

Colbert Mashile – *Truth or Dare*6th April – 7th May 2017

Story telling is one of the cornerstones of human existence and is arguably one of the traits that distinguishes us from other animals. As the bedrock of culture, storytelling provides context and meaning, morality and guiding principles to the blank slate of our newly born brains.

The culture of storytelling in South Africa has long been one of its hidden gems. Most traditional stories, like most folklore and fables universally, anthropomorphise animals in the service of a good story, and to deliver the message. It's almost as if by presenting arguments through animals allows us to dissociate from specific judgments of the human being in question, and rather to focus on and better understand the human archetypes at play.

Colbert Mashile is a storyteller and unequivocally draws on this tradition although his works are almost infuriatingly post modern in their lack of ambition to definitively moralise. These are no unequivocal treatises, but rather poetic meanderings that set up anthropomorphised protagonists in suspended animation. The baboon, as a close cousin of humans, is an overwhelmingly recurring protagonist, in all his guises. Whether supine on a couch or wheelbarrow, or tucked neatly in a "wheely bin", or, in the case of his collaboration with Wilma Cruise, in multiple incarnations variously lurking without intent in a Beckettian limbo, the baboons present a lugubrious inertia that almost ironically flips the metaphor and animalises the human.

Curiously, whilst presenting these archetypes of anonymous, bored, self satisfied humans, without ambition, and malevolent only in so much as they are so utterly contemptuous of human (or other incarnations') endeavours, the specificity of two other works including baboons perhaps presents a key to the target of Mashile's fables. The one, *The Revenant I*, presents a baboon in repose with a crucifix around his neck, his hand either clutching his considerable belly, or indeed heading for his groin. It immediately invokes, both in its lavender hues and subject matter, parallels with Francis Bacon's portrait of *Pope Innocent X (after Velazquez)*, that all but "rendered the near sacred image unholy". Just as Bacon insisted however that he had no problem with Pope's per se (albeit that he was an avowed atheist), Mashile here does not elaborate on his premise but rather unceremoniously presents the image of a slightly disaffected, self conscious animal, emboldened by a cross around his neck. Similarly in the title piece of the show, *Truth or Dare*, Mashile presents a baboon on a couch with the irrepressible shower rose over his head in homage to the satirical cartoonist, Zapiro's, talismanic gesture to represent President Jacob Zuma's folly. The Puff Adder, amiably sharing an enamel cup completes the fable as Mashile employs the devices of distilled, stylised children's book illustration to convey his warning. Truth or Dare scrawled in the top left hand corner asserts his open ended question about the specific game of chicken that the president seems embroiled in.

The apparent simplicity of the work belies the risk that Mashile takes in crafting such a work. Zapiro has been the subject of lawsuits to remove the shower head from the head of the caricature of Jacob Zuma, and has come under fire for depicting one of his lackeys as a monkey. Brett Murray's work satirizing the president in the pose of a Stalinesque, social realist poster, with "his" penis hanging out was defaced and invited a march on the gallery that housed it, and death threats. Likening a black man to a baboon in South Africa is understandably tantamount to heresy, particularly when espoused by a white man. Interestingly the legitimacy of a black artist depicting another black man as a baboon remains to be tested in the court of public opinion. But while Mashile may well be asserting his right to depict anyone as 'a baboon' if he sees fit, one senses there is almost a sense of pity rather than accusation or belittlement, as if by recasting him as an oblivious proxy, the President is unaware of the perils that await. This work then is a key to the other less specific works onto which we can layer our contemporary experience and interrogate the specifics and archetypes of our society, and this is Mashile's genius. He tells stories compassionately to errant children, with the gravitas and warmth of a grandparent. He delights in accompanying us as we view his works and when we are subsumed by the complexities and pathos of his ostensibly simple stories, and we chuckle at his capturing the innocence and folly of human existence, he chuckles along with us, not as a purveyor of one-liners that point fingers at the world, but as a world weary seer, who hopes to help us see too.

Everard Read Cape Town is delighted to present this body of works across both floors at the Everard Read Cape Town space.

A portfolio is available upon request.