



# **ON SPIRITUALITY & SPECULATIVE MODES**

A CONVERSATION  
BETWEEN  
NISHA MERIT &  
KAGISO GUNDANE

*Kagiso Gundane is young in age, though when speaking to the 25-year-old South African artist, his mind is mature - maybe one can say he is an old soul. We sit outside the residency at the back of Gallery MOMO Johannesburg where Gundane has been working for the past two months. His eyes are clear and sturdy. His practice and research combine questions on spirituality, speculative futures, and art-making as an impetus for healing. The artist's studio holds paint and canvases that are put up on the walls around him, a book called "Your Mysterious Power of ESP" by Harold Sherman on the table, and everywhere traces of art-making - drips of paint that speak of a process that is simultaneously extremely introspective yet universal. The artist's works reveal timestamps in terms of progress, a search, a beginning, and a possible destination, though, not linear. They show a circular connectivity between himself and the spiritual world. Art for Gundane seems to be an extension of his being, a way of seeing, and mapping the world - physically and spiritually.*

**NM**

Spirituality is a strong denominator in your work. It is also a complex concept interpreted differently depending on the context and geography. Please unpack what spirituality means to you, and how it is used in your work.

**KG**

I grew up in a space encompassed by traditional healers. Back in 2008, there was an incident with my mother, she collapsed, her body was trembling, her eyes were half shut, and she was mumbling things we couldn't understand. We quickly took her to a nearby clinic, and as the doctor was about to give her an injection, my uncle, who is a prophet, alerted us that, if she took it, she would die. He suggested that we take her to a traditional healer because her problem - apart from a physical health issue - was more of a spiritual nature. We took her to my aunt, a practising healer, and as we arrived my mother instantly came back to life which marked the beginning of her journey as a diviner. It was a really difficult time and I remember I was not allowed to see her as much as I wanted to. I was not allowed to touch or embrace her in any physical form, which stripped away some of the affection that is needed between mother and child at that stage. This also shaped how I perceived a lot of things in life and it inspired me to create work and express what I had witnessed through a visual medium. My definition of spirituality is derived from a 2008 research study by Dr. Magkati Mokwena, a South African psychotherapist. Some of the people that she interviewed and studied were South African traditional healers. She defines spirituality, as an introspective journey of pain and suffering towards attaining the full potential of the self or transcending towards transcendence. Upon the initiation process, there are different rituals and activities which are done, that are aimed at healing the physical, psychological, and spiritual in order to prepare one for becoming a healer.



*Ukuphulukisa VII*  
2023



*Ukuphulukisa VI*  
2023

## **NM**

I think of spirituality as different worlds that everyone carries and which are often disjointed but healers are able to move between them. Although we are anchored in this very physical world, just by the mere fact that we have a physical body, the spiritual world is always within us. That moment of being aware of this other world, and that you have access to it also describes a rupture, something is opened up which is often painful. Not necessarily physical pain, but painful as in understanding and being knowledgeable, which comes with its own type of burden. Seeing something beyond the spectrum of most people, I can imagine is not easy to handle. And I think it's really interesting that in your work you acknowledge that path and how to navigate these worlds. Given that, please describe your art-making and how these different layers and materialities are involved.

## **KG**

I first began this series of work two years ago, looking at different approaches to tackle this concept of spirituality from a post-colonial African context, specifically looking at the Nguni traditional healing process. In the beginning, I used the Kanga Cloth, which is essentially a Dutch wax-printed fabric, mainly produced in the Netherlands. Primarily based on the Indonesian batik, a method of dyeing fabric using wax-resistant techniques.

It was first introduced and sold in West African markets in the late 18th century, where it became really popular. Across West African countries and different ethnic groups, it became a symbol of authenticity and pride in one's cultural heritage, which for me, is a bit suspicious, because the producers of these fabrics were the colonisers. In the context of South Africa, the Kanga cloth has also been transformed into an object of communication, especially for traditional healers, who wear this cloth

whenever they perform rituals and ceremonies as a conduit with the spirit world. In my practice, I used the cloth as a first layer to communicate ideas related to spirituality, but given the connotations inherent to the fabric, it became difficult to use it further. Instead, I began to mimic it by translating its actual size - 150 x 100 centimeters - to my canvasses. The Kanga cloth is preferred by healers primarily for its colours, during the initiation process, the initiate is dressed in both red and white colours. The red symbolises the initiation period, which is often grotesque, and most difficult within the diviners' journey towards transcendence. The white symbolises the psychic and prophetic abilities that one acquires during this process. Black also features and symbolises the dark period, which the individual experiences prior to the initiation.

In most of my work, I do go back to these colours, and I work with human figures and silhouettes in different tonal variations. This connects to the different stages of the spiritual journey. The more light and translucent the figures are, the further they are, and the more opaque they are, the closer they are to their destination. For me, there's always another higher, spiritual stage that you can attain - a constant progression. In terms of process, I usually take photographs in a studio space, after that I cut them up for the composition before painting.

## **NM**

I understand that photography in your practice is a moment of research. You also speak a lot about the healer and the healing. Looking at the interconnectedness of these two, leads me to my next question, especially in conjunction with Mohau Modisakeng's work which has inspired you in your own practice. You reference generational trauma, the black body, and post-colonial reality, how does all that relate to your work?

**KG**

I think art-making itself is a process of healing. I portray two aspects in my work: the spiritual and the political. Considering South Africa's history of racial violence and discrimination, as black bodies, we have not fully healed from that and although I was not present then, I am in some way, shape, or form part of that past. Looking at Mohau's work, particularly "Ditaola" (2014), which translates to divination bones, in which he uses riffles and white doves, speaking of this struggle and the need for acknowledging the pain and suffering before there can be peace and equality.

This is also a topic in Frantz Fanon's book, "The Wretched of the Earth" (1961), which makes this point of how there has to be a war before things can be re-created to some degree. That's why in my work I also look at generational trauma pertaining to black bodies, and how spirituality is a methodology for healing these bodies. There's a book written by Resmaa Menakem an African American psychotherapist, titled "In my Grandmother's Hands" (2017). His study focuses on how trauma affects the human body, and the effects when trauma is not properly dealt with, which becomes this vicious cycle for future generations.

For me, there is a correlation between the initiation period that the diviner undertakes which in itself is a process of healing, and the more scientific, academic way of healing from the past, which is discussed in Menakem's book.

**NM**

You raise an interesting point that, a healing process and a spiritual journey can take many shapes and forms. You use scientific ideas through academic works, speculative ideas from science fiction publications, and spiritual knowledges from your surroundings, and with that, you invite different

methodologies to unpack that. How does that feature in your understanding of the world and your art-making process?

**KG**

It's interesting that you mention this, Dr. Magkati Mokwena's research study, within interpersonal psychology, integrates all these things that have been overlooked by Western psychology such as spirituality to deal with mental health issues or generational trauma. With interpersonal psychology, I think she was able to fuse, what is termed the intangible and tangible, which is the scientific and mathematical precise evidence and African spiritual practice and knowledge.

Through my work, I am trying to suggest different ways of dealing with the problems that we have in post-colonial South Africa. As an artist, I am using the platform and the opportunity to give black bodies a sense of hope. Like Afrofuturism, which creates emerging futures for black bodies, or the US-American composer Sun Ra, an afro-futurist who used Jazz music to imagine, speculate, and heal black bodies from the inflicted trauma we carry in our DNA. The speculative moment of how black life could be without the painful inheritance influences my work.

The chaos has happened, but there is a sense of tranquillity and solace that I'm trying to portray in my body of work - an imaginary destination that we can inhabit as black bodies if we can heal from our trauma. I'm from the Northwest, there's a lot of red soil. The red links to the colour mentioned earlier but also to the soil as an idea that translates to land and South Africa as a geographical location.

## NM

Science often speaks of the originator, someone who owns a discovery, whereas spirituality speaks of the multitude and shareability of things. To stay on top of ownership or power often means to negate the other. Looking at this body of work you are creating here at Gallery MOMO's residency and the topics we talked about - historical violence, contemporary violence, and generational trauma, your works feel rather gentle, speculative, and seem to render as a dreamscape. The figures appear in transition, suggesting growth and constant change...

## KG

This work is titled *Isithunywa* (in Zulu) or *Messenger*. It started with a performance piece, a video of me walking over these canvases with red ink dripping from the cloth I was wearing. Circling back to the red colour and the connotation of blood that symbolises the liminal space the diviner moves through. This acts as an archive of the journey that the diviner has to make. After that, I started working on the background before working on the figures themselves. Here I am looking at spirituality as a process of denouncing your former identity and attaining a new one. The figure goes through a transition from lying and crouching to walking and standing up straight, a journey through the spiritual potential. I often portray female figures in my work, this in a sense is a visual representation of my mother and the journey she went through. The few male figures represent me and I took photographs as a reference. The translucent and light figures in the work are in a liminal state or metamorphosis of some kind. It is all developmental, like a child developing in the womb, a metaphor for spiritual growth and healing.

*Nisha Merit is an independent curator and writer  
based between Johannesburg and Berlin.*



*Ukuphulukisa III*  
2023



Studio view at Gallery MOMO with the artist works in progress  
*Istithunywa III* (2022), centered artwork



*Istithunywa II*  
2022





*Ukuphulukisa I*  
2023



*Ukuphulukisa II*  
2023

Istithunywa I  
2022





Studio view at Gallery MOMO  
with the artist works in progress