works allude, almost mystically to a bygone era. There is frequent allusion to, or evidence of, fossil-like remains, 'buried' or uncovered in the earth and in the sky, both domains commonly associated with the ancestral spirits. There are also references to a specifically African past, most strongly evident in his frequent references to cattle, rich in association with a pastoral age ruptured violently by western notions of land ownership and wealth. Yet in the uniqueness of his iconography, in its generously fantastic presence, his art projects as much into an unknown future as it recalls a distant past. Consequently many of Madi's paintings appear to occupy a transitory, temporal state, as tangible and tactile as they are evocative and elusive. These qualities introduce a sense of the epic into his works, regardless of their physical size.

While cattle represent an important recurring theme in art produced in parts of Africa, particularly Eastern and Southern Africa, what sets Madi apart from every other artist I can think of who paints cattle, is that his focus is less on the meaning of the cattle themselves than it is on the persona of the herdboys. Cattle may exist in Madi's works as a referent to notions of African culture and tradition, but he is seemingly more interested in the herdboys, somewhere between a child and a man, who acts as the

guardian of this wealth, and who may be prone to wander, even neglect his responsibilities, while he busies himself with acts of imagination far away from other members of his family or community. The Herdboy theme, Madi tells us, represents a journey of self discovery. The self clearly has a sense of community, but it is not a rigid or fixed community. Like the herdboy Madi roams the hills and valleys, absorbing lessons from a range of encounters that he alone must mediate. He emerges from these journeys with an identity that transcends those imposed on him. He arrives as Madi Phala, artist.