

Johannes Phokela

Born Soweto, 1966

Lives and works in London and Johannesburg

Graduated from the Royal College of Art, London, with a Masters degree in Painting, 1993

Phokela's mutated doppelgangers of Dutch and Flemish Old Masters query illusions of aesthetic purity and notions of cultural authenticity. His beautifully painted manipulations of iconic images by the likes of Old Masters such as Rubens, Van Dyck and others, weave a personal history into this historical canon. Characters of key protagonists are often altered from their Northern European settings, resulting in unsettling images that challenge Eurocentric narratives around contemporary and historical art. Phokela is best known for his polemical use of iconography as a resource base from which to transcend the burden of cultural myths. The Baroque images of the 17th century, as well as old Flemish painting particularly fascinate him. He takes on what he perceives as being Europe's "grandiose" history of art as a medium to convey values and ideals represented within a global context of cultural elitism, an approach primarily chosen as a diversion.

"I grew up thinking that the so-called Old Masters only existed as religious or iconic knick-knack prints, particularly those by the likes of Leonardo da Vinci or William Blake. They were or still are very popular and are often used domestically in Soweto. I have always been curious about what these prints were actually made for, apart from making money. Besides their religious or popular value, what possible effect can they have on those who own them? As for Dutch genre painting, they portrayed a certain European lifestyle coinciding with a period in history that saw the arrival of Europeans in South Africa. This was the only visual reference available, utopian in many ways, the harsh realities of war and famine left out. The subsequent cultural collusion is significant and becomes an essential source for my ideas".

(Courtesy: Momo Gallery, the artist)

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2006 'Translation', Johannesburg Art Gallery, SA
- 2005 'Imagine where you'll be' Gallery MOMO, Johannesburg, SA
- 2005 'Landlord of the Lion', Stephen Lawrence Gallery, London, UK
- 2003 'Age of Enlightenment', Gallery MOMO, Johannesburg,
- 2002 Café Gallery Projects / inIVA, First major touring solo, London, UK
- 2001 London Printworks Studios, London, UK
- 2000 Fixation, Art Exchange Gallery, Nottingham, UK
- 1998 Rack Gallery, London, UK
- 1995 Galleriet (Molde Kunstgalleri), Molde, Norway
- 1992 Harlequin Gallery, London, UK

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2006 'Body of Evidence', Smithsonian National Arts Museum, Washington DC, USA
- 2006 'Erase me from who I am, Elvieda Quin Soy' Centro Atlantico de Arte Moderno, Canary Islands, Spain
- 2004 'Tremor', Palais des Beaux-Arts de Charleroi, Belgium
- 2004 'Personal Effects' St John's Cathedral, New York, USA
- 2001 'Unpacking Europe', Boijmans Museum, Rotterdam, EV+A Limerick Open, Limerick; 'Figure of ', Battersea Pump House, London
- 2000 'Beautiful, Spaces' @ OXO Tower, London, 'Cross Current', Atkinson Gallery, Somerset, UK
- 1999 'Routes: Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's idols', Brunei Gallery, SOAS, London, touring to Gardner Arts Centre, Brighton
- 1997 'Trade Routes and History', Johannesburg Biennale '97, South Africa
- 1996 'Seven for Seven', Gallery 7, Hong Kong