

Liberated Mind: a conversation with Avhashoni Mainganye

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by Nolan Stevens

At its conception, former President Thabo Mbeki's "I Am An African" speech sounded more utopian than a reflection of the times. As those words age, their echoes etch deeper into the collective consciousness of all those with ties to the continent. The truths in those words find us today living in a global age of African ascension; evident in the time where every facet of life and culture appears to be touched by the influence of the African continent.

Almost as if the once-dubbed dark continent demanded to have its light seen in as many forms as possible – from blockbuster Hollywood Afro-futurist films like *Black Panther* to cross cultural fashion collaborations, such as that of the Wafrica Collection, which heavily features African designs on the Japanese traditional kimono garment. The continent's latest culturally influential global status can be found in music and dance seen in west African Afrobeats rhythms and southern African Ngqom and Kwaito sounds amongst diaspora communities globally. There is also a rise in Afro-orientated narratives being thrust to the fore in the theatrical sphere, both on the continent as well as abroad. South African theatre is concentrating more now than in previous years on local and Afrocentric content. This includes the Market Theatre's annual Black History Month programme focusing on struggle content which is as relevant to the African-American slave experience as it is to the South African struggle. The visual arts arena is also one not to be ignored by this African chic trend. This is evident in the ever-increasing appeal of the African aesthetic, seen both in contemporary African art fairs such as the 1-54 (which has bases in both London and Marrakech), the Investec Cape Town International Art Fair as well as the FNB Joburg Art Fair's recent inclusion of the fringe, Latitudes Art Fair. They all have a vested interest in furthering artistic voices of and from the continent. So much so is the impact of the continent's appeal of late, that one may be compelled to believing that Africa's time has truly come. However, for the Limpopo based multidisciplinary visual artist, educator, poet and cultural activist, Avhashoni Mainganye, Africa and its diverse cultural heritage has never *not* been in vogue. I stole a few minutes of this artist's time to discover what lies beneath this his process, and practice.

Nolan Stevens: I guess the best place to start is at the beginning. Having started your artistic career at the now iconic Rorke's Drift Arts and Crafts Centre, how would you say that experience shaped the artist you are today?

Avhashoni Masinganye: I think that experience paved my way, because there were things that I learnt there that I hadn't learnt anywhere else. Today, I am a watercolourist and a printmaker because of that experience. Also, Rorke's Drift was my first art outing, from the rural Venda to the rural KwaZulu-Natal. The cultural differences of Venda and KwaZulu-Natal and also meeting people from three of the big cities – Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town – made it all quite an experience for me. I think I wanted to prove myself and say, although I am from the small Venda tribe, I would stand out and be counted as one of the best. That was quite an experience.

NS: Has the work of any artist influenced the direction of your creative path?

AM: Yes, I think because I am a person who has always believed in art education. I met my mentor Theo Gerber in France. He said, "Talent alone doesn't make one an artist." I think, having gone through different institutions and having worked with different people, I think in a way that that has shaped and moulded me into who I am now. It's through art that I have been given opportunities to travel the world. I think that there are some artists who have never been on a plane, and I have been traveling all the time – learning through different experiences by meeting different people and being exposed to different cultures. This is all through art. Yes, but Gerber was the man who wanted me in France when I went for the first time. I was not even on the list for the people who were going to France but, when he went to Soweto and saw my work, he said, "You are definitely in." I was told by the writer Zakes Mda that, as he was passing on, he was calling my name. I mean, that's quite an experience. I mean, no one, not even a family member has called my name as he or she was passing on.

NS: That leads me onto something that I also find interesting about your career. It's how you've sought to incorporate your love for literature in both the written and spoken formats.

AM: You know, it's very interesting, because I'm not in the academic world, but I am always surrounded by books. I was once asked where I get my inspiration from. I ended up saying, "From books, from things that I read from books, from traveling." Books influence so many different things around me.

NS: That's so interesting, because I am also a book-lover. I probably get it from my mum who is a writer. I mention this because I still get a lot of people who say to me that it isn't the African way to read so many books.

AM: You know, maybe when they say, it's not the African way, this is because we have just graduated from the oral tradition of storytelling. I am not saying that my work is completely or directly influenced by literature. The influences are there in a way. You know, when you read, sometimes there are things that remain because you are so close

to the story. But that doesn't deny that I'm always surrounded by books, and it is very inspiring.

NS: Could you elaborate on why you decided, in those early days when you performed some of your writings in public, to express this creative side of yourself in your mother-tongue of Tshivenda instead of the expected English language?

AM: Well, sometimes this depends on your audience. I'm not very much of a public speaker. I was invited by Benedict College in the US, and they asked me to do some storytelling. Can you imagine translating the Venda stories into English? Stories that we grew up listening to in our indigenous language and, all of a sudden, I had to turn them into English. They eventually said, "Okay, can you say something in your own language?" So I had to give that to them, even though I knew that they couldn't understand a word, but they just wanted to get the originality of it. As I say, it depends on the public or the event. It's just that, when it comes to literature, I am not in the public arena, but I have done a lot of poetry both in English and in my language of Tshivenda. Have you by any means come across the names Ramphele or Madingoane? Madingoane was a township poet around Soweto. He wrote a poem called "Africa My Beginning, Africa My Ending." I'm just mentioning his name because, when people were liking or taking Mzwakhe Mbuli as an icon, some of us who are a little bit older were aware of poets like Ramphele Mamphela and Ingoapele Madingoane who became very popular in the 1970s before Mzwakhe. He was one of the people who influenced a lot of young poets. In the US, we can talk of The Last Poets in that same light.

NS: Therein lies the subject I would like to uncover. I get the feeling more and more lately that we, as Africans, are becoming less afraid of creating and presenting what is expected of us by the western world and a lot more comfortable with telling our own truths in the way we feel most comfortable with. Would you agree?

AM: You know, when it comes to today, we have so much choice. You like those who can speak French, can express themselves in that language, although at the same time being Africans. With us, unfortunately, we are limited to our vernacular languages and quite often with English being our second or third language. Which seems officially like it's our first language, but in actual fact, it's not.

NS: That actually reminds me of something that John Kani once said during an opening address about the productions showcased at the Market Theatre last year: "When I am asked why we don't provide subtitles for the plays we put on in our vernacular languages here, I simply say, you would not ask a French playwright to provide subtitles to a production you see in Paris." Which, I thought, is so powerful, because we are so used to playing into the western hands, you know. This same mindset appears to have awakened in you at an early age. What was this attributed to?

AM: There's a Kenyan professor, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, he was writing in English all the time, but the time he wrote in his Kikuyu language, he made more sales. He was also criticised at some point for writing in his vernacular language, but in the end it worked

for him because he had more following in his vernacular language. This is a literary giant; he is now based in the US. The time he came here, tears rolled down my cheeks because, I thought to myself, how lucky I am to meet this man personally. It was very emotional when I met him. These are some of the African giants that we are losing to the west.

NS: Would it be fair to say that this also contributed to your interest in teaching and passing on your knowledge to younger generations?

AM: Through all my life, I've been doing this. When I say through all, I'm referring to the time when I was at the Funda Centre in the mid-1980s. There were people who would come and take classes, though it was not formal. Somebody once said, "You know, you guys come here from all over the country to Joburg and, once you are here, you get stuck. Why don't you go back home and start something?" I think I'm one of the few people to heed that call and say, why don't I go back to my own community and do something? I think, so far, I've been twice to the US to teach. But, you know, home is home. I could have stayed in Joburg like the rest. But I just felt like this place needs me. So, yes, I would say it is something that I've been doing throughout my art life. Teaching the youth. Not only the youth, but anyone who availed themselves to me.

NS: Your answer has actually inspired a question, in reaction to what you said about "home is home." Even though you taught in the States, this made me think of Bra Hugh Masekela and his legendary meeting with Miles Davis. This had happened when Bra Hugh had just gotten to the states and heard that Miles was going to be playing at a jazz club. He had planned that that was going to be his big break and that he would show him what he could do. After finding him and playing him a jazz standard, Miles then said, "Don't play this American stuff to us, we know this stuff. Go back to Africa and play that African stuff." He obviously didn't use the word 'stuff,' but if it wasn't for that encounter, I wonder if we would have gotten the Hugh Masekela we knew.

AM: It's true. I mean, most of us knew our guru. The great black watercolourist Durant Sihlali, when he went to Nice, the southern part of France, he wanted to prove that he was the best watercolourist. He told me that someone told him that they didn't see anything African in what he was doing and said, "I want to see you doing something African, something from the heart." He came back home, and there was a different Durant Sihlali all together. These are challenges that come quite often. Sometimes, you try to adapt, especially when you are exposed to the world, because it's so easy for you to be influenced and lose your identity. I mean, I always find that the type of art that I am doing nowadays is influenced by mural painting, be it Ndebele, Venda, or Shangaan. This is a fading tradition where women back home would paint their homes to impress their returning migrant worker husbands, but now, that tradition is fading away. Even in cultures like the Zulu culture, you would know that there is a girl ready to get married because of the mural painting that they would put on that house. I don't know why, but we have been losing a lot generally.

NS: Very true. I was recently exposed to an artist named Erla S. Haraldsdottir, who came on residency from Iceland. She and her husband were both very interested in Ndebele culture, with the husband doing his PhD in Ndebele culture, and she was incorporating Ndebele patterns into her art. I happened to be there when she presented her work to artists at the Bag Factory Studio in Johannesburg. I remember afterwards that a lot of us were hesitant about this presentation because of the way African culture has been stolen or appropriated in past and recent history. She was really grilled about her intentions and motives and because it seemed at the time like she was implanting Ndebele culture into her own culture.

AM: I mean, the public out there is very sensitive, even choosy, even in music. In music, I like what Johnny Clegg did, because that was from the heart. I was so privileged to take him around Venda as a tour guide. I always remember when I was in Paris in 1990, and there was this very dark-skinned guy I met. When I asked him where in Africa he came from, he said, "I'm not an African, I'm French." I started to think of Johnny Clegg back home and thought, 'You know, he is an African. He is white, but he's an African.' At the end of the day, it's all about culture and how you represent the culture, it's not only about the colour. These are the kinds of things that some of us wrestle with every day, when we think that Africa can be a home for all. I think there still is so much for all of us to learn in this world.

NS: Earlier, you spoke about the collaboration that happens when teaching. I would like to know how that has informed your creative understanding of art, people and life in general?

AM: I think I wouldn't say I have done much in terms of collaboration, but what I've been doing is saying, "Make art with me." Or, "Let's go along together," allowing them to do their own thing while I do my own thing. Encouraging people to be observant and work from life before I can release them into the world.

NS: How would such – shall we call them partnerships instead of collaborations – reach wider audiences if they are started in isolated areas, like Venda for example?

AM: Well, what I've been doing is encouraging students to apply for residencies in spaces like Greatmore Studios, Bag Factory Studios and so forth. This area is known for wood sculpture. We are a community of wood carvers. Very few people are into two-dimensional art. I think the difference is that, when it comes to sculpture, you can grow up with an uncle or brother who is a carver, but when it comes to two-dimensional art, you need some formal training. It's like a more urban-based kind of art.

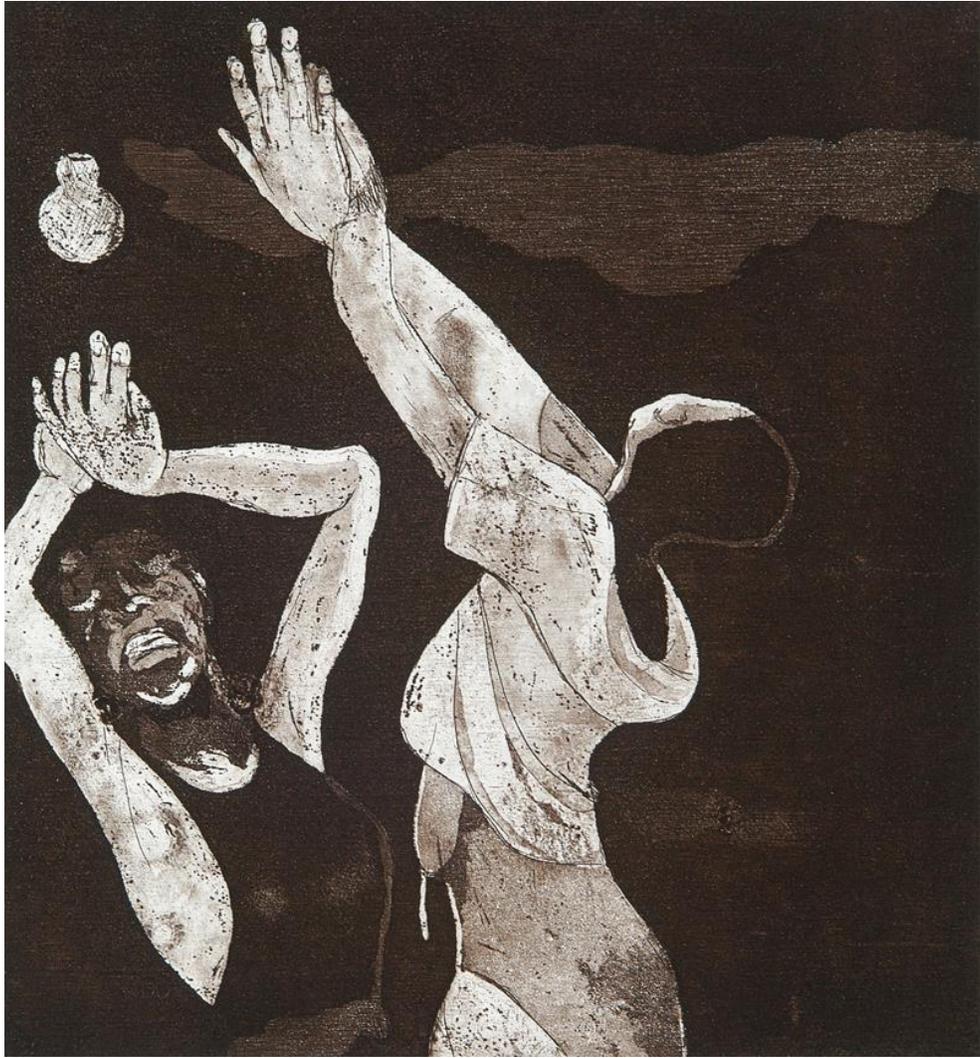
NS: Can you tell us a little about the connection you had with your father, and if at all the connection between yourself and your children are similar?

AM: I love that. I thought you weren't going to touch on that. I had even forgotten to mention that part, because people are not aware that both my father and my aunt were traditional healers. At home, I am the chosen one, I am the one who should be carrying

the tradition. But, you know, I've been asking myself, "Why me?" because I'm the youngest in my family. You know, once I was stopped by an elder in Pretoria who said, "You are working hard, but you don't make any money." I said, "Wow, how do you know that?" I even thought maybe it's someone who is trying to rob me. He said, "No, do you know where your grandfather's grave is?" I said, "No." He ended up saying, "Go and find out where your grandfather's grave is." He quickly said, "Not your father. Your grandfather." At home, they told me where it was, and it happened to be almost in the same vicinity where I was trying to develop something. It was such a coincidence, like I was being guided by the same spirit. I grew up with very strong dreams, and most of them would come true. To the extent that every morning, after having a strong dream, I would tell someone so that, when it happens, they say, "Ja, you did mention that." Spirituality is something that is strong within the family. We had less people being absorbed into the Christian religion. It's a pity that people don't want to talk openly about it. But these practices are happening. I've taken people to traditional healers on tours, and sometimes I'd have the traditional healer say the kind of job that I'm doing here should be you, meaning me, I should be you doing it. So, yes, I am aware of my spiritual connections.

NS: You just spoke of the spiritual connection you had with your father, leading up to your grandfather, and I'm thinking of the etching you did, *Daughters of the Earth*. When I look at that work, my interpretation is of the two girls reaching up for a calabash which, to me, symbolises culture and spirituality and trying to keep it from falling.

AM: You know, that work was conceived in France. Ja, the initial work was started there. Then it was finished at David Krut in Joburg. That work is very connected to what we are talking about, because that calabash is a vessel to carry medicine. Again, I use the female figure, because there's this very strong spiritual connection between women and the spirit.



Daughters of the Earth I, 2004. Etching on paper, 41 x 36 cm. Courtesy: Avhashoni Mainganye

NS: Because I know you have a daughter, that work made me wonder if the relationship you had with your father and your spirituality and that connection you have with being a healer is something that you possibly share with your child?

AM: Ja, there is this thing that happens with my daughter and a bird. This bird would always hover around her and enter the kitchen and fly over her head. One day, I said, "No, there must be something about this bird." She then told me that this bird has been following her even from primary school; it would follow her until she entered the classroom. One day, I said to her, "It looks like it's no longer following you," and she said, "It followed me the day I wrote Psychology, and you'll see I'll get a distinction." Come the day of the results, it was a distinction. I'm mentioning this because it's proof of that connection again. Nehanda [1] was a very strong figure in the Zimbabwean history so, my daughter having that name, is like it has triggered something. It's like the spirit of Nehanda or our family spirit is following her in a way. We, as Vendas, are very connected to the Shonas, especially the Karanga tribe.

NS: There is something quaint and modern about your work despite your cultural thematic focus. Would you agree with this assessment? If so, what is the cause of this?

AM: I think the modern element [comes] from as early as my Rorke's Drift time. I fell in love with Dadaism and Surrealism, maybe as a form of protest, I don't know. This brought me closer to the works of Salvador Dalí and a lot of European Surrealists. So, I think the Modernism in my art was triggered by that. Also, like I said, when you travel and you read a lot, it's very easy to be influenced. However, a lot of the elements we regard as being European elements are African elements that have been incorporated into European culture.

NS: Your art work also veers between naturalism, the abstract and, at times, even the absurd. Are you challenging convention?

AM: I think this is just the way I work, because being versatile is special to me. The time I left watercolour painting, I felt like I was on top of it. For some reason, I left it because I felt like it was becoming too soft for me. That's when I started to develop my oil painting in a very surrealistic way. Things come very naturally to me. If I don't feel it, I won't do it. Even if I am commissioned with a lot of money, if it doesn't speak to me, I won't do it. I wrestle with my material to the extent that, when I worked with metal when I was studying through the University of South Africa (UNISA), I would think, I want to maintain this rust, but how do I do that without making it rust further? Until I discovered that applying linseed oil stops the rust. Whether metal, wood or stone, all these materials I wrestle with in my own way when I'm creating. This gives me freedom in knowing I am not confined into a certain way of doing things.

NS: Speaking of your tendencies to wrestle with your mediums, what is it that abstraction allows for in your work that perhaps figurative forms wouldn't?

AM: That's what I'm doing right now: abstraction, but in pastels. You know, there's a work I took to Sanlam the year before last called *Le Monde*. It was very interesting exhibiting this work in Santa Fe. I read through the visitor's book. At the end, one of the ladies wrote: "In the past ten years of coming to this gallery I've never seen anything like this." Something that I don't talk about so much is the other artist that I like a lot, this is the painter Judith Mason. Some of the effects that I used on *Le Monde* are some of the effects that I picked up from Judith Mason. Like the splashing of water with spray paint to create texture.



Le Monde, 2017. Oil on canvas. Courtesy: Avhashoni Mainganye

NS: It's great that you would mention *Le Monde*, because that is one of my favourite works of yours, after seeing you speak about it in a YouTube video. I especially enjoyed how you would incorporate elements of your photography in it with the painted photographs of the eclipse. Of course, we know that the moon has a spiritual significance to the Venda people. Can you speak a bit more on your relationship with myth in your work?

AM: Some of these things just come naturally. Again, I remember when I was in Chile, and a local asked me at an installation art show about Syria if this is how white artists in South Africa work. I mentioned Judith, and I said Judith is one South African painter who is white but still has that spirit. I later told her this, and she said, "I wish you had said this to the media." Like I have said, some of these things come naturally. The time when I was painting in France, there were people who would say, "No, this is mysticism." But you know, though my paintings are abstract, you can still pick up some mystic figures, like in my work *Voice of the Master*.



Voice of the Master. Oil on canvas. Courtesy: Avhashoni Mainganye

NS: How do you relate to your Africanness as an artist, and do you consider yourself an African artist?

AM: I think the term is too defining. At the same time, I would like to [call myself an African artist]. But not really. If there is something like typical African art, it's something that we, here down south, don't feel so much. I think the world has dictated that the work that comes from central Africa or western Africa is more 'African' than what we do here. I say this because South Africa is like a cultural melting pot, in the sense that we are exposed to the whole world. In a way, we have lost our individual identity. So, I cannot say that my work is typically African. There will be a few elements thrown in here and there, but it isn't the defining factor.

NS: Do art fairs focus increasingly on art and culture production from Africa and the diaspora?

AM: I mostly exhibit in places like Santa Fe, where I do see what you would call typical African art. I do know I see a lot of African art in France and in Switzerland also, and some of it is hosted in people's houses. There are people who have big collections of African art in their homes.

NS: Have you personally noticed any differences to your reception in the countries you've travelled in when people realise that you are from the continent?

AM: I think you start to realise how much people respect the Africanness in your art when you travel somewhere else. At home, it's still regarded as craft, but that side, it's regarded as art. This also gives you courage or pride, seeing that people can go to the extent of having such a big collection of work of artists that we as Africans are not aware of. There are families outside who take a lot of pride in having these collections. you know.

NS: Something else that has stood out for me in your work is that there seems to be a way that you make the medium you choose to work in favour your particular style. Can you speak on this?

AM: Yes, that comes close to what I was saying before about how I push my art. I try to put as much pressure [on my process], not just brushing it or touching the surface, but I try to go deep into it. Right now, stone carving is new to me, so I consulted someone recently who sells granite, just to understand every aspect of the medium, from its formation to its geographical location. That's just what I do to try to understand my media. So then, when I wrestle with it, I deal with it from within. The other media that people are not really aware of that I use is the medium of photography. I used to move around with my camera in Soweto documenting events from 1985–1989. I once showed a few photographs during the Sasol Art Award, and I remember someone saying, "What do you know about photography?" They didn't even know that I started with the traditional black and white photography, not with digital. Not to say that I've covered all the ground, but I have done so much in art.

NS: Like you've said, you have been creating art for a long time. Has the shift in technology and modern-day art productivity influenced your artistic process in a positive or negative way so far?

AM: Even if we look at this in terms of photography, the only change is that I have switched over to digital from manual film type of photography. I think, because I am still very old fashioned, I am still wrestling with the traditional mediums and ways of doing things. I still do graphics the manual way and still using the printing press manually. Maybe this is just because of my age, because most of the youth now are doing installations, and I get the feeling that they are moving fast with time. I feel that I haven't exhausted much of what I have been doing. I am yet to feel like I have totally arrived. I like the journey more than arriving at the destination.

NS: What one thing do you think is needed to improve the arts industry in South Africa?

AM: Well, I would say the marketing, because people are producing out there. Maybe I should talk from my own experience. I am not expected to be dealing with the marketing part of things, but whenever I get a platform, you'll hear one of the officials saying, "You guys," meaning 'us.' As artists, you must learn how to market yourselves. What I always say to that is, no, our duty is to produce good quality work. Someone has to take over and give himself or herself a job. Our duty in this business is to put all the effort into making sure the quality of the work is high.

NS: Speaking about the business side of the arts, what do you feel some of the key issues are going forward for artists from emerging art sectors, particularly for those who have experienced the art market spotlight?

AM: I would still say that, even when you are a beginner, make sure that the quality of your work can attract the buyers, especially because the field is very competitive. To attract the Everard Reads or Goodman Gallerys of this world, you have to be of some standard. I don't believe you can afford to be scratching the surface by not dedicating everything to your practice.

NS: That is true. At the same time, I've noticed that you have an Instagram account that would suggest that you are at least attempting to play the 'art game' of this era, not so?

AM: Yeah, well, my son is the one responsible for that, because he is into graphics and so on. I'm still very old fashioned. Sometimes, it becomes like a job even to go onto Facebook and so on. I do try to make some time for these things late in the afternoon. I use most of my day to help me to produce art instead.

NS: Lastly, what projects can we look forward to seeing from you this year, in 2020, and beyond?

AM: Something very interesting, especially if you know Mbongeni Buthelezi, the plastic artist. If you have noticed, his plastic works are two-dimensional, right? So, what I've been doing now is something similar. I didn't want to repeat what Mbongeni is doing, because he is the master of plastic painting. So, I've been melting plastics but making sculptures, making three-dimensional works. That's something that is still new. I'm still developing it. I don't yet know where this process will take me, but I'm quite enjoying the newness of this. The public may be able to see these as soon as next year when I have an exhibition.

If there is anything to gain from engaging in conversation with Avhashoni Mainganye it is that his life experience makes it clear that Africanness and similar concepts such as Afrocentricity can never be static. As Mbeki demonstrated in the inauguration of the South African Constitution address in 1996, being African is an ever-evolving construct. This is an ideal reflected in the creativity produced by Avhashoni Mainganye. One does wonder what has taken the world so long to openly admit that yes, we as Africans, in all our complexities, are truly great. Engaging with creative minds such as that of Mainganye is proof of that.

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Notes

[1] Nehanda is a Shona spirit who uses women as her mediums. One well-known medium of Nehanda was Charwe, who helped lead the Chimurenga (war of liberation) against the British settlers in Mashonaland (now Zimbabwe) in 1896.

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