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# Zwelethu Mthethwa: What happens to an artist's work after they commit murder?

Kwanele Sosibo (https://mg.co.za/author/kwanele-sosibo) 24 Mar 2017 00:00



Last week the high court found Mthethwa guilty of the brutal murder of a sex worker, Nokuphila Kumalo, in Cape Town in 2013. (Photo: The Times, Esa Alexander)

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If the upheaval that followed last year's inclusion of artist Zwelethu Mthethwa's work in the *Our Lady* exhibition at Iziko South African National Gallery is anything to go by, his name now evokes a certain level of reticence and embarrassment.

Last week the high court found Mthethwa guilty of the brutal murder of a sex worker, Nokuphila Kumalo, in Cape Town in 2013.

That sentiment, and its related commercial implications for the art world, appear to be neither unanimous nor indefinite. Mthethwa's inclusion in last year's exhibition, which sought to reframe the portrayal of women — especially when that portrayal happens through the male gaze — culminated in the retraction of his work and that of other artists who were part of the New Church Museum's collection, which had been lent to the gallery for the duration of *Our Lady*.

New Church Museum director Kirsty Cockerill told *City Press* in January that the decision to remove the artworks was motivated by a breakdown in decisionmaking between Iziko and New Church, but she also pointed to the “ideological hypocrisy” driving some of the artists who were claiming to make a “principled gesture of protest” against the exhibition.

“Other artists who have been vocal in criticising *Our Lady* are currently included in Home Truths [another exhibition at the Sanlam Art Gallery which featured Mthethwa’s work],” she said.

Following pressure from rights group Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce (Sweat), a portrait of Kumalo was then included as part of an exhibition titled *At Face Value*.

Elsewhere, there is silence, but there is also a mood of business as usual. According to the sales record on their website, art auctioneers and consultants Strauss & Co have been selling Mthethwa works throughout his trial, beginning in October 2013 with a 1992 (69cm by 98cm) pastel on paper work titled *On the Beach* (for R51 156) and ending, at the time of publication, with two works sold on March 6 this year for a total of R111 407. Strauss said they would issue a statement at a later stage.

Mark Read, the founder and owner of Everard Read Gallery, which has exhibited Mthethwa’s pastels in the past, was emphatic about his decision to return works in his possession to the artist. “I can’t speak for any art dealer other than our gallery,” says Read, “but I’d find it surprising if people can talk up his work at the moment because there is a feeling of revulsion about it all.

“Medium or long term, the market has its own peculiarities, but I can’t see that people would risk it — not in South Africa anyway, where there is hopefully a very real sensitivity about crimes and violence against women.”

When the story broke, Read said he initially held on to the works, but “when it became apparent that this [the trial] was going to take a long time and it was an issue I’d want nothing to do with, we sent the work back to him”.

Mthethwa got his first degree in fine arts at the University of Cape Town’s Michaelis School of Fine Art, before attaining a master’s degree at the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York in 1989 on a Fulbright Scholarship. To be allowed into Michaelis, Mthethwa had to write a letter to the then minister of education for special permission. He also taught at Michaelis for four years in the 1990s before focusing full-time on creating art.

The road map to Mthethwa’s pedigree was laid out pretty much from the beginning of his art career. His work had an easy, unforced intellect. He was able to transpose the sensibility of his pastel drawings on to a new medium: photography. Here he trained his sights on society’s untouchables, evoking a sense of community and shared mores beyond the mere aesthetics of the photograph.

“One of the fundamental issues that concern me with photography is that I really strive to make beautiful photographs,” he said to curator Okwui Enwezor in an Aperture Foundation-sponsored talk in 2010. “It’s very important for me that the sitters love the photographs. It’s very, very important. It’s very important that they see history as it fits them.

“I remember one guy saying, ‘Please take me a photo, I want my kid to see me at work. I hope that the photograph will stimulate her to pursue her education.’ It was very telling and moving for me. It confirmed that I was doing the right thing.”

Mthethwa has exhibited his work mainly overseas, including at the Museum of Modern Art and the Centre Pompidou in Paris. He is represented by prestigious New York-based gallery Jack Shainman. Attempts to get a response about how Mthethwa’s murder conviction affected the gallery and its handling of his work went unanswered.

Although one would expect such pronounced silence from the market, especially from his gallerists, the pall of silence casts its net wider, roping in associates from across the colour line.

“There is an OJ [Simpson] vibe,” says a curator, who wishes to remain anonymous. She is alluding to the fact that how one self-identifies racially influences the degree of sympathy being dispensed to the artist in the court of public opinion. The “OJ vibe” theory, which clearly applies here, is also steeped in the history of black incarceration. It is a silently acknowledged collective pain, stored deep in the DNA, to be unleashed for tacit allegiances in times such as these.

In a sense here, silence is golden, or worth millions of bucks. As every aspect of our society is mapped out on racial and gender-based lines, so too is the prism through which Mthethwa’s offence is viewed.

“In the context of a South Africa where we have a strong Constitution and gender organisations, [it will be hard for business to continue as normal]. They are watchdogs, so to speak,” says independent curator Andile Magengelele. “His work has not fared badly in the secondary market, but most speculators have been guarded because he has been on trial.”

Magengelele adds that, as the Deutsche Bank named an entire wing in an exhibition space after him, it will be interesting to see how it manages that reputational damage, as it has possibly the largest collection of his works. “The art world is not regulated, so one can never be sure of what will happen. But there are speculators, just like in the financial world. Some people have exchanged money on that work, so they will not speak out. Sales will continue to happen in the private domain.

“If you have blue-chip works, say worth about R800 000, you won’t discard them. After a few years, you will call Magengelele and say, ‘Hey, I’ve got a pastel, do you want to buy it or should we exchange?’

“It’s like blood diamonds. People might say they don’t buy blood diamonds, but speculators are selling them. The incident probably won’t affect his pricing.”

Although nobody can expect even a sliver of morality where money is concerned, the irreconcilable irony remains the disjuncture between the artist’s discursive framing of his own work and how all that was upended with the murder of Kumalo.

How would the encounter have gone had they met as subject and artist, perhaps in a similar dwelling to the ones the artist photographed in his *Interiors* series?

Now, it is in a stroke of ill fate that, in the artist’s words, one who occupied the periphery is now one who is driving the mainstream, even if only from the grave.


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Kwanele Sosibo

Kwanele Sosibo studied journalism at Durban's ML Sultan Technikon before working at Independent Newspapers from 2000 to 2003. In 2005, he joined the Mail & Guardian's internship programme and later worked as a reporter at the paper between 2006 and 2008, before working as a researcher. He was the inaugural Eugene Saldanha Fellow in 2011.

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