

Lyles & King

Phumelele Tshabalala

The act of witnessing the descendants of Hope

October 28 - December 18, 2021

Lyles & King is pleased to present *The act of witnessing the descendants of Hope*, Phumelele Tshabalala's first solo exhibition with the gallery and first solo exhibition in the United States.

Effervescent Black joy brims out of the mixed media works of Phumelele Tshabalala, defying the rectilinear edges of the picture plane. This series of large-scale portraits depicting individual subjects and scenes with multiple figures operate as landscapes wherein metaphor and magical realism meet to create a more true impression of the mundane.

Fluorescent and metallic hues vibrate against the burnt Sienna skin tones of the subjects' brilliant faces whose features seem to be sculpted more by highlights than shadow. Figures pose with fixed expressions that seem to focus directly on the viewer, while other faces smile a distant smile, head turned to denote their preoccupation with some delight that we are not privy to. All the same our spirits are lifted in turn by glimmering teeth and shimmering black eyes under golden sunshine.

We encounter regal figures whose facial expressions speak volumes, even the mum figure with pursed lips and shut eyes in *A moment in the Sun*, or a woman with a hand clasped across her mouth whilst giving side eye in *Why does the caged bird sing?*. In *A dream is a story only you can tell*, dancing and seated characters are adorned with fabric swatches of textures reminiscent of fashion from another time and place, most probably garments from the secondhand store or a hand-me-down from a relative. This alchemy of weaving appliqué, brush stroke, spray paint, and shading with graphite is reminiscent of the multitudes of technologies, dialects, and spiritual practices that is the specificity of Blackness.

In the versions of the world that Tshabalala presents to us, shadows are the colour of sulphur and the horizon between the sky and the land is as unimportant as the line between city and homestead. We are taken through worlds undefined by boundaries where strife is overpowered by gilded surfaces as precious as the Black folks depicted. The work is prophetic, pointing us to our desire, a version of ourselves sometimes hard to access. This place where our identities and our humanity blaze to give us hope for the future, a flame that reminds of us who we have been and who we could become.

—Nontsikelelo Mutiti, 2021