FRANS THOKA – Ba ile kae; a way to reconcile

Ashraf Jamal

Frans Thoka’s gallerist, Karen Cullinan, and I, are driving through Johannesburg’s downtown warehouse district in what looks and feels like a hummer, an all-terrain military vehicle. The sky is a greyscale – slurries of thin and thick black ink – a storm is about to break. Between a grey sky and broken asphalt beneath, we enter Thoka’s studio which, too, is tonally grey.

A grey skip crammed with off-cuts of 100’s of meters of grey blanket material sourced from Aranda occupies the center. A bolt leans against the wall which is lined with artworks at various stages of completion. The overall impact is emphatically monochromatic, though quiet moments of colour – deep blue, earthy green, hessian the colour of wheat – make their entrance. Grey, however, is the defining colour, or rather black, its monochromatic source.

The defining colour, or non-colour, in South African resistance art, monochrome, black on white, signals the didactic and graphic, an expression that is narrow or narrowing, preoccupied with a precise interrelation of form and content – ‘statement art’. This, however, is too simplistic a view, for resistance art – art against an oppressively racist and unequal apartheid system – was never that reductive. Urgent and pragmatic, true, but the illumination of black consciousness never supposed a rallying ideology alone. In *I write what I like*, Steve Bantu Biko sums up the complexity of the struggle: ‘The first step … is to make the black man come to himself, to pump back life into his empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity, to remind him of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be misused and therefore letting evil reign supreme in the country of his birth. This is what we mean by an in-ward looking process. This is the definition of “Black Consciousness”’.

Murdered on September 12, 1977, Biko’s legacy lives on in the art of Frans Thoka. Its function – if art can ever be reduced to its aim or intention – is to work through grief, acknowledge on-going suffering, and, in-and-through the making of art, perform an exorcism. If the ‘miner’ or ‘prison’ blanket is Thoka’s defining trope, it is because it carries the burden of Black pain, and its revelation. But it is not only the symbolic power of the miner’s blanket that matters but also its uneasy consolation – the white-striped grey blanket conceals the sleeper as the land conceals historical pain.

As the South African Nobel laureate, J.M. Coetzee, reminds us in *Age of Iron*, the Black dead continue to groan their woes beneath ‘the skin of the earth’. There remains the urgent need for a cleansing of that vision, or, after African tradition, of putting medicine into the grave – a way of telling a story through words and paint and dance of a land reborn, so that ‘each time one of us touches the soil … we feel a sense of personal renewal’. These last words are by Nelson Mandela, from his 1994 inaugural speech, one which remains a great promise deferred in what is none other than a phantom democracy.

Titled *Bai ile kae / A Way to Reconcile – Chapter 1* Thoka’s solo show at Artyli in Johannesburg – followed pell-mell by a group show at Scope in Miami – acknowledges the land as a source of pain and hope. His art, however, is not a morbid retention of suffering. Rather, it advances through the embrace of pain, towards reconciliation. In this self-congratulatory hour in which Black portraiture reigns, Thoka reminds us that change is never simple, that Black life, after Biko, remains to be invigorated, transfigured, rendered inspirational.

As to how Thoka practices this advocacy? He does so quietly, softly, through tones of grey, layered textures of black oil paint, stitched and glued collage, the effect of which is silhouetted and intrinsically flat. If depth of field is secondary in Thoka’s collaged blanket-works – while primary in his drawings on Fabriano and hand-made paper – it is because the artist’s approach is fundamentally abstract – Thoka elicits emotion. His artworks, like sonar, evoke or sound suppressed despair and yearning. For what Thoka can never forget is the catastrophic consequence of the Natives Land Act of 1913, in which, under British rule, 90% of the land was given to a white minority, a calculatedly devastating legislation that left South Africa’s Black majority landless.

In her collection of poems, *Mine Mine Mine*, Uhuru Portia Phalafala sums up the impact of this brutal and cruel legislation which resulted in ‘Social death, communal death, familial death / ambiguous loss … the loss of fatherhood when you had children / the loss of manhood when you were infantilized and called boy / the absence of your divine humanity in your ancestral land’. In Thoka’s art this psychic disfigurement runs deep – it is never graphically represented. Rather, by operating elliptically and inferentially, Thoka returns us to an ancestral land that remains benighted. Over a century has passed since the Natives Land Act, and still land redistribution, restitution and reconciliation, remain deferred. Nevertheless, for Thoka ‘land is the observer of truth’, its mute witness.

Raised in Northern Limpopo, by his parents in the township of Marapong and his maternal grandmother in the rural village of Ga-Maja, Thoka understood both the tension of a congested disenfranchised community and the solemn solace of wide-open spaces. He speaks with great relish of the illicit pleasure of ‘crossing fences and travelling through bush’, of his passion for indigenous plant-life – cacti, aloe, acacia – of ancient burials beneath enduring trees and secret pacts – his a childhood that has endured and shaped the nature of his art fundamentally.

If Gustave Courbet, in his painting *Burial at Ornans* (1849), sets a commemorative stage, the rural community of varying social stature arranged about a vacant black hole at the centre, then Frans Thoka, unceremoniously, conjures an erased, unnamed and nameless history – an invisible truth. We discuss a cut-out elongated black shape with a rounded tip. A coffin, I ask. Thoka smiles. An entrance to a cave perhaps, he says, or, the silhouette of a cactus or gravestone.

A deep melancholy pervades Thoka’s art. And yet, it is never cloying. While historical ‘trauma’ is understood as indelible, it is carried along with precarious grace. This counterpoint informs the weight and distribution of his monochromatic works, which elegantly balances what is hidden with what is germinal. Ovoid seed-like forms are cut-out, the tonal dance of black and white assume a sonority – the earth might be said to ‘sing’, for the solemn earth is choral too, a song of songs.

Dressed in charcoal overalls, blue and steel fabric scissors in hand, illumined by a low grey light pouring thickly through a bank of industrial windows, Frans Thoka is the youthful embodiment of an ethical complexity. Unmoved by any triumphal zealotry, firmly focused on human paradox, snagged between tragedy and hope, he has chosen to gift us a dilemma. How do we move forward? How do we reconcile what remains irreconcilable?

That said, there has been another human presence in the studio throughout – Frans Thoka’s little son, Lesedi. In between discussions about art, Lesedi and I have been pulling faces. I take a photograph and find him with eyes agog, joyous, hearty … pure.