

Business Day: Life / Arts & Entertainment

ART: Kemang Wa Lehulere's Some Deleted Scenes Too

BY CHRISTINA KENNEDY, SEPTEMBER 06 2012, 06:49

The artist sits, his face inscrutable, surrounded by a semicircle of music stands propping up sheets of blank paper. As the assembled crowd waits, he sets a page alight and gazes at it intently as the flames lick at its corners and begin to engulf it. After what seems like an eternity, the last embers smoulder into ashes that tumble on to the parquet floor below. With his profile in chiaroscuro shadow, he repeats the gesture a few more times. Some onlookers start shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot; a couple fiddle with their cellphones. The ding-dong of the gallery doorbell and the clacking of heels occasionally intrude on the hypnotic silence of the makeshift performance space.

A clue to its symbolism lies in the title of Kemang Wa Lehulere's solo exhibition at the Stevenson Gallery, *Some Deleted Scenes Too*, which explores personal and collective stories, memories and histories. In his site-specific performance as part of the exhibition, the paper scraps are obliterated at varying paces, perhaps echoing the random and selective nature of recollection and amnesia. Wa Lehulere calmly observes the immolation; there is an odd beauty in this destruction. But violence follows. He grates the spine off a book and scatters the pages, then stuffs paper clips into his mouth and garbles incomprehensible words through the wiry tangle. Lost in expression, lost in translation, lost in obliteration? Maybe, maybe not.

This, ladies and gentlemen, is performance art. If it leaves you scratching your head, don't fret: the meaning is often secondary to the method, the mood and the overall tableau. What is important is that we have just witnessed the creative musings of one of SA's most talented and thoughtful young artists, who was recently announced as the winner of the Tollman Award for the Visual Arts. Wa Lehulere readily admits he has "been accused of being obscure", but seems unfazed that his work doesn't lend itself to obvious and immediate interpretation. "My strategy is to be more poetic and lyrical. I think art is like producing gifts — if there's no gift in the work, it's like a lonely Christmas."

Originally from Gugulethu, near Cape Town, Wa Lehulere has quietly started making waves in local and international art circles. There's no lack of assertiveness in his art, though. Using diverse media in works ranging from ink drawings and text scribbles to vast chalk on paint murals and video installations, he has exhibited around SA as well as at the New Museum in New York, at the 11th Biennale in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Lyons, France, and at the Kunsthalle Bern and Zentrum Paul Klee in Switzerland. Having already benefited from residencies in New York and Switzerland, next year this Wits fine arts graduate will have similar sojourns at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam and the New Museum, and will present a solo show at Lombard Freid Projects in New York.

Text and performance are a vital component of his oeuvre, and although it's not uncommon for "fine artists" to veer into these fields, for Wa Lehulere it was a natural extension of his upbringing. "I've been writing for more than 10 years now, since high school. I also have two family members in theatre (including Itumeleng Wa Lehulere, director of the developmental Ikhwezi Theatre Festival at Cape Town's Baxter Theatre), so I grew up in that space." Since the age of 11, he has been doing radio adverts, modelling for magazines, appearing in TV series, writing scripts and working as a theatre-set artist. At the Baxter one day, it struck him "how in a rehearsal room there is an energy and a looseness that is lost on stage, which is more like a packaged product, a spectacle with no connection to the actors ... the product and its value are divorced in a capitalist society". He got to thinking about modern society's lack of appreciation for the labour that goes into creating a consumable product — the baker up early to bake, for example — and decided to extrapolate this notion to his art.

"In a show, you generally just see this magical thing on the wall, not the tension in the studio or the frustration of battling with the work." It's not just the final, polished product or artwork that interests him, he's also concerned with the process of creating the work. That is why his current exhibition includes his imperfect or "dud" studies, sketches and jottings created in preparation for the show. Such oddments are usually discarded because they are deemed flawed, but they provide the context, which is usually unseen, behind the completed artwork: "They are works I personally feel are failures, but that are important to include to understand the project as a whole. It's not just about the perfect image."

There's a personal back story, too, to the unwritten and unspoken narratives he probes. "My aunt was a survivor of 1976 — she was the first student shot in Cape Town, and she still carries that trauma. I was never allowed to ask questions about it, which pushed me to go and find information elsewhere." This preoccupation with things left unsaid and histories left untold also led him to co-found the Centre for Historical Re-enactments last year with fellow artist Gabi Ngcobo. Among other projects, it has helped pick up the pieces after photographer Alf Kumalo tragically lost much of his vast archive to water damage at his Soweto home-turned-museum.

The excavation and forensic evaluation of the bones of memory is a recurring theme in Wa Lehlere's work; he made a video of a "dig" he undertook in Gugulethu, using an Afro combto painstakingly create a hole in which, to his surprise, he found the skeleton of a cow. Whena long-standing resident recalled that livestock had been burned at that very site in the 1970s, it opened up a cross-generational dialogue about the social history of the time. "My personal view is that towards and post-1994 there was a huge rush to move on, and a huge neglect of history beyond the dominant historical narratives. I've been researching art collectives working in Soweto in the 1970s that are seldom mentioned, for example, and why were very political, which alienated other artists who were scared to take part because of their fear of arrest."

The Tollman Award is not Wa Lehlere's first: he won the inaugural Spier Contemporary Award in 2007 and the 2010 MTN New Contemporaries Art Award. He is grateful that such awards allow him "to continue making work without the constraint of having to make money — it gives me the space to think and push boundaries". All art, he believes, is political. "Making a work of art is a public statement and is sociopolitical; it doesn't have to be about Zuma. Yes, in a broader sense, I do think art — whether the work is produced under favourable or unfavourable conditions, or in a rural or metropolitan space — is a political act." He becomes less serious for a moment when asked about his next artistic forays: "My work doesn't follow a linear trajectory. I like to take funky turns!"

- Some Deleted Scenes Too is on at the Stevenson Gallery, 62 Juta Street, Braamfontein, until September 21.