ART WALL

Karabo Poppy Moletsane

UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive
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Interview by Ivy Mills

November 2, 2017, Berkeley, California

Ivy Mills **The scaffolding is up, and you are preparing to paint a work of monumental scale on the BAMPFA Art Wall. How would you characterize this painting's distinctive style?**

Karabo Poppy Moletsane The painting is done in a style I've been working on for about three years. Many South African artists are highly influenced by the West, but we're still trying very hard to find our own voice. The style emerges from my larger project, which is, at its heart, to preserve the African aesthetic. A great place to locate the African aesthetic is in its people. So, I often go out and take photographs of people who I see as good representations of contemporary South Africa, and I like to show them in a way they haven't been seen before. My portraits are done in a very stylized manner that you don't see many illustrators working in. I stylize the nose so that it looks extremely geometric, but everything around it is extremely organic. You'll see colors that people aren't often represented in—a lot of oranges, and luminous greens. My choice of color is one way I reference our link with the West. I use colors that you wouldn't ordinarily associate with African art, but that you would see more in contemporary Western illustrations and sci-fi.

IM **The pairing of bright reds and greens in some of your portraits made me think of colors associated with the idea of Africa—those of the Pan-African flag, for example. Is your palette at all inspired by African aesthetic traditions?**

KPM I'm from a tribe in South Africa called the Basothos, who have a specific design for blankets that I was exposed to when I was very young. As I entered adolescence, I began to notice the colors in barbershop signage, especially the bright reds. Hair is such an important part of everything that my family does. If there's a special occasion, hair is the first thing we have to get right before anything else. I spent a lot of time in hair salons, and I remember being absolutely struck by art advertising the salons and new hairstyles.

The distinctive geometric features of my portraits—the nose, and the bags under the eyes—were developed to provide platforms to add more color to the faces. I also wanted to create a hybrid style that paired organic and geometric forms. Many have pointed out the resemblance of these features to those of African masks. Initially, it wasn't a conscious influence, but when I realized the similarity, I pushed it a bit more. If you look closely at my portraits, you'll see that the features are very separate, which comes from the construction of masks. I've also been told that the bags under the eyes make my subjects look like they've lived through stressful times. I'm more drawn to people who look like they've struggled and faced hardship than to the perfect models with pristine facial features that we see in magazines.

IM **In your search for the African aesthetic, where do you go? Are there particular places, people, objects, or practices that exemplify this aesthetic?**

KPM What draws my eye is a physical sense, including how people are dressed, but also the environment around them. I often go to the central business districts because those are the places in South Africa that have a little bit of roughness about them, and the most exciting visuals. So it's a combination of how they're dressed, their hair, their choice of makeup, their choice of accessories, and their transportation choices as well. There are a lot of markets in the central business districts, so I'm also interested in which stores they choose to go to and what different vendors in the stalls sell.

In one of my projects, *Pretty/Ugly*, I looked for tropes and characteristics of the market that suburban South Africans would likely deem ugly. This "ugliness" is part of us, and we want to celebrate it, not get rid of it. What I'm calling the South African aesthetic involves finding a beautiful way to present what is often considered unappealing. In the central business district, you'll see that people don't have access to a lot of things, but they still manage to create something incredible with what they have.

IM **There are well-known traditions in which women in rural South African communities painted the exterior walls of their homesteads with colorful geometric designs. You recently began painting murals, and have incorporated designs that resemble those of the rural traditions into your work. What is your relationship to these traditions?**

KPM One of the reasons I began painting large-scale murals was to inspire urban women to return to wall painting. That tradition was extremely sacred for a very long time, but you don't see younger women doing these paintings anymore. Instead, most urban murals are painted by men. I wanted to counter men's domination of urban mural art and inspire more women to produce this work. South Africans should recognize that it's part of our tradition, not something new. One major challenge to female mural painters in the city is safety; we hear about violence against women daily. I think a lot of women look at the work and say, I don't want to deal with that fear—I'd rather do something else.

IM **South African barbershop culture is influenced by filmic representations of the African American barbershop, and portraits of African American hip-hop and movie stars often grace barbershop walls. To what degree has African American culture inspired what you are calling the African aesthetic?**

KPM African Americans have had a giant influence on Africa, as it was the first time we saw black people creating an aesthetic that caught on to a large number of people. When I was starting with art and trying to find my voice, I would always look to African Americans because they had this almost inexplicable way of creating something that was iconically *theirs*. Everyone desired everything around it. African American culture didn't always come from a positive place, but they found a way to make it their own and find the positivity in it.

When South Africa entered into the post-apartheid era, it was time for us to create our own voice. Obviously, we're going to look towards people who have gotten it right. African Americans had it right, and we wanted to follow in their footsteps. I have three older brothers who are obsessed with hip-hop culture, and that spilled over onto me as well.

IM **You have been exploring Afrofuturism. How did you become interested in this speculative genre?**

KPM I grew up watching sci-fi movies—like *Mars Attack* and *Independence Day*—and thinking, everything happens to America! I had never seen anything like it at home, and I started to imagine how we might picture those utterly foreign experiences like alien attacks if they were to happen in South Africa. I thought it would be an interesting way to show how we might hybridize things that are iconically South African with things that are iconically Western. The film *District 9* does a great job of imagining how aliens would look if they were in South Africa; the film's alien "prawns" are inspired by an insect called the Parktown prawn that is endemic to southern Africa. I wanted to show how this sci-fi hybridity would look in illustration.

IM **What are some Afrofuturist elements we might discern in your work?**

KPM In the Art Wall painting, I wanted to show a wide variety of people you would meet in the central business districts, but I wanted to portray them in a way that is not ordinary—with halos, and rays coming out of their eyes. The portraits are of a peacekeeper, a student, a fashion designer, and an unemployed person. I chose to have the rays emanating from the eyes of the peacekeeper because she had the most striking face. The rays speak to South Africa's hidden potential; we're on the cusp of achieving this iconic aesthetic that I think the world is going to latch onto.

Excerpted from a longer interview with the artist conducted by Ivy Mills. Mills is a lecturer in the Department of the History of Art at UC Berkeley, specializing in the visual and literary cultures of Africa and the African diaspora.

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Karabo Poppy Moletsane: *Untitled*, 2017; latex paint on wall. Photo: JKA Photography.