

GAGOSIAN



MELEKO MOKGOSI

Democratic Intuition

September 29–December 12, 2020

6–24 Britannia Street, London

Meleko Mokgosi, *Bread, Butter, and Power*, 2018 (detail), oil, acrylic, bleach, graphite, photo and pigment transfer, and permanent marker on canvas, with plastic sleeve, in 21 parts; 1 part: 108 × 72 inches (274.3 × 182.9 cm), 18 parts, each: 96 × 96 inches (243.8 × 243.8 cm), 1 part: 96 × 132 inches (243.8 × 335.3 cm), 1 part: 84 × 12 × 12 inches (213.4 × 30.5 × 30.5 cm) © Meleko Mokgosi

September 2, 2020

Democracy is incompatible not only with the foundational elements of the human subject, but also with the various systems and institutions that support dominant forms of subjectivity or humanism in general. In other words, democracy is incompatible with structural racism and institutionalized or systemic violence; democracy is incompatible with neocolonialism and neo-imperialism; democracy is incompatible with the instruments that reproduce the conditions for and possibilities of capitalism; democracy is incompatible with race discourse, Eurocentrism, ethnocentrism, and humanism—all of which have become the dominant ways in which reality is conceptualized, interacted with, and historicized.

—Meleko Mokgosi

Gagosian is pleased to present Meleko Mokgosi's first solo exhibition in the United Kingdom and Europe, drawn from his grand project *Democratic Intuition* (2013–20).

In works of sweeping scale and scope, Mokgosi applies the principles of cinematic montage to the conventions of history painting, editing together images of political and social propaganda, religious

imagery, and advertising from southern Africa and the United States to produce layers of meaning both familiar and unfamiliar. Reconceptualizing where art history, postcolonial nationhood, and democracy intersect within an interdisciplinary critical framework, Mokgosi draws attention to the many ways in which Black subjects have become unattributed objects of empire and institution.

Democratic Intuition is an eight-part epic that includes multi-panel depictions of southern African life and folklore; its title is a nod to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory that the functioning of democracy is dependent upon accessible education. Mokgosi engages this concept and its internal contradictions through compelling genre scenes—often involving prominent figures from public life—that jump-cut between the confines of manual work, the freedoms of intellectual enterprise, and their ties to gender and race. A parade of finely drawn characters emerges out of raw canvas backgrounds, portraying the asymmetries of power that underscore traditional divisions of labor.

One chapter in the series, *Bread, Butter, and Power* (2018), is an elaborate twenty-one-panel panoramic painting, wrapping around the walls of an entire gallery, that abounds with overt references to recent social and political histories, as well as diverse associations brought together imaginatively to make a conceptual point. In one panel, uniformed schoolgirls, painted in meticulous detail, till a field of soil rendered in broad abstract strokes; in another, a group of elderly South African military veterans in uniform are gathered, two women seated at the front, as if for a reunion photograph; in a third, two women in period dress embrace in an imagined domestic tableau that contains, among other visual cues, a portrait of a defiant young Harriet Tubman, dressed in the black, green, and red of the Black Liberation flag; a self-portrait by Cameroonian photographer Samuel Fosso in the guise of Black radical Angela Davis; and Mokgosi's own protest poster in ANC colors, which refers to the people's battle cry following the infamous Uitenhage massacre in 1985: THEY WILL NEVER KILL US ALL.

In the chapter *Objects of Desire* (2016–20), individual small paintings of Afrocentric beauty advertisements, Paleolithic cave paintings, and contemporary African objects are grouped together with text paintings in both English and Setswana, in which lines from museum wall labels, poems, and *dinaane* (oral histories) are accompanied by Mokgosi's own critical marginalia. His annotations confront the erasure of African languages by racist policies under apartheid and reclaim these varied mother tongues. Key references for this chapter were the Museum of Modern Art's controversial exhibitions "*Primitivism*" in *Twentieth Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (1984–85) and *Objects of Desire: The Modern Still Life* (1997), both notorious for framing historical African artworks as anonymous sources for early European modernism.

Meleko Mokgosi was born in Francistown, Botswana, and lives and works between Wellesley, Massachusetts, and New York. He is codirector of graduate studies in painting and printmaking at the Yale School of Art, New Haven, CT, and cofounder of the Interdisciplinary Art and Theory Program, New York. Collections include the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, ME; Baltimore Museum of Art; Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, MA; Pérez Art Museum Miami; and Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Solo exhibitions include *Democratic Intuition*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (2015); *Pax Kaffraria*, Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester and Rochester Contemporary Art Center, NY (2017); *Lex and Love*, Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, MA (2017); *Acts of Resistance*, Baltimore Museum of Art (2018); *Bread, Butter, and Power*, Fowler Museum at UCLA, Los Angeles (2018); *Selections from the Hammer Contemporary Collection: Meleko Mokgosi*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2019); *Bread, Butter, and Power*, Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago (2019); *Pan-African Pulp*, University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor (2019–21); and *Your Trip to Africa*, Pérez Art Museum Miami (2020–21). Mokgosi participated in the 2013 Biennale de Lyon, *Meanwhile... Suddenly, and Then*.

Key chapters of *Democratic Intuition* were brought together in a major exhibition at The School in Kinderhook, New York, during 2019–20. A catalogue documenting the entire *Democratic Intuition* project will be copublished by Jack Shainman Gallery and Pacific Editions at the time of the London exhibition. During the exhibition, gagosian.com will host a curriculum and a series of online international seminars organized in collaboration with the artist.

Coinciding with *Democratic Intuition* is a special collaboration between Mokgosi, Gagosian, and the urban art initiative W1 Curates on an outdoor digital installation of monumental scale. The project comprises an algorithmic sequence of image fragments and text panels from Mokgosi's narrative paintings, digitally adapted to the full scale of the Flannels flagship store at 161–167 Oxford Street in

Soho. The sequence will play in a ten-minute loop across the three-story LED facade of the building twenty-four hours a day, beginning at midnight on October 1 and through October 18.

#MelekoMokgosi

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