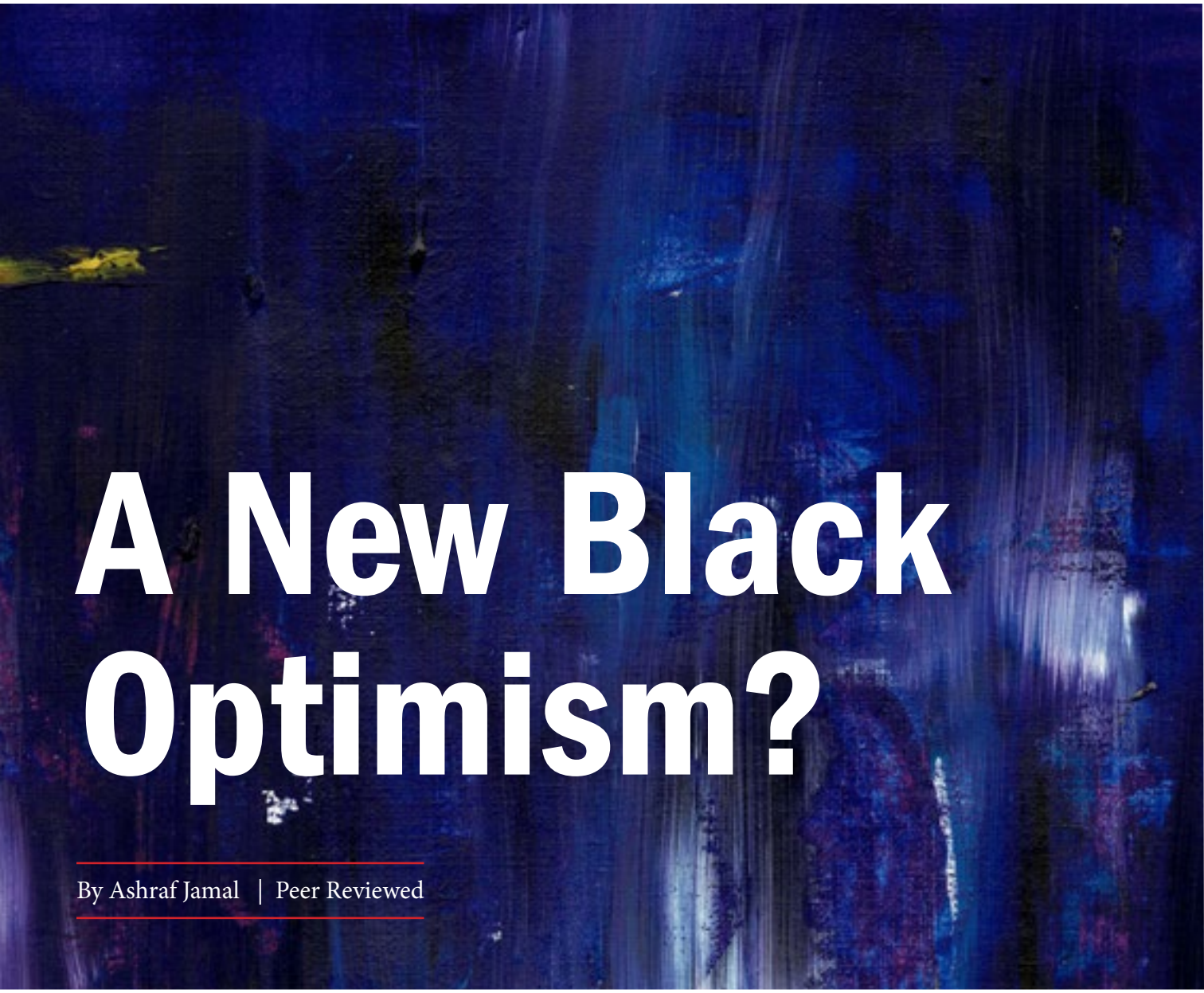

A New Black Optimism?

By Ashraf Jamal | Peer Reviewed

Abstract

For all the opportunistic and/or pathological expressions of black life today, and the celebratory glow which surrounds it, there remains an art that is irreducible to the conflicts of its time, even when it galvanises its urgencies. In this paper I note the exceptionality of Henry Ossawa Tanner, who captured the tenderness and profundity of familial love, and the importance of mutual care—a deep humanitarian seam which ran counter to the racism of the time. I point to the missteps of Titus Kaphar and Kehinde Wiley, the ingenuity of Kerry James Marshall, the sublimity of Lynette Yiadom Boake. Finally, and fundamentally, I ask you to reconsider the persistently misunderstood and misperceived South African painter Nelson Makamo. If his children possess an oneiric quality, it is not because they are projected fantasies, but because they are dreams realised in this future-present moment—as treacherous as it is generative.

There is no doubt that at this historical moment, contemporary African art, and art of the African diaspora, has assumed a preeminent place in Western taste. It would seem that there is no greater currency in the contemporary art world than black skin. I refer here not only to the content of art – black bodies, black faces – but to the artists who are now lauded. Witness the meteoric rise of Amoako Boafo, the celebratory reappraisal of Kerry James Marshall, or the iconic stature of Zanele Muholi – none other than a Black Madonna. Interest is growing rapidly, the market expanding, with black portraiture now also infiltrating the Asian market. As to what this new economy signifies, I cannot quite say. I remain unclear and unresolved in my view, though the hyper-visibility of black artists, and black portraiture in particular, is indisputable.

A case of reconciliation? A need to right a historical wrong, reboot the art canon, ensure diversity and inclusivity? Certainly. For doubtless, we are dealing with a seismic shift in the art world, rather than a mere trend. Beneath the exploded view that is black portraiture lies an existential quest to rethink the Human. As Steve Bantu Biko declared in *I Write What I Like*, Africa would give the world a 'more human face' (1987: 47). Africa, and the African diaspora, is not the last frontier of the art world but its frontline. As such, it is a critical matter of concern, a vital way to rethink the obscenity of colonialism, which persists today. To speak of 'a new black optimism,' therefore, is to address the reconfiguration of the black body, while at no point suppressing the complexity of its emergence. Art is never a single story, never an innocent representational economy. What especially interests me – in the thicket of contesting strategies and expressions – is the work of artists able to simultaneously embrace and transfigure the burden of black history. In this regard, the painters Henry Ossawa Tanner and Nelson Makamo are exemplary. It is the stories they tell, the ways in which those visual narratives are put together, that deserve our attention. Neither is an exhibitionist, neither is a reactive or aggrieved polemicist. Rather, theirs is a subterranean force. What particularly struck me, on encountering their paintings, was their treatment of children who, historically, have suffered profoundly within a Western optic and painting tradition. In this regard, it is the painting of black children that assumes centre-stage.

I have addressed this matter at greater length in 'Giants' (2017) and 'Children of the Dream' (2022), in which I wager that the idealisation of children is all too often accompanied by perversity, certainly in their rearing in the West. The repressive cliché, 'children should be seen and not heard,' is but one of many aspects of systemic cruelty. Clear delineations of space, power, and the body (which either possesses rights or does not), are central to systemic control. Tracking systemic oppression from the 18th century onwards, Michel Foucault notes: 'Schools serve the same functions as prisons and mental institutions – to define, classify, control, and regulate people' (Saneei, 2018). This is also the case regarding systemic racism. By foregrounding the corruptive treatment of all those deemed Other – children, blacks, the insane and criminal – we begin to see the neurotic power required to standardise normalcy, whiteness, and by extension, the critical role that aesthetics – and a cultural economy more generally – plays in the consolidation of a series of punitive binaries designed to ensure the perverse valorisation and damnation of those who occupy the margins. For if children are routinely abused, they are as routinely exalted and enshrined. This paradoxical damnation of children, and their exploitation as a trope for futurity, reaffirms the insidious nature of adult authority – the child, in the circuitry of human exchange, rendered forever the surrogate, adjunct, oracle, boon, and curse of the adult. That the same can be said for the construction and representation of the black person and body is, if we concur with Foucault's economy of Othering, unsurprising. However, as I've noted at the outset, we are witnessing a profound ethical shift, a reappraisal of centuries-old economies of systemic oppression.

In my search to find wholesome or inspiring depictions of black children in literature and art, I came across two radically contrasting representations: Titus Kaphar's *Enough About You* (2016) – provoked by an 18th-century painting of Elihu Yale, his white cabal, the second Duke of Devonshire, Lord James Cavendish, Mr Tunstal, and 'an Enslaved Servant' – and Henry Ossawa Tanner's *The Banjo Lesson* (1893). Both paintings are concerned with the black child, but their renderings – *the causes for their becoming* – signal a forked path that we cannot ignore. Kaphar's painting is more reaction than inspiration, a rerouting and hijacking of a colonial painting in which white sovereignty is the focal point, amplified against the

image of an enchained black child. Kaphar merely inverts this relationship. He repaints the white cabal, then crumples the canvas, rendering the self-aggrandising white presence proportionately indiscernible, while the black child, lost in a shadow world, assumes centre-stage.

This is the received, politically correct reading. However, in Kaphar's reactive assault whiteness retains its grip, thereby challenging the integrity of the manoeuvre. The framed black boy, his chains replaced by a ruffled collar, requires its foil. We remain trapped in a dialectic in which blackness, to assume self-presence, requires whiteness. This is Kaphar's point. As he observes in his TED Talk (2017), white mythology is an inescapable dimension of black being – its doppelgänger – which is why it cannot quite be erased or redacted; why it can only be 'amended.' This supposes that art, for Kaphar, is legislative – a fairer, more accurate reflection of changing circumstances. That his painting replaced the original at Yale University signals the defining mood and ethos of this era – *revisionism*. However, in my mind, doubt persists: how effective is a strategy that remains reactive and rhetorical? During his TED Talk, Kaphar paints over a copy of Frans Hals' *Family Group in a Landscape* (c. 1648) with a thin layer of white paint, leaving the black boy unpainted. The lesson he performs is yet another instance of this reactive and polemical strategy, a further redaction, or 'amendment,' in which whiteness persists – under erasure – while blackness is viewed as a revelatory story – *because* of this erasure.

"Black portraiture is consumed by this reflexive expression of black self-presence – a presence at a remove, as though gazing upon itself, devoid of a generative essence. As Frantz Fanon and Achille Mbembe have never failed to remind us, the black body exists beyond the pale of history, unheeded, unrecognised, and, as Ralph Ellison reminded us, *invisible*."

It is the inexistence of black life across history that justifiably perturbs Kaphar. There are more books on the history of silk, he notes, than on the presence of black people in Western painting. Of the re-envisioned black boy in *Enough About You*, Kaphar remarks that he 'wanted to find a way to imagine a life…that the historical painting had never made space for in the composition,' the child's 'desires, dreams, family, thoughts, hopes' (2017). While a reasonable and sound wager, its execution remains, to me at least, a foiled exercise. The child remains a ploy. I say this because Kaphar reactively (if justly) chooses to remind us that the indistinction of the black body, the negation of its reality, is not only a historical phenomenon, but achingly current. His decision to rectify an erasure is therefore not only a critique of the past but a contemporary revisionary exercise. However, despite the artist's desire to humanise his subject, the black child remains a concept-conceit-idea. *Enough About You* may strive to shift the conversation, but, despite its error-stricken celebration, it remains little else. This is not a failing on the part of the artist alone, it is a widely deployed reactive strategy that is ideological and material and, as such, limiting.

Black portraiture is consumed by this reflexive expression of black self-presence – a presence at a remove, as though gazing upon itself, devoid of a generative essence. As Frantz Fanon and Achille Mbembe have never failed to remind us, the black body exists beyond the pale of history, unheeded, unrecognised, and, as Ralph Ellison reminded us, *invisible*. The 'negro' he writes of in 1952 is 'anonymous, and hence beyond public concern.' 'I am an invisible man,' Ellison resumes, 'simply because people refuse to see me…When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me' (2001: xxix). This is Kaphar's grievance. My point, however, is that the strategy he adopts is deficient. Consciousness is an inadequate means with which to fill a vacuum. Nevertheless, in a culture consumed by consciousness, an artist who alerts us to what we already know and presents a collective problem in a clever package – as *predictive activism* – will likely triumph.

As noted at the outset, today there is a plethora of black success stories, painters in particular who have been globally celebrated because they have

tapped our guilt and done so through formal means which are pronouncedly decorative. Kehinde Wiley's portraits are an obvious example. For all their self-awareness and calculated posturing, they are devoid of life, as ephemeral as the aesthetic they refashion – Pop/Rococo – though Wiley does make claim to Realism which, to my mind, is none other than a caricature of a Reality Affect, and, as such, in this dehumanised time, immensely and misguidedly popular. Wiley's riff on Anthony van Dyck's painting – *Charles I at the Hunt* (c. 1635) as *Le Roi à la Chasse* (2006) – typifies this manoeuvre. Sarcastically appropriative, it diminishes the tradition it inherits. Tongue-in-cheek, it reveals art as pastiche, disguises an existential disconnect with mirthless humour. Inversely, one can argue that Wiley's take is a critique of power – in this case, white imperial power. To my mind, however, it lacks (or represses), the Flemish artist's grasp of mortality. Van Dyck, unlike Wiley, was no mere court painter. He understood power's fallibility, and portraiture's ability to expose it.

This all-too-current vacuity in taste, which I associate with Wiley, runs deeper. It signals the taste of our times – the consumerist desire of the body-as-object, a thing of beauty – and, more disturbingly, despite the fetishization of blackness in the arts, the on-going incapacity to sustain a humane grasp of perceived cultural or racial difference. That we insist upon a condition we dub 'black life' reveals the grotesquery of a segregated consciousness. If Ellison's insight persists – embodied in the Black Lives Matter movement, in ubiquitous protest signage which reads I AM SOMEBODY – it is because black people are not seen, not even by black people. This shocking realisation explains the comparative absence of an organic, lived depiction of black life; why it persists as caricature, and why its hysterical self-assertion misses the mark. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule. Where Wiley spectacularises black life, further amplifying an inessential and anti-essential reality – black life as surplus, as comedic folly, as travesty – Kerry James Marshall reconciles style, vitalism, and the ordinary. Then again, contrast the vacuous glamour of Wiley's work to the portraits painted by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. If Wiley knowingly punctuates the world, Yiadom-Boakye grasps what eludes most – the ur- of black life, its humanity. In this regard, it is all the more disturbing to look at Wiley's portrait of Yiadom-Boakye, in which we see the bespectacled artist, rifle in hand, dead hares all about. It is a funerary and chilling ode to portraiture and landscape painting. 'We murder to dissect,' William Wordsworth famously remarked in his poem *The Tables Turned* (1798). Wordsworth's point? That nature is a greater teacher than books. In the case of Wiley, an artist who operates at a troubling remove, nature is little more than an idea and affect, as is the black body. Wiley's is a morbid and posthumous stylisation and vision – simulacral, denatured, fundamentally cauterised, disassociated, alienated, and alienating. John Berger echoes this view in his critique of 'lifeless' painting which fails to grasp its subject – 'the result of the painter not having the nerve to get close enough for a collaboration to start. He stays at a *copying* distance. Or, as in mannerist periods like today, he stays at an art-historical distance, playing stylistic tricks which the model knows nothing about' (2020: 81–82).

It seems ironic to me that Wiley should choose to paint Yiadom-Boakye, who is temperamentally wholly unlike him, for she is no mannerist, no pasticheur. Rather, after Tanner and Makamo, Yiadom-Boakye seeks an idiom that allows for an intimacy that is irreducible to the cognates of systemic oppression, prejudicial projection, or mimicry. Theirs is a humanist art, which has received a bad rap in the 20th and 21st centuries, poopooed as a bankrupt Enlightenment notion, which it is not. In this nihilistic, Pop-driven age, I find it both fascinating and obscene that black power should emerge at the precise moment when white mythology and power exhausts itself. I cannot develop this paradox here, but I will make the following wager: Is black portraiture today a pyrrhic victory, and if so, yet another manifestation of a compromised will to life? This is a bleak prognosis. Fortunately, there are antidotes – Henry Ossawa Tanner and Nelson Makamo.

Painting in the late 19th century, Tanner's expression of black life remains an inspiring anomaly. His paintings of black people defy historical constraints. In this profound regard he is Makamo's progenitor. I make this large claim on a basis that is not technical – they paint differently, Tanner's paintings are more immersive, Makamo's more graphic – but one which is determined by subterranean forces. The link is psychic. In the work of both painters, I discern no irony, no detachment, no dissociated relationship to the body or sensibility. Both painters are wholly in the

world. One painting by Tanner in particular struck me as the grail I was looking for, *The Banjo Lesson*, painted in 1893. Indebted to American Realism and French Impressionism, the painting began as an illustration for the short story which inspired it, before transforming into a work that is singularly its own. A young black boy sits on the lap of his grandfather, banjo in hand. It is a vision of youth and old-age, the great arc of life. Most remarkable, however, is that while Tanner's painting depicts a lesson – be it of youth and old-age, the sanctity of practice, study, duty, love, protection – it does not tell us what to think. Unlike Kaphar's self-reflexive morality, or Wiley's blasé irony – both painters still locked within a pathology – Tanner liberates the beings he captures. His is an unvarnished tale, free of reactive instruction.

If, in this revisionist moment, the matter of race is vital in the painting's assessment, for Tanner it was not, or rather, not quite. This is because of the artist's ambivalent relationship to race as a category for being. 'In America, I'm Henry Tanner, Negro artist, but in France, I'm "Monsieur Tanner, l'artiste américaine"' (Khalid, 2020). This split is something Tanner could not overcome. That he expresses himself in the third person, at a subjective remove, is telling. Tanner explains his approach to the black body as one that is freed from caricature. For him, it is the authenticity of a singular expression that matters. As Judith Wilson notes, Tanner invests his black subjects 'with a degree of dignity and self-possession that seems extraordinary for the times in which they were painted' (1992: 40). Then, as now, it was far easier to stereotype and commodify blackness – in ways comparable with the diminishment and objectification of women, children, criminals, the insane – because, in doing so, the rationale of those in power, white men, could remain unchecked.

As I've noted, taking the easy, reactive route has a knock-on effect, because black artists who have inherited a constitutive vacuum unwittingly perform their inexistence in portraits which do little more than dissimulate self-presence. Kehinde Wiley's portrait of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye is a case in point. This, however, is not the case in Tanner's *Banjo Lesson*. Against the dictates of his time, he created one of the most enduring visions of compassion, care, and familial love. Immersed in sentiment, it is not sentimental. Rather, it expresses a profound lacuna in the historical representation of black life. While an anomalous vision, rare in its honesty and depth and therefore justly celebrated, Tanner's *Banjo Lesson* also provides a profound insight into the future. In brief, Tanner's painting, despite being conceived under repressive conditions, emerges as a prophetic marker for the 'new optimism.' A century later, this vision is also key to the work of Nelson Makamo, an artist who, more than any other, has grasped what we fundamentally suppress – the visionary power of childhood.

When the filmmaker and director of *Selma* (2014), Ava DuVernay, was invited to guest edit the February 2019 issue of *TIME* magazine, she chose Makamo to provide a painting for the cover. If the decision was a canny one, it is because she recognised that the artist is no opportunistic ideologue; that he refuses to treat the black body as something iconic (its idealised inflation the inverse of its caricature); that his understanding of being is irreducible to a historical burden; and that art, to thrive, needs to be free from bondage. It is this self-same energy that I see in Tanner's painting. The singularity of their respective gifts is best expressed by Maya Angelou: 'I've learnt that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel' (Tunstall, 2014). If feeling is vital, it is because reason cannot overcome our need for human connection. In fact, it is the absence of sentiment and feeling – its dismissal in the name of reason – which has proved damaging. This dismissal is the core of our continued abjection, self-hate, and hatred of others. It is also the root of a cultural phenomenon – black portraiture – which is largely attitudinal and devoid of feeling, none other than a chilling extension and symptom of a gnawing abjection. Unchecked and unguided by sentiment, this pain, often disguised as reason, is the foundation for systemic cruelty.

It is in this greater context that we must consider the significance and impact of the paintings of Tanner and Makamo. Both can easily fall victim to Kenneth Clark's indictment of Frans Hals, the 17th-century portraitist, as 'revoltingly cheerful and horribly skilful' (Cumming, 2007). However, time, as it is wont, is changing. From my vantage point, a Wileyesque cynicism is on the wane, a Kapharesque earnestness de rigueur. However, if Tanner and Makamo are deserving of our attention it is because their paintings

live on as a feeling. This was certainly the case with Makamo's *TIME* cover. The widespread enthusiasm for Makamo's painting of his bespectacled niece, Mapule Maoto, has much to do with the sanctity of its subject and the ferocity of its execution. Whether or not Maoto requires spectacles is by the by, they are a key structural feature which create the distance that affords Makamo's child-subjects their agency and 'private space'.

'While we live at a time when division is the norm; when biases and beliefs seem static and immobile… art calls to the optimism within us and beckons us to breathe.' DuVernay's opening wager in her 2019 *TIME* op-ed conveys an irresistible verve and energy. It is against 'bigotry, poverty, injustice, trauma, trouble' – against her own 'feelings of despair and doubt' – that she sets up a new creative ecology which prioritises 'hope,' 'the proverbial bright side,' a 'vital moment' that comes 'when we each must understand that the social, political and historical connectedness born of traumatic experiences can and should transform to true…engagement with one another. Engagement not steeped in fear and separation, but in shared knowledge, recognition and contentment' (2019). That said, it is DuVernay's emphasis on art, in the broadest sense, which is the crux. 'Art is worthy of our interrogation and is in fact an antidote for our times' (2019). The question remains: How does art countermand the narrowness of the time in which it emerges? In Makamo's case, it does so by refusing to succumb to taste, by-passing the political and ideological pressure placed upon it to be representative of the concerns of the time. Moreover, it is Makamo's refusal to comply with such dictates – and here he echoes Henry Ossawa Tanner – that enables him to produce a more enduring vision of the sanctity of race and youth as a lived condition, far removed from a pathology calculatedly disguised, or any projected idea or fantasy.

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If Makamo's paintings of black life exude this promise it is because the artist does not succumb to an inherited pathology, insisting that he has personally experienced no psychically disfiguring pain. Here I am reminded of Koleka Putuma's poem *Black Joy* (2017: 13):

> Isn't it funny
> That when they ask about black childhood,
> All they are interested in is our pain.
> As if the joy-parts were accidental.
> I write love poems, too.

Makamo's paintings are precisely thus – *love poems*. For him, the 'joy-parts' are never 'accidental'; they are fundamental. That he has become the black poster-child for the black poster-child is the inevitable by-product of hype, which, in this radically unsettled historical moment, is as ravaged by anxiety as it is hysterically excessive. Unsurprisingly, the doubters will see a Rockwellian sentimentality in Makamo's faces, while others, attuned to a deeper yet still emergent register, will sense their radicality – a new optimism. While self-absorbed, Makamo's children are wholly in the world. The answer to this disposition lies in an enabling communal inheritance. 'Raised in community, you get to understand community,' says the artist, who grew up in Modimelle, a rural township in Limpopo. It is because Makamo channels the strength of community that his paintings contain no existential dread, no dissociative complex, no rage or reactive grief. At their core lies the artist's desire 'to enlighten, to liberate'[1].

While it is as yet unclear, we are on the cusp of a new age. As the Mexican filmmaker Guillermo del Toro reminds us in his contribution to the *TIME* issue: 'The most radical and rebellious choice you can make is to

be optimistic' (2019). It is because we are faced with despair – bigotry, cruelty, hatred – that DuVernay, Del Toro, and Makamo have chosen optimism, a choice which, for Del Toro, is far better than 'being skeptical by default.' 'We seem sophisticated when we say "we don't believe" and disingenuous when we say "we do"' (Del Toro, 2019). This insight reveals the depth of our ironical depravity. In the midst of a global pandemic, and in the face of rising fascism and the threat of a failing neo-liberal democratic vision, it is this newly minted, radical optimism that is slowly and steadily assuming dominance. We see it in the Black Lives Matter and Me Too movements, in the active desire to rethink social systems and the cultural practice within them, in what Nietzsche dubbed *a radical transvaluation of values*, in what Del Toro describes as the 'instinct to inhale while suffocating. Our need to declare what 'needs to be' in the face of what is' (2019).

For all the opportunistic and/or pathological expressions of black life today, and the celebratory glow which surrounds it, there remains an art that is irreducible to the conflicts of its time, even when it galvanises its urgencies. I have noted the exceptionality of Henry Ossawa Tanner, who captured the tenderness and profundity of familial love, and the importance of mutual care – a deep humanitarian seam which ran counter to the racism of the time. I have pointed to the missteps of Titus Kaphar and Kehinde Wiley, alluded to the ingenuity of Kerry James Marshall and the sublimity of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. Finally, and fundamentally, I've asked you to reconsider the persistently misunderstood and misperceived South African painter, Nelson Makamo. If his paintings of black children possess an oneiric quality, it is not because they are projected fantasies, but because they are dreams realised in this future-present moment – as treacherous and toxic as it is profoundly generative.

Notes

[1] From a conversation with the author.

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