

Nikoali Nawa's Aesthetics of Social Reportage and Dialogues with Being-Black-in-the-World

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by Kolodi Senong

Bonang banna ba rona (see our husbands)

Ba tjheka taemane, gauta (digging for diamonds, gold)

Majwe 'ruo la heso (precious stones our wealth)

Bonang 'tjhaba sa heso (see our nation)

Makgoba re fetotswe (we're turned into slaves)

Bonang fatshe la bo ntata rona (see the land of our fathers)

Madi a rona a phalla (our blood spilling)

Matla a rona a hodisa ba ditjhabeng (our energy spent nurturing foreigners)

Ba mose (from abroad)

– Caiphus Katse Semanya, “Hauteng”

Born in 1965, Nkoali Nawa's life and work brings to mind the mournful “Hauteng (Gauteng),” written by Caiphus Semanya and sung by Miriam Makeba. Released in 1974, the song laments how, since the colonial-apartheid era, black people have worked in the mines while being accommodated in gloomy and overcrowded compounds. [2] Interestingly, Nawa asserts that “listening to Hugh Masekela's song, ‘Stimela,’ provided the ideas for most of my work, which explores the harsh realities of life in the mines,” [3] where certain people used to live like dogs in the barracks. [4] Many of these migrant workers perished in the hazardous process of enriching foreigners, leaving behind broken families, orphans and widows. Laws made leaving such contracted work for any reason whatsoever a punishable offence deserving of a jail term. [5] Nawa himself underwent the controversial and humiliating mine medical examinations [6] as a rite of passage into Goldfields' *mankalanyana* (rail-mounted locomotives) section. [7] During his two years toiling in the belly of the earth, Nawa also taught adult literacy classes in order to supplement his meagre remuneration. He then spent a further two years working as a mine security guard. Unsatisfied with his career prospects, Nawa resolved to save money to study the visual arts.

This dream was realised in 1998 when Nawa enrolled at the Free State Technikon (Central University of Technology), obtaining a B-Tech Fine Arts degree four years later.

Since graduating and embarking on a professional career as artist, his art makes visible the inhumane conditions prevalent in the volatile South African mines. In 2002, the artist had residencies at the Bag Factory Artist's Studios in Newtown, Johannesburg and later at Greatmore Art Studios in Woodstock, Cape Town. His work is collected by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), Labour Research Service, Community House and Mine Worker Development Agency, among others.

Drawing on his exposure to exploitation and brutality in the mines, Nawa's vivid paintings and charcoal drawings perform a cleansing act, thus restoring a sense of dignity. Nawa's subject matter also includes interactions between street vendors and patrons holding packed plastic bags, dejected job seekers waiting for opportunities from potential employers, toiling manual labourers or street children scavenging through heaps of rubbish for food or valuable, discarded items. Conversely, the artist's oeuvre is dominated by images of groups of people walking purposefully towards different directions and dressed in recognisable brands such as Nike, Adidas and Levi's. These deceptively pleasing compositions represent the people he sees around him, capturing the minute details of his subjects' daily life experiences. At the same time, informative titles such as *Job Seekers*, *In Search of Recycling Materials* and *Street Children* conjure up images of compromised psychosocial conditions, a result of the assault on personal and collective dignity with poverty, hunger and joblessness persisting unabatedly. In all, his images introduce pertinent questions about the contemporary existence of ordinary black people.

Being-black-in-the-world

The ensuing essay discusses the artist's visual language through a theoretical framework which psychologist Chabani Manganyi calls being-black-in-the-world. [8] In his use of the phrase, Manganyi adds the word black to stretch Martin Heidegger's concept of *Dasein*, a particular awareness of being human. [9] Manganyi's term accounts for specific experiences which are generally limited to black people in terms of their socio-cultural and economic positions. This is not to claim that black people experience being-in-the-world uniformly and distinctively from other racial groups. However, there are common denominators applicable to the experience of being black, for example, the quest to regain the personhood lost and compromised by racial discrimination.

It should also be noted that the artist's experience of being-in-the-world owes much to his birth in a township outside the gold mining city of Welkom, Free State Province. Nawa's birth into a racially segregated society, maintained through vicious laws and policing, means that anti-blackness began shaping his worldview from infancy. The young Nawa's psyche includes images of Sharpeville shootings, political banning and detention, exile and the start of the Black Consciousness Movement. Apartheid's arrogant and dreadful manufacturing of societies dictated the path of the artist's life as a human being.

The artist uses a camera to capture these ways of being-in-the-world, particularly in Welkom and Thabong. Nawa points out, "The camera is my friend, which I carry

everywhere I go.” [10] Looking at his compositions, it becomes apparent that the artist understands how the camera captures everything within its viewfinder, in contrast to how the human eye chooses what it sees. The artist explains, “In the studio, I interrupt some of these elements of the camera by choosing what to include in my compositions.” [11]

Mining histories of the present

Many of Nawa’s compositions are characterised by the skilful use of light and dark to depict figures that are juxtaposed against flat backgrounds. He adopts this dramatic device to help express the vitality of immediate time and space. This particular technique can be seen in *On His Way* (2001), a head-and-shoulders portrait that is overlaid with red and yellow washes.



On his Way, 2001. Charcoal and wash on paper, 90 cm x 70 cm. Courtesy: Tania Olsson

On His Way depicts a serious-looking male figure with a knobkerrie resting on his right shoulder. [12] The man exhibits a calm demeanour and stares straight at the viewer. The inspiration behind this work comes from how the discovery of gold gave birth to the city of Johannesburg, to which many black people migrated from different parts of southern Africa. In cahoots with the mining houses, all owned by Europeans, the

region's racist, minority governments encouraged the migration of black men to the mines through mandatory tax requirements. From the second half of the 1800s, all black men in South Africa were decreed to pay Hut tax, enforced on every shelter around their communities. [13]

Initially, these trips to the mines were undertaken on foot. Consequently, some people lost their lives on the way, while others managed to reach their destination, notwithstanding failing health and trauma. Nawa's subject in *On his Way* is depicted devoid of personal valuables except for his blanket and knobkerrie. This wooden club might be the traveller's only "hope of protecting themselves against the roaming marauders on the way." [14] A copy of the work has been exhibited on a billboard in Braamfontein, Johannesburg since 2001, as part of Cell C's Art in the City project. [15] *On his Way* pays tribute to the spirit of the people coerced into leaving their families and homes to the life-consuming Johannesburg gold mines.

As demonstrated by *On his Way*, Nawa uses art to intimately mirror life experiences of ordinary people. While he draws on a particular history, his themes also appeal to universal ideals and inalienable rights such as the quest for identity, human rights and justice. The artist talks fondly about how these ideals are expressed in music. In particular, Nawa cherishes Burning Spear's emphatic yet relaxed anthem, "Identity," which charges, "so they want I to change my identity." [16] These lyrics resonate with his aims as an artist.



Miners at the End of the Shift, 2001. Charcoal on paper, 100 cm x 150 cm. Courtesy: Nkoali Nawa

Manipulating social realism, the artist endeavors to portray the stories of the working class candidly with passion and dedication. "I lived in the mines, I know the life and exploitation, living and working conditions, low wages, I experienced them all," says Nawa. [17] He subtly combines elements of observation, memory and imagination to

relate some of the stories of generations of migrant mineworkers, for example, in *Miners at the End of the Shift* (2000). The artist depicts miners inside their cage being transported to the surface. The composition pays homage to Nawa's first shift underground as part of his in-service training for a blasting certificate with the Chamber of Mines Training College. During this time, "a harrowing rockfall accident led to one person dying and another one sustaining serious injury." [18] This training in handling explosives underground entailed the supervision of a team of miners whose well-being would soon be under Nawa's care. Later, in response to the disaster, the artist applied charcoal marks on paper to portray the relief felt by the miners inside the moving cage. These figures are shown contemplating their existence after managing to finish a shift unharmed.

Following on from *Miners at the End of the Shift*, Nawa explores the loss of identity amid the lurking dangers rampant underground. In *The Loss of Identity* (2002), Nawa portrays a mature miner wearing a safety helmet mounted with front light. The forlorn driller's left forefinger and thumb rest against the side of his face. The subject is depicted standing as if to expose their amputated middle and ring fingers — lost in a mine accident — together with a bracelet on the left wrist. This bangle is engraved with a serial number, functioning as "a source of identification for each miner because, once underground, you lose your name and assume a number in its place." [19] Resorting to his extensive knowledge of the history of mining in South Africa, the artist further claims that "generally, accidents used to be a daily occurrence in the mines and, sadly, some people had to continue working under such cruel conditions." [20]



The Loss of Identity, 2001. Charcoal on paper, 100 cm x 70 cm. Courtesy: Nkoali Nawa

The Loss of Identity is characterised by tonal variations set against a spotless background. This technique brings into focus the miner's facial expression and features such as the wrinkles of his skin. The miner's penetrating eyes reveal wisdom and knowledge borne by years of being a citizen of this unforgiving world. According to the artist, the composition probes into issues of identity and the risks involved in working underground, including the constant threat of injury and death, while the owners and shareholders become richer in the process. [21]

Nawa's aesthetics of the ordinary

Some compositions, such as the portrait, *Unnecessary Expenses* (2018) focuses on his subjects' particular experiences. This work depicts two neatly dressed figures facing each other while enjoying a meal after what looks like the burial of a loved one. Nawa's melancholic composition shows one person dressed in a long sleeve shirt and what looks like Levi's jeans. The figure in Levi's is portrayed with their back to the viewer. His right arm is still bent from bringing food to his mouth. His companion, dressed in a white shirt, tie and a dark jacket, outstretches his hand to help balance the disposable polystyrene takeaway plate that rests on his open left palm. A quiet, contemplative moment results from the two figures' focused attention. The influence of photography is recognisable from the detailed texture of the figures' skin, hair and clothes, which is countered by the dark, uniform background.



Nawa's ability to invoke meaning from the mundane act of eating through the manipulation of different charcoal marks puts this image into a unique category of visual story-telling. Reminiscent of Njabulo Ndebele's assertion that ordinary events often comprise "the active social consciousness of most people," [22] *Unnecessary Expenses* (left) details particular communal practices associated with the black existence. [23] As a result, the work becomes a distinctive and personalised account of a particular way of being-black-in-the-world. Generally, meetings at the deceased's home after the funeral formalities are important social gatherings where people catch up and network while enjoying a meal and consuming alcohol. Nawa, however, decries how contemporary funerals, among black people in particular, are turning into spectacles showing off the deceased's family's means of living. [24]

In *Showing Off Fabulous Lives II*, a group mingles after the burial ceremony of a loved one. The composition portrays finely dressed figures in the process of enjoying a meal outside what looks like a tent. Each female figure is characterised by their distinctive hairstyle. In the background, a frowning male figure wearing a hat heightens the

sombreness of the moment. Nawa, the storyteller, portrays one figure holding a plastic plate filled with food to seemingly stress what he calls “loss of culture and tradition, where mourners dress to impress without regard to societal expectations.” [25] According to the artist, people are expected to dress according to their perceived gender roles. Additionally, Nawa points out matter-of-factly that women ought to wear long dresses, cover their shoulders, heads and arms, predominantly during such sacred services as the one portrayed in *Showing Off Fabulous Lives II*. [26]



Showing Off Fabulous Lives II, 2018. Charcoal on paper, 100 cm x 100 cm. Courtesy: Nando's Creative Exchange

Nawa's figurative compositions investigate the socio-political realities of post-1994 South Africa and form part of an age-old tradition of realism. In his diptych, *Taking a Stand* (2020), a group of protesters fills up two-thirds of the surface. Nawa manages to

freeze echoes of the marchers' voices which reverberate across the picture space. Blank posters seem to invite the spectator to interpret the source of the marchers' gripes, linking contemporary protests to South Africa's pre-1994 methods. Yet, in contrast to the violent protests often displayed on our national television screens, where smoke, knobkerries and sticks in the hands of the marchers are a trend, Nawa's rally seems peaceful and contained. Nawa asserts:

The artwork represents people taking a stand against South Africa's current pandemic of gender-based violence (GBV). Since the South African government implemented a national lockdown in an attempt to arrest the spread of Covid-19, there has been a striking increase in the GBV cases. Due to our weak justice system, people are adopting alternative means of voicing out their frustrations. It is generally perceived that the punishment meted out to the perpetrators of these dastardly acts is lighter compared to the trauma suffered by the victims and their families. My artwork shines the spotlight on those raising awareness while encouraging more protection for women and children. [27]



Taking a Stand, 2020. Charcoal on paper, 100 cm x 140 cm. Courtesy: Nkoali Nawa

Typical of Nawa's compositions, *Taking a Stand* displays a dark, uniform background. This flat background compliments the flowing charcoal marks and unifies the

composition. The artist demonstrates a unique ability to accord each figure complex levels of individual personality, expertly contrasting shades and illuminations, along with the graceful folds of the figures' clothing.

Conclusion

Nawa's compositions of social reportage are suggestive of works by artists such as John Mohlankana (known as Mohl) (1903–1985), George Pemba (1912–2001) and Ernest Kole (known as Cole) (1940–1990). His art deploys established conventions of social realism, notably through his accurate depiction of socio-political themes concerning the working class, and its implicit dissent towards those who control the means of production. The artist's influences include the German Kathe Kollwitz's (1867–1945) psychologically-tortured drawings interpreting the effects of war and impoverishment. Furthermore, Nawa considers Diane Victor (1964–) and William Kentridge's (1955–) ability to fuse social reflection on current affairs inspirational, along with Vincent van Gogh's (1853–1890) expressive lines. He also counts Francisco de Goya (1746–1828) and the lithographs of Honoré Daumier (1808–1879) among some of his primary inspirations. The ever-humble Nawa is moved by how some of the artists "define simplified forms through contrasting dark and light marks while depicting lives of people, peasants and the working class." [28]

Nawa's experiences of participating in youth politics, trade unions and adult education in the mines contribute to his role as a visual story-teller. The unassuming artist engages with lived reality as perceived by the people around him. At times, his works address socio-political and cultural disputes implicit in the lives of ordinary people. His artworks probe the social and historical context of his compositions. His visual vocabulary reflects on the remnants of apartheid's spatial planning, which hauntingly reverberates within the present.

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[1] Caiphus Katse Semanya, on *A Promise* (France: Les Disques Espérance, 1974).

[2] Apartheid is but an extension of its predecessor, colonialism, in that the two systems' primary focus was the subjugation of black people. My general understanding of the term black is informed by those people who, because of their skin colour, suffer from subtle or extreme racial prejudice and identify with the people and traditions associated with the African continent.

[3] Nkoali Nawa, phone interview, 10 July 2020.

[4] Hugh Masekela, "Stimela," *I am not Afraid* (Los Angeles: Blue Thumb Records, 1974).

[5] *Roots of Apartheid: South Africa's Mining Industry*, CJPME Foundation, May 2014, 2, https://www.cjpmefoundation.org/roots_of_apartheid_south_africa_s_mining_industry

[6] Ernest Kole captured this humiliation in the 1960s photograph showing a group of young and old black men standing naked in a queue with raised hands while waiting to be examined by white medical doctors. Also, Steve Biko mentioned a similar experience during the 1976 cross-examination concerning the South African Students Organisation trial in Pretoria. Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like* (Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2004), 123–124.

[7] Nkoali Nawa, phone interview, 9 July 2020.

[8] Chabani Manganyi, *Being-Black-in-the-World* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2019), 54.

[9] This German word expresses the existential philosophical concept about the experience of life and mortality. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 8.

[10] Nawa, phone interview, 12 July 2020.

[11] Nawa, phone interview, 12 July 2020.

[12] A knobkerrie is stick with a ball at its top. It is usually carried by men as a weapon and support in South Africa.

[13] Levied on the heads of households occupied by black males, this form of taxation entrenched the system of cheap labour around South African colonial governments. Thatshisiwe Ndlovu, *Fiscal Histories of Sub-Saharan Africa: The Case of South Africa, Public Affairs Research Institute Working Paper Series 2* (July 2017): 7-10, <https://pari.org.za/fiscal-histories-sub-saharan-africa-case-south-africa-2/>

[14] Nawa, phone interview, 9 July 2020.

[15] Together with the Johannesburg Art City Competition, Cell C's Art in the City commissioned artworks from South African artists as part of the Johannesburg urban renewal plans.

[16] Burning Spear, "Identity," *The World Should Know* (Massachusetts: Heartbeat Records, 1993).

[17] Nawa, phone interview, 9 July 2020.

[18] Nawa, phone interview, 13 July 2020.

[19] Nawa, phone interview, 10 July 2020.

[20] Nawa, phone interview, 13 July 2020.

[21] Between 1984 and 2005 the South African mining sector experienced over 11 000 fatalities. "Mine Accidents and Disasters," Department of Mineral Resources and

Energy, accessed 25 July 2020, <https://www.dmr.gov.za/mine-health-and-safety/mine-accidents-and-disasters>

[22] Njabulo Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2006), 49.

[23] Steve Biko, *I Write what I Like* (Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2004), 45–46.

[24] Nawa, phone interview, 26 July 2020.

[25] Nawa, phone interview, 26 July 2020.

[26] Nawa, phone interview, 9 July 2020.

[27] Nawa quoted in “Raises awareness through art,” *Netwerk 24*, August 27, 2020, <https://www.netwerk24.com/ZA/Vista/Nuus/raises-awareness-through-art-20200826-2>

[28] Nawa, phone interview, 13 July 2020.