The Beautiful Ones

Nolan Judin
The man watched the bus go all the way up the road and then turn and disappear around the town boundary curve. Behind it, the green paint was brightened with an inscription carefully lettered to form an oval shape: THE BEAUTYFUL ONES ARE NOT YET BORN. In the centre of the oval was a single flower, solitary, unexplainable and very beautiful.

By Storm Janse van Rensburg

The group exhibition The Beautyful Ones takes a cue, spelling mistake included, from the 1968 novel The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born by Ghanaian author Ayi Kwei Armah. In one of the last paragraphs in his text (quoted above), Armah articulates an apt metaphor for what precedes the utopian yearning of the title. Armah viscerally and brutally recounts an unnamed man’s struggle in a society rotten to the core as a result of the aftermath of colonialism and the failures of a new regime. A dream deferred...

Whilst the exhibition is not intended as an illustration of Armah’s book, and knowledge of its content not necessary in reading or accessing the show, some core themes informed my thinking about the selection of artists and artworks.

The exhibition brings together international artists who are exemplary of a generation of artists from and interested in Southern Africa, who create and work in an international context, whilst their practices remain connected to the social and political contexts of their home countries.

With an understanding of, and empathy with the ongoing debates within the larger contemporary African art communities about notions of ‘Africanness‘ and African diasporas, the exhibition does not attempt to present narrow visions of any singular African identity, but aims instead to challenge and contribute to debates regarding artists operating in an international context and articulating an open engagement with regard to many contexts, histories, homes, and the self.
A first thematic strand, and impulse for the exhibition, is the borrowing of the poetic title from Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones*, which suggests a special group of people. An open-ended reading is possible here—a suggestion that the artists in the exhibition are the special ones, the anointed ones. For their entries in this booklet, the artists were asked who they think *The Beautiful Ones* are, and their responses are telling, and mostly political. A common feature, however, is an understanding of the term to refer to a generation, to the possibility of new beginnings and realities, and, as mentioned above, a certain utopian yearning for a better time, for a better future.

Although *The Beautiful Ones* could be celebrated and longed for, ‘beauty’ is not a neutral and innocent concept, as it involves prejudice, exclusion and complexities. The results of urban scavenging are (literally) embedded in the work by Gerhard Marx selected for the exhibition. Daily walks from his home to his studio in suburban Johannesburg, South Africa, drew Marx’s interest to the suburban garden as a metaphorical site of control in the urban landscape. He became interested in what is discarded and ejected from this ‘safe’ zone into the ‘unsafe’ public space outside, which in its most mundane and banal form manifests as unwanted plant materials or weeds. The collecting, sifting and ordering of this material led to a body of work which expanded an ongoing interest in mark-making (drawing) and mapping. By cutting, splicing and grafted, methods associated with hortus siccus and horticultural traditions, Marx creates intricate, delicate and visually complex drawings and sculptures. The works included in the exhibition simultaneously engage aspects of decay and death, but paradoxically also growth, familial connections and birth, as expressed in the haunting bronze sculpture, *Scion (Mother and Child)* (2013).

Dineo Seshee Bopape’s site-specific installation, *Sketch of Landscape Painting* (2013), is a continuation of the artist’s development of an idiosyncratic aesthetic language, utilizing found objects, drawing elements and video. These spatial experiments consist of interconnected elements, physically tied and attached to each other, either via strings, ribbons and fabric, or through visual and conceptual associations. Considered by the artist as process-based and ongoing research, the work is infused with playfulness. Whilst referencing intimate experiences in relation to social and political concerns, Bopape resists reductive readings of her work, as well as classifications based on her biography. The installation consists of found objects mined and scavenged for in Berlin, resulting in the interweaving of her own narratives with objects infused with the spirit of that city.

The portraits by Andrew Gilbert are representations that are foreign, exotic and from another time. He interrogates and critiques England’s violent colonial presence in Africa in the series of drawings titled *Queen Victoria’s Enemies* (2013). A major influence in his practice is the British film *Zulu*, a 1964 ›historical‹ war film, featuring the actor Michael Cane in a heroic lead role. The film depicts the Battle of Rorke’s Drift between the British Army and Zulu warriors in January 1879, during the Anglo-Zulu War. Gilbert’s fiction stems from an internalized obsession with the horror and violence depicted in the film, and the uncritical reception of its unbalanced and problematic viewpoint. Gilbert’s practice centers on complex and contradictory positions that subversively play on historical facts and fictional flights of fancy.

Meleko Mokgosi is known for his large-scale paintings and installations, and an approach that is concerned with Africa-centered history and representation. The title of his recent painting, *Africanis* (2013), is also the name of a humble Southern African dog breed, still found today in rural areas. Superbly adapted to its environment, and a loyal, tenacious and intelligent companion, Africanis has also been considered a mongrel, or inferior dog breed. The impact
of rapid economic change and migration on rural societies, together with a certain disdain for the traditional dog and the status that the ownership of an exotic breed provides, poses an increasing threat to the survival of this ancient and only indigenous African dog breed. Mokgosi re-images the animal, and through the monumental scale of the painting, elevates its status.

Central to the practice of Kudzanai Chiurai is a critique of the representation of political power and the pictorial manifestations thereof. His interrogation of the pomp and ceremony associated with the political ruling classes results in large-scale installations and video works. The bronze sculpture, *State of the Nation* (2011), is the focal point of a ›tableau‹ mounted to resemble an ornate ceremonial throne, which the artist created for a fictional inauguration of a new president or revolutionary leader. The sitter is ensconced between two awkwardly distorted, albeit symmetrically conjoined human figures, bearing a likeness to the artist and referencing the artist’s position within a volatile political milieu as court jester or agent provocateur, or perhaps also as victim. In the video work, *Creation* (2012), Chiurai retells a Setswana creation myth, a spiritual counterpoint to the subjugation of societies by power-hungry political elites.

Kiluanji Kia Henda presents new works based on the abandoned and soon to be demolished Feira Popular de Luanda (Luanda Funfair) in Angola. The series marks a continuation of the artist’s interest in the physical traces left by colonialism, and the fictionalization and reinterpretation of symbolic sites. The funfair, established during colonial times, functioned intermittently during the civil war in Angola and was finally abandoned in the late 2000s. The funfair, as a site of dreams, magic and childhood innocence, can be likened to a utopia, and the metaphor extended, as it now resembles, in its decay and neglect, a dystopia. The works also foreground Hend’s interest in playing with and distorting our perceptions of time; there is uncertainty whether these images are of relics from the past or the vision of an apocalyptic future.

The science fiction created by Gerald Machona developed from performative works based on his experiences as a foreigner/alien in an often hostile environment. Central to the film *People from Other Places* (2013) are detailed props and costumes made from defunct South African and Zimbabwean currencies. This stems from earlier works and takes its cue from masked ritual performances, where Machona, wearing masks constructed from banknotes, acted out the problematic stereotypes of Zimbabwean immigrants in South Africa. The work is concerned with precarious notions of value, and is analogous with immigrant experiences elsewhere in the world. Although we are living in an era of unprecedented interconnectedness, paradoxically, we are also negotiating increasingly restrictive economical and physical borders.

The Beautyful Ones brings together a diverse and dynamic range of artistic practices and visual languages intended to create tensions, collisions and, ultimately, conversations. The exhibition would not have been possible without a large and supportive network of collaborators, and I join Juerg Judin in thanking the following individuals and institutions:

Tony East, Neil Dundas, Liza Essers and Damon Garston of Goodman Gallery; Joost Bosland, Lerato Bereng and Andrew da Conceicao of Stevenson; Baylon Sandri and Mareline van Zyl of SMAC Gallery; Justin Rhodes, Ashleigh McLean and Pamella Dlungwana of Whatiftheworld Gallery; Kai Erdmann of power galerie; Honor Fraser; Hoosein Mahomed; Philippe Dutilleul-Francoeur; Francisca Bagulho; Daghild and Busso Bartels.

Lastly, and most importantly, we would like to thank the participating artists for their commitment and enthusiasm about being part of *The Beautyful Ones*. 
Meleko Mokgosi

Born in Francistown, Botswana in 1981. Currently lives and works in New York, USA.

Mokgosi is currently Clinical Assistant Professor at New York University. He completed his MFA at the University of California, Los Angeles in 2011. He was a fellow of the Whitney Independent Study Program (2008) and was Artist in Residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (2011/2012). International group exhibitions include: *AmericAura*, National Library of Cameroon, Yaounde, Cameroon (2008); *Pool of Possibilities: Mapping Currents*, 3rd Guangzhou Triennial, China (2008); *Four Continents*, Botswana National Gallery and Thapong Workshop, Gaborone, Botswana (2008); *Narratives of Now*, University of California Los Angeles, Los Angeles (2009); *Look III*, The Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art Museum, Peekskill, NY (2011); *Made in L.A 2012*, organized by the Hammer Museum in collaboration with LAXART, Los Angeles (2012); *Primary Sources*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (2012) and *Capital Offense: The End(s) of Capitalism*, Beacon Arts Gallery, Los Angeles (2012). He is the recipient of the inaugural Mohn Award (2012) and was awarded a Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters & Sculptors Program Grant in 2013.

»In my region, Botswana, white/fair skinned people were perceived to be more beautiful just by virtue of their skin tone. So this phrase, *The Beautiful Ones*, means something quite specific in my thinking about politics and beauty – not to mention post-coloniality – because it ties the idea of beauty/favor to an articulated subject position: the ones that are beautiful.«

1 *Africanis*, 2013, 243 x 488 cm, oil on canvas
2 Right: *Africanis* (detail), 2013
»Beautiful ones are born every day – but we smear them with dirt so they don’t recognize themselves.«

Kudzanai Chiurai


Chiurai was the first black student to graduate with a BA Fine Art from the University of Pretoria. He has participated in a number of important group exhibitions internationally including: Africa Now, a travelling exhibition in Scandinavia (2008); For Those That Live In It, Mu, Eindhoven, The Netherlands (2010); Photo Ireland Festival, Dublin, Ireland (2010); the Dakar and Cairo Biennales (2006, 2010); Impressions from South Africa, 1965 to Now, Museum of Modern Art in New York (2011); Figures & Fictions: Contemporary South African Photography, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK (2011); ARS 11, Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, Finland (2011); Fresh Paint, Stenersen Museum, Oslo, Norway (2012); and dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, Germany (2012). He has presented three solo exhibitions at Goodman Gallery Johannesburg (2010, 2011, 2012), and presented his film Iyeza as part of the New Frontier Short Film programme, Sundance Film Festival, Utah, USA (2013).

3 Creation, 2012, video, edition of 5
4 Right: State of the Nation (detail), 2011, bronze, 153 × 120 × 110 cm, edition of 5
»There is an urgent need to deconstruct what was dictated as beauty, and those who had the exclusive right to dictate it. To conquer independence was the most important step. Now beauty can start to take new shapes, while prejudices are broken.«

Kiluanji Kia Henda


Kia Henda’s work has been included in a number of Biennales, including: 1st Luanda Triennale, Angola (2007); Check List_Luanda Pop, African Pavilion, 52nd Venice Biennale (2007); Farewell to post-colonialism, 3rd Guangzhou Triennial, Guangdong Museum of Art, Guangzhou, China (2008); There is always a cup of sea to sail in, 29th São Paulo Biennale, Brazil (2010) and Les Praires, Les Ateliers, Biennale d’art contemporain de Rennes, France (2012).

Selected group exhibitions include: Africa on My Mind, Savannah College for Art and Design, Atlanta, USA (2009); Tomorrow Was Already Here, Museo Tamayo, Mexico City (2012); SuperPower: Africa in Science Fiction, Arnolfini, Bristol, UK (2012); Doublebound Economies, Halle 14, Leipzig, Germany (2012) and Estación experimental, LABoral Centro de Arte y Creación Industrial, Gijón, Spain (2012). Solo exhibitions include Self Portrait as a White Man, Bevilacqua La Masa Foundation, Venice (2010) and most recently Homem Novo at Kunstraum Innsbruck, Austria (2013).

5 Black Swan Carousel, 2013, inkjet print, 112 x 170 cm, edition of 5 + 1 AP
6 Right: Balance Chairs (Satellite) (detail), 2013, inkjet print, 170 x 112 cm, edition of 5 + 1 AP
»There is unbridled optimism in the term The Beautyful Ones, and of course I think of my children. But one knows that ›are not yet born‹ is still to follow, which adds a sense of futile nostalgia for what might be an impossible future.«

Gerhard Marx


Marx completed his MFA *cum laude* at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg in 2004. His fifth solo exhibition, *Cumulus* was held with the Goodman Gallery, Cape Town (2011), followed by *The Viewing Room* at Goodman Johannesburg. His work has been shown at various international art fairs, including ART Basel and FIAC (Paris) and has been featured in numerous public and private art collections. During 2009 he completed two large scale public sculpture commissions in Johannesburg, South Africa: *The Fire Walker*, a collaboration with William Kentridge and *Paper Pigeon*, a collaboration with Maja Marx. He has extensive experience in theatre, as scenographer, director, filmmaker and playmaker, including the recent production *REwind: A Cantata for Voice, Tape & Testimony* (composed by Philip Miller, designed and directed by Marx), performed at the Royal Festival Hall, Southbank, London (2010), the Market Theatre, Johannesburg (2008) and the ’62 Center, Williams College, Massachusetts (2007). Marx is a fellow of the Sundance Film Institute, the Annenberg Fund and of the Ampersand Foundation. Marx has been included in the South African Pavilion of the 55th Venice Biennale.

7 *Cumulus II* (detail), 2011, plant material, acrylic paint and glue on cotton paper, 153 × 103 cm
8 *Left: Scion (Mother & Child)*, 2013, bronze, 44 × 53 × 56 cm, edition of 5
»The Beautiful Ones are an idea that gets made again with every generation.«

Georgina Gratrix

Born in Mexico, 1982. Lives and works in Cape Town, South Africa.

Important group exhibitions include: From Pierneef to Gugulective at the South African National Gallery, Cape Town (2010); ¡ALPTRAUM!, a travelling exhibition shown in Washington D.C., London, Berlin, Los Angeles and Cape Town (2011); Beguiling: The Self and the Subject, University of Cape Town Irma Stern Museum, Cape Town, South Africa (2011) and Paddle 8 Curator’s Selection, ARCOmadrid, Spain (2013). Residencies includes the TAKT Kunstraum, Berlin, Germany (2009) and the Nirox Foundation Residency, Johannesburg, South Africa (2013). Solo exhibitions include Everything Ecstatic, Ten Haaf Projects, Amsterdam, the Netherlands (2010) and most recently My Show at SMAC Art Gallery, Stellenbosch (2012).

9 The Baroness, 2012, oil on board, 120.5 cm (diameter)
10 Right: Ed Young (detail), 2013, oil on canvas, 120 × 110 cm
»Although blessed by the many freedoms and liberties won by our predecessors, many, like myself, who are the so-called born free generation, are faced with our own forms of bondage. The struggle for freedom continues through rebellion. The beautiful ones would be those who chose to rebel against injustices, even if they are part of the status quo.«

Gerald Machona


Currently pursuing a Master of Fine Art degree (MFA) in Sculpture from Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa and holds a Bachelor’s degree in Fine Art from the University of Cape Town (2009-2010). He has participated in group exhibitions such as Making Way, Standard Bank Art Gallery, Johannesburg (2013); The Night Show, Goodman Gallery, Cape Town (2011); The Geography of Somewhere, Stevenson Gallery, Johannesburg (2011); and US II, Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa (2010). Machona is a recipient of a Mellon Scholarship and is a member of the Visual and Performing Arts of Africa (ViPAA) research group at Rhodes University.
»When I hear the phrase *The Beautiful Ones* I think firstly of Armah’s book. I think of the title… the moment it was written, I think of other writers… I think of a future moment, something postponed…«

Dineo Seshee Bopape

* Born in Polokwane, South Africa in 1981.
* Lives and works in Johannesburg, South Africa.

»I think of The Messiah, The Emperor, The Female Zulu Elite Regiment – those who will wipe clean the blade and the table covered in false idols and corrupt, rotting vegetables.«

Andrew Gilbert


Important recent group exhibitions include Moving Walls, Museum of New Art, Detroit, USA (2008); Der Müde Tod, Kai 10 Raum für Kunst, Düsseldorf, Germany (2009); 6th Biennale for Contemporary Art, Salle des Calandres, Eragny, France (2010); Lontana, Centre for Contemporary Art, Plovdiv, Bulgaria (2010); Berlin Klondike, L.A. Art Centre, Los Angeles (2011); Necessarily True, Garage, Rotterdam, the Netherlands (2012); Berlin Status (1) and Fliegen, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin (2012) and Images for Images – Artists for Tichy – Tichy for Artists curated by Zdenek Felix, GASK Gallery of Central Bohemia, Czech Republic (2013).

Most recent solo exhibitions include Colonial Exhibition – Culloden 1746 at power galerie, Hamburg (2012); The Sacred Ambush is full of the sound of parrots screaming (with Anna Parkina) at SVIT, Prague (2012); The Erotic Adventures of Andrew in the Sudan, 1895, Galerie Andreas Höhne, München (2011); Austerlitz – The Fate of Empires at Ten Haaf Projects, Amsterdam (2011) and Andrew Emperor of Africa at Galerie Polad Hardouin, Paris (2011). His monograph, Andrew, Emperor of Africa (Kerber Verlag) was published in 2011.

15 Queen Victoria’s Enemies (3) – Beja Warrior 1884, 2012, mixed media on paper, 40 × 30 cm
16 Right: Queen Victoria Holding Head of King Cetshwayo ka Mpande – with Potatoe Eyes – July 4th 1879 (detail), 2013, mixed media on paper, 100 × 70 cm
»The Beautiful Ones are the ones that belong to an elusive future. They can sometimes be a tool for a revolution’s aspirations. They can inspire the wary. They are the same as a national, founding myth.«

Athi-Patra Ruga

Born in Umtata, South Africa in 1984. Lives and works in Cape Town, South Africa.

Recent group exhibitions include: Guangzhou Triennial, China (2008); Dak’Art – Biennale of African Contemporary Art, Senegal (2008); A Life Less Ordinary – Performance and Display in South African Art, University of Nottingham, UK (2009); Beauty and Pleasure in Contemporary South African Art at the Stenersen Museum in Oslo, Norway (2009); Ampersand: Ein Dialog zeitgenössischer Kunst aus Südafrika, Daimler Contemporary, Berlin (2010); For Those That Live In It, MU, Eindhoven, the Netherlands (2010); From Pierneef to Gugulective, South African National Gallery, Cape Town (2010); Ilulwane, for Performa 11, New York (2011); Infecting the City, Cape Town, South Africa (2011); Becoming: Photographs from the Wedge Collection, Nasher Museum of Art, North Carolina, USA (2011), and Under a Tinsel Sun, III Moscow International Biennale For Young Art, Russia (2012). Ruga has been included in the South African Pavilion of the 55th Venice Biennale.

17 Castrato as (the) Revolution, 2010, wool and tapestry thread on tapestry canvas, 125 × 80 cm
18 Right: The Future White Woman of Azania, photographed by Hayden Phipps (detail), 2012, lightjet print, 79.6 × 119.2 cm, edition of 5 + 2 AP
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Inside cover
Athi-Patra Ruga,
Deadboyz Auto Exotica #2 (detail), 2009,
photographed by Oliver Kruger, lightjet print,
73.4 × 106.4 cm, edition of 5 + 2 AP

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