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Art - Taking no prisoners

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Through deceptively colourful collages, the artist's hard-hitting and provocative visuals investigate how identity is shaped negatively through language, racism, poverty, religion, abuse, and corruption.

"Our past was documented by those who also oppressed us. This resulted in a future founded on poverty," says Mabulu. "They put themselves on the other side of the unbalanced equation and made us look like the villains when we were in fact the victims."

The show derives its title from the now defunct Imvo Zabantsundu (The Native Opinion) newspaper. Launched in 1884, this King William's Town publication was initially promoted as a "voice of the black people". But, according to the artist, was instead used as a tool to promote apartheid's ideologies.

"The paper depicted black people as barbarians. My exhibition addresses the damage done by those who came carrying a Bible and a sword."

Mabulu's use of animals in pieces such as Black Intellectual and Black Venus serves as metaphor for the resulting racial scars visible to this day.

"Even in today's society, people are still called monkeys and baboons. These are not just words, they are verbal manifestations of someone's perception of black people."

Another significant piece in the exhibition is a triptych entitled Eve. Two African women, each carrying a child on her back, stand on either side of a stockinged nude (wearing a crown resembling that of the Queen of England). While pointing a gun towards the centrepiece, the woman on the left stares directly at the viewer. Her twin on the right has no gaze, and appears to have been rendered blind.

"The disgusting amount of abuse, rape, and violence worldwide towards women speak volumes of the

little respect we harbour for them. In Imvo Zabantsundu you'll see various females claiming a respectful position in society, taking what belongs to them, and challenging stereotypes."

Last year, Mabulu controversially depicted president Jacob Zuma naked in Umshini Wam. Now, less crudely, he is depicted briefly as Donald Duck.

"To me Zuma is not important, and embodies the definition of pure failure."

Several other political figures are presented equally scathingly. In Sidubul'ibulu a monkey is seen defecating on PW Botha's head; while in You Sold Us Out, Nelson Mandela and FW de Klerk lock lips. This scene is mirrored in You Sold Us Out - Act 1, Scene 1 where Desmond Tutu shares a passionate kiss with former pope Benedict XVI.

But it is an image of a pig ejaculating on Steve Biko's face in Biko's Lecture, that is perhaps the exhibition's most shocking.

"Every year I attend the Steve Biko lecture at UCT, only to hear the same old story spun to me," says the artist. "I find it difficult to sit there, and to clap hands afterwards, knowing that there might be people in the room who contributed to Biko's death."

Mabulu says he is prepared for the controversy that is bound to follow.

"In my language, a spade is a spade. As an artist my duty is to not only inspire my people, but to also remind them that poverty is a deliberate act by those in power to marginalise us. We need to revive a culture of thinking people in SA."

Imvo Zabantsundu/ The Native Opinion

Where: Commune.1 Gallery, 64 Wale Street, Cape Town

When: March 14 to April 20

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