

Threading memory and magic

● There's an old Tswana description of time that might make you think a little differently about the moon next time you look at it: each day ends with a crocodile eating the sun and excreting the moon. It's an image that has pressed on Boemo Diale's mind for quite some time. So what does she see when she looks up at the night sky?

"I wrote a little story about the passing of time in relation to Tswana cosmology and other indigenous cosmologies," she says. "I also looked at maternal knowledge."

The result of that story – along with a lot of painting and the making of ceramic vessels – is a new exhibition titled *So Quick the Crocodile Has Eaten the Sun*, opening on October 10 at Kumalo | Turpin gallery in Parktown North.

I met Diale at her studio in Bramley. It's everything you'd expect an artist's space to be. Natural light floods in from the garden and there's the smell of paint and turpentine. In the middle of the room is a long table cluttered with jars of brushes and pencils, and sketches in various stages of completion. Nearby is a brown leather couch spattered with paint. The exposed roof trusses make you think you're inside a whale's stomach. But the centrepieces, of course, are the large canvases leaning against the walls, pulsing with colour.

The paintings are populated by the things that have long appeared in Diale's work: women, bodies, vessels, symbols and the strange interior worlds we form in childhood, where memory, imagination and experience become difficult to separate. But something has moved. The new work feels less concerned with explaining Diale herself than with exploring time and the ways we build a world around ourselves.

BIRTH OF A NEW WORLD

At the centre of that world are three women.

Joburg artist Boemo Diale transforms childhood, cosmology and inherited knowledge into strange, beautiful new worlds. **By Oliver Roberts**



Artist Boemo Diale, above, turns family memory, cosmology and ritual into a vivid private mythology of protection, possibility and hope in her new exhibition. Pictures: SUPPLIED



I REALISED THAT I COULD START PULLING THREADS FROM MY LIFE, ARTISTICALLY, AND CREATE STORIES

Boemo Diale Artist

The largest work in the studio, *The Maternal Table*, depicts a girlish Diale seated at a table, flanked by her mother and grandmother. On the table are a chopping board with slices of carrot, a teapot, a plate and a glass of juice. Behind her are three rectangular windows – another thread connecting the works.

Diale has spoken frequently about the influence of both women, particularly her grandmother, whose home in Rustenburg was a constant throughout her childhood. That's where those three windows come from: Diale vividly recalls sitting in her grandmother's kitchen, marvelling at the light spilling through them and filling the room. Sunlight and moonlight both.

But in these new works, Diale's expressions are less about her own experience of the maternal and more about maternity in a broader sense. She became interested in an

idea she encountered in Taoist cosmology, in which something at the very beginning was pregnant with possibility and gave birth to time and existence.

"I was thinking about the maternal, as in this womb," she says. "Not about actual pregnancy, but the birth of a new world."

This idea of creating, containing and protecting runs throughout the work. Just as a womb encloses the unborn, borders surround some of Diale's paintings. And, as a rule, the paintings without a border contain a vessel. The borders are filled with symbols drawn from different traditions, including Ghanaian Adinkra symbols, but they also serve a deeper, more ritualistic purpose.

"The border is like a protection spell," she says, "closing in and protecting whatever this dreamlike reality is that I'm creating."

Some of those dreamlike realities come

from memory. Others, she says, are envisioned.

Another work shows her again as a young girl, a Bible and candle perched on a shelf behind her. The scene draws on her Christian upbringing, but the objects also point to something broader: the tools and talismans we use to protect ourselves, "whether you believe in something or not".

The vessel has become equally important. Diale is interested in its ordinary function, as something made to carry or contain, but also in the spiritual history of the object. Clay can be transformed into something useful or beautiful, but vessels have also been used in rituals.

"In a lot of indigenous and old African practices, they'd create vessels and break them to call upon things, bury or seal them," she says. "It's my made-up religion, this

practice. I create my own meaning with things."

THE MYSTERY WAVING BACK

Diale, 26, grew up moving between Joburg and Rustenburg. As a young girl, watching the landscape change from the back seat of the car, she noticed how different those worlds were, and began to understand the inequalities of post-apartheid South Africa.

At her grandmother's, she'd sit at a table and draw and paint – a practice she returns to today – a way of tapping into the simplicity of early memories: red soil, tea, thick slices of buttered bread.

Later, attending a Model C school in Joburg produced another set of contrasts. "That brought up a lot of questions for me, sociopolitically in the context of what it means to be a black South African woman in

a post-apartheid landscape," she says. "What was going on? Why did some people have access to things while others didn't?"

"I realised that I could start pulling threads from my life, artistically, and create stories."

Those threads have included race, mental health, family, spirituality and childhood. Her earlier work turned towards her identity and family history. In *Going Home*, which won the Tomorrows/Today Prize at the 2024 Cape Town Art Fair, ideas of home, prayer, her grandmother and mental health were central.

Her newer works push those concerns outward. Folklore and cosmology are woven into family history. Christianity holds hands with indigenous ritual. Inherited symbols and talismans intermingle with a connection to the divine that Diale has invented herself.

"When I'm working I experience a literal download," she says. "It pops up in my head, I don't know where it comes from. In that flow state I open a channel to receive those messages."

HOPE AS RADICAL

Diale works best in summer. The studio is warm, she can go barefoot, and there's always the promise of a Highveld thunderstorm to

bring in the memory of lightning and petrichor, thunder rolling through the body. Music goes on as soon as she enters it, and continues for the day. When things are going well, she breaks into dance.

"A day in the studio starts in a rise and then a fall," she says. "I begin with upbeat music. Towards the middle of the day the music is slower and more connected – at the peak, I might listen to Thandi Ntuli, speaking about the cosmos."

Diale says she thinks in colour before she thinks in images. Her current obsession: pink. There's something useful in that instinct. For the references to cosmology, ritual,

family history and inherited knowledge, the paintings aren't burdened by their ideas. They remain bright, bodily and strange.

This new work expresses hope. "Maternity as hopefulness," she says. "Especially in the world we live in where it's radical to have hope."

Maybe that's what the vessels and borders are doing – holding something long enough for another possibility to emerge.

"I don't believe in limited thinking," she says. "You can make it up as you go along. There aren't any rules."

Somewhere inside that invented world, the crocodile keeps eating the sun.

So Quick the Crocodile Has Eaten the Sun runs from October 10 to 31 at Kumalo | Turpin gallery, Nine Yards, Yard 7, 167 Jan Smuts Avenue, Parktown North, Joburg. See kumaloturpin.com