

THE LIFE & WORK OF johannes phokela

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SOWETO-BORN
**JOHANNES
PHOKELA** IS A
WIDELY ACCLAIMED
ARTIST, BOTH IN
SOUTH AFRICA AND
ABROAD.

HIS LATEST
EXHIBITION, *I LIKE
MY NEIGHBOURS*,
FEATURES A BODY OF
NEW WORK, AS WELL
AS RECENT WORKS
FROM A NUMBER OF
PRIVATE AND PUBLIC
COLLECTIONS.



Johannes Phokela, *As the Old Ones Sing, so the Young Ones Pipe*, 1998. Oil on canvas, 160 x 198 cm. Collection: Iziko South African National Gallery

Johannes Phokela is renowned for his exquisitely painted manipulations of iconic images by European Old Masters, particularly those from the seventeenth century, like Rubens, Van Dyck, Breugel, Jacob de Gheyn and Caravaggio. "Most of my work," says Phokela, "is a contemporary take on Old Dutch and Flemish Masters where I take on what is perceived to be Europe's grandiose history of art as a medium to convey values and ideals represented within a global context of cultural elitism" (Dlamini, 2006).

One striking feature of Phokela's satirical work is his use of a red nose, which appears every now and again in both his paintings and sculptures. He was inspired to use this clown-like nose after he had acquired one in the UK from the charity organisation, Comic Relief. But the nose did not fit his African physiognomy. "At first," he says, "I thought I must have bought the wrong size, but in the end I realised that they were not really made for my type of nose" (Haines, 2002).

The red nose can be seen in works like the theatrical *Pantomime Mortal Quiz* (2001), from a series of works based on Jacob de Gheyn's drawing, *Allegory on the Equality of all Mankind in Death* (1599), in the British Museum. In Phokela's work the nose is fixed to two

EXHIBITION
**I LIKE MY
NEIGHBOURS**
Standard Bank Gallery
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"MOST OF
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skulls, one held by a figure and the other by a cherub. It also appears in a set of sculptures, *Gold, Silver, Bronze Medals* (2008), in which the nose is nailed to three skulls. These sculptures are made of bronze but are coloured gold, silver and bronze to represent currency, wealth and value respectively. The red noses refer to Red Nose Day, the British charity event held in aid of underdeveloped countries. Phokela has said that the use of the red nose is "an entertaining and divergent way of bringing attention to those countries burdened by economic hardship" (Haines, 2002). See images overleaf.

Another recurring image in Phokela's work is a boy soldier holding an AK47 rifle, symbol of conflict and political violence in Africa. He is seen in works like *Pantomime Mortal Quiz* (*Yellow*), *Flip Flop Boys* (2005), *Alien* (2006) and *Regarding Fontana Spatial Concept II* (*White*), from the triptych, *Regarding Fontana: Spatial Concept I, II, III*.

The boy soldier, sometimes adorned with the red nose, is drawn from Phokela's collection of newspaper cuttings of the media's depiction of war and slave children. While Phokela's work often evades simple, clear-cut meaning, the boy soldier tells of Phokela's penchant for including images of contemporary Africa into his work as part of his critique of colonialism and its legacy, and re-interpretation of the works of seventeenth-century European Old Masters. What he is interested in, he says, is "exploring the implications of that period from history on the present day" (Haines, 2006).

By inserting the boy soldier into his renderings of Old Master works, Phokela connects contemporary Africa with historical Europe. Contemporary Africa is also represented in his work through the use of "cuts and stitches," apparent slashes in the canvas through which African figures appear, or from which they burst. This can be seen in a work like *Regarding Fontana Spatial Concept*



Triptych, *Regarding Fontana: Spatial Concept I, II, III* (2005)



II (*White*), where the boy with AK47 emerges from one of these apparent slashes.

This strategy developed after Phokela, who was living in London, visited South Africa on a number of occasions during the 1980s and 1990s, at a time when the country was wracked by political violence in

the townships.

Besides the red nose and boy soldier, Phokela also incorporates other images disconnected from the original Old Master works – like a bunch of bananas, or a credit card, as in the case of another striking work, *Ecstasy of Medusa* (*Trustafarian*) (2002). His inclusion

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of these oddities, all of which are out of place and time, is designed to bring new meanings to the original source material through "a shameless re-branding with contemporary hindsight" (Maart, 2006).

A further intriguing feature of Phokela's work is his use of frames and compartments, usually white and geometric, to disrupt his beautifully painted and sumptuous re-workings of Old Master works, as seen in *Chocolat* (2005), for example. These frames serve to isolate sections of the painting, creating particular focuses within the work. "The grid," says Phokela, "gives another dimension to the work; it is a device to challenge the viewer's perception of the image and form beneath. It is intended to have an effect like an ornamental frame surrounding a mirror, or a glass pane mounting a picture... You have to regard it as part of the work, just like the traditional frame of a painting... It gives the work a sort of focal point that can stimulate the viewer's reaction" (Haines, 2002).

Phokela's work is as much an inquiry into European art history as it is an exploration of contemporary politics, economy, culture and life in the former colonies. Curator Brenton Maart has said, "Phokela's work may... be viewed as an act of insurgency against today's remainders of European colonial action, being and thought. It may be possible that, through his references, Phokela underlines his key intention: to question the enduring system of colonial values that perpetuate themselves through symbols, signs and icons" (Maart, 2006). As such, Phokela adds considerable value to the decolonisation project.

A FURTHER INTRIGUING
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TOP LEFT: Johannes Phokela, *Ecstasy of Medusa (Trustafarian)*, 2002. Oil on canvas, 152 x 122 cm. Collection: Gordon Schachat Collection



MIDDLE LEFT: Johannes Phokela, *Flip Flop Boys*, 2005. Mixed media on paper, 90 x 71 cm. Collection: Dr Oupa Morare



BOTTOM LEFT: Johannes Phokela, *Chocolat*, 2005. Oil on canvas, 198 x 168 cm. Collection: Johannesburg Art Gallery

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biography JOHANNES PHOKELA

Johannes Phokela was born in Soweto in 1966. While in high school he attended art classes at the Open School in Johannesburg. He subsequently studied at the Federated Union of Black Artists, or FUBA (1983-86), also in Johannesburg, where he completed a two-year course. There his mentor was South African art icon, Durant Sihlali. Phokela completed his studies in London, at the Royal College of Art (1991-93); Camberwell College of Art (1988-91); and St. Martin's College of Art (1987-88).

Since rising to fame abroad, Phokela has exhibited in South Africa on quite a few occasions, such as on the second Johannesburg Biennale in 1997. His 2006 solo exhibition at the Johannesburg Art Gallery, *Translation*, was held in honour of his former mentor, Sihlali.

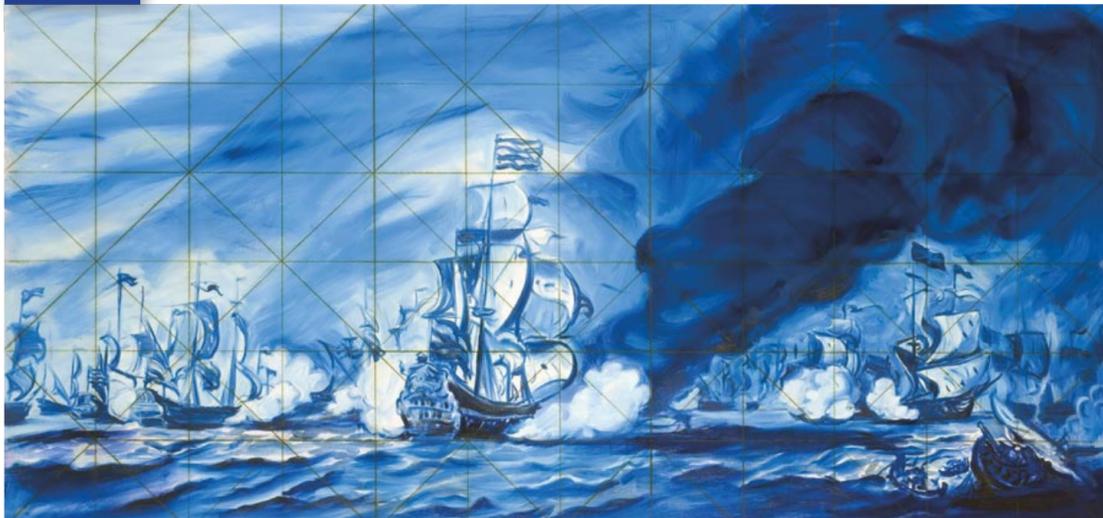
In 2007 he held another solo show, *Compendium*, at the KZNSA Gallery in Durban. He has also held solo exhibitions at Gallery MOMO in Johannesburg – *Imagine where you'll be* in 2005 and *Age of Enlightenment* in 2003.

Phokela is a regular participant in art workshops and residencies across the world and has received a number of awards, including the John Moores Painting Prize through the Walker Art Gallery (Liverpool, UK), the BP National Gallery Portrait Award (London), and the highly prestigious Decibel Artist's Award (UK).

He is represented in major public collections, such as the National Museum of African Art at the Smithsonian in Washington; Standard Bank Corporate Collection, Johannesburg; Gasworks Art Studios, London; Delfino Studio Trust, London; Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town; UNISA art collection, Pretoria; BHP Billiton, Johannesburg; and the Gordon Schachat Collection, South Africa. He is also represented in the collection of the South African High Commission in London.

In 2006, as a contribution to the *Sunday Times* Heritage Project, Phokela completed a memorial in honour of youth leader, Tsietisi Mashinini, in White City, Jabavu, Johannesburg.

Along with artists of the calibre of William Kentridge, David Golblatt, Santu Mofokeng and Zwelethu Mthethwa, Phokela is one of a number of artists who have spearheaded South Africa's re-emergence on the international art stage after the years of isolation under apartheid. Phokela lives in London and Johannesburg and is represented by Gallery MOMO in Johannesburg.



Johannes Phokela, *Testing Equipment*, 2005. Oil on canvas, 287.5 x 223.5 cm. Collection: Gordon Schachat Collection

FACT FILE CHIAROSCURO

This is an Italian term meaning 'bright-dark.' It refers to a style of painting that produces dramatic effects through the use of strong contrasts of light and shade to model forms. Figures and objects are often set against a dark background and lit by a raking light that casts powerful shadows. Many painters of the chiaroscuro style tended to use down-to-earth, realistic colours. The style was pioneered in Italy by Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), but is associated mostly with the Baroque period, particularly with the paintings of Michelangelo da Caravaggio (1571-1610). Its effects were seen elsewhere in Europe, such as in the work of Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-69).



Peter Paul Rubens *Feast of Venus*, c.1630-40. Oil on canvas



Johannes Phokela *Percussion Piece on Mount Serious* (1997). Oil on canvas

- When Phokela selected a section of *Feast of Venus* to reproduce for *Percussion Piece on Mount Serious* what do you think made him choose the erotic group of cavorting figures on the left?
- Why do you think Phokela refers to the place, 'on Mount Serious,' in the title of the work when he actually shows us nothing of this or any other setting?
- In the background of *Percussion Piece on Mount Serious* Phokela has used some features of the chiaroscuro style, especially the dark surroundings for the figures. What effect does this give his work?
- What other alterations has Phokela made to the Rubens group in this work?

TRY OUT Find another painting by one of the Old Masters. How could you 'interfere' with it to create commentary on the world you know? Brainstorm this with your friends, write a list of ideas in your visual diary and start a new series of artworks.

GLOSSARY WORD

SYMBOL

A FORM OR IMAGE THAT REPRESENTS SOMETHING ELSE, BEYOND ITS IMMEDIATE MEANING.



Jacob de Gheyn I, *Allegory on the Equality of all Mankind in Death*, 1599. Pen and ink. Above the head of the boy blowing bubbles are the words 'Homo bulla', meaning 'Man is as a soap bubble.' At the top of the tent is a Latin inscription that means 'Death makes the sceptre and spade equal.' The central background scene shows the Last Judgement.



Johannes Phokela, *Gold, Silver, Bronze Medals (Gold)*, 2006. Bronze, 14 x 13 x 20 cm. Collection: the artist

FACT FILE VANITAS SYMBOLS

Symbolic objects in *vanitas* paintings were popular in Holland and elsewhere in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These objects were incorporated into paintings to add complexity and mystery to a painting: owls commonly symbolised death, lamps signified life, and bubbles stood for the transience of human life, for example. One of the most popular images was the skull, often used as a *vanitas* image (or else rotten fruit, an empty cup or a burnt-out candle), which was meant to remind viewers that they were mere mortals. In a portrait painting, for example, a skull might be placed next to the likeness of the sitter to emphasise the point. Some artists took their imagery from 'emblem books', or cata-



Jacob (Jacques) de Gheyn I, *Vanitas still life*, (1603). Oil on wood

logues of symbolic objects, each of which had a motto belonging to it. Artists from the De Gheyns, to Frans Hals, and to Paul Cezanne (1839-1906) have made *vanitas* paintings using skull symbols.

being on set

- The *Pantomime Act* series is a group of works Phokela based on Jacob de Gheyn's *Allegory on the Equality of all Mankind in Death*. Study the different objects and figures in De Gheyn's allegory. What do you think the artist was warning his viewers about?
- Now compare De Gheyn's work with Phokela's *Pantomime Mortal Quiz (Yellow)*, which is a close copy of it but includes an African child dressed in a Mickey Mouse T-shirt. What else has Phokela changed in the work? What has he kept the same?

TRY OUT

Phokela cuts out media pictures about war and slave children, which he uses as source material for his work. If you were to collect pictures from the media, what topics would you choose? Start a collection of clippings in your visual diary. How many different art ideas can you develop from these? Make some notes and sketches.

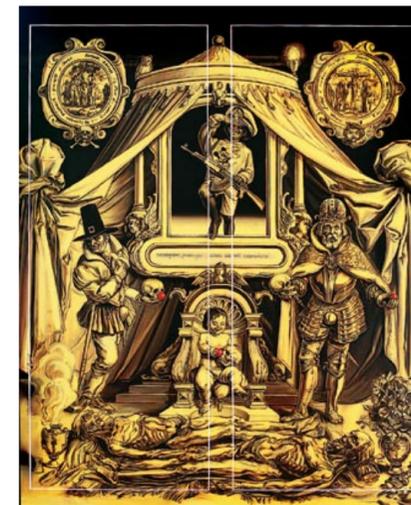
symbols and skulls

Phokela has made a number of artworks that draw on an interest in traditional *vanitas* images and ideas. Read the fact file on VANITAS SYMBOLS and try to identify some of these works.

- Look at the sculpture *Gold, Silver, Bronze Medals (Gold)*. Why do you think Phokela has cast the skull in these metals? Why do you think he refers to these works as 'medals'?
- How has Phokela developed his imagery to say more about wealth, trade or power? What else does this imagery tell you?



Jacob de Gheyn I, *Allegory on the Equality of all Mankind in Death*, 1599. Pen and ink. Above the head of the boy blowing bubbles are the words 'Homo bulla', meaning 'Man is as a soap bubble.' At the top of the tent is a Latin inscription that means 'Death makes the sceptre and spade equal.' The central background scene shows the Last Judgement.



Johannes Phokela, *Pantomime Mortal Quiz (Yellow)*, 2001. Oil on canvas, 198 x 168 cm. Private collection

- What things in the work remind us that we are mortal and frail?
- Why do you think Phokela used the idea of a pantomime in his title?
- Read about Red Nose Day in our introduction to Johannes Phokela. How do the red noses make you feel about the figures in some of his works?
- How does the red nose make you feel about the charity organisation, Comic Relief, and other charities supporting African causes?
- How much of Africa seems to appear in Phokela's works? What is left out? What things make you think of Europe?

THINKING ABOUT johannes phokela

JOHANNES PHOKELA'S ARTWORKS ARE AN EXCITING OPPORTUNITY FOR US TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT CONTEMPORARY AND HISTORICAL ART. A GOOD PLACE TO BEGIN IS BY LOOKING AT THE WAY THE ARTIST DEALS WITH THE HISTORY OF EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA.

power and history

It was during the seventeenth century that Dutch settlers arrived at the Cape. This period, also known as the Dutch Golden Age, produced a succession of celebrated works by Old Master painters. In many of his artworks Johannes Phokela tackles the coinciding of these events – the colonisation of Africa and Dutch artistic success.

- One of Phokela's paintings that deals with this era is *Testing Equipment* (above). What striking things about the work can you list? Think about colour, composition, line, paintwork and imagery.
- Why do you think the artist decided to paint this work as a blue monochrome painting?
- What 'equipment' do you think is being 'tested' here?
- What else do you think the voyagers were testing?
- What things seem historical about this artwork and what things seem contemporary?

messing with mythology

Phokela's interest in figure painting by the European Old Masters led him to make *Percussion Piece on Mount Serious*, a work inspired by Peter Paul Rubens's mythological painting, *Feast of Venus*. Rubens's work is a Baroque scene: swirling forms, partially dressed cherubs and fleshy giantesses. The sensual extravaganza is placed towards the foreground of the scene, with the figure of Venus tended by her admirers in the middle. The setting is a romantic pagan landscape with classical temple and distant skyline glowing with colour.

FACT FILE THE DUTCH GOLDEN AGE

Spanning more or less the entire seventeenth century, the Dutch Golden Age was a period that witnessed a flowering in trade, science and art, and the rise of the Netherlands as a global super-power. This may be attributed to the emergence of a powerful, wealthy merchant class that cultivated and sponsored the visual arts, literature and science. This class built its wealth through the country's colonisation of parts of the world, including South Africa, and trade in commodities such as spices and slaves.

The art of the Dutch Golden Age may be divided into a number of categories: historical

painting, portraiture, genre painting, landscapes and cityscapes, and still lifes. Many paintings of the period are allegorical. Others convey a moral message. Among the key painters of the Golden Age are Jacob (Jacques) de Gheyn I and II (c.1565-1629 and 1596-1644), Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-69), Frans Hals (1581/5-1666), Johannes Vermeer (1632-75), and Pieter de Hooch (1629-84).



Rembrandt van Rijn *Bathsheba* (1654). Oil on canvas

TRY OUT Invent your own set of emblems and mottos. Find inspiration from the objects, events, traditions and popular culture in the world around you. Think about tattoos, comics, video games or movies. Make a book of symbols, or use them as designs on functional objects.

- How are Phokela's ideas about Africa similar, or different, from the Africa you see around you or read about in the media?
- What can we learn from the way Phokela researches his ideas? What can we learn from the way he transforms them into artworks?
- Why do you think Phokela's works have been called 'an act of insurgency'? What seems radical or disruptive about them?
- What can Phokela's work tell us about art history?

ABOUT THESE WORKSHEETS

This educational supplement accompanies the exhibition *I like my neighbours*. In it artworks are explored by means of thought-provoking questions, fact files, glossary words and practical projects. Discussion topics help learners to develop a critical attitude to art, rather than just a grasp of media, styles, subject matter and themes. The questions also refer learners to other African and European art styles, drawing on previous educational supplements in the *Gallery Learner Series*. These worksheets are designed primarily for grade 10-12 learners, but are easily adapted for younger learners. Together with the introductory text, they are a stand-alone educational resource on Johannes Phokela.

Note on assessment

We recommend that educators develop assessment activities based on this learning experience. Assessment ensures that learners integrate and apply knowledge and skills. It also provides teachers with indications of achievement. When assessment is focused, say in the form of continuous feedback over a year, learners understand more clearly what they are required to know. Self-assessment helps learners set personal goals, evaluate performance and build self-confidence. Peer assessment encourages a sense of responsibility. When planning an assessment programme, school teachers need to refer to Learning Outcomes and Standards for the Visual Arts, as envisaged in the National Curriculum Statement

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