

ARISE

LIVE

THE ARTIST: KEMANG WA LEHULERE



Words Bomi Odufunade

The last decade has seen a vibrant contemporary art scene in South Africa with the emergence of a new generation of talented visual practitioners. Among them is Johannesburg-based artist Kemang Wa Lehulere who has been attracting critical praise within local and international art circles. Originally from Gugulethu, Cape Town, Wa Lehulere cofounded Gugulective, a renowned artist collective in 2006 with a group of young artists, musicians, writers, DJs, rappers and poets active within the community. Borne out of a need for an artistic platform and creative exchanges, the collective initiated and curated a number of notable exhibitions as well as collaborating with a variety of groups on projects.

In recent years, Wa Lehulere has been embracing his own individual aesthetic and developing a unique practice of using diverse media. For his debut solo exhibition *Some Deleted Scenes Too* with Johannesburg's Stevenson gallery last year, the artist produced a conceptual body of works. He exhibited ink drawings and text works, alongside a site-specific chalk mural on the gallery's walls and included performance pieces informed by a narrative between past and present, art and literature, the self and the collective. He recently opened his first solo show *Sleep is for the Gifted* in the United States, at Lombard Freid gallery in New York. For this exhibition, Wa Lehulere drew upon his own chronic insomnia including his obsession of unearthing buried memories and attempting to understand the collective history of South Africa. His preoccupation with history 'past' and 'present' also led him to cofound the Centre for Historical Re-enactments with fellow artist Gabi Ngcobo.

Wa Lehlere will be in residency at the Rijksmuseum later this year and will participate in a group show at La Maison Rouge in Paris, this May. The artist will be also included in the South African pavillion group show *Imaginary Fact; Contemporary South African Art and the Archive* at the 55th La Biennale di Venezia opening in June.

You were born in Cape Town and now live and work in Johannesburg. How do feel about your work being described often as ‘attempting to understand both South Africa’s past and present’?

Well, there is not much I can do in terms of how people read the work. Yes, I do have an interest in history, the present and the future but this is not something I am interested in via South Africa, but the world at large as well.

Tell us about the moment or moments that led to your decision of becoming an artist.

I was too lazy to get a job so becoming an artist seemed very relevant to do.

What other artists have influenced your work?

My mother, who was somewhat of a failed musician ... maybe that is a bit harsh but she never became known, but did record with an important South African jazz musician.

You embrace a multi-disciplinary practice of mixed-media drawings and painting, video, installation and live performance art. If you were to choose, which one component is vital to your entire oeuvre?

Performance scares the shit out of me, so it is the medium that excites me the most. Video is occupying my mind more and more.

This is your first solo show in the United States. The exhibition, entitled *Sleep is for the Gifted*, is described as an installation composed of a variety of media. Can you tell us how you approached conceiving the show?

I actually don't really remember, I would be lying if I said I did. Of course, I feel like this is the moment where I say something very smart, but there is none that comes to mind. I do however, remember that I was having a spell of insomnia, which makes it almost very impossible to create anything.

Let's talk about your collaborations and projects with fellow artists. In 2006 you established Gugulective, a Cape Town-based artist network then in 2011 you started the Centre for Historical Re-enactments which you co-founded with curator and artist Gabi Ngcobo. How does this affect or enhance your own personal practice?

I am still not sure. I am hungover on Gugulective for a number of reasons. The work we did, our collective energy, there was something very earnest about it all, but I need more time to reflect on this. I am still in the midst of the Centre for Historical Re-enactments, and would need years to think about it as well.

Remembering the *Future of a Hole as a Verb 2*, a large scale chalk drawing you exhibited in New Museum's triennial *The Ungovernables* last year drew public praise and critical notices. What was the motivation behind this piece?

I actually have a very bad memory and as a result I don't remember the motivation behind the piece. This is no joke!

The contemporary art scene in South Africa is going from strength to strength. There exists a wealth of acclaimed artistic talent, such as Dineo Bopape, Nicholas Hlobo, Zander Blom, Serge Nitegeka, Nandipha Mntambo, Simon Gush and Zanele Muholi, living and working in the country. Why do you think this is?

Well, I think that there are a lot of people who paved the way for this. People like Nigerian artist and curator Olu Oguibe and many more.

You must be excited by your inclusion in the South African Pavillion at this year's Venice Biennale. Can you tell us anything about what you are planning to exhibit in the show?

I don't know, I feel like I need a holiday.

Are there any upcoming projects you are working on that you can tell us about?

I am hoping to spend the last six months of the year reading a lot.

Kemang Wa Lehulere's debut solo exhibition Sleep is for the Gifted is on at Lombard Freid Gallery in New York until 1 June.