

Kudzanai Chiurai *Madness and Civilization*
Goodman Gallery, Cape Town 12 April – 12 May

According to philosopher Bernard Williams, Thucydides made ‘military, economic, and geopolitical assessments of what must have gone on in the Trojan War’ by reading Homer. In the work of the Zimbabwean Kudzanai Chiurai, as for many southern African artists, art and national history have always been closely linked. Under colonialism, the British South Africa Company, Ian Smith and Zanu PF, art in what is now Zimbabwe has often served to document and to protest, a repository of history as much as an object of disinterested aesthetic contemplation.

Curated by fellow Zimbabwean Candice Allison, Chiurai’s *Madness and Civilization* is a restaging of several exhibitions held in Zimbabwe during the past two years and includes two photographic series, one mixed media drawing series and a video. The photographs and video are a case of old wine in new bottles. *Genesis [Je n’isi isi] IV* (2016) and *We Live in Silence v1* (2017) are staged hyper-realist photographs of dominant main figures

– a white man in the first case, a black woman in the second – flanked by two shirtless and subservient miners. They are reminders that, in southern Africa, the privilege of corruption is no longer exclusive to white men. It’s a familiar observation among the farflung Zimbabwean diaspora, and the images suffer from the simplicity of their message.

The drawing series, titled *Madness and Civilization* and numbered 1–XI, with its reference to Michel Foucault’s 1964 work by the same name, collages texts torn from colonial-era publications and images of racist segregation. Fake letters, supposedly handwritten by Foucault and quoting some of his anti-Enlightenment writings on madness, are pasted among the snippets. Chiurai has drawn and scribbled across these collages, defacing his own aesthetically flawless and structured photographic practice.

What draws you in is not their overall effect – messy, seemingly antiart – but the police brutality, inequality and a society without

justice. Reading and viewing these fragments brought back memories of the horror of opening, some years ago, Olive Schreiner’s protest novella *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (1897) to the picture of whites, from Cecil John Rhodes’s British South African Company, hanging Shona men from a tree. Nor were Marlow’s words from Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) ever far away: there was ‘no method at all’ to this colonialism: it was simply ‘robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale’.

As Conrad suggested, any reasonable person would realise that to identify the colonised as ‘criminals’ is absurd. Yet Foucault’s critique of reason – and the rational method – confuses the picture. In these images and texts, the power of colonialism is apparent in the wielded club, the gun and the physical brutality rather than in the imposition of Enlightenment systems of knowledge. But while the objects in this exhibition might not bear out the theses proposed by the inspiration for its title, they are nonetheless revealing. *Matthew Blackman*



We Live in Silence v1, 2017, pigment ink on fibre paper, 130 × 174 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Goodman Gallery, Cape Town