

Johannes Phokela

Mineral Awesome: Ode to the fountain of Zama Zama

24th September – 15th October 2024

Gallery II, Accra



Protocol of the Archaic Triad: Venus Sea Food Diner, 287 x 190 cm, - triptych, Oil on canvas
Image courtesy of the artist and Gallery 1957.

In his first solo exhibition with Gallery 1957, internationally celebrated, Soweto-born artist Johannes Phokela delves into ‘the mindset that drives the pursuit of greater wealth through the acquisition of, and lucrative trade in, minerals’.

This new body of work closely follows *Only Sun the Sky Knows How I Feel (A Lucid Dream)*, Phokela’s major solo exhibition at Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, which shed light on his practice, process, thinking and intentions, and was organised around the artist’s obsessive engagement with pictures and his concerns with pictorial traditions and images as tools to critique social mores and corrupt value systems in the aftermath of empire.

The problem may not be obvious until the catastrophe has occurred. In these seismic paintings, Phokela pursues a covert fault line that runs beneath the high-impact narratives – the dire political ramifications of mining, its exploitative impact on people, land and ecosystems. The artist visually interrogates the impulse that precedes and exceeds the thrust of the spade or the drone of the drill. What does it look like – this primal, burning hunger for wealth that fuels the extractive drive? This obsessive mineral

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bedazzlement that feeds the endless, mounting dumps and slurries of toxic human history? These paintings invite the viewer to go there – to dwell in the basic, intrinsic human will to mine.

As a painter, Phokela spends his time caught up in the physical ooze, squish and slosh of paint – the pigments of which arise from rocks and earth. Burnt Sienna, Umber, Cobalt Blue, Red Ochre, Coal Black, Titanium White: like the metals and minerals in the human body itself, the pigments in paint derive from stardust; ancient stars that go supernova, exploding in a constant process of “galactic chemical evolution” that goes back 13- or 14- billion years. Our enchantment with minerals is bodily and real.

As a contemporary history painter, Phokela’s chosen work is to translate the epic, swirling, global questions of time and conscience into these corporeal, libidinous oozes, squishes and sloshes of paint on canvas. “The thread that binds my ideas together consists of myths, legends and fables, such as Eldorado, King Midas and so on,” he writes. “Historical accounts, such as gold rushes in the Americas and Africa also play a pivotal role in the process of putting all my random ideas into a conceptual framework. And the final product gets spiked with certain overlooked information on global current affairs.”

‘Spiked’ is a key word here. Phokela is a critical, satirical, wildly imaginative painter – his canvases are drenched in the dark spoils and crimes of empire, war, pillage and dominion. But this is no pity party. You can take your polemics and your parlour games elsewhere. The immense scale and breadth of his interrogation is established by works like Original Synergy, his ongoing working and reworking of Peter Paul Rubens’ 1620 painting The Fall of the Damned.

At the same time, he is a ruthless documentarian, with both eyes keenly focused on the assemblages of power that undergird the algorithmic circulation of so-called ‘news’. Take, for example, the immense oil rig that blazes in the distance in ‘Raiders of Baal’s Lost Treasure’, its toxic flare stack spewing methane into the night sky, illuminating the bearded white ancient and his naked nymphs, washed up on the rocks with a trove of treasure. There will be no ancient myth of purity here.

The past is thick with the flagrant crimes and spoils of fossil-fuel extraction – ‘the historical conquests and complete annihilation of myriad life systems, far beyond any political or ethical resolutions’ – that keep the current global economic system burning. The third in a series that features an oil-drilling platform, this painting fuses the Old Testament Biblical account of Sodom and Gomorrah with the genre of Hollywood blockbuster action adventures. ‘For it is written that Baal, the Canaanite term for God, was worshipped and idolised through offerings of oil. I assume that this oil may have been olive oil, commonly produced in the Mediterranean regions,’ writes Phokela. ‘Now, fast forward this fantasy to the discovery of crude oil in the Middle East ... And it seems that Baal’s treasure is causing chaos because it has become an object of global conflict, with those who refused to serve Baal in the past now demanding their share of this awesome mineral.’ Rife with uniquely sardonic wit, this is a painting that invites viewers to think through the relationship of colonialism to the fossil-fuel economy.

‘People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them,’ wrote James Baldwin. Phokela’s paintings open the trap door and let out the demons. There is something at once terrifying and liberating in the unfettered, amoral freedom of imagination that gives form to the bizarre, wanton scenarios that animate Phokela’s canvases. From Randlords to Zama Zamas, we encounter, here, a craven hauntology of fortune seekers, prospectors, diggers, drillers, sifters, grifters, traders, traffickers, prostitutes and Johns let loose from the shafts, saloons and vaults of history.

It is said that history is written by the victors and that it is he (gender intended) that wields the most guns who gets to write it. This messed-up dictum must surely have been circulating in the artist’s mind as he scratched – in a manner reminiscent of the drawings of the late Dumile Feni (1942–1991) – into the surface of the painting Boomstone Town Sabbath, highlighting the pistol in the holster of the Randlord and the ghost of a spear alongside the near-naked Black figure, who seems perilously outnumbered by the so-called “gentlemen” in hats.

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Here, Phokela splices together the genre of the Wild West movies he grew up watching and archival images from South Africa's mineral boom that began at the end of the 19th century. "My new background features some sort of quarantine vaults and a character who has been released for the sake of a routine public demonstration by the Randlords on a Saturday afternoon: how they dealt with workers who swallowed diamonds," writes the artist. "This odd, naked character is actually a mine worker wearing strange, makeshift leather mittens, which look more like tennis rackets.' Perhaps it is they who wield the paintbrush who will flip the 'cowboy' story and tell the strangest and truest history, after all.

"The artwork doesn't necessarily embrace its subject matter in an absolute manner, but rather focuses on the human condition associated with lust for fortune and its social repercussions," writes Phokela. What embodied and interactive form does this impulse take – this compulsion to dig and to burrow; to place mines, in, on or under; to gain access to valuable ore and metals and to extract them from the Earth? What effects does it have on human interaction? And to what extent has this extractive drive been translated into the current cryptographic urge – to create or obtain more units of cryptocurrency through the race to solve a puzzle, complete the next block of the shared transaction log, and win bitcoins?

In the 'Idiomatic Geometry of Chance' installation, we encounter a series of cryptic scenes from Akan proverbs against a backdrop of Adinkra symbols, which encode the historical and philosophical values of the Gyaman people of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. Used extensively in fabrics, logos, pottery and furniture, these visual symbols serve as shorthand for deeper truths that exceed the urgencies of the immediate moment.

Phokela asserts his commitment to the primacy of the visual and to signs as conductors of meaning across time. The Adinkra bird symbol, Sankofa, for instance, carries the message: 'Go back and get it. A symbol of the wisdom of learning from the past to build for the future. From the Akan proverb, "Se wo were fi na wosan kofa a yenkyiri," meaning, "It is not taboo to go back for what you forgot (or left behind)."' It is a message that bears direct meaning in relation to Phokela's practice. Painting is his medium for going back and getting it. It is the deep, dark ore that has been purposely forgotten or buried that he excavates and brings to the brightly illuminated walls of the high-circulation museum and gallery for our collective consideration.

The meaning of signs can be intentional or unintentional. They can communicate feelings, which belong to the volatile, lunar realm of meaning. They can communicate internally, through thought itself, or through the senses: auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory (taste), and, not least, visual. True to the multivalent aspect of signs, Phokela's paintings are concerned with the body and the senses – the fierce carnal entanglements behind the disembodied texts of history. They unleash the wild dogs of retrospection and feed the future.

– Curatorial essay by Alexandra Dodd

About the Artist

Johannes Phokela

(b. 1966, Soweto. Lives and works in Johannesburg, South Africa)

Johannes Phokela (b. 1966, Soweto) is a South African artist currently living and working in Johannesburg. Phokela began his formal art career in 1984 at the Federated Union of Black Artists (FUBA) Academy in Johannesburg, where he obtained a three-year diploma. In 1987, he relocated to London, where he completed a year-long foundation course at Central St. Martins: University of the Arts London before acquiring a bachelor's degree at Camberwell College of Art: University of the Arts London (1988). He then completed a master's degree at the Royal College of Art (1993) and remained in London until his permanent return to South Africa in 2006.

Phokela has established a distinguished career both locally and internationally. He played an advisory role in establishing The Bag Factory, Johannesburg (1990) and was awarded the prestigious year-long

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residency at Delfina Studio Trust, London (1993). He was also one of the founding members of the Gasworks Studios, London (1994 – 2005), producing studio work as well as participating in the International Residency Programme. This inspired him to do volunteer work for The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in 1995 and led to his participation in a residency programme in Senegal through the British Council (1997). He is also a recipient of the Decibel Award from the Arts Council of England (2004).

Phokela's prominent solo shows include an international touring exhibition commissioned by the Institute of International Visual Arts (INIVA) in collaboration with The Gallery, Cafe Gallery Projects, London (2002); Age of Enlightenment, Gallery MOMO, Johannesburg (2003); Landlord of the Lion, Stephen Lawrence Gallery, London (2005); Imagine Where You'll Be, Gallery MOMO, Johannesburg (2005); Translation, Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg (2006); Compendium, KwaZulu Natal Society of Arts, Durban (2007); I Love My Neighbours, a notable retrospective at the Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg (2009); Collateral, Oliewenhuis Art Museum, Bloemfontein (2012); and A World Sacred and Profane, Gallery AOP, Johannesburg (2015), in addition to many others.

He has participated in numerous notable group exhibitions such as the critically acclaimed 2nd Johannesburg Biennale titled Trade Routes: History and Geography, Johannesburg (1997); Unpacking Europe, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam (2001); Figure of, Battersea Pump House, London (2001); Personal Effects, Museum for African Art and The Cathedral of St John the Divine, New York (2004); Tremor, Palais des Beaux-Arts de Charleroi, Brussels (2004); Erase Me From Who I Am: Elveda Quien Soy, Centro Atlantico de Arte Moderno, Las Palmas (2006); Body of Evidence, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington D.C. (2006); New Painting at the KwaZulu Natal Society of Arts in Durban, UNISA Art Gallery in Pretoria and Johannesburg Art Gallery in Johannesburg (2006); and Still (the) Barbarians, EVA Limerick Open, Limerick, (2016).

Phokela was represented in the South African Pavilion at the Venice Biennale (2013), and his work can be found internationally in the collections of the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington D.C.; in London at the Delfina Studio Trust; the London Arts Council Collection; and the South African High Commission. In South Africa, he is represented in the art holdings of BHP Billiton, Southern Collection, Scheryn Art Collection, Johannesburg Art Gallery and the Iziko South African National Gallery, amongst others.

About Gallery 1957

Gallery 1957 is a contemporary art gallery with spaces across Accra, Ghana and London, UK.

It dedicates its programme to spearheading international exchanges between art practices from these communities and the rest of the world, presenting artists who interrogate concepts of belonging and identity, cultural exchange, and social history beyond Western narratives.

Launched by Marwan Zakhem in 2016 on Ghanaian Independence Day, Gallery 1957 has since expanded across three gallery spaces in Accra. Originally set up to promote Ghana and West Africa's presence in the arts scene, it now encompasses the Global South and its diaspora. Gallery 1957's London space opened in October 2020, providing a further platform for artists to build dialogues with its growing network of international collaborators.

Gallery 1957 presents exhibitions, installations, and performances by celebrated artists, fostering connections between local and international audiences. The Gallery's global gallery partnerships and ongoing artist residency program have attracted numerous international artists and arts professionals to Ghana. The Gallery's annual Cultural Week in September serves as a platform for encouraging deeper engagement with Ghana's vibrant contemporary art scene.

In 2021, Gallery 1957 launched the Yaa Asantewaa Art Prize for female Ghanaian artists, the first ever dedicated art prize of its kind. The prize aims to further strengthen the gallery's commitment to supporting and promoting emerging and established artists.

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Gallery

Gallery 1957's work expands beyond the gallery walls through a public programme that includes local and international art fairs, talks, off-site projects, and site-specific installations as well as the publication of books and catalogues – continuously supporting cultural initiatives in Ghana, Africa and beyond.

Artist: Johannes Phokela
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