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Humour in the contemporary artwork of Tommy Motswai

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ABSTRACT

Visual artist Tommy Motswai received much attention from the South African art world during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The attention owes to Motswai's cartoonish-style drawings that comment on human relations under both oppressive and democratic conditions in South Africa. Motswai rendered his commentary in creative yet reflective ways that are humorous. In particular in the early 1990s, his drawings reflect a country in celebration, thus they have been interpreted as being humourous by various scholars (Younge 1988; Arnold 1992; Powell 1992; Kasfir 1999). Such interpretation has been only short descriptions most often made in passing instead of sustained arguments. As a result, there are not yet substantiated scholarly accounts that engage the evident but nuanced humour in Motswai's work. This study undertakes to address this neglect, even if at an introductory level. Through an exploration of postcolonial and postmodern theories, the study examines the ways in which Motswai employs humour as a socio-political critique in his work. Underscoring this study is also the intention to insert Motswai's artworks in the field of South African art history.