

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

Nadia Neophytou

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.

'Is fokol is nex': The South Western side of life

Tshepiso Mabula

On Sunday mornings the terror of the weekly tribulation is humbled by the music of the people.

On Sundays they suffer and triumph in song; they affirm their strength with hymns from old times. Theirs is a tale engraved in the echoes of their melody. They are the ones who have not forgotten that in every place there is a ghetto — a storeroom for desolate black faces, left poor and underprivileged so they don't contaminate distinguished spaces.

Monday and Tuesday, the noble malambane is the kasi cornerstone — selling temporary pleasures ez'khiph'abokleva enhluphekeweni yas ekasi and giving the illusion that everything imnandi and isestazi.

Cigarettes for the deterred guerrilla sotsha, who sits in the corner waiting for his miraculous economic emancipation — reminiscing about dodging ama yellow-mellow eMapetla and strapping on a Kalashnikovs eMaputo. Amakip-kip for abo nana girl, the small souls whose heroic superpowers are dimmed by the mask of poverty on their faces.

On Tuesday, the born-free vezandlebe is a revolutionary resident whose innocent resolve is tested by the Red Ants. She is the tormenting terror on Twist and Claim streets in Hillbrow, Johannesburg. She is the burden of umdlezane, trivial and tiny in her body but carrying a titanic responsibility for her young mother.

On Wednesday, the humble mantshingilane is a custodian of anxiety; he must feed his family. He must serve his masters precisely with perfection. The dirt must be removed so that the clean, rich masters can live harmoniously in the former homes of the peasants he evicts. Can he even spell urban regeneration?

He ignores the obvious similarities between him and the troublesome hillbillies with whom he has often shared a long ride home to the village. Because his kids must eat and, for the sake of the rich, the poor must always retreat

On Thursday, yimini yomthandazo yoonina. It is the day our mothers pray on behalf of the fearless fatherless bastards who will be turned into kings and queens.



Street vibe: Every day of the week has its own rhythm in Soweto. Photo: Oupa Nkosi

On Fridays and Saturdays, akulalwa! Because we perpetuate phuzi face antics with our cigarette-smoking, sexy silk stocking-wearing, ghetto skheberesh endearing, Klipdrif soda-drinking hood inclinations.

We follow the hazy moonlight as it sails like trains moving from Dube to Mapetla. We move with ease like slow sips of black mashaya down the throat of a black labouring thirst. M'rembula turns the shebeen of the

Bantustan into his indumba — sending fly mummies into a trancelike mapanstula, moving their feet to the rhythm of Meadowlands.

And Sundays. Yes, Sundays are the best days, because on these days Thuso Motaung spills unknown truths about the picturesque paradox of black lives living in black times.

On Sundays we all pray. From the sound of intsimbi that resounds

through the church building to the loud bump and grind of umgongo at the local watering hole, we all pray for redemption from the ailing reality that has become our lives — for strength to face the pertinent terror of our every day. And we eat well; we eat like the Lord is on the way and we must make up for all that we've lost in the week that was.

On Sundays we sing. We laugh. We cry. We drink and we pray.