

## Artist Buhle Wonder Mbambo – Black Tax and the curse of generational poverty

Nine puppies were stolen, cursed and killed - one for each of the children's lives. According to Buhle Wonder Mbambo, his grandmother attributed his aunt's, uncle's and mother's ill fortune to the cursing of these nine small dogs. His family's future had, seemingly, been set in stone.

This bit of family history recounted by his maternal grandmother is one of Wonders' formative memories in which his Zulu traditions play a central role.

Wonder is an artist, currently based in the fast-moving West Street, whose career journey from his village in KwaNgcolosi to his studio in Durban's commercial centre has covered a period just short of a decade. He started with art classes at the BAT Centre in 2010 and later he was included in the Velobela Mentorship program at the Durban University of Technology in 2012. Another equally definitive experience was his 2016 residency in Bremen, Germany as the recipient of the Bremer Kunst-stipendium Art Grant.

Buhle creates art primarily in the media of charcoal drawings. He recalls his first classes at the BAT Centre, Durban in 2010 where he was presented with a range of art materials – one of them being charcoal. The sticks of drawing material transported him back to his village where he was encouraged to draw... even though he was drawing on the walls of his home.

The 29 year old artist views the success he has with charcoal as deeply symbolic of the role he plays in his family's rise from the symbolic ashes.

His series of drawings are organized into themes such as "*Ukumisa Ntliya*" in which he explores the concept of being groomed for leadership ... being groomed to open the way, to bring light to the roadway. This exploration is biographical. In one such drawing from the series, "*Umkhanyiselwa 1, (The Illuminated One)*", Buhle portrays a solitary figure – elevated, floating above a group of people. While the people below are drawn in only the dark tones of his charcoal the sole figure is rendered in a bit more colour. The heads below come together, collectively buoying the individual with the power of all their hopes and dreams.

Wonder speaks openly, poetically about the content of his artwork.

*"Yes, the family was cursed... in darkness, but when I was at school doing art and selling work I started realizing that I wasn't a part of the nine. I had to come and bring the light."* It's clear that the floating individual in the drawing is a form of self portrait. However, in this same series from 2017, there is another perceptive piece titled "*Black Tax vs. Dreams*". This sort of colloquial wording in the title tells of a personal tension accompanying the roles assigned by tradition.

The drawing pictures the tension characterises the common struggle of young black breadwinners in South Africa. In one of his previous interviews Buhle mentions the "*unlocking themselves from financial burials*" which becomes the duty which the migratory black workforce has to the "*people back home*".

Buhle elaborates, "From my window in West Street I see the routine every day. I see people rush to work in the morning and then they leave in the afternoon. The same happens the next day and I ask myself what would drive people to do this? I saw there is only one reason in common – they need to keep food on the table"

The conflict for many such breadwinners lays in the demands which modern life and family traditions place on them. The challenge is to see to it that their families can eat, to scrape together a meagre living and then by some miracle try to create some form of generational wealth. The artist's personal search for the precarious balance between tradition and personal prosperity appears in his

two *Imiyalezo* mixed media art works. In both of the artworks an elderly figure and a child hold an empty spoon in their hands. For Wonder these are the sorts of questions a man will ask when the generational passing of the torch occurs. A man becomes concerned with the responsibility to those who came before you and also those who will come after. A black man is concerned with the cultural norms which are governed by traditions, the adherence to which will determine whether you are a 'good' man. These questions about black masculinity and their relationship to working in urban, western spaces can generally become awkward.

Wonder addresses what could be misread as a hint of selfishness or frustration by providing context in other works. In the large diptych, *Happiness is a process*; he expresses his view on the tug-of-war between the past and present. In this drawing Wonder presents us with a vast sea of garbage beneath a dramatic sky and in the right-hand panel of the two - a white dining table with empty chairs. His reflections are partly inspired by Pitika Ntuli's 2013 interview on the Marikana massacre during which the veteran artist-academic refers to the generational crisis of perpetual poverty with which black miners and by extension – people of colour – seem to be cursed.

Professor Ntuli tackles the subject of Black tax quite academically when he speaks of vulnerable migrants from Tanzania, Zambia ...those from the remote parts of Limpopo and the Eastern Cape on who have had no choice but to agree to the terms of financial exploitation or remain destitute. He continues to explain that when the descendants of these people who have suffered under the economic oppression of apartheid raise questions of reparation they are effectively silenced.

THIS is effectively the ambivalence which Buhle Mbambo addresses in '*Happiness is a process*'. The dinner table is the empty, the absence of reparation discussions. It is what Professor Ntuli refers to as "Cultural betrayal".

These questions around cyclical **sdsdsdsd** with which Buhle Wonder Mbambo's art works wrestle. They are the expressions of disbelief at generational indebtedness to a South African past still burdens many young South Africans like Buhle. Buhle has, since becoming a professional artist, answered many calls from home and even built a house for his grandmother. Perhaps he is now seating himself at the head of the table and waiting – spoon in hand – for the silence to be broken and an appropriate type of justice to be served.

*At the time of writing the artist, Buhle Wonder Mbambo, was preparing for his solo exhibition at the Durban National Art Gallery. He had also just received an invitation to attend the Art House and ROSL Residencies in the UK. More of Buhle's work can be seen at [artistwonderbuhle.com](http://artistwonderbuhle.com)*