

A GRAND WAY TO FALL

Ndikhumbule Ngqinambi
'Window Part II' at Barnard
Gallery, Cape Town

By Ashraf Jamal

A window is an aperture, a screen; connecting, dividing. The history of illusion in painting is connected with the idea of the framed window. Here the Barnard Gallery has noted the importance of Leon Battista Albertus' 1435 study, *De Pictura*, and the shaping influence of the Quattrocento System central to Renaissance painting in which the Eye – yours and mine – is kept at the centre of the picture plane and allowed to become the all-powerful surveyor of the world. That Eye is also the Ego, which in the 18th century spirited the birth of individualism.

But, looking at Ndikhumbule Ngqinambi's paintings, it is not this triumphal vision of painting as the centering of selfhood that springs to mind. Rather, something much darker operates. I was immediately reminded of the opening credits of Season One of *The Leftovers* in which we see half the human race vanish from the face of the earth, borne upward as if to heaven, though we never truly know if it is heaven or hell that is the final destination, or if we, those who remain on earth, are the saved or the damned. What we do know is that this is one of the most crippling miserable TV series ever created – which says everything about the manic-depressive state of the world.

I think Ndikhumbule Ngqinambi's paintings convey this very same unease – psychological, emotional, spiritual. Damnation informs his middle world, his threshold, his window. For one is not quite sure if we, in turn, are the saved or the damned.

Looking at these paintings, it is not Albertus' 1435 tome *De Pictura* which springs to mind but Dante Allighieri's 1555 work, *The Divine Comedy*, and, in particular, his first movement – *Inferno*. As the



Ndikhumbule Ngqinambi, *A Grand Way To Fall*, 2016. Oil on canvas. 150 x 200 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Barnard Gallery, Cape Town.



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- 01 Ndikhumbule Ngqinambi, *Infinity Part II*, 2016. Oil on canvas. 150 x 200 cm.
 02 Ndikhumbule Ngqinambi, *Thick Lines*, 2016. Oil on canvas. 150 x 200 cm.
 03 Ndikhumbule Ngqinambi, *Virginia's House*, 2016. Oil on canvas. 150 x 200 cm.
 All images courtesy of the artist and Barnard Gallery, Cape Town.

famous opening lines read, “In the middle of the journey of our life I found myself within a dark woods where the straight way was lost.” It is this uncertainty, this point between worlds, this window, which Ngqinambi’s paintings dramatise. They have the feel of the allegorical, or the darker side of stained glass church paintings. In short – they are enigmatic lessons.

As Naom Chomsky remarked, the Bible is the most genocidal book ever invented. Whether you agree or not, there is no doubt that faith is at the root of global conflict today. And as for the church, it holds a massive destructive sway over the poor in this country. I say this because it is not clear – and neither should it be – where exactly the painter positions himself in his art. Are these paintings of doom? Are they redemptive? What are we to make of the flood and the fire? The televisual blue and flaming and smoking screens? As for the windows that block the nocturnal pathway? I am not here to make up your minds, and neither is the artist.

The *Inferno* depicts the nine circles of hell: Limbo, Lust, Gluttony, Greed, Anger, Heresy, Violence, Fraud, and Treachery. Do these circles within circles sound familiar? They should, because they are in our news every day. In South Africa we inhabit this very hell. Of course everyone will insist that this hell is global, it’s experienced everywhere. But if Ngqinambi’s paintings have a universal pull, there is no doubt that they are also peculiarly wrought from this ground – a ground betrayed, abused, in which the suffering continues unabated. We have fashioned our own hell – Ngqinambi seems to suggest.

“Hope not ever to see heaven. I have come to lead you to the other shore; into eternal darkness; into fire and into ice”... “I am the way

into the city of woe. I am the way into eternal pain. I am the way to go among the lost.” These words are from the *Inferno*, not *Purgatorio* or *Paradiso*. But it is very evident that in his mid-30s Dante was having a very serious crisis. Whether he ever got out of his funk is up for grabs. The *Inferno* is his most read work, most quoted. Perhaps because it describes a state, a threshold, a window between worlds which all of us endure. And perhaps, to quote the title of one of Ngqinambi’s paintings: This is our “grand way to fall.”

Finally, let’s return to Dante’s famous opening words to *Inferno*: “In the middle of the journey of our life I found myself within a dark woods where the straight way was lost.” Now consider the following by Franz Kafka, written four hundred years later: “we are forlorn as children lost in the woods. When you stand in front of me and look at me, what do you know of the griefs that are in me and what do I know of yours. And if I were to cast myself down before you and weep and tell you, what more would you know about me than you know about Hell when someone tells you it is hot and dreadful? For that reason alone we human beings ought to stand before one another as reverently, as reflectively, as lovingly, as we would before the entrance of hell.”

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