

# Nontsikelelo Veleko

*Works in order of appearance:*

*Kepi V, 2003*

*Cindy and Nkuli, 2003*

*Untitled*

*Thabo III, 2003 – 2006*

*Sibu IV, 2003-2006*

*Hloni, 2004*

*Manthe Ribae, Miriam Makeba Street, Newtown, Johannesburg, 2007 (from the series Wonderland)*

*Vuyelwa, 2003-2004*

*Thabo Chicks, 2004*

*Nonkululeko, 2003*

*Sibu II, 2003*

*Thulani, 2003*

*Kepi I*

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**Nontsikelelo Veleko** was born in 1977 in Bodibe, South Africa, and lives and works in Johannesburg. She was brought up in Cape Town and studied photography between 1999 and 2003 at the Market Photo Workshop in Newtown precinct in Johannesburg, an initiative co-founded by veteran photographer David Goldblatt. In the last couple of years Veleko has been attracting a great deal of attention with her striking work entitled *Beauty is in the Eyes of the Beholder*, a depiction of South African street style. Defying the clichés of what life can be like in South Africa, Veleko captures young people dressed in unique outfits, often with handmade elements.

Nontsikelelo Veleko was a nominee and finalist of the MTN New Contemporary Artists in 2003 and has since participated in prominent local and international exhibitions. In 2006 her photographs were ex-

hibited in the landmark exhibition *Snap Judgements: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography* at the International Center of Photography in New York and in *Personae Scenarios-the new African Photography*, Brancolini Grimaldi Arte Contemporanea in Rome. She has taken part in such well-publicized shows as *7th Recontres Africaines de la Photographie exhibition – Bamako 2007* and 2009 and was represented at the Armory Show in 2009 and most recently she held a solo exhibition *Welcome to Paradise* curated by Elvira Dyangani Ose for Casa Africa, Las Palmas, Spain.

Nontsikelelo Veleko is represented by Goodman Gallery in Cape Town.

**Mark Sealy** is the Director of Autograph ABP.

# The Canvases of Representation & The Photographs of Nontsikelelo Veleko

by Mark Sealy

**'In time, we shall be in a position to bestow on South Africa the greatest possible gift, a more human face.'** – Steve Biko

It's now evident that curatorial work in the field of photography across the continent of Africa has, especially in the last 20 years or so produced some intriguing interpretations of what constitutes good 'African photography'. Some exhibitions have been truly innovative and in time have proved to be historically important moments, particularly *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art*, New York in 1991, the *24th Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie*, Arles 1993 and the first *Rencontres de Bamako* in 1994 were exceptional moments in the presentation of contemporary African photography. Its true that many exhibitions have done good work in allowing its audiences to discover African photographers but others have simply served to expose a deep-seated conservative approach to contextualizing, presenting and exploiting the complex nature of photography produced by indigenous African photographers.

An obvious and recent example of an inherently conservative approach to working with African photographers was the restaging in March 2005 of Samuel Fosso's photograph *Le Chef* as a live performance which saw the artist himself displayed in the main shop window of one of London's most fashionable department stores, Selfridges on Oxford Street. This event, though satirical in nature not only restaged one of Fosso's

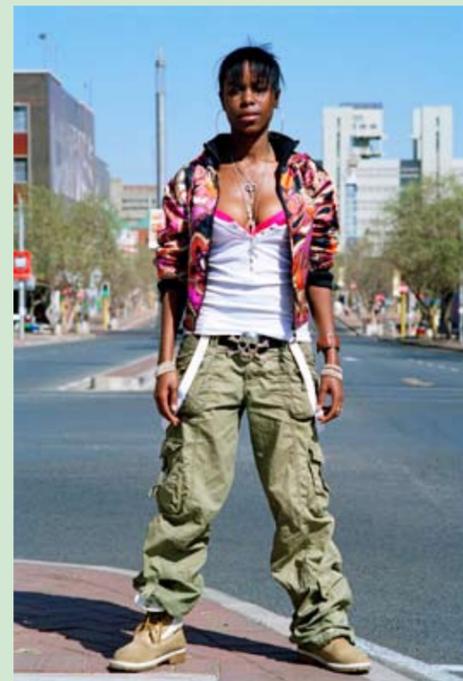
most celebrated photographs but also recreated the violence of colonial capture, display and invention of the African subject. Fosso's ill-conceived project, menacingly echoed the large-scale temporary events that took place at the Great Exhibitions held in cosmopolitan centres such as Paris and London at the turn of the 19th century. Events that saw the colonized subjects of imperial Europe put on display for the entertainment of millions of Europeans; a violent form of cultural ridicule.

When dealing with African cultures in Europe one has to be critically aware of the impact that these historically and culturally biased encounters have had on our understanding of Africa. If Europe insists on inventing Africa for popular Eurocentric consumption then, critically, those of us who are now working with images from Africa should be asking for what cultural purpose our work is intended. Africa, with a landmass that covers 20.4% of the total land area of the earth and 47 countries containing a myriad of different cultural formations that seamlessly slide across borders cannot possibly be reduced or framed as one historical moment, one big idea. The very idea of an African photography is therefore a deeply problematic conception that needs unravelling and rethinking.

There is no doubt that a rich photographic tradition has existed all across the continent since the invention of the medium. We therefore have to recognize that the history of photography on the continent of Africa has not yet been fully written, especially whilst it continues to be presented as an adjunct of the medium's growth.

This continued invention of Africa in Europe is a recurring cultural nightmare that constitutes an invitation that perpetuates an undercurrent of uncontrollable desires that forces us to keep Africa at a distance. The danger of a continued cultural distancing brought on by objectifying the African subject affects our capacity in Europe to engage with and respond to the humanity of the African Other. Each time we objectify the African body it reignites the historical horror of African anonymity, cultural erasure and fantastic inventions of our own imaginary African place.

Observing how African photography has been pulled from the margins towards the cultural centre is an interesting exercise in postcolonial engagement that resonates with the funk of cultural imperial-



Lesego, Mirriam Makeba Street – Newtown

ism and the aesthetic management of the Other. The legal actions over 'Who Owns Seydou Keita' that saw two European collectors fighting in court over 'ownership' of Seydou Keita's archive and prints<sup>1</sup> 2006 and the Golden Lion award for Malick Sidibé at the Venice Biennale in 2007 are contrasting, defining moments in the history of photography and on the landscape of western visual culture. Both situations raise questions about the place of African photography, its position within the art market, the construction of canonical figures, the intentionality of the photographer and, critically, the reception of an image once removed from its original field of perception, reception and its use.

The tension of representational politics, even if one desires not to be caught within these frames of reference, simply won't go away, especially when photographic works produced by artists in Africa are judged from the perspective of European, ethnocentric, institutional concerns. At present African photography can be read as an impossible science. It's meaning is always open to re-invention. Therefore the globalization process of African visual culture through the international museum and art gallery networks has the capacity to render local concerns, the specific moments of interest or nuances of expression invisible, lost in translation. Large group shows that collect and display African artists are clearly susceptible to reconstructing an experience that is not unlike the cultural work that was done by the Great Exhibitions of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The current size and scale of museums in the West now, as they increase in capacity and compete for globally trans-fluid audiences are seriously in danger of turning the art-object encounter into a theme-park experience in which the role of curator functions like that of the circus ringmaster. This was certainly the case for the last big African art fair in London, part of which was *Africa Remix*, an exhibition that featured more than 60 artists from 25 countries which caused Jonathan Jones, *the Guardian* art critic to give up trying to present criticism of the work for fear of causing offense, 'In the end, this is a subject I probably shouldn't

even be writing about. What do I know? Racism is limitless.'<sup>2</sup> Jones's position is interesting as it's a clear example of critical judgment being suspended by the overbearing weight of trying to read individual artists works through prism of an incredibly diverse geo-politically complex continent.

The reception of African photography is shrouded in discursive debates concerning African modernity, 'and with it a great number of current paradigmatic oppositions have developed: traditional versus modern; oral versus written and printed; agrarian and customary communities versus urban and industrialized civilization; subsistence economies versus highly productive economies,'<sup>3</sup> exotic versus violent, famine versus war, local versus global. Cyclical debates concerning African modernity have become the norm in which we read the art produced across Africa. The quest for the Afro-Modern moment or the proof of Afro cosmopolitanism says more about us in Europe than it does about the subject in focus.

'Naturally, the institutional rise of Orientalism must – at least in England and France be associated with the huge expansion of colonialism and other forms of domination over Asia and Africa taking place at the same time. Not only was a systematic understanding of non-European peoples and their spoken languages needed to control these peoples but a knowledge of their civilizations, by seizing and categorizing their cultures, ensured that the natives themselves could only learn about their own civilizations only through European scholarship'.<sup>4</sup>

It's through the prism of these debates that the photographs of Nontsikelelo Veleko have to perform their epistemological work. Her photographs have to rub against the grain of historical visual knowledge concerning how Africa and in particular South Africa, has been systematically constructed for Eurocentric consumption over time. Her photographs have to work against the historical theoretical inventions of an imagined Africa. This invented Africa has created a fantastic temporally distant and pessimistic African vision that has come to dominate how and when we see the African subject today.

Veleko's photography turns away from the core tradition of Afro-pessimistic history so prevalent in the turbulent or melancholic visualizations



Nkosana

of African societies. Her work is an active engagement with the now-generation of fashionable people who are not throbbing with the hangover of Apartheid. Her found-subjects demand to be considered as subjects living in the moment, a claim common across the worlds' youth cultures.

Veleko's work oscillates between several photographic traditions. It embraces the style photography made popular by magazines in the UK such as *Dazed and Confused* and *iD-Magazine*, magazines in which street fashion is the dominant semiotic register. Veleko's models serve as representatives of a people with a shared social formation and cultural identity of those who aspire to be identified beyond the burden categorization. The subjects' desire is to be seen and their willingness to be photographed offer readers of these photographs a visual comment on the post-apartheid condition at work, a condition that isn't trapped by despair and dysfunctional political parties. In this context, as in all fashion photography, there is a sense of contemporary social anthropology at work in which the more exotic figures and moments are brought into focus for visual pleasure. The point being made by Veleko here is that these individual forms of expression, through fashion, lay claim to a new kind of assertive cultural pattern that reclaims the street in a manner that is more akin to historical and political exuberance of black dandyism in Harlem in the 1920s, a moment in history that represented a growing social confidence and new forms of black self-invention. As Henry Louis Gates noted, when discussing the concept of the 'New Negro' movement in America, he states that, 'negroes are called or call themselves new at what might be considered moments of crisis or times of strange, interesting, and often arresting opportunity. Used to describe an African recently arrived in eighteenth-century England, a newly emancipated slave in the 1870s, or variably, a political radical or poet in the Harlem of the 1920s, the term "new Negro" carries with it an eighteenth-century vision of utopia with a nineteenth-century idea of progress to form a black end-of-the-century dream of an unbroken, unhabituated, neurological self.'<sup>5</sup>

But we would be mistaken to read Veleko's photography as simply a meditation on the current state of street fashion in Johannesburg. Having studied at the Market Photo Workshop, a centre that 'has played an integral role in the training and growth of South Africa's photographers for twenty years; ensuring that visual literacy reaches those in neglected and marginalized parts of our society'<sup>6</sup> it's not surprising that there is a latent sense of political urgency and defiance about her work that wants to look forward into a place of unhinged freedoms; to be really free one has to have the capacity to imagine or explore what one's life is actually like, not be told what one's place is and not be held or fixed within a scopoc regime over which one has no control. The camera in the hands of Veleko, is really a simple tool with which to carry out the investigations of a life without boundaries with categorizations and obsessions with race. Like Harlem in the 1920s the subjects of Veleko's photographs are 'not only emphasizing their differences in the way they look and move, but also insist that they have a right to the streets and that the milestones in their collective past are part of the city's history.'<sup>7</sup> Veleko's portraits are therefore a mighty step forward towards the profound gift anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko dared to imagine in 1978 the year after Veleko was born, the gift of a new and human face for South Africa. +

#### References:

<sup>1</sup> [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) accessed 7 May 2010

<sup>2</sup> [www.arts.guardian.co.uk](http://www.arts.guardian.co.uk) Accessed 7 May 2010

<sup>3</sup> MuDimbe.VY. *The Invention of Africa*. p4. Indiana University Press, 1988.

<sup>4</sup> Bernal, Martin, *Black Athena: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece, 1785-1985 vol.1: Afro-Asiatic Roots of Classical Civilization: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece, 1785-1985*. p236. Rutgers University Press, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Gates, Henry Louis Jr. From his essay, 'The trope of the new negro and the reconstruction of the image of black.' Published in *Representations* number 24, University of California, 1988.

<sup>6</sup> [www.marketphotoworkshop.co](http://www.marketphotoworkshop.co) accessed 10 May 2010

<sup>7</sup> Miller, Monica L. *Slaves to Fashion*, p199. Duke University, 2009.