

Kemang
Wa Lehulere
Where Did The Sky Go?

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“Where Did The Sky Go?”

By Athi Mongezeleli Joja

The title of Kemang Wa Lehulere’s exhibition ‘Where Did The Sky Go?’ captures a sense of capriciousness and bewilderment. The disappearance of the sky causes panic. It is a disorienting absence. The image created in one’s mind can perhaps be read through the theological lens of the biblical pre-creation and calls to mind the absolute nothingness that defines it. Examples of mythopoetic narratives around the fall of darkness are commonplace in all corners of the world. Though their contexts may vary, their intentions all gravitate towards the same point. The absence of the sky not only becomes a cosmological and astrophysical enigma, but it also tends to imply the derangement of our temporal and spatial coordinates.

Wa Lehulere recalls a trip he once took with his son Tau, on the local underground speed train, the Gautrain. Tau was staring out the window as the train rushed past the scenery of Johannesburg. However, when the train entered the underground section of its route, the scenery disappeared instantly. Only pitch blackness remained in its place, staring back at him. Befuddled by this sudden shift in his world, Tau turned to his father and asked, “where did the sky go?” In that moment, what was a child’s expression of bewilderment, registered for Wa Lehulere as a poetic axis.

‘Where Did The Sky Go?’ takes as its departure point this sudden shift, not only as metonymy for planetary precarity, or even as a critique of the restabilisation of global hegemonies, but it also refuses the journalistic currency that tends to inform critical arts, often opting instead for a more conjectural probing form. Such visual language provides raw and heavy materials as the basis for reflection.

One of the most striking features in contemporary South African art in the last decade or so, has been the increasing embarkation on a relentless expedition of questioning the status quo. This inquisitiveness in contemporary South African visual arts is often associated with the development of the much sought-after decolonial turn. The line of inquiry is usually frank and expository, exhibiting a distrust for poetics.

However, Wa Lehulere’s work has found creative utility in the whimsical and fantastic, in the possibilities for social critique these poetic forms engender. Wa Lehulere’s work not only revels in narratives featuring everyday objects, but it also unravels the potential in ordinary objects to relay multiple layers of narratives that are embedded in them. He uses objects such as porcelain dogs, school desks, crutches, tyres, ropes, music stands, and so on, alongside his drawings, paintings, murals, and inscriptions. In their original disposition, these objects form part of the temporal platitudes of everyday life. However, having grown up in the working class Cape flats of Gugulethu, Cape Town, Wa

Lehulere understands that objects never have a singular value or utility; their function is consistently in flux. He therefore doesn't just attach abstract meanings to them but rather attempts to unearth, dig out, or investigate other narratives that are already inscribed in them.

Wa Lehulere attends to these inconspicuous meanings with a very childlike curiosity, deconstructing and reconstructing them to unravel their myriad associations. The reference to tyre-and-crutches freewheeling wagons steered by children in the township shifts in meaning when one processes the historical significance of the tyre in 1980s public lynchings of political spies, where "necklacing" as an act of murder involved placing a petrol drenched tyre around someone's neck and torching it. Once these images are reconfigured slightly and placed at eye level, they transform into a reference to the violence of taxidermy and its use of animal heads as home decor.

Similarly, one can think about how porcelain dogs are not merely a commentary on black working-class domesticity and home decor but also serve to elicit the paradox of the Alsatians (preferred breed of the apartheid police) as a mark of kitsch ornamentation in the interiority of black homes. References to music and sign language are also recurrent motifs that are replete with personal and collective histories, be they about communicative strategies, repressed knowledges, or even psychosocial repressions.

The motif of continuity or elasticity in the work also plays an implicit but significant role in how Wa Lehulere posits a dialectic link between the personal and collective, artistic and political, subject and object, and even reality and fiction. Continuity, as such, is an index of an exploratory procedure; errant, reluctant, skeptical, and even critical of hegemonic discourses. Fundamentally, Wa Lehulere's work continues to interrogate systems of knowledge and their archival methods. It puts primacy in the structures of knowledge, contending with the manipulations, erasures and control of how we come to know. The act of questioning, as a performative gesture, therefore tends to take precedence over the need to declare the question. The question is embodied, contained, and released in the creative modalities of the work — that is, in the digging, unraveling, and in the persistent returns to the various scenes of deletions and histories of censorship. The question digs, explores, probes, unearths, destroys, repurposes, reconstructs. But most importantly, it beckons us to sit with the troubles, misadventures, occlusions, and even erasures of the social kind.

