

REVIEW

Land beneath the dreams

Colbert Mashile's paintings are populated by animals, symbols and dreamlike figures that seem to stray from another world. From his childhood home in Hoedspruit, he talks about the dreams, rituals and memories that shape his work. **By Oliver Roberts**

● Ever since he can remember, Colbert Mashile has woken at around three in the morning, stayed awake for an hour, then returned to sleep. Or, something wakes him. Given the hour's folkloric association with witches, demons and other mysterious entities, this seems more fitting. "I drift away for an hour, that's when I see things," he says. "I don't know if it's healthy for me or not, but it's how I function."

These nightly visions have acted as the genesis for much of Mashile's work. His paintings are populated by animals who seem to have wandered in from the edges of sleep: reclining baboons, goats in turtlenecks, an aardvark licking its own a". The creatures feel less like animals than visitations, bearers of some obscure and possibly troubling knowledge.

Mashile refers to these animals as characters. They act as conduits for the emotional undercurrent of a piece. The baboon represents stress, the rabbit, a kind of streetwise wisdom, often lingering in doorways or casting the viewer an ambiguous side eye. Most persistent of all is the goat, the first animal to emerge from his early morning visions.

"It started popping up in my work. Eventually it took over as the main character."

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Colbert Mashile Artist

Mashile says.

Initially, the goat appeared as a ceremonial being, bound up with ideas of sacrifice and ritual. Over time, it's grown more playful, more satirical. In recent works, Mashile paints the animal in the style of a classical portrait sitter, dressed in ornate clothing, particularly turtlenecks woven from its own hair.

The shift reflects something larger in Mashile himself. Now in his 50s, he spent much of his early career circling the pain and psychic residue of the initiation rituals he underwent as a 10-year-old in Bushbuckridge, Mpumalanga.

To this day, Mashile can't look at pictures of African scarification rituals or body modification. They leave him nauseated. "I've gone through things no-one will ever understand," he says. "But I've made peace with my upbringing and initiation, and with the fact that I'll never heal."

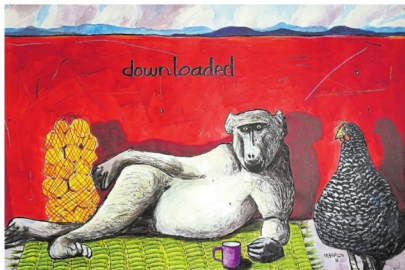
A return to belonging

I last spoke to Mashile in late 2015, at a studio on the ragged boundary of Joburg's CBD. I remember him talking about his dreams, how so much of his imagery emerges from them. They never take place in the city, he said. The landscape is always quieter, greener. Trees. Hills. Rivers. A soft drizzle suspended over everything. He was dreaming of Hoedspruit, the place he grew up.

"I don't see the city as a place of belonging," he told me then. "In my subconscious, in my conscious even, the city is a place for the outside, the inside belongs somewhere else."



Colbert Mashile's paintings are populated by animals who seem to have wandered in from the edges of sleep. Pictures supplied



Mashile refers to the animals in his paintings as characters, acting as conduits for the emotional undercurrent of his artworks.



himself surprised by what's there.

"I see people standing in front of the work, saying, 'Wow.' Then I stand back, look at the piece and say 'Wow' too."

Mashile's paintings occupy a space that South African art doesn't often make room for. They are political in the broadest sense, concerned less with events than with inheritance.

Tyrene Salmon, owner of Art Eye Gallery, which sells Mashile's work, says: "Over the past two decades Colbert has steadily shared his unique stories of Africa in a way that captures your eye and folds itself into your heart and home. Every artist strives for the ability to create something unique. Colbert does it with pure simplicity, an organic ease that speaks to the land that he comes from in a language that everyone understands."

Indeed, Mashile's works are filled with symbols, rituals and dream imagery that emerge from a distinctly local experience, but they never feel confined by geography. Concurrently, the work concerns itself with questions far older and more universal: belonging, transformation, fear, identity and the strange ways in which the past inhabits the present.

That said, Mashile remains wary of definitive interpretations. He rarely conducts gallery walkabouts and is suspicious of academic readings.

"I don't like to guide people into my work," he says. "I like people to formulate their own theories, and then I'll discuss the theories with them. What's more important to me is being true to myself. Like all kinds of artists, we're measured through the ages by whether the work has moved from one stage to another. This was a blue period, this was a red period, this was a what... But I don't want to count my life like that. I want to do what I love every day."

by long hours pacing the studio, waiting for one of his characters to rise from somewhere beneath thought, and tell him what to do.

"Once I start working, it's quick," he says. "It comes automatically. Colours. Proportions. What to put down. What to leave out."

He acknowledges how fortunate he is to have the space to work this way. Being an artist allows him to create his own structures and routines. But that freedom carries its own tension, especially in a culture increasingly suspicious of anything that can't be quantified. "I fight it all the time, it makes me sick," he says. "Sometimes I spend too much time in my head and I need to do something. But what? What should I do if I can't see it? Should I just keep painting even if I don't feel anything?"

Mashile tempers this anxiety by taking stock of what he actually produces. By month's end, the body of work is often substantial, even if his days feel shapeless and

untethered. Sometimes the deeper work arrives only after the artist abandons the panic of needing to constantly produce. As though it had been there all along, waiting beneath the noise.

"It's a mysterious thing," he says. "I don't plan my work in a practical sense. I close my eyes and imagine the piece. I see it, but I need to force it to work on the format. It's there. I can see it somewhere there."

Complexities of inheritance

An artist's proximity to their work can become a blindness. After weeks spent staring at the same canvas – bleeding over it – the labour clings to it. The artist sees every doubt, every wrong turn, every abandoned possibility. Others see the finished piece.

Sometimes, it's only when Mashile encounters his work in a different setting – framed and hanging in a gallery – that he recognises it as a whole. Even now, he finds

Mashile's work can be viewed at Art Eye Gallery, Danfer Square, Fourways, Joburg. arteye.co.za