

THE COLLEGE OF WOOSTER ART MUSEUM
RESPONSE LABEL PROJECT

Fall 2017

After the Thrill is Gone: Fashion, Politics, and Culture in Contemporary South African Art

PARTICIPANTS: Alicia Brazeau, Director, Writing Center, and fifteen students in her First Year Seminar.

PROJECT GOAL: The goal of this assignment was to learn how to use formal analysis (description) to support a personal interpretation or response to a work of art.

ABOUT THE PROJECT: Museum object labels take several forms. The most common is the “tombstone” label that contains basic information—artist, artist dates and nationality, title, year made, materials, and collection information. Then there is the research oriented, extended label copy usually written by the curator that appears beneath the tombstone material. This text provides salient information about the artist, period, style, and context.

Finally, there is the more informal extended object label, **the response label**, that can start with a written description of a work of art to slow down the viewer and often provides a deeper reading of the artist's intent.

ASSIGNMENT: Write a short description of a work in *After the Thrill is Gone: Fashion, Politics, and Culture in Contemporary South African Art*. Using the ideas that the formal analysis or description suggests, incorporate this description with your ideas to assist your reader in seeing why you propose your interpretation.

This project was undertaken with the generous permission of the After the Thrill is Gone curator, Andrew J. Hennlich, assistant professor of art history, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI.

STUDENTS RESPOND

Dan Halter's use of a common transport bag as art material is intended to communicate the ill-favored presence of Ghanaians in Nigeria who relocated there to benefit from Nigeria's economic boom at the end of the 20th century. Now it is widely used as a commercial bag by the average Ghanaian retailer. Halter's piece bears the Zimbabwean phrase "Kurekwegava Ndokusina Mustsubva." Research tells us that this phrase means "no matter how far a place might be, you can always reach there if there is something that you love so much." This is a motivational phrase intended for immigrants who desire to move back home.

This type of bag comes in different sizes and is durable because it is made with woven plastic threads. However, despite its strength, it requires very delicate handling to preserve it. Its fragility depends on the weight of the materials it carries, therefore, the heavier the load, the more susceptible to damage it becomes and vice-versa. Although such bags have retained the old name—"Ghana must go" bag—it is currently used for commercial and

STUDENTS RESPOND

The collage on the right by Julia Rosa Clark is set on a rectangular white, glossy background with a vertical pattern that resembles zebra fur. The paper surface resembles magazine paper, with wrinkles that add an imperfect texture to the work. While the black and white pattern remains open in the middle, one's eye is drawn to the thirty-two cutouts of assorted pictures/shapes that act as a frame around the zebra print. Notably, the cutouts on the periphery of this collage contrast with the adjacent piece by Clark where the images are seemingly exploding from the center. The images range from those easily identifiable to ones that are harder to distinguish.

The collage elements appear to be deliberately chosen, but it is hard to discern the reasoning for them since only a few are identifiable. This could be intentional since the artist would not assume every person can recognize every picture. The most recognizable image is the paper cutout of Africa because my eyes are constantly drawn to it which makes sense given the theme of the work is related to the post-apartheid period in South Africa. One gets the feeling that there are many unanswerable questions involved in the piece which adds to the overall intrigue of the work.

—Samuel Casey '21

STUDENTS RESPOND

What initially captivated me in Gabrielle Goliath's work, *Ek is 'n Kimberly Coloured*, is her use of multiple photographs. Choosing to use three photographs shows that the artist believes her personality cannot be summed up by one identity, but rather, multiple. Furthermore, the text at the bottom of each image resembles closed captions, like those from a foreign movie. Feeling the need to translate herself to those around her demonstrates her feelings as an outsider in her city.

The woman's multiple looks and actions in the photographs vary with the cultures with which she identifies. When viewed from top to bottom, each persona has an increased level of comfort with her intersectionality. In the top photograph her hair is shorter and in the bottom one it is completely pulled back with her face angled towards the camera in a more visible way. As each identity or layer is revealed, the woman's pride and acceptance of her mixed heritage becomes clearer.

—Claire Davidson '21

This text was developed as part of Alicia Brazeau's First Year Seminar, *#NailedIt: Learning, Failure, and Higher Education*.

STUDENTS RESPOND

In Gabrielle Goliath's *Berenice* 10-28 nineteen different women are shown in frames of the same size, all of which have a monochromatic setting. All the women look young, have dark hair, display neutral facial expressions, and are dressed in the same white tops.

Perhaps Goliath's purpose for having all the women display a neutral expression, dressing them in the same clothing, and making the frames the same size is to help the viewer realize that all the women represent one person—Berenice—who was a friend of Goliath's killed during a domestic incident on Christmas Eve. The nineteen women depict the years that have passed since her death. The neutral facial expressions combined with the monochromatic setting help create a gloomy mood. This mood fits this piece well as death is a major theme of this piece. The women also appear to be staring at the viewer, and their enlarged faces make them seem trapped. Perhaps this aspect of the piece refers to Berenice's helplessness, as she was only a child when she was murdered.

—Christian Dokes '21

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STUDENTS RESPOND

This collection of 19 portraits of women is displayed linearly as if creating a timeline from year to year. The different women are all dressed in the same white tank top, suggesting that we view all women the same way. Each woman has the same open, expression-less face, ridding them of their personality. Their eyes peer out into the audience, drawing the viewer in, as if at any minute they will speak out. Each depiction is in grayscale, drained of color, perhaps speaking to the lack of life these women feel. The red line encasing these portraits represents the standards these women are confined within.

A new row starts at age 19 or year 2000, as if to express hope for the new millennium. However, the portraits are displayed the same, reiterating that there is still work to be done for women's equality. The chronological order of each piece seems to signify the woman that Berenice might have become, had her life not been taken as a result of domestic violence. The lack of freedom these women evoke suggest that Berenice might not be missing much. Ultimately, *Bernice 10-28* raises the question of whether life is worth living when it feels like you can only merely exist.

—Kylie Hawkins '21

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STUDENTS RESPOND

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In *EK is 'n Kimberley Coloured* Gabrielle Goliath presents three staged photographs of the same woman. Each includes the same phrase in Portuguese, French, and Spanish. I think Goliath's intent in doing so is to contextualize the cultural viewpoints regarding the same individual.

My initial impression of the piece was one of curiosity. In the top photograph, the woman is putting on lipstick while staring at herself in the mirror as if she is giving into the laws that society has put in place for women. The woman in the middle image holds a book and looks directly into the camera as well, perhaps challenging the different laws put in place for women. In the lower photograph, she again looks into the camera while smoking a cigarette. I read this action as her not only mocking the laws society puts in place for women but completely disregarding them.

My first interpretation of the piece was that it is about not judging people without knowing who they truly are. The phrase in each photograph translates to "I am a half-breed of Kimberly" meaning each picture portrays what it is like to be from Kimberly, and the different images also show how women have to change themselves to fit into what society believes is right.

—Harlan Jones '21

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STUDENTS RESPOND

The Mobutu Sese Seku-style cap by Gerald Machona is covered with currency from many countries. This seems fitting because money is woven into the fabric of life, and is something associated with the upper or ruling class. The money, however, also serves as a metaphor for the suffering of the people and represents the devaluation of the Democratic Republic of the Congo's currency under Seku's kleptocratic regime which resulted in citizens who truly came to know the meaning of "after the thrill is gone." Unfortunately, Seku's military regime was put in place to overthrow the previous oppressive government, but he could not bring his promises to fruition.

STUDENTS RESPOND

In this staged photograph by Athi Patra-Ruga, the person on the zebra is wearing pink leggings and is blocked from view by balloons of various colors. There are also figures in the background—possibly people—covered in hats and gowns. Not only that, but there are pink and purple flowers in front of the zebra. To the right of the zebra, there is some unknown thing with multiple colors surrounding it as well as a pink hat on top of it, and there are several green trees in the background.

I thought that the bright colors might suggest something positive; however, the background is not bright. The dark background as well as the fact that the balloons are covering the human from waist up could point to people sometimes being insecure with themselves. The artist is from South Africa and might be trying to hint at the fact that even though there is poverty, lack of safety, discrimination and prejudice in this world—especially in areas of Africa—we can overcome that, which might be what the brighter colors are trying to illustrate.

—Matthew Olszewski '21

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STUDENTS RESPOND

Both of these photographs by Mary Sibande feature a single woman standing in the center, framed by empty negative space. The photograph on the left depicts a black woman wearing a full, dark blue Victorian-style dress under a white apron of the domestic worker. Her beaded necklace unravels similar to the fate of South African peoples during (and after) apartheid. The beads collect on the ground at her feet while she appears to bow to the viewer. This unraveling, viewed in conjunction with the extravagance of the dress, led me to believe that she is symbolic of the results of colonialism in South Africa and the subservient role its people were forced to perform.

There is far less color in the photograph on the right. In fact the only color is the rich sea foam green of the gown. The other prominent features in this work are the staff held in the woman's hand and her profile. The woman holds the staff high in the air but her other hand appears to be in a defensive gesture as if she fears some unseen entity. This fearful gesture contrasts with the staff affixed with a cross that is purposefully and protectively outstretched, and might represent religious transitions in South Africa with the institution of Catholicism and Christianity as a result of colonialism. However, there is an additional dialogue when the two photographs are considered together as the staff and stance of the one on the right appears to be pushing aside the themes presented in the photo on the left.

—Samuel Smith '21

STUDENTS RESPOND

Mohau Modisakeng's video *Inzilo* references traditional mourning rituals through the clay and wax he puts on his body and the toll it takes as he shakes free of the materials. The initial removal of the clay through picking, pulling, and tearing resembles—albeit on a smaller scale—the hardships and violence that occurred during apartheid in South Africa. This includes

STUDENTS RESPOND

Mohau Modisakeng's *Ditaola XV* presents a man kneeling in the center of the image grasping a rifle in one hand, and in the other hand a dove raised to the sky. The dove seems to appear from a mysterious white powder (perhaps gun powder) that is dispersed over the man and the ground. This might indicate that peace prevails over violence.

Moving to the bottom of the photograph there are geometric shapes in the powder on the floor resembling a hand holding up fingers. Although I am unsure of the significance of the shapes they may be used to expand on the meaning of the dove and gun situated in the man's hands. Behind the man are different shades of green with the darker shades on the outside of the print and brighter shades closer to focal point. Perhaps the reasoning behind this is to demonstrate that the man is the light in the darkness; the bridge of peace for all.

—Brett Stern '21

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STUDENTS RESPOND

Berenice 10-28 by Gabrielle Goliath is inspired by her experience of seeing a friend, Berenice, killed in a domestic violence incident as a young girl. In this piece, nineteen women stare out from red borders. All are blank-faced and solemn. Perhaps their uniform white tank tops mean to unite them as representing Berenice; maybe it's representative of youth. The bleak, grey backgrounds create a sense of tragedy. Still, there is ostensibly hesitance, confidence, and accusation in their gazes.

Despite the similarities, each woman is unique; and though they are Berenice in spirit, they are not her in body. This leaves the viewer staring into their eyes, asking questions. Why are they only shown from the chest up? Why 19? These questions left me pursuing answers. The piece intends to do this; we are expected to look for responses from these women. I think they are all blank-faced because there are no answers for what happened to Berenice.

—Zizia Swan '21

STUDENTS RESPOND

Gerald Machona's *A Luta Contradicta I* and *A Luta Contradicta II* features two hats covered in devalued currency from countries such as Brazil, Ghana, and Portugal. The two hats vary in structure, and both cap styles are associated with dictators.

I didn't really quite understand the use of currency as fabric on the hats although evidently the artist uses devalued currency as a common element in his art. One of the two hats is modeled after the hat style worn by the Democratic Republic of Congo military dictator Mobutu Sese Seku, and potentially indicates how wealth flowed to the dictator instead of the citizens. Keeping the title in mind, the hats may also represent contradictions within struggle as "a luta continua" translates to "the struggle continues."

—John Stevens '21

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STUDENTS RESPOND

Ditaola XV by Mohau Modisakeng depicts a man kneeling on the ground while holding a gun and throwing powder into the air. When looking at the piece from a distance, the man looks like a woman because of the fur cap and skirt. The artist seems to use these features to blur the lines between masculinity and femininity. Modisakeng may also be attempting to blur the lines between animals and humans with the fur cap and the dove that takes flight out of the powder. The gun itself possibly represents violence because it is pointed up towards the dove. Doves are commonly associated with peace so it is likely that the artist is using that symbol in combination with the gun to suggest that the peace is being threatened in South Africa. Perhaps the artist is using the dove and gun in combination with the blurred lines between masculinity and femininity to also comment on violence against women. This artwork may aim to end some of the traditions that are harmful to South Africans.

—Hayley Swinnerton '21

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