Singing and Keeping Silent:

The Complex Role of Contemporary Art in Reconciliation

by William Danaher

In 1795, writing in the aftermath of the French Revolution, the German poet Friedrich Schiller wrote a series of now-famous letters on the political role of art. Attempts to establish a secular state grounded in reason and liberal sentiment were doomed to fail, he believed, much as the French Revolution was then failing, without a program in aesthetic education. “If man is ever to solve that problem of politics and practice,” he argued, “he will have to approach it through the problem of the aesthetic, because it is only through Beauty that man makes his way to Freedom.” As Duke University professor David Morgan notes, Schiller’s remarks set in motion longstanding disagreements about the meaning of the terms, “art,” “politics,” and “religion.”

Behind these disagreements, however, is the shared belief that Schiller was right. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, art and politics have become entwined. Art plays a sacred role in secular societies by protesting, sanctifying, and transfiguring a given political order, thus taking the job once occupied by religion. So politicized, art has come to be valued as much for its social utility as for the beauty it expresses. Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935) and Norman Rockwell’s *Freedom of Speech* (1943) are two of numerous examples that might be cited where art works have expressed and shaped a given political community’s identity and imagination, for better or for worse.

Over the course of the past half-century, the political role of art has expanded and proliferated. Rather than merely legitimizing a political order, art now helps communities remember, grieve, and remake social relations destroyed by gross human rights violations. Art works tell stories and give voice to the victims of these violations so that their struggle is not forgotten. They also are often done in a way that recalls the culture and history of the people who have been destroyed and threatened during the past repressive regime. This, again, is sacred work––a remembering of the dead by the living so that the living might live better.

Sometimes, this art begins as an act of protest completed while the struggle is far from over, when the mere act of remembrance and giving voice to an oppressed people is tantamount to treason. To pick two of many possible examples: Between 1940 and 1941, Jacob Lawrence painted his famous *Migration of the Negro* series to remember the plight of Africans Americans who moved in large numbers from the agrarian South to the industrial North in the early twentieth century. Portraying simple scenes with simple strokes from everyday life, while at the same time using a painting method characteristic of masterpieces, Lawrence depicted the dislocation, starvation, violence, and death experienced by his parents and more than six million other African Americans. Completed during the mid-point of the Great Migration northward from 1917-1970, Lawrence’s paintings reflect his determination to tell a history that often seems on the verge of being forgotten in a society that has yet to come to terms with its racism.

Another artist who employed a similar style and method is Tshibumba Kanda-Matulu of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, who employed a style known as “African popular art” to paint 107 scenes from Congolese history from 1974-1976, including forced labor, massacres, and political murders of local religious and political leaders by Belgian colonial authorities. Kanda-Matulu’s paintings reflect the determination to tell Congolese history from the perspective of the oppressed, even though his country, at the time he was painting, suffered under a corrupt military dictatorship.

The difference between art that protests and art that reconciles depends, therefore, less on the intention of the artist, or even the subject matter covered, as it does on the wider social context. For a political community that is willing to face the evil it has perpetuated, such art provides a way of remembering the human cost paid in the past. This work of remembrance helps that community move forward with a better, fuller sense of itself. In a way that is analogous to therapy, such art helps a community heal by helping it see itself as a whole person, both responsible and redeemable.

At the Constitutional Court in Cape Town, South Africa, there is a mixed-media triptych created in 1998 by Judith Mason, entitled “The Man Who Sang and the Woman Who Kept Silent.” Like many other works of contemporary art, it is hard to discern the complex symbolism portrayed without further context. We see images of a dress hanging on a chain-link fence and then, in the middle, a physical dress neatly spread on a concrete floor. In the painted panels, behind the fence, wild dogs lurk and bare their fangs, thus filling the paintings with a sense of foreboding. On one panel, a strip from the dress hangs on the fence, suggesting that it has been torn at––either by the fence or by the dog.

At the same time, another panel conveys a sense of hope and presence. Inside the fence––beyond the reach of the dogs––there appear three lanterns and a cup glowing with a soft, beautiful light. The light is, truly, a “light (that) shines in the darkness,” which the “darkness did not overcome”(John 1:5).

In her artist statement, Mason explains that she painted the triptych after hearing testimony from the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1996-1998) about the deaths of two members of the liberation movement, Herold Sefola and Phila Ndwande. Before he was shot, Sefola asked to sing *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrica*, which is now the South African national anthem. His request was granted. Rather than singing, Ndwande tried to meet her death with dignity. After she had been tortured and kept naked in her cell for ten days, Ndwande asked permission to make for herself a pair of underpants out of a scrap of blue plastic so that she would not die naked. This request was also granted, and then she was placed on her knees and assassinated. When her body was discovered in a shallow grave, she was still wearing her handmade underwear.

The dress Mason created for the triptych was also made of blue plastic. Running along the hem, she inscribed:

*Sister, a plastic bag may not be the whole armor of God, but you were wrestling with flesh and blood, and against powers, against the rulers of darkness, against spiritual wickedness in sordid places. Your weapons were your silence and a piece of rubbish. Finding that bag and wearing it until you were disinterred is such a frugal, common-sensical, house-wifey thing to do, an ordinary act ... At some level you shamed your captors, and they did not compound their abuse by stripping you a second time. Yet they killed you. We only know your story because a sniggering man remembered how brave you were. Memorials to your courage are everywhere; they blow about in the streets and drift on the tide and cling to thorn-bushes. This dress is made from some of them. Hamba kahle. Umkhonto.*

Mason’s words are embedded with two complex and intertwined codes. One code is obviously Christian. Mason draws from Ephesians 6:11-12 to paint Ndwande’s last moments as a heroic struggle against evil, comparing the plastic undergarments to the “whole armor of God” she wore as she contended with flesh and blood, as well as “the spiritual forces of evil.” In this way, Mason portrays Ndwande’s death––her stripping, the brave way she met her death, the way she “shamed” her captors, and the “thorn-bushes”––as a kind of crucifixion, a sacrificial offering of one for many. At the same time, the dress is a kind of covering, a reminder of baptism as a participation in Jesus’ own death and resurrection, for through baptism, those who “were baptized into Christ” have been “clothed” with “Christ” (Galatians 3:27).

The other code is African, indigenous and militant. The final words of Mason’s statement, *Hamba kahle. Umkhonto* (“Farewell Spear” in Xhosa), is from an African funeral song sung by the liberation movement every time a member was lost. Its purpose was to galvanize a grieving community so that the living might still answer the call to resist apartheid as a kind of duty owed the dead––a duty Mason now was assigning herself as a white woman and, by implication, the viewers of the artwork.

The context of the triptych in the Constitutional Courthouse offers a final perspective. Established in 1993, the Constitutional Court is the institution responsible for protecting human rights and dignity in post-apartheid South Africa. From the beginning, the Court saw art as integral to this work, and started a collection of contemporary art inspired by the struggle against apartheid. The purpose of the collection is not, the court’s website says, to use art as a cultural weapon. Rather, it is to portray South African history, and the human struggle, in “its variety, complexity, and richness.”

Like all political art, Mason’s triptych performs a sacred function by drawing deep from Christian imaginary to transfigure the moment of Ndwande’s death. This is to say, she did not die alone because God was with her. In the painting, this is conveyed not only by the inscription on the dress, but the four-fold presence of the light, which is a reminder of the four young men who survived Nebuchadnezzar’s furnace by remaining faithful (Daniel 3:25). A similar faithfulness is required if South Africa will continue to be a whole nation, reconciled.

Finally, Mason’s artwork lifts up a story and voice that has been suppressed. Her determination, as an artist, to paint and create is an exercise in giving voice, a deliberate decision to speak freely. In this respect, it does not matter, physically, whether Sefola sang and Ndwande kept silent before their deaths, for the burden of testimony now belongs to the artist and the community that has heard it. Whether this voice is heard and remembered in South African society will determine whether Mason’s artwork is, in the final analysis, a work of protest or reconciliation.

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SOURCES AND RESOURCES

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