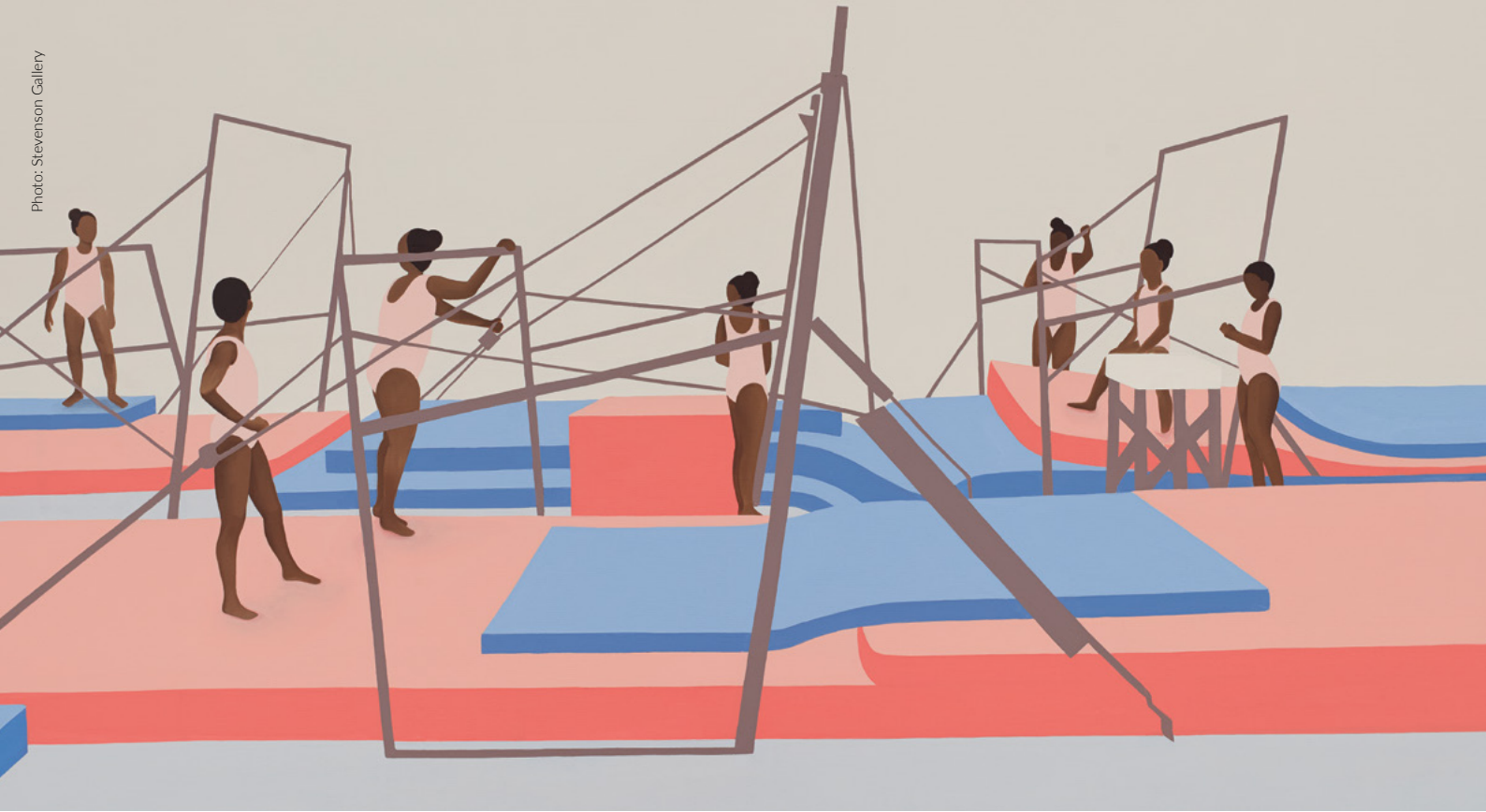




Photo: Stevenson Gallery



# 'WE NEED TO EXPRESS IN ORDER TO LIVE'

## THENJIWE NIKI NKOSI'S GYMNASIUM



Danielle Bowler

want to reach out and touch the painting.

Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi's *Ceremony* (2020) hangs in "mixed company" at Cape Town's Norval Foundation. In pastel pink tones, five young Black gymnasts stand in the intimacy of a huddle – two nearly unseen, their brown girl bodies implied in parts, to register legs, arms, hands, leotards.

The scene transcends the flat dimensions of the canvas. And so, I reach out, unthinkingly. I reach towards something – experience perhaps, but more too. I'm trying to extend the encounter beyond what the eye can perceive, to make sense of the impossible perfection of line; the way that at Nkosi's hand we are encouraged to see the shape of things, and to feel it too.

“You want to be seen and felt,” she said in an interview with Miss Rosen for *Document Journal*. And in this moment, I see and feel, too: moved in multiple ways.

*Ceremony* (2020) forms part of Nkosi’s first solo show and ongoing *Gymnasium* series, which opened in the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic last year. In lockdown, it was viewed not in the concentrated white cube of Johannesburg’s Stevenson Gallery, but expansively ricocheted between online screens, as the works rippled across digital space. They were propelled by the way the show captures our contemporary imagination and Black experience, and the deep aesthetic pleasure of its subversive and tender softness.

In a poetic and imaginative catalogue essay, theatre-maker, facilitator and scholar, Mwenya Kabwe provocatively asks: “What does the *Gymnasium* series give us at a time like this?” One year later, her question echoes.

As the bones of our profoundly unequal, stratified experiences reveal and expose themselves in striking ways in this pandemic-time – as Kabwe noted – we stand, too, on the precipice of the Tokyo Olympics: observing the way Black women’s bodies remain under a historically enduring scrutiny in athletics and beyond it. But while the visibility of these athletes is seemingly heightened, they remain concurrently unseen beyond skin and surface, and are barred, bordered and barriered in numerous ways as race, gender and more intersect. Their names are metonym, monument and many.

**Nkosi asks us to consider what happens when the pressure to perform is diminished, when the performance of blackness is refocused into imagining the spaces we want to inhabit.**

– *Mwenya Kabwe*

In this moment, *Gymnasium* presents a sharp prism of truth, reality and testimony; a totem and talisman as we stand on the edge of the architecture of reason and the question of humanity itself. In sharply precise lines, Nkosi’s work stages an act in imagination, while implicating us all in its intentional, tender and precise enquiry about the conditions of our world, all the while being aware that the art world she labours in is itself “a political structure”.

“no amount of visibility will alter the ways in which one is perceived”

– *Claudia Rankine*. “*Citizen: An American Lyric*”

*Gymnasium* deals in duality and multiplicity: the gymnast’s story is also the artist’s, and one speaks of many others. “The artist, like the gymnast, is witnessed and judged: trying, succeeding, failing,” Nkosi writes in her catalogue notes.

In pastel tones and with multiple kinds of blackness stretched in brown across her canvases, she paints Black gymnasts, judges and audience against a backdrop of sharp-lined architecture – mats, furniture, equipment and arena. It is immediately evocative in a moment where Simone Biles is the image of the sport’s excellence – but the work also extends outwards, beyond gymnastics, beyond excellence, to ask us to think about all spaces and performances of Black identity, and ways of participating in, against and beyond defined demands. Therein lies its resonant power: just as it presents visibility and performance, it questions it too.

As Kabwe writes: “Nkosi asks us to consider what happens when the pressure to perform is diminished, when the performance of blackness is refocused into imagining the spaces we want to inhabit. A simultaneous critique and proposition.”





Nkosi's first solo show came after years of practising: working across forms that include video, performance, installation and painting. At some point she was juggling five jobs: teaching at three institutions, working as a designer and "trying to be an artist". "The *Gymnasium* series gave me visibility at a time when it was giving a lot of artists, black artists, visibility in relation to their particularly figurative work, and that's what I've been associated with, but before that it was really a challenge to convince anybody really to be interested," she says.

Her work meditates on a rich breadth of ideas - which include racial, cultural and national identity, but also "the idea of history, and the history of architecture [and] musings on futures, alternate universes and realities", she says, as we speak over a Zoom call. Dealing with big ideas - questioning life, history and memory itself - her themes, interests and gestures are vast, both including and stretching beyond identity. But in "quite clear terms in the past", Nkosi was told "if you want visibility you're going to need to speak about your experience...I've never given in to that, I've just made what I've wanted to make, at different points in my life", she says.

As the daughter of activist parents - a Greek, historian mother and South African economist and Pan African Congress leader father - who was born in exile, and who has lived in Zimbabwe, South Africa and the US, and is currently in Johannesburg, Nkosi is reckoning with the idea of biography presented as practice. It is a reality that affects Black artists across time. The place from which Black artists are read and presumed to be speaking - and their sole area of expertise, she points out - is the locus of their bodies and experiences.

Reflecting on this, she writes: "Black artists have been making all kinds of work for a long time, but the thing that gets consistently foisted upon us is that we are expected to make our ideas accessible to white audiences via our particular 'alien' stories, Black stories, 'other' stories."

Her words invoke the words of Hennessy Youngman, taken from his satirical and subversive video from his "How to be a successful black artist" and recalled by poet Claudia Rankin in *Citizen*: "if 'a nigga paints a flower it becomes a slavery flower, flower de Amistad'".

"I'm trying to create, for myself, a long career where I don't become associated with one mode of making or one sort of way of speaking or you know like with one language or one place that I'm speaking from," Nkosi says. "I think I'm speaking from many parts of myself that are interested in many things and that are made up of a whole lot of different cultural references."

"Everyone's always speaking from a perspective," she points out, explaining that this reality needs to be considered in the case of White artists. They too, speak from a position, and not the universal. And as she meaningfully implores in her catalogue comments: "Let's think about what conversations about Blackness are revealing more broadly. When we talk about race, we're talking about a set of structures that underpin everything."

"What happens when the black figure is no longer in the image? Are you still interested in me making this work?"

- Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi, *WePresent*

To see Nkosi's work as only valuable in its representative dimensions misses the many questions layered into them - literally. Her process thinly brushes multiple coats of paint onto canvas, to produce astonishingly precise lines by hand. As the same work is painted over and over again, it becomes deeply layered, in paint and meaning too.

Everything that makes up Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi - her belief system, ideas, questions, experiences, feelings, hopes and desires - vibrate in the images.

In a series of beautiful, grainy images by Andile Buka, made while Nkosi was creating *Gymnasium*, some of the books on her shelf are visible. Their spines reveal Mahmood Mamdani's *Citizen and Subject*, Steve Biko's *I Write What I Like*, William S. Burrows' *My Education*, V.S. Naipaul's *Reading and Writing*, *Mythologies* by Roland Barthes, Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind*, among others. On a lower shelf, the titles *African Futures* and *Living Archive*. Seeing the work and speaking to her, it is palpably evident that these texts texture her work, and the makings of her mind.



Nkosi is an intellectual who thinks and feels deeply and is propelled by hope. “It’s sort of idealistic and maybe it’s annoying to say, but I really do think that all of these structures can be undone through loving practices.

“I’m very much into Buddhist philosophies and I really enjoy listening to particularly black Buddhist teachers talk about just resistance and change and love and being with yourself and being with others – because I think that perspective is just particularly nuanced in terms of what we need to heal this situation, to dismantle these structures and to help people build compassion and empathy for one another.”

It is this sense of care that saturates *Gymnasium*, and an understanding that, as Grant Farred writes, “culture can sometimes in and of itself constitute an instructive politics”.

Nkosi’s work is expansive in that she actively makes space. There is room for reading and returning, constantly, to her richly textured canvases to find new meanings. In rendering faceless figures, she is drawn to the way this creates “broad symbolic potential. I’m interested in the idea of a Black person, particularly a Black woman, standing in as the ‘every person’. That this feels in some way radical should give pause for thought,” Nkosi says. Her minimal aesthetic, paring everything down to the very basics of shape and symbol, evocatively invites the audience into the conversation. In both her abstract and figurative work, she is dealing with – how to reflect “world of questions and ideas and provocations” with care and thoughtfulness, through line, geometry, colour and approach.

Looking at *Routine* (2019), with the gymnast’s arms stretched out as she stands in triumphant display post-movement, the question emerges: is she actually happy, exultant, feeling victorious, or is this just the demand of the sport, of the moment, of the gaze? Observing the piece more closely, one of the judges is looking away.

In another work, the kaleidoscopic *Audience* (2020), each of the many audience members are engaged in looking differently. One person holds binoculars, another’s hands are clasped in anticipation, two hold onto each other, one looks away or at the ceiling, another looks bored. There is tension, drama, tenderness and the mundane in the theatrics of witnessing. The result is thrilling. Through her artistic choices there is much imaginative ambiguity – and is not the space for multiple meanings, and multiple ways of being, the ultimate freedom?

It is a deeply communal gesture to create in this way, by compelling the viewer to participate in the making of the art’s meaning. And as the work becomes ever more alive with our participation, she gives “the world a more human face”, as Biko implores.

Nkosi depicts before and afters in the gymnast’s world, away from excellence and the spectacular moments of their dynamic routines. By focusing on the quotidian, she renders her figures worthy of being seen, looked at and witnessed in mundane moments – their humanity is not contingent nor needing to be achieved through performed brilliance.

As we speak, she leans into vulnerability and away from the idea of excellence, too. She is currently thinking about how to navigate both the many different kinds of visibility that have come with the success of the work, and speaking about it.

“I think often when we speak publicly we don’t show vulnerability,” she says. She is currently thinking about weighty questions about what art should do, about her own responsibilities with regards to this, and questioning the pressures she puts on herself.

“I really truly believe that if all of us were just given the opportunity to be whatever version of ourselves that we are, whatever that is, and to learn and to try again... if we could afford that kindness or love to one another, I really think that the world would be a different place,” she says. This grace extends to herself too. “That’s like a big sort of motto or refrain in my head right now, like ‘ok just try again, you can always start again, you can try again.’”

This sensibility is infusing her extension of the series: in November, Nkosi will present her second solo show. “I’m still working on the *Gymnasium* series, in different ways. There’s figuration, there’s abstraction,” she says. “This is the first time that I’ve allowed myself time to work through an idea ... I’m just allowing myself to figure it out, and to figure out what is mine and what is not mine and what do I actually want to paint.” The work is moving out of the particular context of the gymnastics arena as Nkosi is thinking about “art and movement and art and sport” alongside researching “the history of sport in art, and the relationship between the two fields”.

Beyond the idea of the artist/gymnast’s performance in the context of the “structures or the rules of the game in both cases”, Nkosi is contemplating “what these things mean to us spiritually a little bit.



*Nkosi depicts before and afters in the gymnast's world, away from excellence and the spectacular moments of their dynamic routines.*

"I don't know what I'm aiming for exactly yet but the necessity of expression in both of those fields is something that's really interesting to me: that we make from this drive, and we move from this drive, and I'm interested in what the relationship is between those things. What is it about us that we need to do these things? What purpose does it serve? I know we need to move in order to live but I think similarly we need to express in order to live," she says.

In making this work, Nkosi is "interested in how people actually arrange themselves in groups at the moment". "How people are together is something I'm exploring," she explains.

To return to Kabwe's question ("What does the *Gymnasium* series give us at a time like this?"), Nkosi is "giving people ways of thinking about the future". Her work thinks about how we can be in and create this future, together.

In her own work and career, Nkosi is not interested in individual success, but collective liberation. It echoes the way she points out that: "While the sport's establishment, the media and most spectators fixate on the individual star, isolated and exalted, the gymnasts themselves understand the necessity of the team, which is the foundation on which all 'individual' performances rest ... these athletes exist — even when alone — as part of an implied network of reciprocal relationships."

She understands herself in this communal dimension too. When I ask what her bar for success is, simply,

to be able to make the work and be sustained by it. It is a reality she wishes for everybody, and views as essential for dismantling all oppression.

"So, for me, the bar is to create that for myself, and I do want to create it for others, on a basic level of not wanting to be alone in it. You don't want to build something that doesn't involve your people and other new potential people - you want to be in community."

In all of this, her imagination and way of occupying the role of artist in society relentlessly sings with possibility, with what it means to dream, relentlessly, and to create work, ideas, and alternative realities and futures. Nkosi unceasingly gestures to humanity, asking viewers to reach and think beyond the flat surface of the painting and initial readings - take seriously the questions Nkosi phrases in paint, and ask them of ourselves too.

And as she phrases these questions, she keeps her future self in mind. "The image that I connect to that is both my guide and my goal, it's my gogo self - 90, still moving - and she often comes back from the future and just tells me 'hey it's ok,' or 'hey just keep doing it girl'. She is very instructive and comforting, and ... she's just still working".



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