Nelson Makamo's Representations of African Vernacular Rooted Images of Black Children

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Abstract

My paper offers an interpretative approach using visual analysis. In doing so, the paper contributes a discourse on artworks by the South African artist, Nelson Makamo, and focuses on the images drawn from black children. And "the predominant theme, black child, is examined as African vernacular rooted images. He uses the motif of the African child to reflect on different" (James 2020, p.1) lived experiences of black children in South Africa. Thus, his paintings and drawings were selected and "analysed for their formal content and contexts, and the discussion is framed by the insight gained through interviews with the artist" (James 2020, p.1). While several ideas are reflected in each of the works analysed, the works highlight the contemporary social issue of homelessness experienced by rural-urban migrants, the early training of a black child in carrying out responsibility, the socio-ethical humanism in African communities, especially in the upbringing of black African child, and the effects of technology on regard for African cultural values in a young African child who adopts headphone in the postcolonial era. Through these, it is argued that Makamo's representations of "black African children engage a discourse that contributes to global contemporaneity" (James 2020, p.1).

Keywords: Black Children, Images, African Vernacular, Makamo, Contemporary art

Introduction

Who is Nelson Makamo? He is a contemporary South African artist, born in 1982, in Nylstroom (now Mondimolle), Limpopo province, South Africa. He moved to Johannesburg to join the Artist Proof Studio (APS) in January 2003, where he trained as an artist and obtained a diploma in Printmaking, Marketing, and Product Design in 2006. From that time onward, Makamo lives and practices art full-time in Johannesburg. Besides, the Artist Proof Studio (APS) was established in 1991 by Kim Berman and Nhlanhla Xaba. In tracing the historical circumstances that led to its establishment, Berman points out that 'Artist Proof Studio (APS), a community printing studio in Johannesburg, was founded as a response to the challenge of building democracy in post-apartheid South Africa' (2011, p. 52). The institution was a democratic space, an open, non-racial centre, to redress the adverse effects of racialism created by apartheid. The training is focused on the creative potentials of the individual artist. Since its inception, the institution has trained several notable black artists. The training is subsidised for young artists who come from financially or educationally challenged circumstances without access to University. Although Makamo was taught there, his painting skills were self-taught, and at some point, older artists influenced him in defining his focus. Makamo had a patron at APS who supported him as a student from 2003 and arranged his first solo exhibition at the Obert Melrose Gallery while he was a 4th-year intern at APS in 2005 (which was a sell-out). He worked in the Gallery at APS until he was able to be self-supporting. In his professional practice, Makamo has participated in several groups and solo exhibitions nationally and internationally.[1]

This paper is an interpretative approach using visual analysis. In doing this, the article provides a discourse on the African vernacular rooted images of black children in Makamo's art produced between 2007 and 2016. Vernacular is defined as "that which is domestic and indigenous and is often taken to mean the language, art, or culture that is specific to and representative of a place and time" (James 2020, p.2). But, in this article, the images of black children in his art are analysed as African vernacular not because they signify the practice of any indigenous African art or its continuation (James 2020, p.1). Rather, it is to theorise how the images are deeply rooted in Africa. This approach is significant in contributing new insight into understanding the lived experiences of black African children in South Africa. Such objectification of black African children's experiences in the art may inspire people when seeking a new society in South Africa. That is because art is a fair politics that helps us

to reflect, liberate and challenge. To this end, five artworks which comprised of paintings and drawings were selected, these include; *Somewhere I Belong* (2010), *Moment Alone* (2011), *Smiles* (2015), *I belong to the World* (2016), and *Young Soul* (2016). These works were interpreted through visual analysis. Another focus is on his influence, frame of reference, knowledge base, ideological stances, and philosophy. In doing this, the following research questions were used to loop the analysis. Can the vernacular images of black children represented in Makamo's art be analysed as African? What aims do the interpretations of his works convey to the audience?

Through formal analysis and cultural history methodologies, this paper analyses the images of black African children represented in Makamo's works. Visual hermeneutics theory was also adopted by returning to cultural history as a significant step in understanding the categories of the present experiences framed in each art. To justify the combination of these methods, it can be argued that methods are combined to achieve richness in interpretations (Hannula et al. 2005). In doing this in each work, formal analysis was employed in analysing the visual elements and their possible effects on viewers, and the cultural history method was adopted in situating each oeuvre in the African-centred history, it recalls. That is because the cultural history is imperative, not merely in giving context to the African vernacular-rooted images but in searching for the true identity and the actual meaning found primarily in their past. The paper also provides the artist with a voice by relying on interviews to analyse his works and authorised claims.

Through art, Makamo does not just demonstrate sensitisation with his South African environment but interprets the African experiences of black children through his eyes as part of those experiences. That is to exercise impact on the viewers by calling forth responses. To affirm this view, Ashraf Jamal (2021) argues that "What immediately strikes one is emotion – Makamo emotes, draws one into the theatre of the moment. But what is more striking is the quality of feeling". It can be argued that not every viewer may identify with the quality of feeling Jamal speaks of, as it depends on the viewer's cultural background. However, the striking response could be because his works are not detached from the social realities of those children, thus life-affirming. Makamo (2017) points out that "I reflect on what it takes to be an African child in the contemporary era, and visualises how the black child may also symbolise the present and the future of Africa". His stance suggests that although he focuses on constructing the African identity of the black child, he embraces a pan-Africanist

perspective as he reflects on the many characteristics of the African worldview on black children.

That he continues to represent black African children in art, "is for every adult to relate with them, because the present experiences of those children, mirrors the past childhood of most adults".[2] Even though Makamo believes that adults can easily relate to his works, the interpretations of the ideas would largely depend on the cultural background of the viewers. Despite focusing on diverse themes on the black child, Ashraf Jamal (2021) argues that "Makamo is best known for his portraits of bespectacled children". A development Jamal sees as "an aspirational sign [that] is the inevitable by-product of hype". If this is "hype", then it aims to reconstruct the image of the black child in Africa and the world over.

In tracing the historical trajectory of the influence of black children on him, it all began when he was introduced to older black South African artists. According to Makamo (2017),

> When I was introduced to the artworks of George Pemba, David Koloane, among other South African artists, I discovered myself. I observed that they depicted a lot of visual forms that reflect African societies, and I said to myself, I can use similar visual language in communicating my experiences and cultural environment in a language everybody can understand.[3]

Apart from the initial influence older artists and their works had on him, Makamo observes that "another major factor that influences me is that, when I spend time with an African child, I am inspired to reflect on memories of my childhood". It is for this reasons his works contain no dissociative complex with the social realities of black children. Thus, he represents different themes on black children. He reconstructs some of his past childhood experiences and hopes to convey ideas about the struggles, pains, history, and cultures of black children in South Africa. But Makamo's art is not only about the pains of black children but also their joys. In expressing this view, he points out that some of his works "reflect black children playing, sitting, or walking, which signal attempts to move on in life". In addition, the moods of black African children also influence him. Through his art, he is focused on relaying social and political commentaries not merely about children but symbolically, a continent that is hopefully moving forward.[4] On the other hand, he seeks to write a visual history of black children in South Africa and Africa in general. Similar visual representations of images with

roots in Africa are evident in earlier black South African artists like Lucky Sibiya, Azariah Mbatha, Dan Rakgoathe, and several others.

In discussing the ideas he represents on black children, Makamo notes that in some works, "the ideas are framed around the concerns and love I have for the future of South Africa and the African continent".[5] One of such concerns is conveyed in *Somewhere I belong* (2010). The work reflects the social problem of homelessness experienced by some black South Africans who migrate from rural to urban spaces with no one to accommodate them. While this speaks to the contemporary issues of rural-urban migration, it reflects on the global challenges of migrants. In other works, the black children look confident and proud of their present moment as they glide into a hopeful future. Makamo argues that he "seeks to convey the idea that, if a black child is well trained, he or she will turn out great in the future".[6] To this end, as he looks back. He likens the rural environments where those black children are playing today, to the space that contributed significantly to making him an artist. That indicates that when an individual is raised in a community, he understands the community. A strong value that Makamo embraced during his days at Artist proof studio (APS) is *Ubuntu*. He was assigned to write an essay on *Ubuntu, so* Makamo travelled from Johannesburg to Avon, a farm or large village, in Limpopo province. There, he interviewed his grandfather, who unpacked the ideas or meanings of *Ubuntu* (Berman 2017). That assignment made a difference in him and impacted his construction of narratives on black African children in art.

Makamo uses different materials as expressive vehicles in his art. Some of his works are made with charcoal on canvas or paper, watercolour or oil on canvas or paper, and printmaking. This reveals that he "mastered the use of different media in depicting visual forms from a very early age, as he comes from a drawing background".[7] While most artists mix their colours on a palette before painting their compositions, Makamo paints directly with pure colours, not from a palette. He ends up blending the colours on the canvas, board, or paper alternating between his fingers and brushes. His technique of colour application is just a matter of choice.

In the 21st century when painting is considered retroactive and many contemporary African artists are leaning towards international tendencies like new media and installations, Makamo still paints. Why? He reveals that "I still paint because it enables me to easily tell stories about South Africa and Africa". This reveals not just the sources of his African rooted visual

narratives but the proven medium that helps him convey African experiences easily. He "feels certain subjects in contemporary African societies have not been represented for people to relate with".[8] For this reason, he is focused on representing the African vernacular-rooted images of black children in paintings. Through this focus on black African children, he contributes works to global contemporaneity, at a time when the history of contemporary African art has not been fully explored.[9] Makamo further adds, that "I still paint because I want to introduce more black Africans to appreciating and collecting my works. That is because I realised that contemporary African art is not well collected among black South Africans". His view indicates that his major collectors are not black Africans but Americans and international collectors. This is not to deny that more black Africans now collect his art than in the past. In critiquing the demand for his art, in an article titled *Human Grace,* Ashraf Jamal (2021) argues that "If black portraiture now defines Western taste – the West, problematically, remains the taste-maker". While such Western patronage that keeps an artist focused on the black face as the in-thing may not be viewed as problematic, Jamal remarks that such a development indicates "that we've entered a murky realm".

For Makamo, the reception of his works over the years of his artistic practice has been encouraging. That is simply because his art appeals to collectors, some of whom are Western celebrities. In advancing possible reasons for the patronage, Ashraf Jamal argues that "the works possess a deep structure of feeling ... because they are life-affirming" (2021, p. 1). As a result, they hook people and make them respond differently by collecting them or expressing appreciation for the works. In expressing this view, Makamo (2017) claims, that "some people call me African Picasso, while others call me 'talent'. Some others say my works are incredible with amazing concepts and contents".[10] Apart from the verbal responses he receives, he exhibits regularly, as outlets for marketing his works. Another factor responsible for his commercial success is his collectors. In 2017, he had five major collectors of his works.[11] This number must have changed in 2021, as Makamo is at the height of his popularity. As of 2017, the reception of his works, as he claimed must have been the reason, among others, why he was seen as the second best-selling contemporary black South African artist.[12] Although I did not ask him, who is viewed as the first commercially successful artist, in an interview with Grace Malley, a curator at Everard Read Gallery, she points out, that 'he could be referring to William Kentridge, Marlene Dumas, David Goldblatt, Zanele Muholi, Nicholas Hlobo, Mary Sibande, Sam Nlengethwa, Dr. Esther Mahlangu, John Meyer ... to name a few hugely successful contemporary South Africa artists'.[13] However, this

information is not sufficient to state who is the first. Malley adds, "based on the information accessible to me, I believe that he is amongst this group of hugely commercially successful black South African artists". While Grace Malley's argument establishes the fact that Makamo is among the most commercially successful black African artists and that Everard Read Gallery had sold his works to many major collectors, the identities of his collectors are not disclosed, as the gallery operates under strict confidentiality.[14]

Apart from those collectors known to Makamo, he has continued to take advantage of the social media platforms in this information age not merely to construct his popularity but network and promote his artworks. This approach is helpful because social media platforms have increasing penetrations that blur the distances and boundaries between the sellers and buyers of art. That is why 'social media is changing the way to create, communicate and collaborate' (Saini and Gupta 2016, p.18). Thus some of the major social media platforms he posts his art on are Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. He has over 12,400 followers on Twitter, 22,612 on Facebook, and over 183,000 followers on Instagram. These massive following and his popularity influence his works and sophisticated marketing. In narrating his commercial success, Grace Malley (2021) points out that 'Nelson Makamo has the enviable combination of extraordinary talent, a hard work ethic, great personality, a professional team supporting his endeavours and ambitions, an extensive network of prominent individuals who support and promote his works, and his art is relevant to the times in which we live'.

Visual Analysis

The visual analysis of Makamo's representation of African vernacular rooted images of black children in this paper begins with a work titled *Somewhere I belong* (2010) (Figure 1). It is a work in a series of drawings dedicated to people moving from rural areas to cities in South Africa. Although this subject matter draws attention to the construction of social identity, it signals a statement of personal consolation. What images of black children did Makamo represent in this drawing? The realistic composition that shows charcoal as the medium of the protocol, is an exercise in strict black and white. The depiction is divided into two, with a boundary created between the background and the foreground. The scene depicts three black youths sleeping beside each other in a roofless space, whereas the foreground reveals an aerial view of houses (bungalows).

Although this rupture between the landscapes views of a township and the above micro view of the three individuals, in my view, shows his mastery of painterly dramaturgy as it creates a contrast that hints at different visual narratives. In the background, the arrangement of half-images of three black African youths sleeping in different directions and postures narrates the social issue of urban homelessness. At the same time, close analysis of the clustered houses symbolises bungalows in a township in South Africa. This urban settlement creates a form of social identity, as it gives a clue to a place where some/ or these Africans live. In this regard, the composition contrasts two socially realistic living conditions, the roofless abode of young black Africans and people living in the comfort of their houses. Through this mode of depiction, a narrative is created on how some people experience city life differently. While the blurry lines create effects of smooth texture in the composition, it exemplifies Makamo's mastery in using lines in depicting images. The medium he used allows for modelling the shapes of the images, especially in the distribution of light and dark without the complexity of colours.

Figure 1: Nelson Makamo, *Somewhere I Belong,* 2010. Charcoal on paper, 200 x 150 cm. (Courtesy of the artist)

Further analysis of the closeness that appears from the sleeping postures of these images reveals, on the one hand, a bond that exists among friends or siblings, and on the other hand, it suggests that the space they are lying in is narrow. This experience recalls the cultural history of migration in South Africa, which on the one hand, began in the 1880s when

African people joined the migrant labour in greater numbers at the advent of the mining industry. During that era, people migrated from all parts of South Africa and Southern Africa to Johannesburg (Manaka, 1987). As a result, urban townships were created to cater for the population providing cheap labour for Johannesburg and Witwatersrand. But, during that period, as Eloff and Sevenhuysen (2011) point out, the municipalities refused or were unwilling to build more houses because many migrants could not afford to pay the rent. Consequently, people who could not pay rent became homeless. On the other hand, it also evokes the cultural history of twenty-first-century street homelessness, a social issue affecting significant cities in the world.

Though contestable, the results of the Human Science Research Council 2005-2008 in South Africa show that there may be 100 000 to 200 000 truly homeless adults and children living on the street in rural and urban areas in South Africa. But Johannesburg, as of 2001, had the highest figure of street homeless children of over 3000 (Cross et al., 2010; Rule-Groenewald et al., 2015; Tenai and Mbewu 2020). Although these data are dated, recent researchers on homelessness in South Africa have continued to reference them due to a lack of recent official statistics. In an article titled *The reality of living on the street in SA*, as Sandisiwe Shoba (2021) reiterates that 'Accurate statistics of the number of homeless people in South Africa are non-existent. But in Cape Town alone, figures from 2020 suggest the metro has upwards of 14,000 people living on the streets. Johannesburg has around 15,000'. Despite these recent data, Tenai and Mbewu (2020:2) argue that while 'research is often conducted on the street homeless ... conclusions are based on assumptions because of their constant mobility. However, they agreed with other researchers that 'statistics on street homelessness portray an upward trajectory' (Tenai and Mbewu 2020:1).

As a work deeply rooted in Africa, it reflects the African human experience of enduring momentary discomfort for a better future. During the interview, Makamo (2021) observes that it reflects the plight of "people moving from rural areas to cities to seek better opportunities". He further points out that "this is the place where stars are born. This is the place where legends are made. They say that this is the place where it can happen. People come from far away to find their dreams". It is, however, contestable for Makamo to argue that people only find their dreams fulfilled after migrating, as many localised people never migrated and yet realised their dreams. This idea is deeply rooted in the African worldview and accounts for the heightened national and international migrations. While a close analysis

of their temporary roofless abode hints at homelessness, it is a metaphor for people's sacrifices to have a better life. To this end, the contrast of the two living conditions reflects their temporary homelessness in urban areas and the houses they later built in their rural areas. On the other hand, the work may be analysed as street homelessness, affecting people who never gained an initial foothold and those who have fallen out of developed society (Cross et al., 2010). This depiction might then be analysed as a reflection on a people plagued with poverty and structural inequalities in South Africa (Ntombela, 2011).

Even though some poor persons become homeless, many poor people in urban areas in South Africa do not live on the street. But in this context, therefore, the street homelessness echoes the despair of the three black boys. Alternatively, aside from speaking to the surrounding social issue experienced by rural-urban migrants, it highlights xenophobia. In reflecting on xenophobia, this may be analysed as the experience young Africans trying to find a home in a foreign African country sometimes undergo. The philosophy that guided Makamo in this work centres not merely on his sensitivity to the urban homelessness of rural-urban migrants but the subsequent socio-economic empowerment of the black South African youth. But his next vernacular image unfolds differently with the title *Moment Alone* (2011). The title suggests a scenic view of loneliness, a period of reflectiveness. What vernacular image did Makamo depict in the context of this work?

He portrayed a black South African girl standing alone but backing the viewer as she walks away. In Makamo's view, "she is waiting for her younger sister". But there is no representation of any other black girl in this work to demonstrate that the young African girl was waiting for her sister. Thus, her lonely static posture is in dissonance with the notion of waiting for a sister. Instead, her posture suggests a girl walking home with the plastic bag and possibly in a contemplative pose.

Though a realistic depiction, it is presented in monoprint, a medium influenced by Makamo's background in printmaking. The reproduction of the image in monoprint is to get fresh ideas of the vernacular image in a different medium. It is a new idea of life and serenity. While the main print reflects a day scene, the ghost print gives clues to a night scene as evident in the background covered with black ink. A mode of representation that evokes darkness from a night scene, even though light reflects on her from behind. Although the work shows a half-

image of the black girl, it draws attention to the focal point constructed around the bulging plastic bag she is holding over her back.

The bulging plastic bag suggests that the content is weighty, even though she carries it conveniently. To establish her identity, in Makamo's view, "she is a child sent to buy provisions from a shopping mall, returning home with her purchase". Besides, she is depicted with a short flowing dress that drapes graciously below her backsides, with folds and dark shades created on the left side. The contrast highlights the direction from which light reflects on the girl. A moment of waiting is suggested from her standing posture.
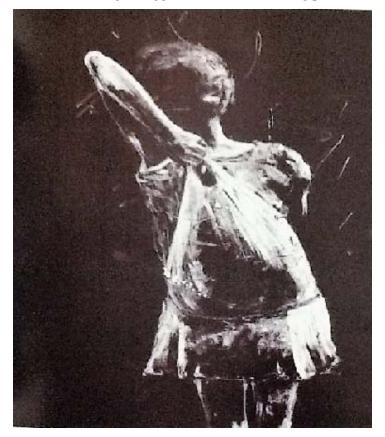

Figure 2: Nelson Makamo, *Moment Alone*, 2011. Monoprint, 77.7 x 106.5 cm.
(Courtesy of the Artist)

The experience of this black child recalls the history of black children in South Africa. The apartheid and post-apartheid eras show that they are the most neglected population (Lockhat and Van Niekerk, 2000). In this light, during apartheid, the black child, in particular, was not afforded any protection. Instead, the state waged a carefully planned war on black children (Lockhat and Van Niekerk, 2000). But in the twenty-first century, there are increased

activities to boost the economic well-being of adults and children. As a result, the previously untapped markets in the townships and rural areas of South Africa have emerged as a new market (Edwards cited by eProp@News, 2013). This is evident in the growing numbers of shopping malls in the townships and rural areas. It is a development that defines another kind of day-to-day responsibility for the black girl, as she is sent for shopping rather than fetching water or firewood.

This vernacular image is deeply rooted in Africa, as it relays an idea on child training in South African society. In stressing this view, Makamo (2017) notes, "An African child is trained to begin taking responsibility such as running errands at an early age". As a result, while the girl child does shopping in the twenty-first century, in rural areas, older vernacular images of girls show them fetching water and firewood. This portrayal hints at a change of role in the domestic activities of an African girl in present-day South Africa. Thus Makamo's rendition draws attention to an African lived experience that places value in child training and development in running errands from an early age.

On the other hand, the plastic bag held by the girl may be analysed in Makamo's view, "as the kind of bag an individual takes along when migrating from rural to urban areas, within Africa and from Africa to other continents, in search of greener pastures".[15] Although migration still occurs in African societies, not all migrants may take along with them only a plastic bag, as it has assumed different forms. Thus as internal migration and international travels still occur in Africa, this does not mean that there are not many localised and sedentary peoples in Africa (Ogbechie, 2009). However, the different forms of migration in Africa question the submission that a nation or African continent is a continuous narrative of national or continental progress (Bhabha, 1990). This is because migration is an indicator of "development failure" in African nations, rather than a sign of progress.[16] Alternatively, the depiction narrates the story of a victim of a xenophobic attack escaping with the only handy property at the crossroads of decision making. The plight of a victim who did not plan to relocate when the xenophobic culture of violence was unleashed. Hence, confusion and panic set in after properties are destroyed or looted, making it challenging to decide the next direction.

The interpretation further indicates as Makamo claims, that "the African child is a metaphor not merely for the present but the future of Africa". A present plagued with diverse social

issues. The next African vernacular-rooted painting in Figure 3 unfolds with the title *Smiles* (2015). While this subject matter does not create any subjective identification, it hints at a smile which is a humorous facial expression. But the context depicts a young black woman, whose dramatic pose in the centre of the picture plane shows a head tilted backward, with her mouth widely opened, exposing teeth and tongue. The depiction signals elicit laughter. In this regard, it appears to be in dissonance with forms of smiles in art, often revealed by baring the teeth slightly, or an enigmatic smile with a tight-lipped expression. But the representation evokes Makamo's (2017) claim of "sometimes focusing on the face in an attempt to summarise its expressions in his depiction". Rather than an expression, a smile is a response. The reason is, as a response, an individual communicates a smile or laughter to a friend when she finds some features in hers humorous (Hartz and Hurt, 1991).

Figure 3: Nelson Makamo, *Smiles,* 2015. Mixed Media, Size unknown. Private collections
(Courtesy of the artist)

Smile or laughter as a bodily response may be noticeable in African dancing figures (Thompson, 1979) but is scarce in African art. But it is evident in this contemporary painting.

The female figure in the centre of the picture plane is dramatic, but her posture does not indicate dancing. Instead, it gives clues to humorous responses in interpersonal relationships. The facial expression shows elaborate black lines resulting from the effects of light and shade. A similar effect is created around the neck of the lady with slight folds. This realistic work reveals the use of pen and colour in the portrayal, making it bold as it stands out from the receding background, smoothly painted pink. Other media used are a charcoal stick, powdery charcoal, and acrylic pastel applied to paper to create different tonal effects on the young black woman. From the top, he used charcoal to depict the neat Afro hairstyle. Rather than introduce other colours on the face and neck of the lady, Makamo chose the use of charcoal to contextualise her as a black lady, thereby alluding to her African identity.

There seems to be a little study in African art history that focuses on smiles and laughter in art. But, an example of work baring teeth, which suggests laughter, is evident in a nineteenth-century commemorative figure of a queen, Bangwa Kingdom, Cameroon (Grossman and Bonnell, 2009). But it is not contextualised as conveying humorous expression. Aside from that, in South African society, like any human society, different scenes in domestic life, work environment, and other social gathering places, where people meet, present opportunities to interact with friends and loved ones. Often time interactions among friends and loved ones result in humorous responses to conversations and sometimes unexpressed actions. When this happens, an individual may interpret specific actions beyond the visible expressions of smile or laughter, which may be heart-warming and contagious, but embodies symbolic meanings. To this end, laughter or smiles may be analysed as concealing an individual's beauty and the beast. In expressing this stance during an interview in 2017, Makamo notes that "I always do pieces with varied expressions, and 'smile' is one that I continue to depict. It is a constant reminder of how we all need to remember to smile from the heart". Although this may not be the experience with everyone smiling or laughing, his argument suggests that behind the "smile-mask" are hidden truths that could only be seen in a person's mind. Further interpretation indicates that this is a visual response to a social issue of insincerity in a relationship, and demonstrates as Ntombela points out, that Makamo's works reflect his "personal experiences and gaze upon the world" (2011, p. 15).

A similar focus on facial expressions is evident in the works of Joe Musa, a contemporary Nigerian artist. Musa's symbolic paintings were visual representations of the human phenomenon in the masks series. Still, they reflect the idea of someone smiling with a

supposed friend, with venom hidden in the heart (Ikpakronyi, 2008). This idea hints at the ambivalence in inter-personal interactions among Africans. An individual attempts to change the cultural value and attitude that underlies a genuine relationship that comes from the heart. Alternatively, while it reflects a truth hidden in the heart, a smile or laughter does not necessarily evoke deception (Peffer, 2009; Hurley and Frank, 2011). That is because laughter or a smile may signify affection, happiness, and friendliness. Therefore, the interpretation of this work suggests that Makamo was guided by a philosophical view that echoes the value of true friendship rather than pretending to be one. Besides, this painting indicates that a smiling face is not a sign of a perfect life but a hopeful life. His next painting, *I Belong to the World* (2016) (Figure 4), presents a title that forms an individual identity not merely in African space but globally.

The context of this painting shows a realistic stylistic tendency in representing a vernacular image of a black girl. She is foregrounded in a pastoral landscape scene walking away from the viewer. Though the work is a complete charcoal depiction, Makamo's style in employing lines applied with brushstrokes creates a simulacrum of painting rather than drawing. His recourse to charcoal as the medium in rendering this vernacular image suggests an attempt to comment on the black girl's African identity. The distribution of light and shade is evident, with faint splashes showing smooth effects of the application of charcoal appearing transparent like watercolour. This mode of depiction hints at the artist's mastery of formal and expressive aesthetic experience. It displays a monochromatic use of black pigment plus white, which allows focusing on the exact shape of the girl with degrees of light and dark.

The black girl walks away with her head slightly tilted downwards, suggesting a gaze at an object of attraction. The effects of the brushstrokes employed to represent her hair are evident in the upward stretches. Nonetheless, as the young black African girl walks away "barefooted", her left hand holds part of her garment, while the right hand swings freely, possibly feeling at home within her neighbourhood. She is represented with a sleeveless garment that appears fitting at the top and flows graciously with folds downward. In describing this garment, Orsmond (2016) points out that "the flowing softness of her dress is as magical as the ballet dancers of Degas". Orsmond's association of the rhythmic movement, gracious flow, and softness of this young black girl's dress to that of ballet dancers suggests the hybridity of diasporic European cultural ideas and dress elements.

Figure 4: Nelson Makamo, *I Belong to the World*, 2016. Charcoal on paper, 190 x 90 cm. Private collections. (Courtesy of the artist)

Furthermore, to give this depiction context, it is presented from the perspective of its cultural history. This reflects a history of a highly communal pre-industrial way of living among black South Africans in the rural areas (Manaka, 1987). Communalism is not merely a cultural practice but a universal human interdependence, that was adopted in pre-colonial African communities (Gade, 2012). Even though children belong to their biological parents in such communalistic societies, they are generally thought of as belonging to all (Isiugo-Abaniche, 1985). That is an African approach to 'the ideal of relating in a communal way ... embodied in the southern African Nguni word for human virtue, *Ubuntu'* (Berman, 2017, p. 7). *Ubuntu* simply means "humanness". This peculiar virtue highlights African socio-ethical humanism, in which actions are motivated by concerns for others. The belief establishes that the well-being of an individual is intertwined with others. The thematic thrust resonates with this virtue and calls on people not merely in rural, national space. Still, the global community to engage in an inclusive and participatory collaboration in the training of the African child.

Makamo's work acts as an agent of social change. It echoes the voice of an African child calling for a rethink of communalism in twenty-first-century African society. This African cultural value suggests that the care and training of black children in the rural areas should not be surrendered to Gogos (grandmother or senior ladies) only. Besides, the black African girl's movement signifies not merely her progressive steps but a symbolic representation of the African continent moving forward. It is, however, doubtful if one can position the direction Africa is heading. Alternatively, as Makamo (2017) notes, she represents "a generation that can be moulded to experience the desired change on the African continent".[17] The analysis reveals that a philosophical view guided Makamo that an African child symbolises the future of Africa and should be given a didactic opportunity to actualise a better future. Another painting by Makamo unfolds with the title *Young Soul* (2016) (Figure 5). The title hints at the construction of the subjective identity of a young child. What vernacular image of a young child did he depict in the context of this painting? It shows the realistic portraiture of a young black child seated alone in the centre of the picture plane. Rather than being expressive, the child is calm, gazing at the viewer. The calm disposition reflects confidence and innocence.

Elaborate lines are used to create the smoothly applied charcoal on the face, yet showing contrast. Then, he delineates the image of the black boy and creates linear patterns on his shirt painted with yellow acrylic. Such media applications do not merely create effects of smooth and rough textures but demonstrate Makamo's mastery of them.

The background reveals a bright atmosphere with depth and distance even though not painted. The painting depicts the young black African child sitting on his folded legs. Although the black child appears with an Afro-hair style, the appearance hints at being rough. Over his head is an earphone, which suggests that he is listening to music. Such adoption of modern technology reveals the hybridity of foreign elements in shaping the social life of a black African child. As Makamo (2017) notes, this child's appearance indicates that "when an African child is playing where he or she was born, he feels at home".

Figure 5: Nelson Makamo, *Young Soul,* 2016. Charcoal and Acrylic on Paper, 120 x 160 cm. Private collections (Courtesy of the artist)

This depiction traces the cultural history of black children during the apartheid era, when they had neither toys nor play facilities during that brutal reign, except toys they made with improvised materials (Peffer, 2009). Although that was the grim social reality of black children during that regime, Makamo's twenty-first-century representation presents a postcolonial condition. The adoption of modern musical technology by a young black African child highlights hybridity in South African space. This does not just recall the history of a country occupied by white settlers but modernity. Such modernity that results from cultural contact is often seen as a violent rending of culture in Africa but understood as the rich and lively source of culture in America and Europe (Nelson, 2013). In this regard, the interface of modern music technology and young African child may as well be interpreted, as Makamo (2017) points out, as a reflection "on what it takes to be an African child in contemporary era". Such adoption of technology may be criticised for playing a role in shaping the social life of an African child and disrupting African cultural values. In other words, it highlights an

influence on a black child towards surrendering his culture to the white man's way of life, thereby robbing Africa of her cultural values, making her become a victim through technology.

As a work locked in time and place, Makamo's vernacular image reflects an African experience rooted in the South African context. The *Young Soul*, through the adoption of technology, is at the crossroads of cultures in daily life. Despite the influence of such technology in isolating a black child from African cultural values, the painting embodies Makamo's love for black childhood, which is a constant reminder of his childhood. Thus, it echoes a creative cultural production that attempts to understand his and others' childhood (Muponde, 2015). Such an idea of multiple childhoods invokes the visual languages of different social and cultural constructions in African cultures, with modern technology constructing such reflectivity in the present. The analysis suggests that the possible philosophy that guided Makamo is that modern technology brings the child from a rural environment and keeps him in touch with the global community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the visual analysis of Nelson Makamo's works reveals the representations of African vernacular images of black children; whose lived experiences are deeply rooted in South African space. They are valuable in offering new insights into the theory of narrating representations in African art. The interpretation also presents Makamo's perspective on the images of black children in his works, which he argues symbolises the present and future of Africa. The paintings also give insight into some of the pains and joys of black African children, as the different thematic thrusts reflect some of their social realities and lived experiences. The analysis of the images of black children in each context reflects serenity and solitude. However, the communicated ideas suggest that they are not detached from the occupiers of the rural and urban spaces, as they make social and cultural commentaries. Makamo demonstrates African consciousness as he adopts charcoal and black paints as the major media he combined with colours to construct identities. While such uses of materials in his works signal attempts to create visual aesthetics, they highlight representations of African identity. A demonstration of the fact that the artistic media used in representing images have their language in constructing identity.

All the works are realistic depictions that show his unique styles and formal qualities. His composition that depicts three black boys arranged sleeping together does not merely hint at the bond between friends or siblings but evokes the human need for a sense of being and belonging in a temporary abode. While the narrative relays the problem of black children's homelessness, it also invokes the challenge of homelessness faced by some African immigrants suffering xenophobia in their search for a home in a foreign nation. It mirrors the experience of African immigrants who have lost their homes to xenophobic attacks. This urban homelessness demonstrates an attempt to redefine living conditions in urban spaces and makes a socio-political commentary about South Africa and Africa. In a different depiction, the interpretation reflects the need for a sincere interpersonal relationship with humorous responses like smiles and laughter in African societies. Also, another work reflects the idea of *Ubuntu* which reflects a communal or collective way of raising a black child. This African socio-ethical humanism is born out of concern for the well-being of others in rural areas and townships. As Berman (2017:28) notes, ubuntu is "an embodiment of the ethos and values of our common humanity". On the other hand, its title *I belong to the World* indicates a black child choosing her home and fate, which suggests 'that the nation-state and national identity no longer matter' (Muponde, 2015, p. 141). Thus, she is embarking on a process of globalisation and taking on an alternative form of identity.[18]

Other ideas echo gender dimensions with a boy adopting modern technology rather than toys. A black girl child shopping rather than fetching water and firewoods, evident in past vernacular images of girl children in rural areas. While these ideas reflect on the effects of modernisation on black children, sending a black child to shop hints at African cultural value in turning a child in the direction of the human he or she should reflect (Richards, 2011). In general, the ideas reflected in Makamo's works invoke how the lives of those who live in South Africa are particular ambivalence that hunts the concept of the Nation.

Additionally, as a paper that contributes a mainstream art historical discourse on the works of Makamo, it establishes his recurrent referencing of the black child as a significant practice, given the fact that the arts construct childhood experiences that bear on social issues of history, politics, and Africa. To this end, his artworks are analysed as the expressions of the lived experiences of blackness or Africanness. As they reflect images of African children and some of African worldviews and philosophy. Lastly, the analyses of his works give insight into the constructions of some kinds of childhood in South Africa. As Jamal (2021) points

out, a major reason for this is "Raised in a community, you get to understand community". Makamo's works are not dissociated from the social realities in the rural community, as they embody his and others' experiences of people raised in such a community.

Notes

[1] Some of the national and international exhibitions Nelson Makamo participated in include solo and group exhibitions. His Solo exhibitions include 2018 The Re-Awakening, CIRCA Cape Town, South Africa; 2017 I am the of Azania, Gallery of African Art (GAFRA) London, UK; 1:54 Art Fair, London. UK; 2016 Dipolelo Exhibition, Paris, France; 2015 New Works, CIRCA Johannesburg, South Africa; 2014 Generations, Everard Read Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa; A New Lease on Life, Everard Read Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa. 2009 Sharing Realities II, African Studies Centre, Leiden, Netherlands and Walk with Me, UTS Gallery, Edinburgh, Scotland, UK. Just to mention a few.

[2] Makamo, Nelson. 2017. Interview by author 6 November, August House, Johannesburg.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Imaging the black child as a symbolic representation of the African continent that is moving forward is one of the ideas Makamo reflects on in his depiction of the black child.

[5] Ibid.

[6] He expressed this view during an interview with him in his studio at Johannesburg. In his view, the black child can turn great if given attention and modelled adequately in the present.

[7] During the interview, Makamo revealed that his drawing and painting techniques, and the media he uses, were influenced by his training at the Artists Proof Studio, Johannesburg.

[8] Makamo, Nelson. 2017. Interview by author 6 November, August House, Johannesburg.

[9] Makamo, Nelson. 2017. Interview by author 6 November, August House, Johannesburg.

[10] Makamo made these expressions about audience reception of artworks during interviews at his studio in Johannesburg.

[11] Ibid

[12] Ibid

[13] Grace Malley, in an email interview on 18 October 2021, expressed her thoughts on the role Everard Read Gallery has played in the marketing of Nelson Makamo's works.

[14] Grace Malley notes that they operate under strict confidentiality. In terms of the statistics of the commercially most successful black African artist, she added that they do not have statistics like this, for the secondary market, one can contact the auction houses to verify this. Nelson Makamo should be at or near the top of that list and most likely in the company of artists like Sam Nhlengethwa and Zanele Muholi (if we are looking at living artists with huge local and international presence). In the primary market, we are not privy to the financial statistics of artists represented by other galleries, so one can only hazard an educated guess.

[15] Makamo's expression on the idea he reflected on in the composition during an interview in 2017.

[16] See Flahaux and De Haas, 2016, p. 2. The authors argue that migration taking place in Africa is an indicator of system failure.

[17] Makamo, Nelson. 2017. Interview by author 6 November, August House, Johannesburg.

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