Still Caught in the Acts

Nkule Mabaso


Set in Durban and published after the Acts prohibiting mixed marriages were repealed, Lewis Nkosi’s novel *Mating Birds*, first published in 1983, explores the enduring pathology of racism and the devastation it wrought on individual lives. The similarly titled curatorial essay that the exhibition ‘Mating Birds Vol. 2’ represented, through the montaging of place, public memory and the archive, marks a space of encounter between pernicious apartheid laws and the small, singular events in lives at the interstices with unjust and repressive laws.

1 The exhibition featured the work of Dineo Seshee Bopape, Simnikiwe Buhlungu, Trevor Makhoba, Sabelo Mlangeni,
The first Immorality Act was introduced in 1927 and the second in 1957 (renamed the Sexual Offences Act). A number of amendments were made to the Immorality Act. In 1949, the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act was introduced, and that, too, was amended. It was repealed by the Immorality and Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Amendment Act of 1985.

The works in this exhibition, as it stated, “map the manner in which artists have intervened in the space of sexual politics”. The premise was set forth in a pedagogy of complexity, requiring viewers to suspend judgment and, instead, implicate themselves in the narrative. The atmosphere of the gallery was cool and muted. The walls on the right were stark white, while the walls on the left of the lower level, situated beneath the cantilevered platform that makes up the upper level, were black. In white chalk at the bottom of the wall was a timeline of the Acts. The periods between 1957 and 1969 were interspersed with the increasing numbers of people arrested for engaging in sex across the colour line, until 1985. Above this timeline, the exhibition’s thesis was advanced through a series of ‘paragraphs’ formed by clustering works together. For example, the greyscale image of Tracey Rose’s Lovemefuckme (2001) – in which Rose’s masked face is contorted upward, with the mismatched gloves on her hands poised to deliver the next strike to her face – sat next to an A3 photocopy of pages 42 and 43 from an edition of Fanon’s much-quoted Black Skin, White Masks (1967). In these two pages, Fanon endeavours to trace the perversions and imperfections of love through exploring a quotation, which contends that, even in love, a woman of colour is ‘never altogether respectable in a white man’s eyes’.

This was followed by Billie Zangewa’s Pillow Talk (2004), presented here as a colour reproduction, which, as the title suggests, contains the kind of erotic words that are often said in a post-coital embrace. Yet, in contrast to the erotic nature of the words in Zangewa’s work, the two lovers are turned away from each other, revealing some distance, perhaps discomfort or strain. When considering Pillow Talk next to the Fanon quote, the lovers become explicitly exoticised and somewhat sinister.

The next ‘paragraph’ of the exhibition was foregrounded by a poem by Lebogang Mashile, Kedi’s Song, alongside which were A4-sized images of Zanele Muholi’s ‘Massa’ and Mina(h) series (2008), surrounded by excerpts from two academic texts. One of these texts analysed Zakes Mda’s novel The Madonna of Excelsior, and the other examined whiteness. Mda’s novel tells of a sex scandal in the 1970s that rocked the town of Excelsior in the Free State. Seven men and fourteen women were arrested for participating in sexual unions across the colour line that produced children. Also drawing from the same events in Excelsior, Mashile’s poem evokes the tragic existence where one’s skin is the evidence of
miscegenation, reminding us of the violent futility that was the life of Happy Sindane, who in 2003 reported to the police that he was a white boy kidnapped by a black family and forced to work as a slave. Ten years later, he was stoned to death. Why he was killed and who was responsible has never been uncovered.

By placing the poem next to Muholi’s image from the ‘Massa’ and Mina(h) series – in which three maids (performed by Muholi herself, Sthandiwe Yeni and Pam Dlungwana) are assertively positioned on chairs, while a white man (Robert Hamblin) lies on the ground with his tie loose and his shirt misshapen – it could be inferred that perhaps the ‘Lolitas’ of Excelsior would have had everyday proximity to these men. The nature of the intimate proximity is suggested in Muholi’s image, and pieced together and unravelled in The Madonna of Excelsior – which incidentally positions the women as being maids and their participation in the sex ring as ranging from coerced to transactional.

Traversing the grey concrete floor of the gallery space, one encountered an off-centred vitrine with its collection of supplementary evidence. These included colour photocopies, mounted on foamboard and in varying sizes, of the 1983 cover of Mating Birds. There was also a United Nations photograph of beachgoers at the Durban beachfront in 1976. The vitrine also contained enlarged copies of the front pages of the 1927 Immorality Act, its amendment in 1950, and the later Act of 1985. Next to these was a newspaper article about the vitriolic social media comments on the rugby player and Springbok captain Siya Kolisi’s marriage to Rachel Smith. But none of the documents in the vitrines were original documents, and the gesture of keeping them in the vitrine sanitised them and created a sense of distance and remove. They were presented without sensationalism, the veneer of politeness swept away, and the cyclical nature of collective social dysfunction was laid bare. Like dirt swept beneath a carpet, the racist outbursts that were delivered through social media produce a familiar outrage, seemingly concerned less with the shame of the dirt being there and more with the fact that it has been seen.

Apartheid’s heteronormative fixation is evident from the 1967 amendment of the Immorality Act that, almost as an afterthought, dealt with homosexuality. ‘Paragraph’ four of the exhibition described a deliberate queering of the archive as a necessary action to liberate queer experiences and possibilities out of the archival closet. Through this interweaving of the fictive and the personal, space thus opens up for queer subversion. This makes possible the reading of stories and narratives that would otherwise not have found direct expression. Muholi’s ‘Massa’ and Mina(h), for example, is sexually charged and suggestive of same-sex desire. Two of the images from this series, one where the maid is on her knees polishing the
floor with face turned up and encountered through the madam’s legs, and one where the maid has her hands over the madam’s eyes from a position behind the madam, are placed next to John Muafungejo’s ‘prototype’ *Life is Very Interesting* (1980). The positioning infers that Muafungejo’s print of two men, wide-eyed and caught in a tentative and cautious embrace, may be something more, something possible in private but not in public. On the other hand, photographer Sabelo Mlangeni’s *Bafana Mahlanga and His Soccer Star Boyfriend* (2009) presents the two men in a loving embrace. In the midst of mirth, the two lay on a bed pushed up against the corner of a room, with looks of joy and contentment on their faces.

Between these works was an excerpt of a speech from P. C. Pelser, the National Party’s Minister of Justice and Prisons from 1966–1974, decrying the viperous spirit of homosexuality that threatened to ruin the spiritual and moral fibre of Afrikaanerness unless dealt with decisively. Next to this was the ‘Rise and Fall of Apartheid’ (2013) exhibition catalogue opened to a page where a short account, with images, details how a magistrate and
his colleagues performed voyeuristic duties to catch suspects in the act of contravening the Immorality Act.  

The rest of the ‘essay’ was advanced through the presentation of singular works from Dineo Bopape’s new film Untitled (Of Occult Instability) [Feelings]. Alongside these were Tracey Rose’s The Kiss (2001), Lady Skollie’s homage to Trevor Makhoba’s Studio Visit (2001), and Simnikiwe Buhlungu’s silkscreen banners proclaiming varying articulations of ‘We’re not making this up!’ There was also Trevor Makhoba’s provocative 1995 work, Great Temptation in the Garden, along the same wall. Skollie’s wall mural produced for the exhibition showed two figures in the act of mutual pleasuring. The figure on the right touches the face of the figure on the left; in the space between them is an image of a small television screen with two birds and a tree on it. Makhoba’s Studio Visit, to which this sensitive and

2 ‘Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Photography and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life’ was a photographic exhibition that examined the legacy of apartheid and how it penetrated even the most mundane aspects of social existence in South Africa. Curated by Okwui Enwezor with Rory Bester, it was first shown at the International Center of Photography, New York (September 14, 2012–January 6, 2013), and toured over 2013–15 to Haus der Kunst, Munich; Padiglione d’Arte Contemporanea Milano, Milan; and Museum Africa, Johannesburg. www.icp.org/exhibitions/rise-and-fall-of-apartheid
sensuous work pays homage, is starker, and depicts a group of what one could suppose are black youth who are fixated towards a large screen where a pornographic scene with white actors is playing, and in which the male has mounted the female in a missionary position. Bopape’s film, produced over several years and completed on the occasion of the 10th Berlin Biennale in 2018, draws on the trial of the former president of South Africa, Jacob G. Zuma, for the rape of Fezekile Ntsukela Kuzwayo. As part of his defence of his actions, Zuma appealed to ‘tradition’ as a cloak for his perpetration of sexual violence against Kuzwayo. Bopape’s film addresses the epidemic of sexual violence in South Africa, and the Canadian actors the artist cast for the film complicate both the narrative and the idea of who is recognised as a rapist and how one becomes, or remains, a victim.

On entering the upper level, one encountered Makhosazana Xaba’s poem *You Told Me*, which took up a good part of the wall with its matte, amber-coloured vinyl lettering. Xaba’s poem touches on the incongruencies of those allied to the struggle being able to learn every other language other than the local Nguni languages that would have allowed them to communicate with the oppressed and be emotionally immersed in the struggle. She questions
the authenticity of their motivations in the way they boast of their credentials in the struggle, of having black lovers and yet who ‘still cannot speak Zulu’. Immediately to the right on this level of the gallery, we were presented with the sensitive personal letters of Simon Tseko Nkoli to his lover Roy Shepard. Written over four years while Nkoli was in prison, initially without being charged and later while awaiting trial on treason charges, the letters, which reveal an intimacy sustained by an explicitly stated longing, are the transcripts published by the Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action (GALA) organisation in 2007 and which form part of GALA’s archive. Positioned in a vitrine next to these letters was a reproduction of Zanele Muholi’s *Caitlin and I, Boston, USA* (2009). The work is broken into three parts; both figures are naked and stare directly into the camera, and while Muholi lies on her stomach on a surface covered with a sheet, Caitlin lounges sumptuously atop of her in the invert position.

Makhotsozaana Xaba’s poem You Told Me (2005), vinyl lettering on the wall in the ‘Mating Birds Vol. 2’ exhibition, 2019, photo by Paulo Menezes, courtesy KZNSA Gallery
Elsewhere in the exhibition there was the consistent language of clusters for ‘paragraphs’, vitrines for supplementary information and writing low on the wall in white chalk for footnotes. The intertextual nature of this ‘essay’ offered multiple entry points – from the visual, the literary, the textual and disparate sources, to arrive at a discursive moment that coalesced as the exhibition. Rather than simply looking at the images and works of art, the Immorality Act was explored through the cultural and social, as well as personal accounts and configurations that were read in relation to each other.

Through meticulous research and deft curatorial gestures, the curators of ‘Mating Birds Vol. 2’ reminded us that relationships are difficult anyway without bringing the government into the bedroom. Perhaps one of their aims was to bring us closer to our selves and move us from our entrenched solipsistic positions by giving familiar reference points from the works of art, the newspaper clippings, the legal documents and novels. Instead, in the context of this curatorial essay, they offered interpretations of how we could survive recalcitrant, residual social attitudes and find not just victims but agentic selves in otherwise hostile archives.
This exhibition was intimate, dense, and required a shift in our gaze, both in how these works, already somewhat familiar in the South African context, are encountered and how we look at the present manifestations of interpersonal violence in intimate relationships and the continued expression of toxic masculinities and fragile femininities. This is not to excuse these manifestations but to exercise introspection and compassion when considering them. The exhibition communicated the complex and explorative sexual expressions that emerge from the psychosocial atrocities that are driven by abuses of power, warped hierarchies and sexual oppression.

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