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An abstract painting of a person from the back, wearing a blue and pink patterned suit and carrying a red bag. The person is walking towards the left. The background is black.

RESEARCH REFLECTION

Examining findings from the Living Artists Emporium

IN AN INTERVIEW WITH WORLD-RENOWNED ARTIST LIONEL SMIT, HE EXPLAINED THAT THERE IS AN INCREASING SORT OF TOKENISM IN SOUTH AFRICAN GALLERIES AND MUSEUMS AS THEY SEEK TO REPRESENT ARTISTS THAT PROVIDE CULTURAL PRODUCTS WITH AN 'AFRICAN LOOK'. WHEN PRESSED FURTHER, MR. SMIT STRUGGLED TO PUT INTO WORDS THE AESTHETIC QUALITIES OF THESE WORKS THAT WOULD ENCOURAGE ONE TO LABEL THEM AS SO-CALLED 'AFRICAN'. THIS POSES A SERIOUS LIMITATION TO THE ARTISTIC QUALITIES AND MEDIUMS THAT AFRICAN ARTISTS CAN OPERATE IN WITHOUT BEING PIGEONHOLED OR, ON THE OTHER END OF THE SPECTRUM, EXCLUDED.



TOKENISM

MR. BOTHA EXPLAINED HOW FNB'S ART JOBURG HAS BECOME INCREASINGLY EXCLUSIVE SINCE THE FAIR WAS BOUGHT OUT BY SOME OF THE COUNTRY'S OLDEST AND MOST PROMINENT ART HOUSES. HIS FRUSTRATION AT ENTERING THE ARTISTS HE REPRESENTS WAS CLEAR. WHEN APPLYING FOR THE FAIR THE WORK OF ALL THE ARTISTS AT LAE WAS REJECTED EXCEPT FOR THAT OF SIYABONGA MLAMBI. MR. MLAMBI IDENTIFIES HIS WORK AS SYNTHETIC AFRICAN CUBISM DUE TO THE STRONG LINES AND USE OF BOLD COLOURS IN HIS WORK. IT MAY BE ARGUED THAT HIS ALIGNMENT AND USE OF THE WORD "AFRICAN" IN HIS ARTIST STATEMENT SPEAKS TO THE TOKENISM AND ACCEPTANCE INTO THE FINE ART SPHERE THAT MR. SMIT WAS DISCUSSING. HOWEVER, THIS DISADVANTAGES OTHER AFRICAN-DECENT INDIVIDUALS WITHIN THE COMPANY THAT DO NOT OPERATE UNDER THE SAME AESTHETIC. MR. BOTHA TURNED DOWN THE OPPORTUNITY FOR MR. MLAMBI BECAUSE HE BELIEVES IN THE COLLECTIVE OF LAE WHEREIN PREFERENTIAL TREATMENT IS FROWNED UPON.

TOKENISM PT.2

BORDER PERMEABILITY

"Hard" and "Soft" National Borders

The vast difference between swimming in the Caledon River with Lesotho-nationals to talking to artist Danisle Njoli about spending all his savings on a guide who could take him to the shallowest parts of the Limpopo River in the hope of avoiding crocodiles, made my understanding 'hard' and 'soft' national borders tangible.

Lesotho





CRIME

What I did not expect is the depth of experience that I would be facing during my research internship. The vast difference between swimming in the Caledon River with Lesotho-nationals to talking to artist Danisle Njoli about spending all his savings on a guide who could take him to the shallowest parts of the Limpopo River in the hope of avoiding crocodiles made my understanding ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ national borders tangible. Another barrier that was recurring during my interviews was that of crime. This is largely due to the fact that undocumented foreign-nationals cannot open a bank account. At LAE artists can request to be paid via an ATM. This then poses security challenges as some are mugged after withdrawing the money and others do not have secure spaces to keep their money in their homes. This was something that I was able to relate to as my accommodation, and the family home was broken into and robbed during February. It is for this reason, that I am having to do my last month of my internship remotely online. I would not like to make this a tale of woes, but I would like to communicate how disheartening it can be when encountering these types of situations. My admiration for those who have been beaten down and set-back but decide to continue. It hurts. It hurts when artist Splash Motong showed me his stab wounds – having his phone and salary stolen. It hurts to hear of Dani(sle) feeling dehumanized as immigration officers threw stones at him when he was forcibly removed and taken back to Zimbabwe. I do not think any formal research training can prepare you for the real-life stories and encounters that take place.

TECHNOLOGY/SOCIAL MEDIA AS CULTURAL CAPITAL

One of the respondents was Greatjoy Ndlovu (you may remember him from a YouTube video I shared about LAE). He has grown his career in leaps and bounds over the last five years. I was informed that some of his clientele takes the form of public figures, such as Trevor Noah. During our interview, he was very curious about my own career trajectory. He encouraged me to grow my online presence as he counted this as an attribute to his success. It was a recurring comment throughout my internship that these emerging artists need to better market themselves online. However, this dictates a sort of privilege. First and foremost, there is a technological disadvantage to some, and internet access is incredibly expensive. However, the key issue is that in order to make yourself 'palpable' for the aesthetic necessities of social media platforms – such as Instagram – there is a certain amount of know-how required. This kind of cultural capital comes about from following tastemakers online and years and years of exposure to social media trends. Ergo, this is another barrier that (emerging) artists are facing.





MARKETABILITY FOR A SOUTH AFRICAN AUDIENCE

Here, Vincent Osemwige uses the term "if it is what they are looking for". This refers to the gatekeeping done in the South African art scene and how there are certain 'looks' that are admitted into the scene. This relates to some of my comments in an earlier slide. What was astonishing was how much foreign nationals were encouraged to change their style for marketing purpose. Nisty Chatha told me how he had to change the settings of his paintings from Malawi to South African townships in order to appeal to local 'taste'.

Vincent's art
in Nigeria



Vincent's art
in South
Africa

THANK YOU!

Looking forward to further unpacking this with you

