

Lifestyle

Artist tells what we have done

A US museum has given Gunn-Salie the chance to realise an idea and take the message to the world

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In the same week as South Africa was removing its president, Cape Town-born artist Haroon Gunn-Salie was installing his latest artwork at the New Museum in New York City.

The timing, though coincidental, sees Gunn-Salie's work casting a long-distance shadow over the new president and raising some unanswered questions about a chapter that has yet to be closed in the country's recent history.

Titled *Senzenina*, the work greets visitors when they enter the third floor of the museum. It comprises 17 figures made of mixed media: men on their haunches, arranged in a V formation, and headless. They represent the striking mine workers who were shot by police during the first violent encounter at the Lonmin mine in Marikana on August 16 2012.

Gunn-Salie sees that day, when 34 people were shot and killed while attempting to disperse peacefully after a week-long strike, as a rupture in South Africa's democracy — one that has yet to heal.

"I don't think it's left any of us," he says. "And, if there had been justice, maybe it might have. But there is no justice. In fact, the widows and the workers are in a worse position. It's so tense in Marikana right now. There were many killings there last year. It's on a knife's edge."

The reverberations of the Marikana massacre are still being felt,



A wound that has yet to heal: Haroon Gunn-Salie's *Senzenina* is showing at a gallery in New York

and he wants to focus international eyes on the role of the multinationals involved in the strike and the events that followed.

These are questions that involve South Africa's new president, Cyril Ramaphosa, who at the time was a nonexecutive director of Lonmin, which owns the mine.

Although he has apologised for the role he played at time of the massacre (the subsequent inquiry absolved him of guilt), there are some who still blame him for urging the police to intervene.

That the exhibition opened in the same week as Ramaphosa was sworn in imbues Gunn-Salie's piece with an

unexpected but urgent power. His work is part of the New Museum's Triennial, an annual group exhibition of young and emerging artists from around the world, the so-called disruptors who use art to address current issues in their societies.

It was an ideal opportunity for Gunn-Salie, exhibiting for the first time in an American museum, to put these questions to the world: What role do multinationals play in tragedies like Marikana and how do they, and those involved in them, share responsibility for the deterioration of sociopolitical and economic conditions in the areas they exploit? His work provokes

viewers to think about how they can change a democracy if it is failing its people.

The 28-year-old artist sees it as his duty to keep those in power accountable by bringing the events of Marikana to an international audience.

"One way is to make sure it never leaves national consciousness and that it enters global conscious[ness]. There can be international solidarity, but only if people know about it."

Since his days studying at the University of Cape Town's Michaelis school of fine art, where his graduate exhibition, *Witness*, focused on the forced removals in District Six

during apartheid, he has been concerned with art that risks more than it rewards. He says he had been conceptualising *Senzenina* for some time but didn't have the right space for it. The museum's invitation gave him the opportunity.

"It has been the biggest challenge of my working career so far. The magnitude of the audience and the weight of presenting in New York and at a very important institution like the New Museum is a lot of responsibility."

The figures themselves aren't the only arresting part about the piece, it is also the accompanying soundtrack, which he has titled *Songs for Sabotage*. It is taken from archival footage on the day the mine workers were killed.

When Gunn-Salie speaks about using the anti-apartheid mourning hymn as the title of his exhibition, his eyes become moist and there is a quiver in his voice.

"In the installation, there is a recording, which comes five minutes before the massacre, where Joseph Mathunjwa [head of the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union head] said to the workers: 'Please leave the Wonderkop peacefully'. And, just before they left, they sang in chorus *Senzenina*," he says.

"And *Senzenina*, at that moment, was a premonition. They knew they were going to get shot. They could see; the landscape was flat; there was no way out. They were trapped. And that singing of the lament, that is the song for sabotage. It sabotaged our whole belief in our democracy."

Gunn-Salie's work is a vivid, life-sized reminder to people everywhere that, no matter who is in power, the people should never be forgotten.