



Sam Nhlengethwa, *Phalaborwa Six*, 2018. Oil on canvas, 120 x 180 cm

## In the Between: Sam Nhlengethwa's 'Waiting'

Sam Nhlengethwa

By Thuli Gamedze

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The world is never as vivid as when we are waiting. Whether for the bus, for a friend, for a miracle, or in the more existential sense – for Godot, perhaps – waiting introduces us to a very particular mode of sensory sensitivity. We all wait, and it happens inside a limbo dimension of infinite potentials, where images, dreams, and urgent hopes pre-exist the reality that lurks on the other end. To wait is a collective process where a future is imagined, urged, and dragged in.



Sam Nhlengethwa, *Waiting for a friend I*, 2018. Mixed media on canvas, 80 x 90 cm

Sam Nhlengethwa's *Waiting* spies on a number of scenes of waiting activity. Collage and paint works on canvas depict domestic spaces and impending family decisions, the anticipation of public events (and public unevents) and *the moments before* political moments. By pausing life at precise points where an action is in the pipelines and not yet in full existence, Nhlengethwa's images seem all to be animated with a ton of potential outcome.

*Waiting for an answer*, a colour lithograph, is one of the more understated works in the body. Nhlengethwa's cinematic style brings a certain drama to the image, which captures a moment clearly just before a relational shift, whether toward reconciliation, chaos, anger, or tenderness

between the two characters. They sit together at an expansive wooden table – a hunched over, hatted figure who looks down at his own fidgety hands, and another, who stares straight ahead, considering the possible lives that may follow the answer that comes.

Nhlengethwa's conceptual framework is intriguing in this regard, for the the audience is captured by multiple *potentials*, gazing at images where the anticipated objective will never be revealed. How strange to situate waiting as the subject, drawing the viewer into the prefigurative moment, asking us to stop and enter the void in which our own projections and political motivations are exposed.

Two works, titled *Madiba waiting for his freedom* and (somewhat insultingly) *Winnie waiting for Madiba*, open up the less-visited dialogue of what Nelson Mandela's release from prison could have

meant for South Africa. Before the damaging negotiations to end apartheid, and at the time Mandela was waiting to be released, there existed a million possible South Africas – and Azanias – in peoples' minds. The works use now-iconic photographs of the late lovers within painted backgrounds; Mandela's face behind bars, and Mama Winnie, stylish as always, placed in a still, solitary moment in a sparsely decorated room.

The power of the work is the way in which it wards off the inevitability of what actually followed Mandela's release, opening up public opportunity to revisit our political desires without the pressure of certainty. We are invited to re-imagine a present – ironically, perhaps it is one where women are not perpetually

Sam Nhlengethwa, *Madiba waiting for his freedom*, 2018. Mixed media on canvas, 80 x 90 cm

understood as beings 'in waiting', or perhaps it is a present where socialist, decolonial politics have led us to true independence. Perhaps it is a place where no one ever waits.

For waiting should not only be understood as a universal activity. Through Nhlengethwa's frequent focus on the waiting(s) of the black working class – for transport, for jobs, for medical attention, for urgent help – the show hints at the notion of waiting not just as a neutral verb, but also as a market-driven force that actively dispossesses marginalised people of their time.

The tragic, perilous wait of six mineworkers in dangerous conditions is illustrated in the three-part work *Waiting to be rescued I* and *II*, and finally, *The Phalaborwa Six*. The images reference a recent, deeply horrifying history, where miners in Limpopo, instructed to await rescue from fire in an underground refuge chamber, died deep underground, waiting to receive the help that would only arrive many hours too late. This theft of time from workers underlines the politics of the capitalist framework, where ability to escape the sometimes deadly act of waiting is bought and sold, and rarely given freely.


Sam Nhlengethwa, *...to be rescued I*, 2018. Mixed media on canvas, 100 x 140 cm

The barbed wire and barred windows of South African homes, newspaper headlines chatting Zuma-this and EFF-that, paintings adorning interior walls, and tiny pieces of litter dotting the street... These are the details that Nhlengethwa sneaks into the backgrounds of his urban scenes, at times, perhaps in

order to hint at the political framing of 'the wait', and at others, simply illustrating the nuances of human moments in the between.

If we choose to frame waiting as a practice worth meditating on – worth historicising – it can become a deeply philosophical thinking space. Waiting can be understood as an endless landscape, holding all possible futures upon its surface. From the mundanity of waiting for traffic lights to change, to the significance of waiting for a baby to enter into the world, waiting might be the place of all potential universes – the place before it all comes crashing down.

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