

THEBE PHETOGO



Thebe Phetogo
Born 1993, Gaborone, Botswana
Lives and works in Botswana

EDUCATION

- 2019 Master of Fine Arts. Michaelis School of Fine Art (UCT), South Africa
- 2017 Postgraduate Diploma in Fine Art. Michaelis School of Fine Art (UCT), South Africa

RESIDENCIES

- 2021 Visiting Artist Residency, Greatmore Studios Trust. June - August (Cape Town, South Africa)
- 2021 Art Connection Africa residency, The Bag Factory. February – April (Johannesburg, South Africa)
- 2020 Arthouse Foundation residency. January – April (Lagos, Nigeria)

Solo Presentations

- 2021 *blackbody Rogues' Gallery*, von ammon co, Washington D.C
Ko ga Lowe, Guns & Rain, Johannesburg, South Africa
- 2020 *blackbody Composites*, kó Artspace, Lagos, Nigeria
A Confluence, Unintended, 99 Loop Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa
- 2019 *Bogasatswana - Rebuilding the boat while sailing* (MFA exhibition), Michaelis Galleries. Cape Town, South Africa

Group Exhibitions

- 2022 *Fantasmagoria*, Lofoten International Art Festival, Lofoten, Norway
Paris Internationale, von ammon co, Paris, France
Dogtooth, Helena Anrather, New York, NY
Maš(w)i a Ditoro (tsa Rona), Sakhile&Me, Frankfurt, Germany
- 2021 *Look Mama, A Negro: Black Existence as Black Resistance* curated by Motlalepula Phukubje, Latitudes Online
Frieze New York, Half Gallery, New York
Untitled 8.99, 99 Loop Gallery, Cape Town
FRIEND ZONE curated by Vaughn Spann, Half Gallery, New York
- 2020 *African Galleries Now*, Guns and Rain, Artsy x AAGA
Finalists Exhibition, Emerging Painting Invitational
The Botswana Pavilion - Collective Ties, Online (With the support of an ANT Mobility Fund from Pro Helvetia)
Fresh Voices, Guns and Rain, Johannesburg, South Africa
- 2019 *Cassirer Welz Award Exhibition*, Strauss and Co. Fine Art Auctioneers, Johannesburg
Joburg Fringe 2019, The Art Room, Johannesburg, South Africa
- Summer Salon*, Bag Factory Artist Studios, Johannesburg
The Botswana Pavilion - Subjective Nationhood, Botswana National Museum & Art Gallery, Gaborone, Botswana
The Botswana Pavilion- No Return, Gallery Momo, Cape Town, South Africa
Surfaces, Kelvin Corner, Cape Town
- 2018 *Eclectica Collection*, Eclectica Contemporary, Cape Town
New Arrivals, Lutge Gallery, Cape Town
- 2017 *Michaelis Graduate Exhibition*, Michaelis School of Fine Art, Cape Town

2016 *Artist of the Year Exhibition*, Thapong Visual Arts Centre, Gaborone, Botswana
Barclays L'Atelier Top 100 Exhibition, ABSA Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa
Ideas Expo Exhibition, University of Botswana, Gaborone
Members Exhibition, Thapong Visual Arts Centre, Gaborone
Barclays L'Atelier Botswana Exhibition, National Art Gallery, Gaborone
What Is Art, The Test Kitchen, Gaborone

Awards

2020 Emerging Painting Invitational Prize (Finalist)

2019 Cassirer Welz Award (finalist)

2016 Absa L'Atelier Top 100

Bibliography

2021 Thuli Gamedze, "Rainbow Scale: Thebe Phetogo in conversation with Thulile Gamedze." Artthrob. April 8 2021. Digital.
Jean-Christophe Maur. "Thebe Phetogo – Green is Black." Africanah. May 11 2021. Digital.
Mark Jenkins, "In the galleries: A rock-and-roll odyssey through sex, race and religion Thebe Phetogo." The Washington Post. December 24 2021. Digital.

2020 Jareh Das, "Lagos Roundup." Art Agenda. November 20 2020. Digital.
Sabo Kpade, "The Blackbody Against the Green Screen." Contemporary And. November 06 2020. Digital.

2019 Khanya Mashabela, "Subjective Nationhood: 'The Botswana Pavilion: No Return' at Gallery MOMO." Artthrob. July 05 2019. Digital.
Gabiella Pinto, "Thebe Phetogo's figurative paintings acknowledge the unseen." Between 10 and 5. September 20. Digital.

Thebe Phetogo

blackbody Rogues' Gallery

13 November - 25 December 2021

Washington DC: von ammon co is pleased to announce its fourteenth project at 3330 Cady's Alley, *blackbody Rogues' Gallery*, a solo show by Botswana-based artist Thebe Phetogo.

A continuation of Phetogo's *blackbody* series of exhibitions, each painting in *Rogue's Gallery* employs a null backdrop: either the acid-green of a soundstage or the checkerboard of a transparent digital image. This painterly manifestation of a digital void is where Phetogo arranges disembodied segments of post-colonial African historical subjects. Mostly ensconced within an acid-green field, these figures appear on the brink of aqueous dissolution or oblivion. Vestiges of bodies—both central and peripheral—appear in modeled shades of green, and allude to a history that has just expired and remains only as an afterimage. The artist's use of modeled shoe polish to articulate faces and limbs alludes to the cross-cultural history of blackface, which happens to reside both within American (the minstrel show) and African (The Concert Party) ritual tradition. As a corollary to the green screen, Phetogo's *blackbody* figures are embodiments of concealment and disappearance..

Phetogo's allegorical band of subjects toggle between the political and the mystic, the benevolent and malign, the dominant and the oppressed. A real Tswana historical figure such as Mmanthatsi takes on the attributes of a female deity, evoking majesty and luridness simultaneously; inversely, a figure of folklore such as Mmamashia—the *night seducer* who lures drivers to car wreck—appears as a contemporary revolutionary in sunglasses and head garb. The hacking of discourse throughout the exhibition can be as subtle as sartorial adjustments: a portrait of activist Roy Sesana adorns the radical in resplendent leopard pelts, the most common marker of conservative government in Botswana. A *rogues' gallery* is typically associated with the collection of photographs in detective offices that represents prime suspects; in comic books, the term refers to the cast of villains and deviants often used as foils in superhero stories. In the context of postcolonial Sub-Saharan Africa, myth and reality often cross-pollinate: the impartial and often unjust levers of historical discourse have distorted real figures into chimerae while mythical beings inhabit the bodies of historical subjects. *blackbody Rogues' Gallery* continues Phetogo's examination of the *blackbody*—the free-radical, removable, discontinuous subject of Setswana history, both specific and general—but through the perspective of the historical genre painting.

Thebe Phetogo (b. 1993, Serowe, Botswana) is a painter based in Gaborone, Botswana. He earned a Postgraduate Diploma in Fine Art and a Masters in Fine Art from the University of Cape Town, and a Bachelor's Degree in Media Studies from the University of Botswana. He has exhibited widely in Nigeria, South Africa and Botswana. *blackbody Rogues' Gallery* marks Phetogo's first solo exhibition in Washington DC and with von ammon co.

von ammon co is a contemporary art gallery based in Georgetown, Washington DC and founded in 2019. One of the only privately-run contemporary art spaces in the US capitol, the gallery's agenda is the presentation of important exhibitions on a project basis by international artists. *blackbody Rogues' Gallery* is the eleventh project in its current location. The gallery is open Friday through Sunday, 12pm to 6pm and by appointment. Please email info@vonammon.co for additional information.



blackbody Rogues'
Gallery
von ammon co,
Washington, DC
13 November 2021 -
02 January 2022



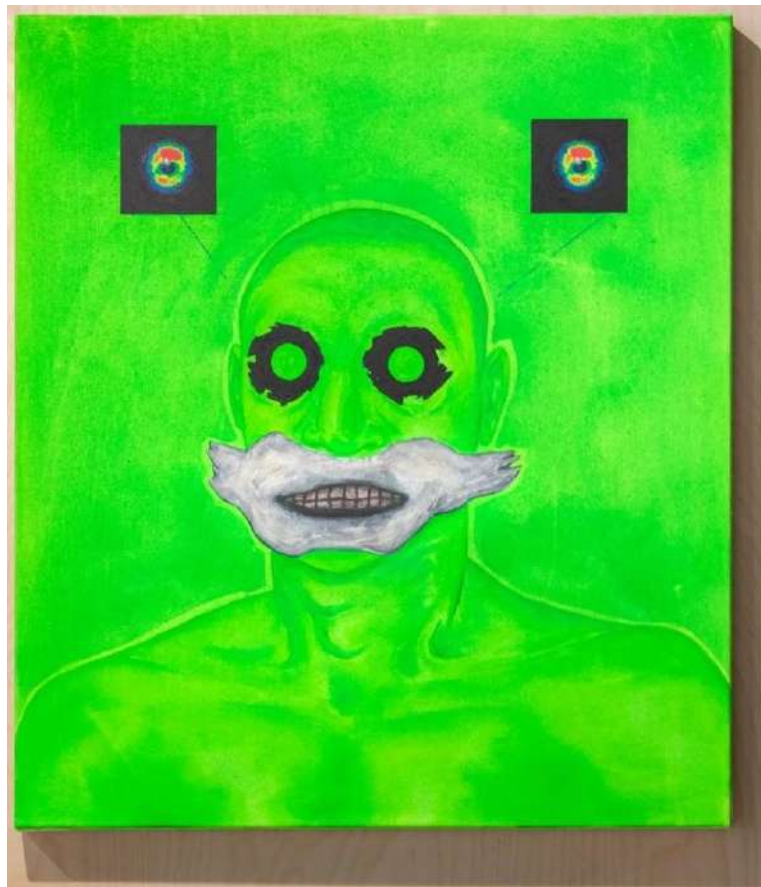


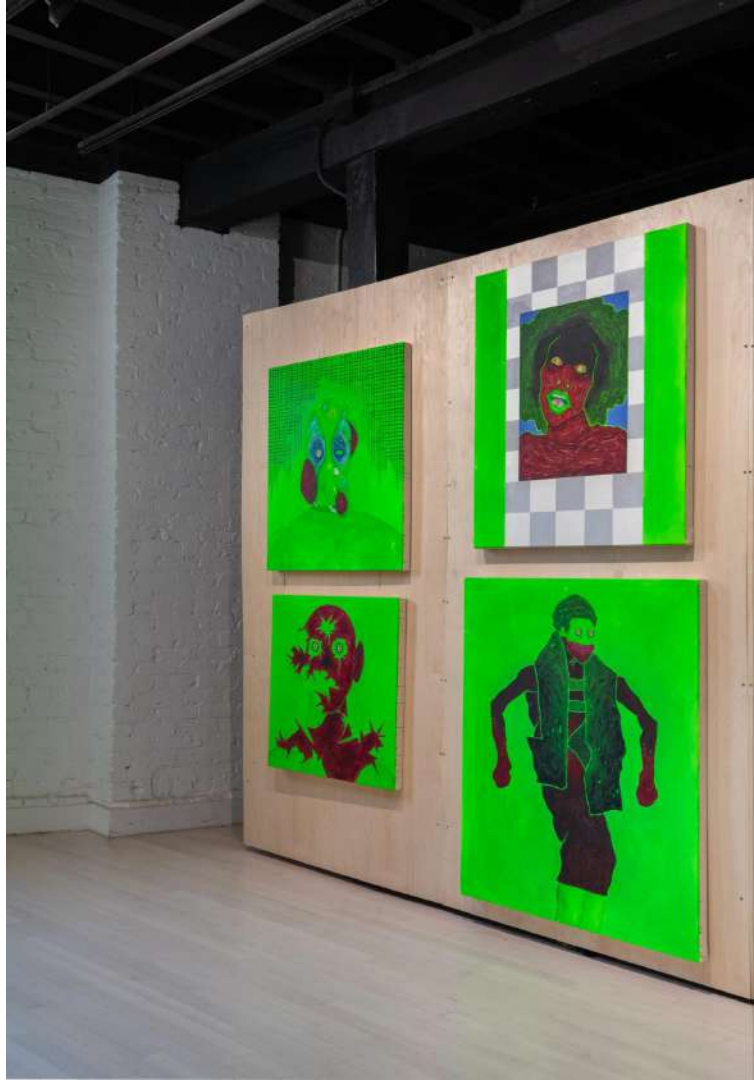
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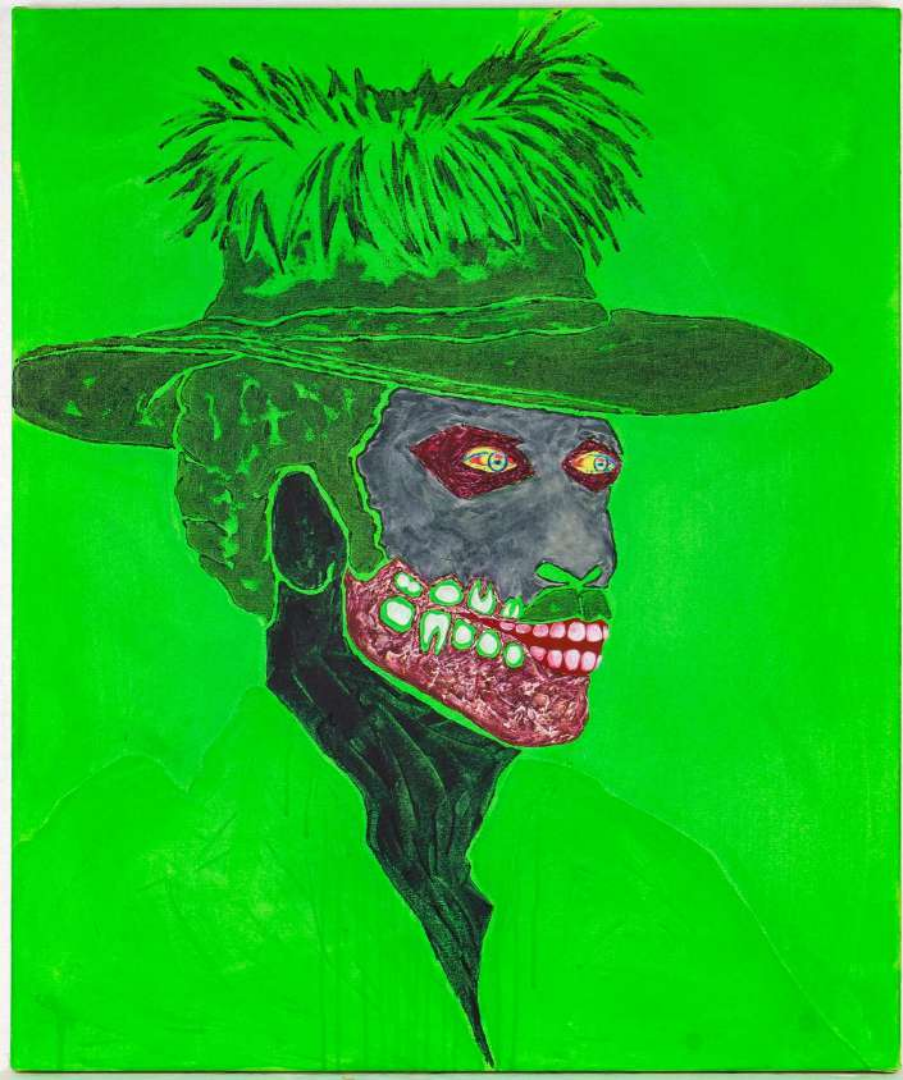




Heel Turn, 2021
Oil, acrylic, shoe polish and collage on canvas
35 3/8 x 31 1/2 in | 90 x 80 cm



Roy, 2021
Oil, acrylic, shoe polish, collage, magnets and magnetic pad on canvas
33 1/2 x 33 1/2 in | 85 x 85 cm



Tshetlha, with a bit of pomp, 2021
Oil, acrylic, shoe polish and collage on canvas
35 7/8 x 29 7/8 in | 91 x 76 cm

Thebe Phetogo and Monsieur Zohore

Paris Internationale

18 October - 23 October 2022

von ammon co is thrilled to announce a two-person project by Thebe Phetogo and Monsieur Zohore at Paris Internationale.

Thebe Phetogo will present six paintings, continuing his blackbody Composites series. These works involve groups of human figure in various states of dissolution and dispossession—a salient aspect of Phetogo’s painterly project, which focuses on the diffuse concept of personhood in post-colonial Southern Africa. Rendered mostly in a modeled acid green paint, the artist borrows the null backdrop of a green screen, with most of the figures in a state of digital dissolution. Phetogo carves vignettes out of each scene with sharp passages in colorful oil paint and shoe polish, which alludes specifically to the mutual tradition of Blackface in America (minstrel show) and Africa (The Concert Party).

Ivorian-American artist Monsieur Zohore will present three new paper towel works which collapse various insoluble notions of history into multifaceted, contradictory narratives. The works on view at the fair concern dispossession through an exploration of the heist: whether that which has disappeared be a famous painting, a piece of tribal artwork, a landmark, or even one’s dignity, Zohore’s pictures exclaim their content like anachronistic tabloid pages, sending transmissions both pratfall and melancholy. Hovering above the new pictures are the debut trio of Zohore’s exploration of the piñata as a relational and ephemeral object. With each portraying an outrageous proposition of Blackness—Bill Clinton with his saxophone, Robert Downey Jr. in blackface, or porcelain-white Michael Jackson—each suspended object beckons (by nature) to be bludgeoned into disrepair to deliver its bounty: a pile of silver-wrapped candies.



VON AMMON CO
Washington DC







blackbody Composite (Marionette II), 2022
Oil, shoe polish and collage on canvas
73 1/4 x 70 7/8 in | 180 x 186 cm

blackbody Composite (auf den Kopf), 2022
Oil, shoe polish, cold glue and collage on canvas
49 7/8 x 39 7/8 in | 126.8 x 101.2 cm



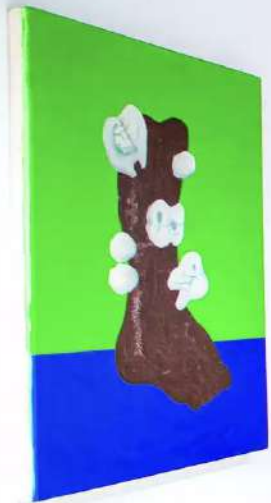


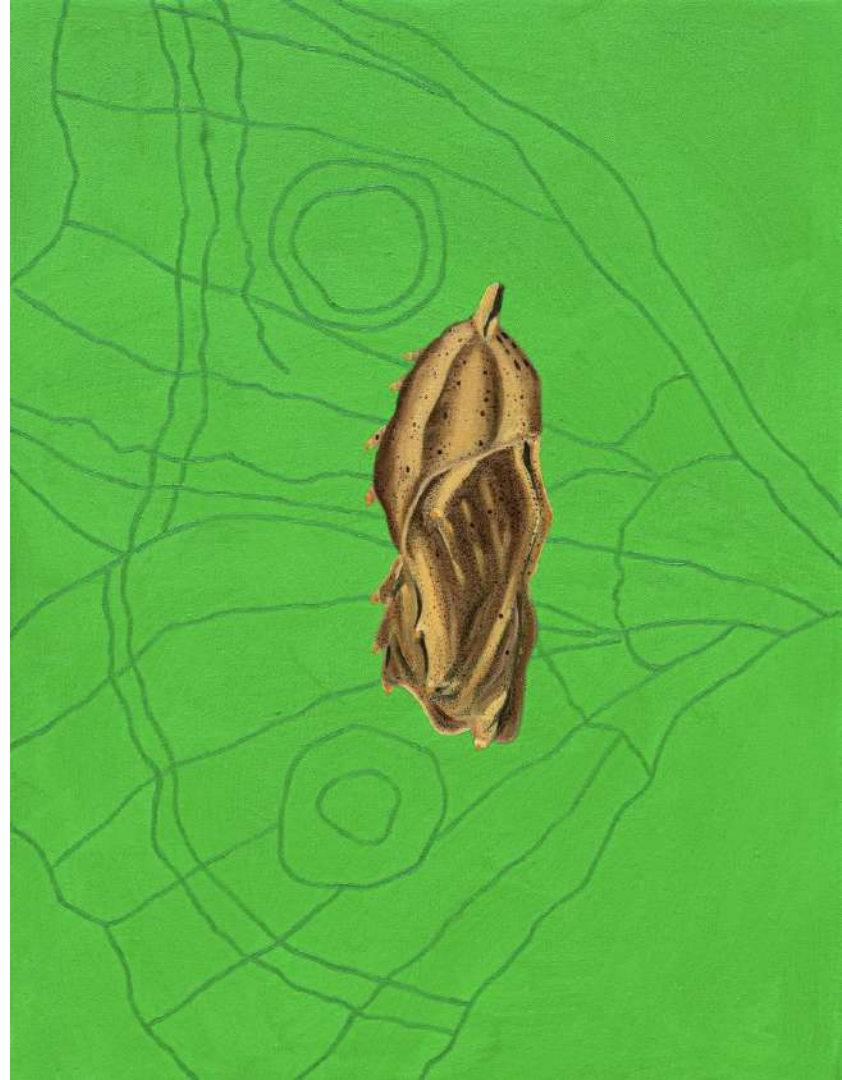
blackbody Composite (Setlhoa), 2022
Oil, shoe polish, cold glue and collage on canvas
39 3/4 x 49 7/8 in | 101 x 126.8 cm



*Thebe Phetogo: 7 Propositions for
the Origin of a blackbody*
kó Artspace
Lagos, Nigeria
March 16 - April 17, 2023







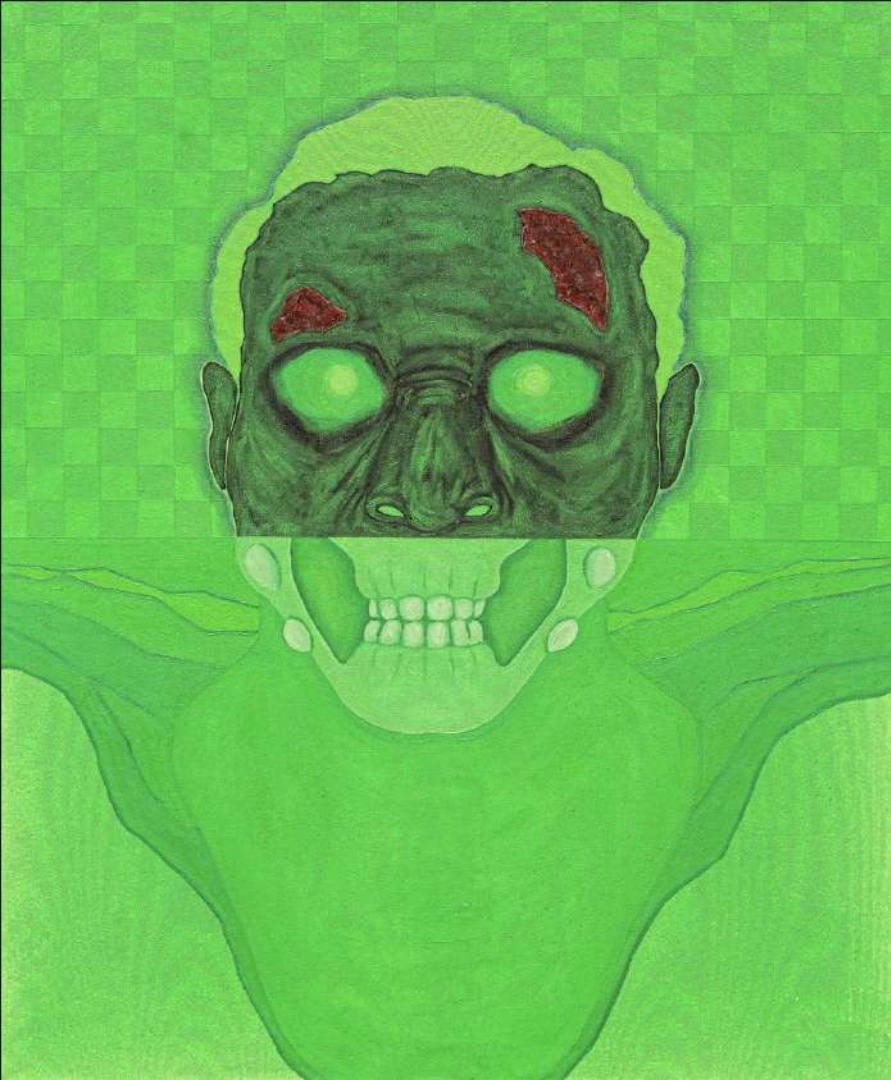
Proposition 3 - Indicator Species, Painting 3, 2023
Oil on canvas
33 x 24 x 2 in | 83.82 x 60.96 x 5.08 cm



Proposition 7 - Lowe, Painting 2, 2022
Oil, acrylic, and shoe polish on canvas
36 1/4 x 30 1/4 x 2 in | 92.07 x 76.83 x 5.08 cm

Proposition 7 - Lowe, Painting 1, 2022
Oil, acrylic and shoe polish on canvas
36 x 30 in | 91.44 x 76.2 cm





Proposition 5 - Zombie Figuration, Painting 3, 2022
Oil, acrylic, shoe polish and glue on canvas
36 1/4 x 30 1/4 x 2 in | 92.07 x 76.83 x 5.08 cm

Proposition 3 - Indicator Species, Painting 2,
2023
Oil on canvas
40 x 50 x 2 in | 101.6 x 127 x 5.08 cm

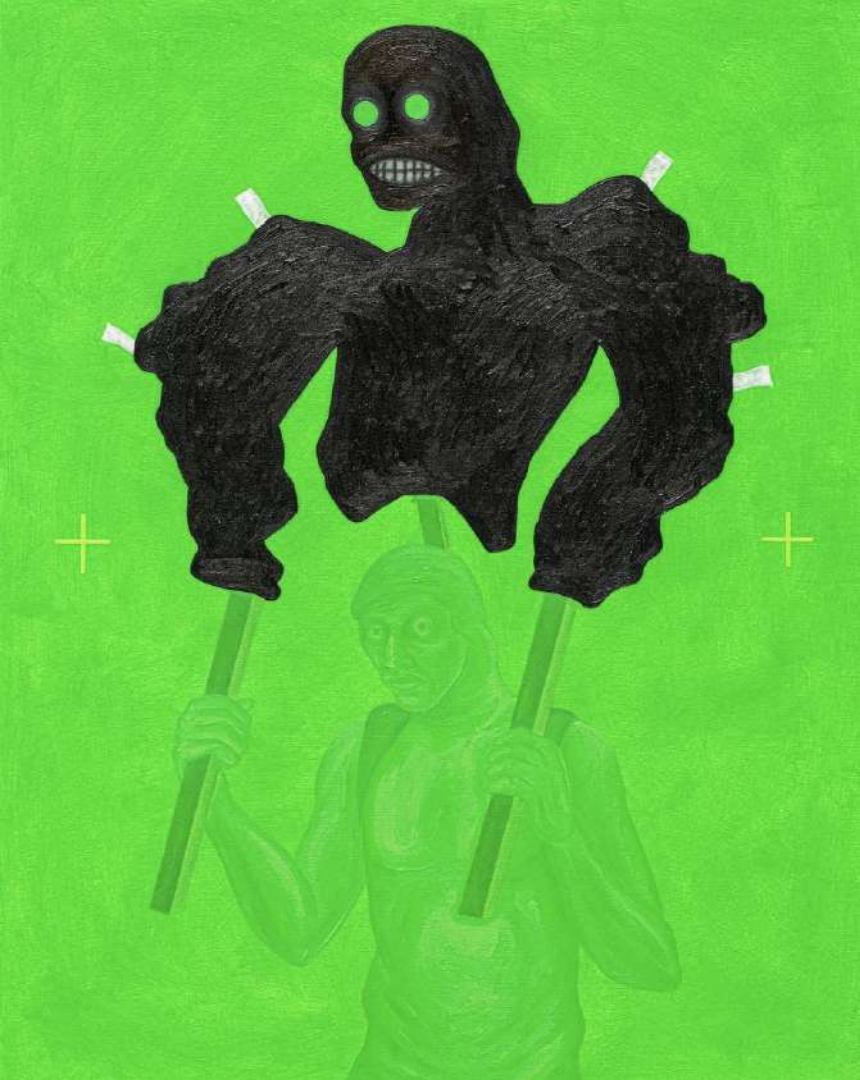




Proposition 1 - Autogenia, Painting 3, 2022
Oil, shoe polish and glue on canvas
50 x 40 x 2 in | 127 x 101.6 x 5.08 cm

Proposition 6 - Composites, Painting 1, 2022
Oil, shoe polish and collage
50 x 40 x 2 in | 127 x 101.6 x 5.08 cm





Proposition 2 - Material Need and Practical Effects, Painting 2, 2022

Oil on canvas

50 x 40 x 2 in | 127 x 101.6 x 5.08 cm



Fantasmagoriana at
Lofoten International
Art Festival
Kabelvåg, Norway
02 September -
03 October 2022





blackbody
Composites
kó Artspace
Lagos, Nigeria
22-31 October 2020





Secretary, Corporation
Tamil Nadu Heritage



BLACKBODY (UNTITLED), 2020,
Oil, acrylic, shoe polish and collage on canvas,
24 x 20 in | 61 x 50.8 cm





BLACKBODY COMPOSITE (BACK TO BACK), 2020
Oil, acrylic, shoe polish and collage on canvas
40 1/2 x 35 in | 102.9 x 88.9 cm

*BLACKBODY COMPOSITE (IN
PROTEST)*, 2020
Oil, acrylic, shoe polish and collage
on canvas
45 x 60 in | 114.3 x 152.4 cm





BLACKBODY COMPOSITE (THE MARIONETTE), 2020
Oil, acrylic, shoe polish and collage on canvas
32 3/8 x 29 1/2 in | 82.3 x 74.9 cm

BLACKBODY COMPOSITES (CONJOINED TWINS), 2020
Oil, acrylic, shoe polish and collage on canvas
35 1/2 x 31 1/2 in | 90.2 x 80 cm

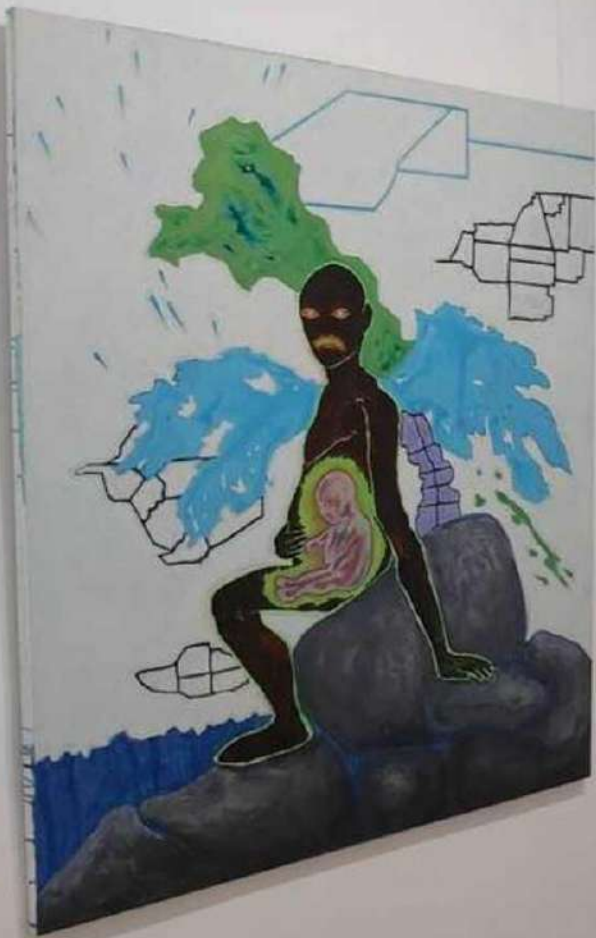




Ko ga Lowe
Thebe Phetogo

Ko ga Lowe
Guns & Rain
Johannesburg, South Africa
18 March - 05 April 2021





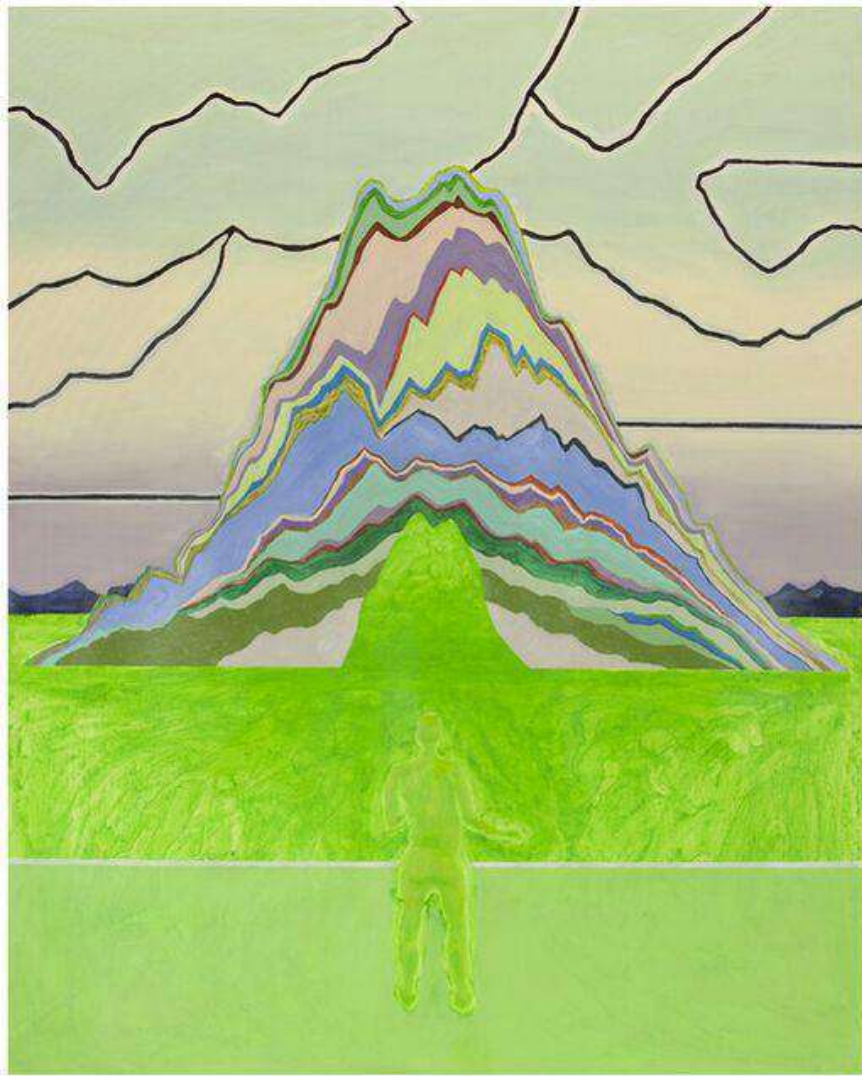




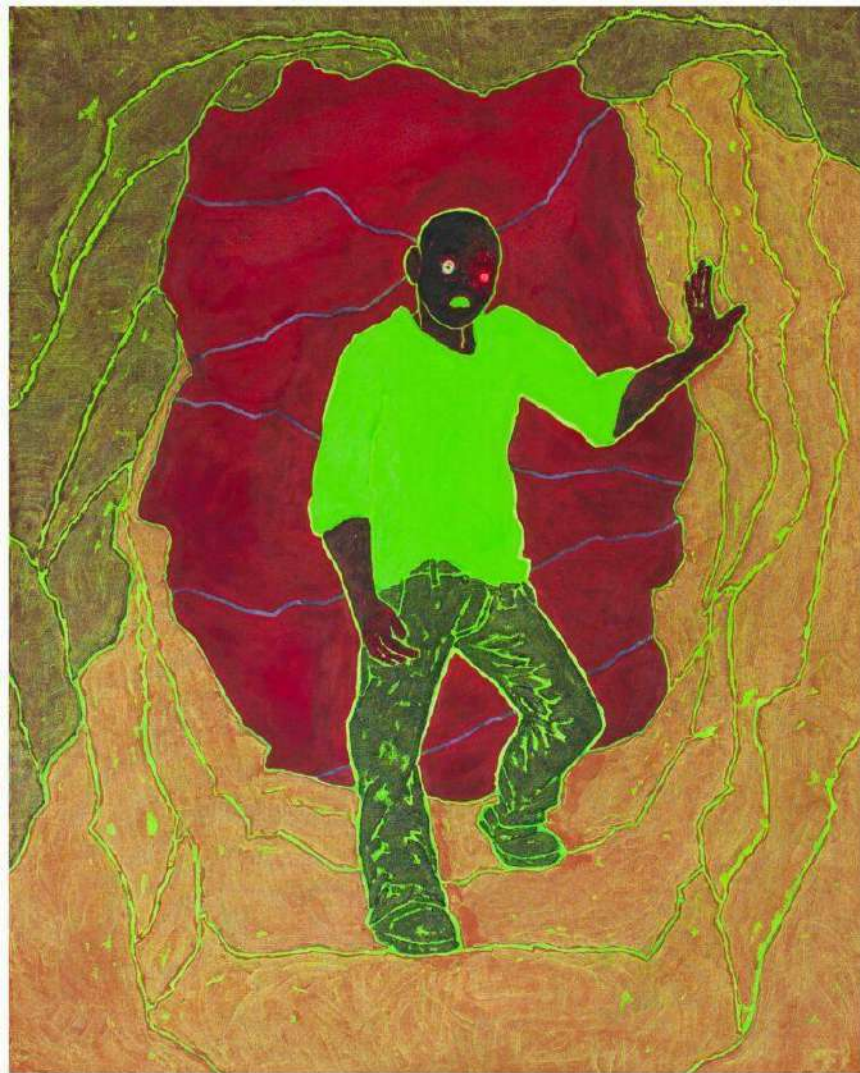




Go tswa ko ga Lowe, 2020
Oil, acrylic and shoe polish on canvas
50 x 40 in | 127 x 101.60 cm



Cave Rock Opera, 2021
Oil and Acrylic on canvas
322.58 x 258.06 in | 127 x 101.60 cm

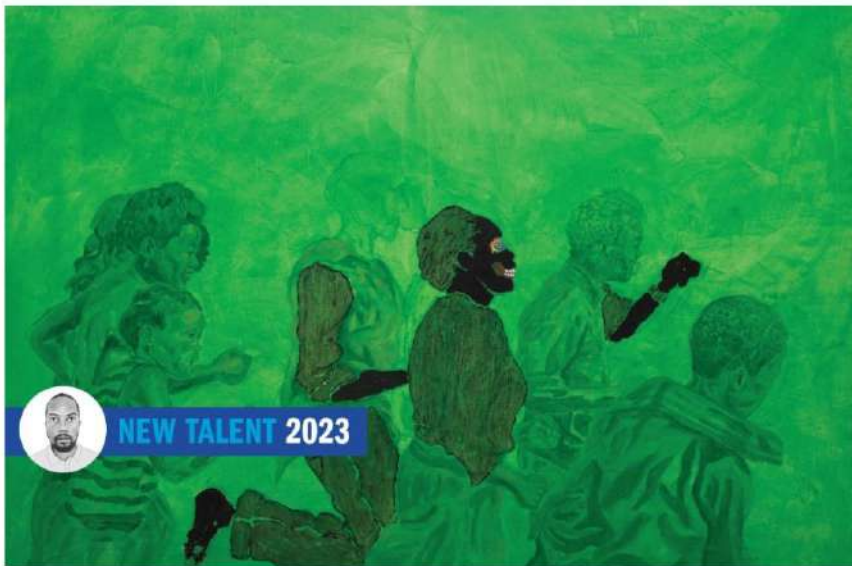


Descent to Zone, 2020
Shoe polish, oil, acrylic and collage on canvas
50 x 40 in | 127 x 101.6 cm

blackbody Begets a blackbody Begets a blackbody, 2020
Shoe polish, oil, acrylic and collage on canvas
50 x 40 in | 127 x 101.6 cm



Art in America



Thebe Phetogo: *blackbody Composite (In Protest)*, 2020
Courtesy KO Art Space, Lagos

Botswana-Based Artist Thebe Phetogo Paints with Shoe Polish to Subvert the History of Blackface



In Thebe Phetogo's paintings, acid-green backdrops offset spectral black figures that become all the more unsettling once you find out what they are made of: Phetogo renders them partially with shoe polish, the material once used by actors to put on blackface. Phetogo says it's that shoe polish that makes his figures "come out a certain way" and guides the disarming, disquieting beauty of his work. At the heart of this is a question: what does it mean to place blackness on a figure?

For Phetogo, the inquiry is a step removed from figuration or portraiture in the way it asks what it means to participate in an ongoing conversation that has been growing in volume. *A Portrait of the Subject Position at Onset* (2020), a painting that depicts his own face smudged with beetle-like daubs of shoe polish, features in "When We See Us: A Century of Black Figuration in Painting," a milestone exhibition currently on view at Cape Town's Zeitz MOCAA. Among other things, the show aspires toward "an internal evaluation of collective self-representation."

As a painter from Botswana operating within a Western-dominated discourse, Phetogo takes a bold approach to a style that might feel uncomfortable but serves, he says, as "an acknowledgment that all is not right." But this is not *all* Phetogo's paintings are about. He likes to travel through wormholes, such as in his "blackbody" series (2019-ongoing) that borrows its title from a physics term referring to a hypothetical perfect entity that absorbs all incident electromagnetic radiation.



The double entendre around *blackbody* helps establish Phetogo's interest in subverting expectations—as he does with his figures, which are immediately striking but far from idealized—while slowly building his self-referential network of ideas.

Phetogo's speculative approach continues in a new body of work titled "Propositions for the Origin of a blackbody," in which he leans further into figurative abstractions. *Proposition 5 - Zombie Figuration, Painting 2* (2022), which hangs beside his self-portrait in the Zeitz show, depicts a body turned inside-out with eyes on an otherwise featureless face, staring blankly ahead. Such work raises an intriguing question: Is it the subject of the portrait that classifies as the zombie, or the ghosts of figuration itself? - *Robin Scher, 25 July 2023*



Thebe Phetogo: *Material Need and Practical Effects, Painting 1*, 2021
Courtesy Guns & Rain, Johannesburg

The Washington Post



*Some of the 16 paintings in Thebe Phetogo's show at Von Ammon Co.
(Vivian Doering)*

Arranged in two rows, the 16 paintings in Thebe Phetogo's show at Von Ammon Co. bear a resemblance to a lineup of criminals. But the subjects of the Botswana artist's "Blackbody Rogues' Gallery" are too fantastical to be taken for the usual suspects. Some of their bodies appear to be made of loosely linked tubers, and bared teeth give a few of their faces a skull-like quality. One visage seems to have merged with a massive butterfly, to ominous effect.

All but two of the figures are posed on single-hue expanses that resemble TV or movie green screens — except in a more lurid shade that suggests some kind of corrosive chemical. The green is actually paint, but the purplish brown that represents flesh in many of the pictures is shoe polish. Phetogo uses that substance to invoke blackface, once used in American and European minstrel shows but also in Ghana's "concert party" performances. Several of these paintings depict African political or mythological figures who are probably unknown to D.C. gallery-goers. Yet the vehemence of Phetogo's work is universal. His pictures are as caustic as their acrid green backgrounds. — Mark Jenkins, 24 December 2021



AFRICANA_H.ORG



Blackbody Composite siren, 2020, courtesy Kó and the artist

Thebe Phetogo - Green is Black

Engaging with the historical economies of racist imagery through citation and repetition, his art shows how “visual referents circulating in different geographic and exhibitionary context generate their own image worlds,” countering the commodification or invisibility of black bodies.

Thebe Phetogo’s haunting paintings stun the viewer with their vivid green. Not one of the soft greens found in nature but mineral, chemical pigments redolent of the color of absinth and cobalt bromide. A bright artificial green, a poisonous, magic substance. A green that suffuses the paintings, challenges the eye and is a door to the invisible, the unacknowledged.

Phetogo will have his first solo show in the United States with Von Ammon Co in Washington, DC, in November, his third solo in a little more than a year, following *Ka Go Lowe* at Guns and Rain in Johannesburg in March and *Black Body Composites* at Kó in Lagos in November 2020. The artist, born in 1993 in Serowe, Botswana and currently based in Cape Town, South Africa, engages with the complex and deep tradition of Black representation in both novel and provocative ways.

Representation

Phetogo invokes chroma keying, the visual-effects technique that employs a uniformly colored screen as background to a subject on camera, thereby allowing for a different background to be added in post-production. In theory, chroma keying can work with any background color, but green and blue are commonly used because they are most distinct from human skin tones. The green screen is preferred for live television, since people often opt for blue clothing, and it has therefore become the metonym for the technique.

Phetogo shares the green screen metaphor with another rising star, Sandra Mujinga, a Norwegian artist born in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Like Phetogo, Mujinga interrogates the fraught tradition of the representation of the black body and the invisibility of black skin. In Mujinga’s words, “Green is ultimately Black.”

In an interview with the poet Olamiju Fajemisin, who remarked that “people describe black as an ‘absence’ of color, an ‘absence’ of light,” Mujinga interjected that “it’s the opposite.” (1) Starting from the premise that black is the combination of all colors, the artist zeroed in on the duality that interests her and that also informs Phetogo’s practice: black is everything (all colors), but black is also emptiness depending on the (mis)perception of others. Or, in the words of the narrator of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*: “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.” (2)

The green screen is a perfect vehicle for this duality crucial to black representation since it can potentially represent everything, “all colors,” but is also empty, signifying absence. The fertile metaphor of the green screen explains how two artists working in distinctly different media—Phetogo’s paintings versus Mujinga’s sculpture, video, and installations—nevertheless converge on the use of green to interrogate the (in)visibility of the black body.

While the green screen is a key metaphor, Phetogo’s paintings also draw their power from the unsettling emotions bright green pigments can convey. Especially when associated with skin tone, green is a signal of illness of the mind or body, often linked to the absorption of noxious substances. From the Impressionists’ absinth drinkers to the Blaue Reiter and Die Brücke painters to Edvard Munch, green has been associated with a break from classical painting and exploration of the margins. The disturbance created by the bright green pigment continues to be critical and generative today, as in the work of Salman Toor, for whom green is “glamorous,” “poisonous,” “intoxicating,” and “nocturnal,” creating a third space that allows new subject positions and identities to emerge. (3)

Beyond the green screen, Phetogo has also been inspired by the concept of “black body” in physics, where it refers to an ideal object that absorbs all the light that falls on it, thus becoming invisible to measuring instruments.(4) However, physics’ black bodies are theoretical constructs, not a reality: the invisibility of anybody in the universe comes down to a limitation of perception. Phetogo explores this blindness in the series of works he presented in *Blackbody Composites*.

Rewriting the narrative of blackness as absence of light also connects Phetogo to an important tradition of Black representation and recalls Glenn Ligon’s account of his conception of *Warm Broad Glow* (2005), his first neon work. When visiting the workshop of a neighbor who was fabricating neon signs, Ligon asked whether it would be possible to produce neon letters in black. It wasn’t, he was told, because black is the absence of light. (5) Ligon proceeded to come up with a process that enabled him to create black neon letters for his work. In the words of the narrator of Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, explaining how he tapped a power line to light his underground living: “I’ve illuminated the blackness of my invisibility.” (6)

Invisibility

Ellison's novel has been a key literary point of reference for many artists, beginning with Gordon Parks' photographs for Life magazine of Ellison himself, to Faith Ringgold, David Hammons, Kerry James Marshall, and more recently Jeff Wall, Glenn Ligon, and Hank Willis Thomas to name a few major figures. It is not surprising to see their fingerprints in Phetogo's work alongside the strong overtones of Ellison's novel.

Phetogo references Marshall in one of the works for his MA thesis. Phetogo's *Portrait of a blackbody as his Material Self* pays homage to Marshall's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self*. Marshall questioned the invisibility of black skin through his black-on-black technique, demonstrating that the richness of the palette of blacks allows him to paint with the same freedom as any other colors.(7) Marshall himself was preceded knowingly or unknowingly by Faith Ringgold's *Black Light Series* from 1967. Two portraits from Ringgold's series in particular, *Man and Woman*, use the chromatic strategy of the black background from which the color of the skin and the face emerge through a call to attention and close looking. At the end of *Invisible Man* the narrator refuses to "strive toward colorlessness" and affirms that his "world has become one of infinite possibilities." Phetogo's answer to the black-on-black technique is to place the black body against the green screen: a negation of blackness as an absence of light, relocating it against the background of infinite possibility, and affirming painting "as a stand-in for history and the world at-large."(8)

Minstrelsy

The black body has endured not only violence and erasure, but also attempts at abasement through gross caricature, another aspect of Black representation that Phetogo explores with vigor. This thread, too, can be traced back to Ellison: "My eyes fell upon a pair of crudely carved and polished bones, 'knocking bones' used to accompany music at country dances, used in black face minstrels; the flat ribs of a cow, a steer or a sheep, flat bones that gave off a sound, when struck, like heavy castanets (had he been a minstrel?)." (9)

Phetogo's signature use of black shoe polish to paint his figures against the green screen, as well as the googly eyes and exaggerated white teeth of their disturbing smiles, signal another troubling tradition of black representation, blackface. A work like *Portrait of a blackbody as his Material Self* engages directly with blackface—yet disrupts its meaning given that the Motswana artist is interrogating the tradition from the space of the African continent. As Phetogo notes, minstrelsy as practiced in some countries in Africa did not carry a derogatory meaning. Black American minstrel artists came to Ghana and Nigeria in the 1920s, inspiring the Concert Parties form of theater. (10) The rich web of references in Phetogo's paintings thus both place him in dialogue with the tradition of questioning and reinventing the canon of Black representation, while affirming the multiplicity of black artists' geographical, cultural, and subject positions and confronting viewers with their racist prejudices and histories.

The green and the minstrel-like characters (bright green, googly eyes, carnivalesque attire) are strongly reminiscent of the paintings of James Ensor (*The Intrigue*, *The Strange Masks*). In the crowd of Ensor's *Christ Entry Into Brussels* in 1889 one sees two characters in blackface in the background. There are also references to Congo masks in the painting.⁽¹¹⁾ Ensor draws on the grotesque aspect of masks to offer a satire of social convention, also drawing from the traditions of carnival of the Low Countries, where blackface characters (Zwarte Piet) had been part of Saint Nicholas celebrations since the middle of the nineteenth century.⁽¹²⁾

If the uncanny is a return of the repressed, then Phetogo invites us to refamiliarize ourselves with the tired and violent stereotypes of Black representation, as if to exorcize them. Engaging with the historical economies of racist imagery through citation and repetition, his art shows how “visual referents circulating in different geographic and exhibitionary context generate their own image worlds,”⁽¹³⁾ countering the commodification or invisibility of black bodies.

Phetogo plays with multiple registers that lend his works their strong evocative power. His richly layered practice invites inquiry and reflection, while his keen awareness of historical context opens up cultural and historiographical depths of meaning. – Jean-Christophe Maur, 11 May 2021



ARTTHROB_



Thebe Phetogo, How they made Rain, 2019. Oil, acrylic and shoe polish on canvas

Rainbow Scale: Thebe Phetogo in conversation with Thulile Gamedze

The following is a collaboratively edited transcript of a conversation between Thebe Phetogo and Thulile Gamedze that took place on the 10th of March 2021 in Parkhurst, Johannesburg, at around 13:00.

Thulile Gamedze: One thing that I was thinking about when I was looking at your artworks just before, was Westworld.

Thebe Phetogo: Oh yeah, I was a big fan.

TG: Me too. Could you say why a Westworld fan would also be a fan of your artworks?

TP: I think so. There were definitely some things that, when I was watching it, I was like, “ah – I want that for my work”. I think the links were most apparent back when I was more focused on ‘worldbuilding’ as a tack. It was stuff like when they test for fidelity in the hosts... The idea of ‘proof of concept’ – an ongoing, doing-as-you-go, that peek behind-the-scenes as the actual grand narrative keeps proceeding... you’re kinda testing, fixing, adjusting as you go, all within a controlled environment.

TG: That draft idea is really interesting. That the hosts become composed of the repair and problem-solving and ‘wiping’ processes they undergo, which go wrong in many ways... They fix the bugs, change the storylines, and then put them back into the landscape for a new start, but it’s a pretence at the return to origin, because in actual fact there’s this deep repression of memory – as code – that enters with the hosts into the controlled landscapes...

TP: That controlled environment for me back then was the idea of postcolonial Botswana. Taking it as a draft, a living document – something like that. I was thinking about the founding myths of Botswana – some of it wasn’t stuff I believed, or stuff I hadn’t cared to interrogate. My painting project has been really useful in confronting my own assumptions, like “this is true, this is history”. Rethinking these things was interesting. That project was called ‘BOGASATSWANA: Rebuilding the Boat while Sailing’. That’s really where the Westworld thing was probably the strongest.

TG: One part of the work in your new show ‘Ko ga Lowe’ is portraiture: the composites and the grids with all the faces?

TP: Yeah, there's different touchpoints for those. That format of grid is something I've been thinking about for a while, from selecting a character in a video game, or the posters with the various haircuts at a barbershop... and much more recently, a Zoom screen.

TG: It also reminds me of once when I had to help with a police sketch of someone who had mugged me. The policeman came to my house and we were sitting at the table in my flat, and he had this folder full of templates to construct the picture of the mugger – hair, facial hair, eyes, noses, mouths, face shapes... We started with hair, but the options in the folder were all based on sort of 1970s white european possibilities, so there were not any black hairstyles or black hair textures – completely at odds with how criminality is profiled. It was just these grids and grids of old school white hairstyles, and pages of different white criminal styles.... Kind of funny.

TP: That police portrait grid thing – it's called a 'rogues' gallery'. And that's actually my next show, what I'm working on during my residency at The Bag Factory. There's a work called *Prelude to Rogues' Gallery* in my current solo exhibition.

TG: This seems like those clues they bury in video games or Disney movies – easter eggs! You put easter eggs in your shows?

TP: I think so, actually. But it might not be a super conscious thing when I do.

TG: Do you play video games?

TP: Not really. I read a lot of comics growing up though. I don't play video games, I'm not that techy, I'm not that sciencey, so I just sort of take the stuff that's interesting to me from these different fields and use them in the most pop way I can.

TG: You take up the physics notion of a 'blackbody' in your work...

"A black body or blackbody is an idealized physical body that absorbs all incident electromagnetic radiation, regardless of frequency or angle of incidence. The name "black body" is given because it absorbs radiation in all frequencies, not because it only absorbs: a black body can emit black-body radiation."

TP: It was just this definition that originally struck me – the title, definition, and only a little bit of the 'actual' thing. I really bastardised the concept and then retrofit it into something that I could paint with, because I was looking for approaches, or reasons to paint the figure at the time – I had no reason to just paint a person or a landscape. I was looking for a way to be able to enter painting...

TG: I appreciate the idea that no object fulfills the ideal of a blackbody in real life but that lots of things, like stars, “behave approximately like blackbodies.”² I can easily see that this would be interesting from a/our bad theory perspectives... In physics, becoming a blackbody is a hyper-physical process and is about how much heat there is, how much radiation something can swallow – this is a ‘real’, almost fleshy process. Whereas the process of becoming racialised, becoming black, is this motion away from flesh, away from undifferentiated humanity, and towards a construct or concept. A ‘blackbody’ becoming ‘black body’ would be a disembodiment process. What does it mean to visualise this transformation? And in your work, what is the base-body – the first green body that is the one becoming ‘black’?

TP: Initially, it was that kind of one-to-one relationship with the blackbody concept, but along the way it has become looser, and I think that’s a good thing probably. I’ve had different ideas about how to define this thing but I’ve just decided to do all of them at the same time. A recurring thing is the possibility of the base or template figure jumping off from the green screen, sort of like a performer. One way to read this is through a theatre lens, with me in some sort of stage designer or make-up artist-type role, where I just put blackness on these figures. So that is one of the things, and it also relates to minstrelsy and the ‘concert party’ thing...

TG: The concert party is a Ghanain tradition of blackface performance-

TP: My initial interest in minstrelsy was never about privileging a white gaze, as ridiculous as that might sound. Although I wrote in my thesis about blackface in the ‘classic’ sense, finding out about concert party and the history of black vaudeville performers – blackface performers – in America, just clicked with something I was trying to do... Layering an identity or the representation of an identity. So the green figures are the base layer and then you put on this different timbre of blackness.

TG: A strange thing, black blackface – to appropriate your own identity on top of your identity?

TP: Initially I wanted to use this context of blackface as a base and then to develop it from there, so making my adoption of it explicit at first and then the approach would develop. I figured that the logical conclusion of this way of working might lead to an end point that didn’t resemble the original thing. But the green screen thing – it seems different to use that as a base, rather than something like the history of blackface, which is a real life thing. But in a way, they are both systems of representation to me for some reason...

TG: I suppose the green screen is an open-ended system, and by thinking about black face as a representation form beyond white gazing, you’re opening that system up as well. If I think like you, then it’s systems on top of systems. The green screen backgrounds have the seeming effect of making it possible to lift the images out of their scenes, as if you could move them onto other surfaces.

TP: I am trying to get at a figure that’s specific to the painting, or specific to the painted world. Beyond the outside references in my works, you always have to reconcile with the figure in the painting, with that as its place, influenced or informed by other things, but ultimately as a thing of pigment on surface.

TG: You are trying to avoid your figures being swallowed by a single piece of flat ‘content’?

TP: Yeah, the main idea was for a different read of the blackbody in painting.

TG: Okay, so you’re interacting with different methods of producing blackness, rather than one static, legible meaning. Even when we are seeing blackface, for instance, we’re having to understand it as a flexible index, related to the history of concert parties, and also against the shifty backdrop of the green screen, where nothing is yet resolved?

TP: Yes, even just the possibility of something different...

TG: In your paintings, your land is almost always drawn in contour, with these colourful layers. You can always see into or inside the land. I think it’s glorious. Is this a specific reference, or has it just become an invented aesthetic symbol for your land depictions?

TP: It is a reference to graphs and infographics. Just putting the colour into it, to kind of be informational, but without knowing what the information is or without there actually being information. With the idea of the informational – do you know ‘the rainbow scale’?

TG: I think so.

TP: Apparently it doesn’t intrinsically mean anything for its intended purposes – it’s used for different things across various fields of science. But the people who use it say it means nothing – it’s a bad system and it doesn’t accurately relay what it’s supposed to relay. People have tried to come up with other kinds of systems for this kind of infographic type.

TG: It makes it seem like perhaps colours would refer to different amounts of temperature or something?

TP: Yes exactly, but apparently it’s a kind of false and unreliable narrator. I picked up on that faulty system, which I liked.

TG: We were looking at your ‘Ko ga Lowe’ paintings together, and you said that the first one you made for the show was the figure with a baby figure inside it. And I think the baby figure looks white.

TP: Looks white? How? You mean the pinkness?

TG: Yes. This struck me in a funny way. Tell me about that...

TP: (Laughs) I was going for part of that rainbow scale, and I don’t think there’s many oranges or yellows in it, so I guess it could look white.

TG: It was also interesting to me, beyond the pinkness, that the baby wasn't green – the base?

TP: That relates to the bastardisation of the concept that the physics blackbody serves, maybe as one of the 'origins'. With the rainbow-scale baby, it could be showing a kind of absorption of radiation, the trauma or force that makes the figures go through these phases, from green, to that thermal quality, to blackness. And the title A blackbody Begets a blackbody Begets a blackbody, cites three blackbodies, but you only see two in the painting, so then who is the third one? Either me – am I the blackbody, because I am the person who made it? Or is it the person looking? I think that's when I wanted to become an unreliable narrator with this whole 'origin' concept, so I made that as a potential origin, and then some other ideas as other potential origins.

TG: There is a painting showing a figure with a doek sitting in a cave – is that the Lowe cave? In reading on these sites, I also came across the name Matsieng.

TP: Yes. It's confusing because there is a site in Botswana that has become known as the 'footprint of Matsieng' – it's a tourist site now. You can see a rock formation that kind of looks like a footprint, and there's actual animal prints around it, so it was supposed to be where the first man emerged from. But technically that is the site of the cave of Lowe, it's just become popularly known as 'Matsieng's footprint'.

TG: In another of the cave images that's titled Go tswa ko ga Lowe, there are teeth, which re-frame the whole composition of this cave of origin as being basically inside someone's throat...

TP: I think it was just a simple thing of the mouth of a cave, so I'd have teeth there... I guess also, if I'll be frank, it's a remnant from when I was trying to invent some symbols back in my master's work – the tooth was one of them.

TG: Would you say you're addicted to painting?

TP: Probably; unfortunately or fortunately. It's just something I decided, like 'oh, that's my thing' – I started painting in Botswana. I'd been drawing since childhood but at the school I went to, there wasn't really painting; there was drawing, or collage, or simple things – no sculpture or photography or stuff like that. I really latched on to this idea later, while I was in undergrad. I was doing media studies-

TG: Media studies! So that's where all this comes from?

TP: Yeah, I did Media Studies and a minor in English Lit, so Media Studies was about focusing on journalism, because for a long time I wanted to be a writer. It was first the art thing, then the writing thing, then back to the art thing – specifically painting – which no one really guided me to. I have no real reason to be interested in this, I just am. This media background may be why I'm interested in these sort of lineage-type things... I'm not trained in art – I just observed and picked it up, as a Motswana guy from this outsider position, but everything is wide open to do what I want... The things that I make are often informed by this position.

TG: I resonate with this wide openness. I loved reading your thesis. I was thinking about how artists' writing in the academic context is treated as a footnote to the 'art', as opposed to something that is interchangeable or in some sort of circular union with it. But reading can open work in a different way - you can really acknowledge it as part of a whole universe...

TP: Yeah. Like you're saying, the idea of work having a world or worlds around it that inform its making - I think I may be more interested in that, than in making work 'about' stuff. This makes the "tell me about your work" question a nightmare for me, and goes against the convention that if you can't sum up your ideas simply, you don't understand them well enough - or they're bad. But honestly, the idea that my practice is possibly a 'bad draft' excites me way more than it discourages me. - Thulile Gamedze, 8 April 2021



ART X
AGENDA



Thebe Phetogo, *blackbody Composite (Back to back)*, 2020. Oil, acrylic, shoe polish, and collage on canvas, 102.9 x 88.9 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist and kó Gallery, Lagos.

In more ordinary times, the high season for Lagos's art scene runs through October and November. This year, as in other cities across the world, major events have been scaled back and directed towards a local audience, with an emphasis on smaller physical events and online presentations. But disruption in Lagos has not been solely due to the pandemic. In the first weeks of October, the city was brought to a standstill by the decentralized social movement *#EndSARS*, which saw Nigerian youths take to the streets across the country to demand an end to police brutality and bad governance. Members of the art community mobilized, joining protests on the ground and drawing outside attention through their social media channels. Following the fatal shooting of at least twelve protesters on October 20 by the Nigerian military, the art community has shown solidarity: postponements and program modifications as direct response.

The major events in the city's calendar include the LagosPhoto Festival, ART X Lagos art fair, and (every odd year) the Lagos Biennial, all spearheaded by artists, cultural producers, and entrepreneurs who have, over the past decade, developed innovative, context-responsive platforms for the city's contemporary art scene. The first week of November traditionally serves as the city's unofficial art week, creating a dialogue across venues on the mainland including nonprofits Centre for Contemporary Art Lagos and Museum of Contemporary Art Lagos, and commercial and alternative spaces—among them Rele Art Gallery, kó Gallery, African Artists' Foundation, Omenka Gallery, Art Twenty One, Treehouse, and hFactor—on Victoria Island, Ikoyi, and Lagos Island. Following the protests ART X Lagos was postponed, as a press release stated, "out of respect for the lives lost," and is now set to take place as an entirely virtual fair in December. A new addition, New Nigeria Studios, will showcase works documenting the recent protests by photographers including Etinosa Yvonne, David Exodus, Ifebusola Shotunde, Grace Ekpu, Anthony Obayomi and other recipients of the fair's funded initiative for 100 photographers at the frontlines of the *#EndSARS* movement.

Lagos Roundup

At the newly inaugurated kó gallery, founded by Kavita Chellaram, collector and founder of Arthouse Contemporary, Thebe Phetogo's "blackbody Composites" explores figuration and a politics of blackness drawing on the artist's experiences growing up in his native Botswana, and on time spent in Lagos earlier this year as an Arthouse resident. The exhibition takes as a starting point the scientific "blackbody"—in physics, defined as a surface capable of absorbing light of every wavelength—and goes on to reference liberation struggles against apartheid in South Africa, Nollywood, Igbo masquerades, organized labor exploitation, and nineteenth-century minstrelsy traditions in the US. Phetogo paints with oil, acrylic, and shoe polish, the latter reclaimed from its history of use in exaggerated caricatures of blackness by non-black performers. By connecting past and present injustices directed at Black folk, these works highlight that oppression is cyclical, and permeates every aspect of modern life. Paintings depict black figures against vivid green backgrounds resembling the chroma key screens used to create visual effects in digital filmmaking. In *blackbody Composite (In Protest)* (2020), a group of men, women, and children take a knee with their fists raised in a stance now synonymous with protest movements from Black Lives Matter to #EndSARS. On the other hand, *blackbody Composite (Back to back)* references the movement of Igbo masquerades, as incorporated into works by Nigerian Modernist Ben Ewonwu, an artist whose work inspired Phetogo during his Lagos residency. The resulting portrait conveys the gestures of a masquerade whilst seemingly emerging from behind a green screen, as if moving between real and imaginary worlds.

At the nearby Rele Gallery, Tonia Nneji's exhibition "You May Enter" invites the viewer into an intimate engagement with female pain via the artist's own experiences of living with Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome, a hormonal disorder common among women of reproductive age. The walls are painted a deep red in one gallery and yellow in the other, exchanging the sterility of the white cube for a warm and contemplative environment well-suited to these highly personal paintings. Exploring Christian belief systems and communities of care formed around the experience of emotional and physical trauma, the works feature figures painted in indigo and midnight blue hues (a combination of acrylics and oils) who tenderly embrace, or gaze contemplatively. In *See Through 2*, a forlorn female face looks out at the viewer with her hand on her head, as if in defeat, or disbelief. A standout work, *Sooner or Later*, sees two abstracted figures embrace, fusing bodies and limbs while seated on stools draped in Ankara fabrics emblazoned with popular patterns and the logos of local church societies. These reference the artist's search for religious-based cures, as well as the valuable commodity of the textiles Nneji's mother sold to finance her daughter's treatment. The fabric also reintroduces the artist's recurring use of forms of shroud—as concealment, a place to hide, or as a protective layer to bodies in the process of healing. Nneji's powerful portraits make visible the pain women are too often encouraged to hide away.

Like ART X, LagosPhoto moved online for its 11th edition and launched “Home Museum,” a concept proposing possibilities for citizen-led and inclusive future museums. The idea was developed from ongoing research into restitution and museum collections in Nigeria, led by the founder of LagosPhoto, Azu Nwagbogu, and curator, publisher, and cultural historian Clémentine Deliss, with guest curators Oluwatoyin Sogbesan and Asya Yaghmurian, while collective Birds of Knowledge are responsible for the site’s design. The result is a digital museum, exploring expanded notions of home through the documentation of objects from around the world by over two hundred participants from the African continent, the US, South America, China, Russia, and Europe. Participants were selected through an open call in the summer to photograph objects of their choice that are of personal, familial, or historic importance—walking sticks, cameras, watches, vases, old coins, photographs, a lantern, clothing. These are presented alongside a short text describing their reason for selection and their significance.

Discussion of Lagos’s art scene in recent years has often heralded a renaissance: new institutions, exciting art being produced in the city, complemented by auction-shattering prices for Nigerian and its diaspora artists. The #EndSARS movement has already seen new, socially engaged artforms emerge, among them a collective live painting intervention initiated by Chigozie Obi and Kéhindé at the Lekki protest sites, and more via social media. Rather than Lagos being treated as yet another stop on the long list of international art-world destinations, it remains to be seen whether such initiatives garner wider attention, catalyzed by the renewed political awakening of young people and activists fighting for Nigeria’s social, cultural, and political future. – Jareh Das, 20 November 2020

ARTHROB_



Thebe Phetogo, *Untitled*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 170 x 135 cm

Subjective Nationhood: 'The Botswana Pavilion: No Return' at Gallery MOMO

With nationality and nationalism, comes baggage. In the places where our varying identities intersect, some chosen and some given, there is often friction. This friction seems particularly poignant for the artist, traditionally constructed as existing and working from a place beyond the mainstream, as an outside observer or as a world unto themselves. This has often been pointed out in regard to the nationalistic nature of the Venice Biennale, structured upon geographic borders. 'The Botswana Pavilion: No Return', an artist-run project show presented at Gallery MOMO, used this friction for its generative potential.

The group exhibition held within a single room within the gallery, included works by Thero Makepe, LegakwanaLeo Makgekgenene, Kim Karabo Makin and Thebe Phetogo. Like many countries within the Global South, Botswana has never presented a national pavilion at the Venice Biennale, an event banally referred to as the 'art world Olympics'. In positioning the exhibition as the Botswana Pavilion, we are offered a complicated occasion of national pride. At the same time that it asserts the national identity of the exhibiting artists, it also begs the question: who decides what art can function as an 'official representation' of a country's cultural landscape? Can art ever represent a national identity, is there such a thing as a national identity particularly after Globalisation, who decides what this identity is and which art should represent it?

These questions extend from this small, independently-organised exhibition in Cape Town, to the main event in Venice. The answer in Venice is often given by the government or publically-run cultural institutions. By nature, this propagates the 'mainstream', both cultural and economic, that art is supposedly meant to resist. Even where the chosen artists are seemingly radical, their counter-cultural nature is somewhat neutralised, if not in concept or appearance then by way of being sanctioned. And so, 'The Botswana Pavilion: No Return' begins on a bold note.

A common theme within the exhibition is a strong sense of medium and materiality. Sound, painting, assemblage sculpture, photography and photomontage are all present, with each artwork appearing to experiment with the expressive capabilities of their medium. The effect of Makepe's photography book and sound work was particularly memorable. Titled *Fly Machine/ Mogaka* (2018), a book of enigmatic, aviation-related photographs is paired with an evocative soundscape. Combined, a film-like narrative is created, described in the exhibition text as "*a memorial and tribute to Major Cliff Manyuni, a Botswana Defence Force BDF pilot, who met his untimely death during a BDF Day rehearsal.*" The work taps into memories and fears of flying to create an experience that is deceptively simple and surprisingly full.

Makgekgenene's apocalyptic photomontages are so multi-layered and imbued with apparent symbolism that I left feeling as if I had missed out on a crucial 'inside-joke'. They gave enough to feel like signifiers, but not much more. Part of what makes up any social grouping is a sense of there being an inside and an outside, and these works emphasised that fact through their cryptic imagery. What is apparent is that they represent a reaction to varying forms of institutional power. Set within a foreboding, horror movie atmosphere of glowing red skies, animals are dressed in the costumes of power, as wealthy politicians, police officers, and priests. The diamonds that underpin much of Botswana's economy are scattered throughout. The effect is Animal Farm-esque (Animal Safari?). I am reminded of the 'lizard people' trope that exists within online conspiracies — reptilian aliens disguised as humans in suits, puppet-mastering society's oppression by the upper classes. The pessimistic, fearful feeling conveyed by Makgekgenene's photomontage series is relevant in the contemporary moment with its political absurdities.

The fearful, paranoid feeling expressed in the works by Makgekgenene and Makepe are shared in a more abstract way in Thebe Phetogo's paintings, created through a combination of oil, acrylic, shoe polish and collage on canvas. A disconcerting mash-up of geometric shapes and fluid lines, and biological, humanoid forms and machines set in murky primary and secondary colours, the paintings give off waves of impending doom. Kim Karabo Makin's assemblage sculptures are less obviously connected to the fear present in the rest of the exhibition, but they do share its emphasis on materiality. Makin's intricately woven pantyhose sculptures appear to comment on the ambiguities of race and immigration in works titled *Racialism* (2018) and *_____ bag* (2018).

While the exhibition does not explicitly address what it means to be Motswana, the geographical context feels present throughout. In the contemporary moment, with its emphasis on relativity and subjectivities, it feels natural to provide the following answer: all identities which exist within a nation are representative of that nation's identity. And while it may appear to be an arbitrary answer, it is an important one within the sociopolitical context of fear and uncertainty which can be felt throughout the exhibition, and which increasingly feels universal. On some level, national identities and rising nationalisms are themselves arbitrary by nature. The exhibition works to make nationhood feel subjective. – Khanya Mashabela, 5 July 2019



between 10ands

Thebe Phetogo's Figurative Paintings Acknowledge the Unseen

“Being an African in the 21st century, I am exposed to at least two pervading ideas in my own life; my own cultural background and Western thought. What happens when these ideas confront each other? What happens if someone rejects them completely?” asks self-taught Botswana-based painter [Thebe Phetogo](#).

His work references both Western and Motswana symbols, creating a dichotomy between different worldviews. Figurative subjects are brightly rendered and interrogate how culture, politics and history affect personal narratives. The unseen, unsaid and unacknowledged inspire him most of all.

“My work explores the construction of identity and narratives at an individual level. The constructs we allow to inform the way we view ourselves and how we live our lives. For example, all societies have their own notions of culture and gender and what it entails... I try to play with accepted ‘truths’ and ask how and why they came to be so, without necessarily trying to give or demand any particular answer,” he explains. – Gabriella Pinto, 5 July 2019