

## **Speech by Gordon Froud**

Welcome to this extensive showing in a range of sizes, mediums, and modes of working.

These range from works on blankets, works on paper, layering, collaging, cutting, stitching, drawing, and painting, building up a rich tapestry of images in a palimpsest of multiple layers.

Matter ranges from hints at landscape, floral-like cactuses, and prickly pears, to mapping aerial views that are macroscopic, which is outward looking, all the way to abstractions that are microscopic and inward looking.

Within the stitching that is often used as drawing or as a symbol, (like the thorns on the plants and sometimes the stars in the sky,) there are many variations of stitching from blanket stitch to rough stitch to finer detail stitching. The yarn has variations of thickness from double knit to chunky, allowing them to be used for maximum effectiveness. In conversation with Thoka, I coaxed art of him, the possible reference to his matriarchal lineage as a reference point. He told of his mother and maternal grandmother, who sewed, and hand stitched in their homes. Often the family would sit with blankets over their knees for warmth and comfort, while the matriarch sewed, embroidered, and worked on fabric with needle and thread. While Franz wanted to contribute, he would often be shooed away in case he damaged the work done already. This left a mark on him, and these works bear traces of this, as he seeks to show that he “can” do the stitching as well, if not better than them all. This echoes some of the fraught relationships with his mother and how the grandmother became the haven of comfort and refuge. The stitching that binds is at once functional, holding things together, and yet also fragile and easily broken or cut.

Thoka’s use of traditional and Basuto blankets has become his trademarks and has now been badly copied and mimicked by a plethora of young artists, as recently as seen in the Sasol New Signatures competition in Pretoria, and most recently the open studios in August House in Johannesburg.

Franz quips that he will always stay ahead of the crowd and lead the way. He has developed a language of the blanket as the substrate, as a layer, as a veil, or as a covering. This combined with Hessian for strength and visual effect allows him to play with shape, form, color, and texture - the formal elements of art. The cutting, piercing, and layering makes for conversation between organic forms, geometric devices, and straight lines that indicate structure, grasses, and landscapes.

Main themes in this body of work are land ownership, tradition, and memory. The land is sometimes represented from above like an aerial shot, where markers like cactuses, bushes, or rocks become abstract signifiers. At other times, the horizon line and close-

ups of foliage, grasses, rocks, and trees become memories of the landscape in which he grew up in, particularly when staying for protracted times with his maternal grandmother. The cactuses and prickly pears become familiar markers to him as a boy. They represented places on a map, example turn right at the cactus, or later on they represented where people had been buried. He tells of incidents of burials with someone close when traditional rituals and burials could not take place. These were sometimes deaths at the hands of locals, or even of their oppressive regime. These burials were sometimes seen as a burying for now, with the intention to come back and re-bury properly later. These became his symbols or headstones of where are they? Both as a question and as an answer, here are they.

The cactus lives in harsh climates and adapts, thus they become a symbol of resilience of the people. He muses about the many who died and were buried and have no markers to indicate their place of rest. Where are they? Graves can be seen as useless vessels to harsh remains, but it was important as African tradition requires a connection to the grave and to the earth. Snuff is also used around graves to make a connection that's sacred. Thoka also notes that cactuses and prickly pears are used in the traditional medicine for healing and ritual. The use of these plants along with aloes reminds us of the fading traditional medicine being overtaken by Western medicine.

He particularly likes specific species of aloes that only flower at night where they cannot be seen. This makes a symbolic fugitives working under cover of dark, - working under the stars. It says they become a reminder that things like trauma occur all the time, even at night, and that a night is when trauma often transferred. He reminds us that day and night are part of a continuous cycle. This he picks up in the stitched stars that travel in the ever-continuous movement.

In unpacking the title, Bai ila kai, where did they go? He asks, who, what, and why? Did they go? This is the title of the poem written (as are his titles in Sepedi, his mother tongue) So even when the title asks, where is Sepedi going?

In his poem, he refers to people, places, incidents, families, the Soweto uprisings, ideologies and politics, and he asks, where did they go? With particular reference to the politicians who have forgotten what they have fought for. Where did they go? Like his landscape devoid of human forms, our leaders have nobody to ask the where from. His message to the viewer through these works is to “ find yourself”, reflect on life and figure out if you are lost. “ Where are you? “

This is the essential abstraction of thought questions where we are, who we are, and what it is we are looking for and what.

I invite you to contemplate these questions as you look at this young master at work. As I said before, to echo a quote by Bruce Springsteen, “ I have seen the future and it is Frans Thoka.”