

The Night Watch



Yiull Damaso commenced “The Night Watch” at the beginning of 2010 after months of discussions regarding South Africa’s politics. It was painted over a period of 7 months.

On 9th July 2010, midway through the painting, the Mail & Guardian published an image of it on their front page, which was the beginning of a roller coaster ride. This image of the work was used extensively worldwide and so very few, if any, photos of the completed work appear anywhere.

During the next two weeks, the unfinished painting appeared in all of South Africa’s major publications as well as international publications *The New York Times*, *The LA Times*, *Corriere della Sera*, *France 24*, *BBC*, *CNN* amongst others. The painting was also featured in a few documentaries locally and in Germany.

Over the next few years the painting and the discussions around it were explored academically at both secondary and tertiary level within South Africa.

“A Symbolic act of autopsy thus gets externalized as a series of questions about the nation, and Mandela’s body becomes a complex site of interplay between private body and public narrative.” (Barnard,R. 2014)

The title:

“The Night Watch!” is the title of another Rembrandt painting and is the basis of the idea behind this painting. It asks the question – “While we are sleeping or attending to our everyday lives, who is running the system, the machine that is South Africa?” said Damaso, the politicians and systems in place are, they are our “Night Watch” and they have the power to move South Africa in certain directions.

The Composition:

Rembrandt’s “The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Tulp” was the inspiration for the painting which is the identical size as Rembrandt’s original work, 1.7m x 2.16m, painted in oil on canvas with a custom rusted frame.

“Damaso’s nod to the great Dutch master seems no accident. After all, in 1652, twenty years after Rembrandt painted *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp*, the Dutch East India Company (VOC), led by Jan van Riebeeck, established a permanent settlement in the South African Cape—thus marking the advent of colonial South Africa and its

concomitant settler ideology. Damaso's integration of contemporary political personalities into this historical milieu cleverly meshes South Africa's colonial past with its postcolonial present. Moreover, on a symbolic level, the opening up of a body during autopsy can suggest something about a larger pattern of colonial discovery and exploration—a pattern anticipating the opening up of the African continent. In fact, beginning with representations of “Hottentot Eves,” portraits of Khoi women accompanying legends on early South African maps, up until and beyond H. Rider Haggard's portrayal, in *King Solomon's Mines* (1885), of the southern African landscape as a naked, supine woman inviting European penetration, the body has always served as a symbolic vehicle of exploration, conquest, and discovery in colonial art and literature. Yet, in Damaso's vision, exactly what kind of land is being discovered in the opening up of Mandela's corpse? If, as Simon Schama notes, Rembrandt literally enacts a Greek sense of *autopsia* in his masterpiece—that is, “an act of direct witness of seeing for oneself”—what are the assembled witnesses (including Jacob Zuma, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Trevor Manuel, Cyril Ramaphosa, Helen Zille, F. W. de Klerk, and Thabo Mbeki) actually “seeing,” or failing to see, in Mandela's inevitable passing?” (Johns, T. 2010)

The characters:

Nelson Mandela The focal point of this work and whom Damaso reveals as a mortal man made of flesh and blood. As in Rembrandt's painting, our cadavers were both convicted criminals. Mandela was imprisoned for 27 years, released and later went on to become South Africa's leader and showed the world a deep level of compassion, forgiveness and love. The world and South Africa elevated Mandela to “Supreme Being” status and Damaso's painting forced the viewer to see his mortality. Mandela's actions and decisions made him a great man, all mortal concepts that are at the fingertips of “The Night Watch!”.

At the feet of Mandela is a book with a quote from South Africa's constitution pertaining to freedom of expression and speech, both of which were challenged during the making of this work.

Nkosi Johnson - Child AIDS activist as “Dr Tulp” who has cut open the arm of Madiba to show the inner workings of flesh and bone, the same as them, the same as us. Nkosi Johnson is saying “Look, he is just a man!” and asks the question “What are you doing to be great?” When this day comes, Mandela's passing, he cannot help us anymore, it will be up to all of us to continue his legacy of compassion and fairness. Damaso again forcing the viewer into an uncomfortable kinship with the dead as well as with the living, as Johnson was the only person in the composition who had passed at the time. While he was alive, he stood up at the World Aids Conference in 2000 and spoke to the adults of the world regarding issues that concerned them and here again he talks to the adults with the innocence and honesty only a child carries.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu - At the top of the composition is our moral high ground, the one closest to “God”. He does not look down at the lesson as he knows that Madiba is just a man! He looks directly at the viewer asking “what are we doing to be great?”

Cyril Ramaphosa - One of the architects of our constitution, which is considered one of the most advanced in the world. An exceptional moment in South Africa's history was the adoption of the South African Constitution on the 8th of May 1996 and Ramaphosa's speech in parliament:

“It celebrates the richness of the diversity of cultures, religions and beliefs of South Africans, and affirms that all belong as equals in our one nation. It commits the State to respecting, protecting, promoting and to fulfilling the rights in the Bill of Rights and acknowledges that it is not enough for the Government simply to refrain from violating people's rights. It is also necessary for the Government to take positive measures to ensure the full and equal enjoyment of human rights by all South Africans. Through this constitution, we hope to transform our society from one that is based on injustice and strife to one based on justice and peace”

“This constitution is the subject of a rather fortunate paradox. It is no one's constitution, and yet it is everyone's constitution. Just as no one party sees its constitutional proposals reproduced in their entirety in this Bill, so no one person can claim exclusive ownership of this constitution. It belongs to everyone in the Constitutional Assembly, and it is a reflection of our collective will for a new, united and democratic nation. This constitution belongs to South Africans.”

During the 2 years it took to write the constitution it was Ramaposa who took drafts to Mandela “When we gave them the small-print version he said: "I am not going to read this. I want the big print, because I want to make sure that there are no small-print bits in which you might be making mistakes." His seat at the lesson is as observer; he is not looking directly at the lesson but at the reaction around it, and maintains the core role of skilful negotiator and strategist. He is deeply entrenched in South African politics and the public often wonder if he will lead the country in the near future.

Helen Zille – A former journalist and anti-apartheid activist and one of the journalists who exposed the cover-up around the death of Black Consciousness leader, Steve Biko. She worked with the Black Sash and other pro-democracy groups during the 1980s, was arrested for being in a "group area" without a permit, and received a suspended prison sentence. Her career has been strewed with bullying and threatened by the ruling party (which ever it was) but she relentlessly continued the battle even after receiving death threats. Ziller became entrenched in South African politics and fought an incredible battle in what is considered a man’s world for what she believes in.

Trevor Manuel – The man who was South Africa’s financial guidance system, skilfully manoeuvring South Africa through difficult economic times. He was one of the main “Night Watchmen”, and so is very focused on the lesson as he understands its importance.

F W De Klerk – Unbanning the “illegal” political parties and having a hand in the release of Mandela, he recognised the power that Mandela held. In his hands are papers that have the opening line of Albert Luthuli’s speech from 1962 – “The task is not yet finished”-this relayed to Damaso’s frustration of the press publishing images of his yet unfinished painting. “South Africa is not yet a home for all her sons and daughters” – this was Damaso’s clandestine statement of his personal status in South Africa, not having been born here, but living here for over 35 years, he is still unable to vote. (In Rembrandt’s version, the papers are indecipherable).

Thabo Mbeki- South Africa’s ex-President is strategically placed at the polar opposite and looking away from Nkosi Johnson for his stance on HIV and AIDS. At the world AIDS Conference in 2000, Thabo Mbeki’s speech mentioned that HIV and AIDS were unrelated and proceeded to not make available anti-retroviral drugs to people that so desperately needed them. As many as 400 000 people died as a result. The spatial arrangement of the group looking at the lesson is deconstructed by Mbeki’s posture and underlines the lack of unity in the group.

President Jacob Zuma- Sitting in the most powerful seat then, and now, even 7 years after this painting was created. He has the most to learn from the Doctor’s lesson, yet his expression is sceptical as if he knows better. Every day we witness his lack of compassion and understanding of the common people, and we watch as he dismantles the frail structure that Nelson Mandela worked so hard to build.

“In a sense, then, Damaso’s painting is not really about Mandela at all: it’s about Mandela’s political afterlife, and how Mbeki and the ANC failed to maintain Mandela’s high moral ground.” (Johns, T. 2010) “The Night Watch”, along with some of Yiull’s other pertinent works, was exhibited at Constitution Hill in Johannesburg in 2011. The exhibition was officially opened by Professor Pitika Ntuli, with the show only destined for a 2 week exhibition however public demand saw it run for two and a half months.

Press:

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11 July - Sunday Sun "Madiba painting fury"

11 July - Rapport "ANC Skree blou Moord Oor Skildery"

11 July - City Press "Dead Madiba painter says he means no harm"

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<http://docslide.net/documents/wound-surface-skin.html>

<http://postcolonialnetworks.com/post-mandela-art/>

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ANC official response:

<http://www.anc.org.za/content/anc-appalled-depiction-dead-madiba>

Video interviews:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A6Bb_-PmDBM

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0QM62od59P8>

The opening discussion of "The Night Watch" that was given by Professor Pitika Ntuli at the exhibition at Constitutional Hill:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7vLyZq2yI60>

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Artist's Intervention:

In 2011 Gordon Froud made an installation based on controversial South African artists' works, amongst which where Brett Murray, Ayanda Mabula, Diane Victor and Yiull Damaso. For the exhibition titled "Tension / Torsion" at Ithuba Art Gallery, Braamfontein, Froud stretched and distorted original images by the artists on vinyl and displayed these stretched on springs across walls in the gallery. The installation commented on the lack of freedom of expression in the press and even in the art world 20 years after democracy. Damaso's work was elongated to appear stretched making the image of Nelson Mandela even more grotesque. This added to the discomfort already initiated by Damaso in his original painting. This was included in "Twenty- Art in the time of Democracy" curated by Froud for Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina – later shown at Pretoria Art Museum and The University of Johannesburg Art Gallery in 2012.

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