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Looking closely by candle light

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Abstract

In this research, I study the work by contemporary South African artist, Johannes Phokela, in relation to the Western art historical canon. I undertake a close analysis of his painting *Candle Bathing* (1997) that quotes *Samson and Delilah* (1609-1610) by the seventeenth century Flemish Baroque painter, Peter Paul Rubens. Through a comparative analysis and close looking I read *Candle Bathing*'s 'visual argument' within a postcolonial context. To argue that *Candle Bathing* is not a mere 'quotation' I look closely from multiple angles. To deal with the complexity of a quotation that crosses socio-political time and space, I interpret the painting from various theoretical frameworks: poststructuralism (semiotics), postmodernism (irony); and postcolonial theory to situate my contextual analysis. I am interested in how we can read beyond the literal and how a close reading of this ironic quotation can surface the complexities of contemporary South African art in relation to the art historical canon and colonialism. Through close looking I read *Candle Bathing* as addressing the art canon, colonialism, critiquing issues of race, and marginalisation. This research contributes to filling a knowledge based gap by researching a previously marginalised artist and a close engagement with *Candle Bathing*. In addition, this research offers a way of looking and a method on how to begin looking closely at contemporary African art quoting canonical works. I illustrate the value of close looking to read multifaceted and layered interpretations.