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Looking Closely by Candle Light

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A Research Report submitted to the Faculty of Humanities at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in History of Art.

Title: Looking Closely by Candle Light

Supervisor: Stacey Vorster

Declaration

I, Zandri Oosthuysen, declare that this Research Report is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the Degree of Master of Arts in History of Art at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other University.

Submitted on 23 September 2016

University of the Witwatersrand

Johannesburg

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Looking Closely by Candle Light

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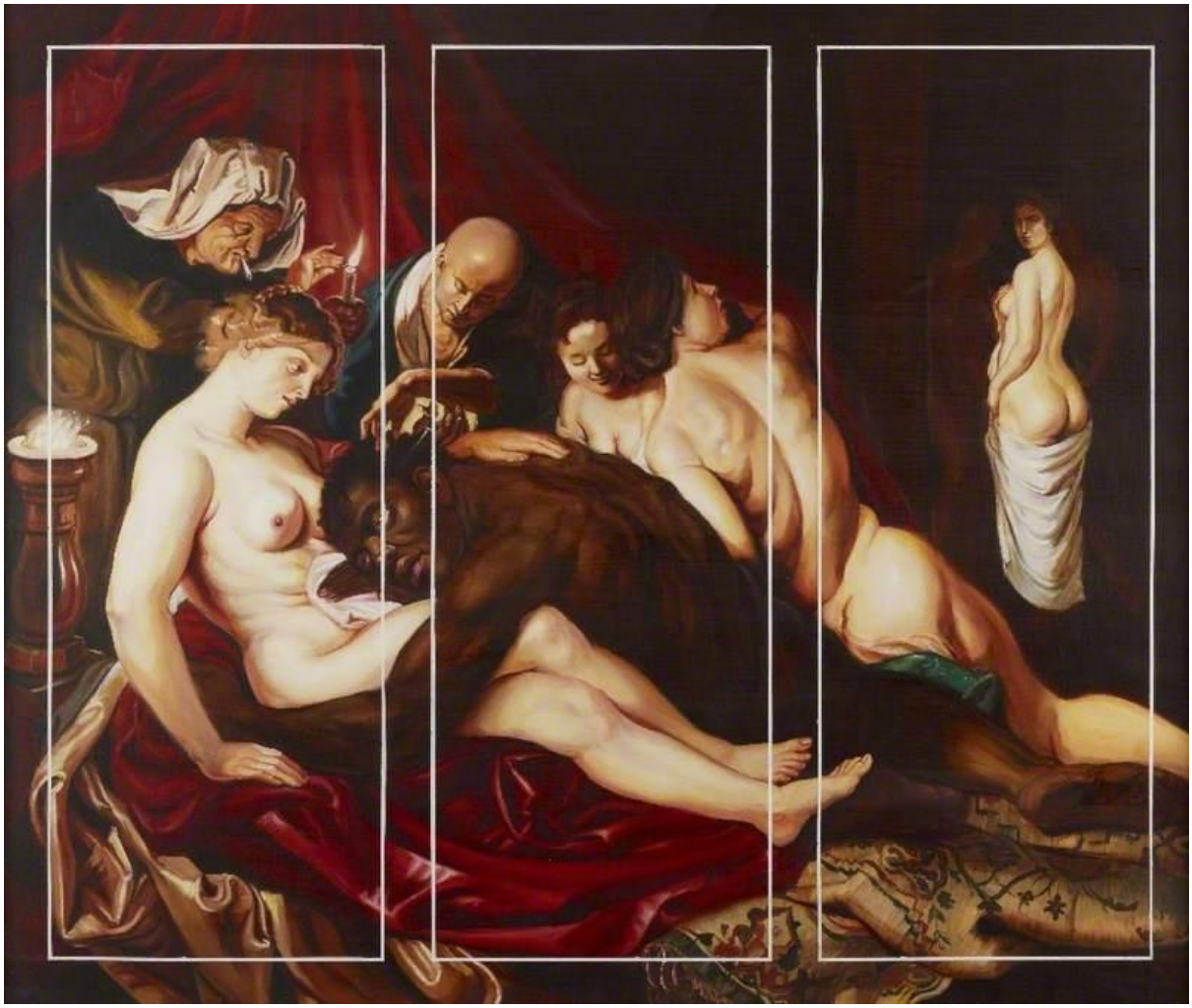
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Prologue

Beginning to Look Closely



Johannes Phokela*, Candle Bathing* (1997), oil on board, 102 x 121.7 cm, Arts Council Collection (ACC), London. Photograph: Arts Council Collection

How Can We Inspect the Caption to Begin Pointing to Meaning?

The **artist**'s nationality, the fact that the **artist** is South African, may point to the context in which the painting was created. The **title** seems poetic and suggests an act of bathing in candle light or immersing in candle light; the light is essentially the result of a burning flame. The title is drawing our attention to the lit candle which an elderly lady holds to light the nude bodies; and to bathe implies a sense of cleansing or submerging. It could also point to candle wax and signify death masks or wax figures in museums associated with history and preservation.

The **date** reveals the time in which it was produced and allows us to understand the socio-political context in which it was made. 1997 was an uncertain period in South Africa because apartheid, on paper, 'officially' ended in 1994, but did not necessarily end racism. The aftermath is still evident in 2016 and the affects were even stronger in 1997. Can reading the title in relation to the date, point to a sense of 'cleansing' South Africa of apartheid and racism? A hope to immerse in the new South Africa? Or perhaps that South Africa is still submerged in racism?[1]

Oil paint as **medium** conforms to traditional Western painting – especially Baroque painting – within the art historical canon. Its **size** is smaller than Rubens *Samson and Delilah*, which is 185 x 205 cm.

[1] The captured date of most of Phokela's works vary, *Candle Bathing* is listed as 1997 and in some references as 1998. I refer to the Arts Council Collection's registered date: 1997.

Look at Me! Look at Me!

At first glance Johannes Phokela's *Candle Bathing* might seem like a 'mere quotation', but with a closer inspection we start to see numerous differences that point to complex interpretations. While the majority of the composition and manner of depiction is generally the same to the 'original' work by Peter Paul Rubens, Phokela has adjusted and added certain elements. For this reason, close looking is vital for a detailed engagement with the painting.

Candle Bathing portrays the biblical story from the Old Testament, but it is not your typical Samson and Delilah portrayal: Samson is depicted as an eroticised masculine nude figure and Phokela has changed Samson's race. The nude Samson and Delilah appear draped over each other, their bodies seem to flow almost in the same way as the draped cloth on which they rest. However, Samson's head does not directly touch Delilah's white skin; Phokela has added a small white cloth beneath Samson's head, which rests on Delilah's pubic area. Samson's arm is around Delilah's lower body, he has a loose grip as if he was holding her, but is slowly losing strength. Delilah's left hand rests on Samson's shoulder while her right hand presses firmly on piled drapes. Delilah sits on a lavish, glossy, dark-red drape, which is layered on a honey gold drape, and a further bronze fabric with intricate patterns. The fabric pattern is similar to the one in Rubens' painting. The colour tones are alike but less saturated, and the embellishments appear simplified.

The scene takes place in a darkened chamber with two visible light sources coming from the far left: an oil lamp and an elderly lady holding a lit candle. The old woman, with wrinkles and sagging skin, holds the candle over Samson and Delilah, inspecting the sensuous figures by candle light. She holds her right hand at an angle to force the light toward them, which aids the man cutting Samson's hair. She wears a peasant outfit, with a light pleated hat, her robe-like dress is a dull mustard-green colour. Phokela has added a cigarette in his quotation: the old woman is smoking. The man cutting Samson's hair is made bald but his clothes are similar to Rubens' portrayal. Phokela incorporates

numerous plump nude figures, which resemble Rubenesque nudes; two nudes side-by-side lean closely into Samson. There is another cloth that acts as a 'barrier' between Samson's black flesh and the nude tilted away from the viewer. It is placed at her buttock, which is distorted and twisted. The combination of Samson's black body that contrasts against the white nudes and the composition, which is weighted on the left of the painting, make him the focal point of the image. The manner in which the nudes are painted make their bodies appear sculpted. The female nudes are plump and even though they are all depicted as white, Delilah's skin tone seems slightly fairer: she is also the only blonde.

Phokela emphasises the colour red by changing the purple drape in Rubens' *Samson and Delilah* to red. In *Candle Bathing* there is an overwhelming amount of red since the drape has also been enlarged. Instead of ornaments and tiny sculptures in the background, the enormous dark red curtain behind the figures seem to encapsulate the scene. The result of its enormity is that it 'de-contextualises' the event. Instead of the 'awaiting doom' with Philistines standing eagerly to capture Samson, the composition within a sea of drapes, alters the narrative's sense of urgency and creates an eerie sensual floating-in-time effect.

The lighting fades from left to right and becomes darkest in the far right of the composition, in fact, the right corner of the painting is so dark that it is difficult to make out what is there: giving the image an air of mystery. The combination of light and dark, the large red curtains with a scene taking place, is stage-like. Baroque art often treated paintings as a stage to 'perform the dramas of life'. A highlighted nude stands in the doorway where Rubens' originally depicted the Philistines. She glares over her shoulder and seems to hover in the darkness. Two figures appear to emerge from the shadows behind her. They are painted in a different manner in comparison to the other nudes; there is no detail, they are flat and simplistic. The representation of these three nudes in a particular formation and pose is reminiscent of the classical trope of The Three Graces.

The atmosphere of the painting is rather glum. Delilah looks exhausted. Samson seems hopeless and overpowered. Yet, the old lady does not fret about the event taking place; the cigarette adds to this idea, by smoking carelessly as an 'onlooker'.

Characteristic of Phokela's work in the late 1990s to early 2000s, three white geometric frames are placed over the subject matter. The rectangles appear like a layer on top of the scene which seems to create a slight distance between the viewer and the portrayal. One of the lines cut through Samson's left eye, which is open, while in Rubens' depiction his eyes remain shut. Even though his eyes are open he does not look directly at the viewer, instead, he stares into the distance. These frames also appear to invite a closer look. To be able to read the painting in a meticulous way, we have to look *through* the frames – this is where close looking is primary.

Introduction:

How Can We Construct Meaning Through Close Looking?

This research paper is primarily about close looking. I demonstrate how one can read a work of art and construct meaning by, firstly, looking closely. In order to illustrate the value and complexity of close looking and reading I offer Johannes Phokela's painting, *Candle Bathing* (1997), as a case study. Phokela is a contemporary South African artist who has exhibited nationally and internationally and received numerous awards, including the John Moore Painting Award and the Decibel Award (Corrigall 2015).[2] *Candle Bathing* is a quotation of Peter Paul Rubens' *Samson and Delilah* (1609-1610).

I am interested in how we can read *Candle Bathing* through a detailed and careful analysis, and argue for how we can understand the use of irony in quoting *Samson and Delilah*. In this process, I argue for the value of reading quotations through irony, as a mode to implicitly convey criticism, and how such an interpretation allows for richly layered meaning. I also motivate how a painting can propose a 'visual argument' and that a Baroque painterly style can be understood as a visual language. For this reason, my reading of *Candle Bathing* is not intended to be a mere reading of Phokela's artistic intentions. Phokela states that his works do not necessarily contain a specific meaning, that: "…anyone can read whatever they want to read into it" (quoted in Corrigall 2009). This seems to invite a focused and critical engagement with his work, which requires viewers to become readers. I argue that the act of close looking allows for intricate and multifaceted interpretations. Through this process of demonstrating the importance of close looking I contribute valuable research on Phokela.

[2] Phokela was born in 1966 in Soweto; he obtained his Masters Degree in Fine Arts at the Royal College of Art in London 1993. He was awarded the John Moore Painting Award in 1993 and the Decibel Award by the Arts Council of England in 2004 (Corrigall 2015).

Johannes Phokela and Rubens

Phokela primarily quotes paintings of Dutch and Flemish 'Old Masters' from the Western art historical canon; and he often adjusts the race of the main characters within the composition. In *Candle Bathing*, Phokela specifically quotes the work of seventeenth century Flemish Baroque painter, Rubens.[3] Since *Candle Bathing* quotes Rubens' *Samson and Delilah*, not merely the Old Testament story, considering Rubens' as an artist may add another layer of complexity to the way we understand *Candle Bathing*. The more we know of the quoted painting, the richer the meaning; intriguing aspects of *Samson and Delilah*, are potentially relevant to read layered interpretations of *Candle Bathing*.

[3] *Candle Bathing* is not Phokela's only appropriation of Rubens. *Fall of the Damned* (1993) quotes *The Descent into Hell of the Damned* (1620) (Williamson 2009:236), *Ecstasy of Medusa* (1999) quotes Rubens' *Head of Medusa* (1617-1618) and *Roman Charity* (2002) appears to be a reinterpretation of *Cimon and Pero (Roman Charity)* (1630-1640). It is worth noting that Rubens often quoted other artists, too. Writing about the 2005 exhibition *Rubens: A Master in the Making,* Christopher White argues that Rubens formed "his artistic vocabulary by the painstaking copying and digestion of the inventions of others which, once absorbed into his memory, reappear in his work in a variety of ways" (White 2005:836).

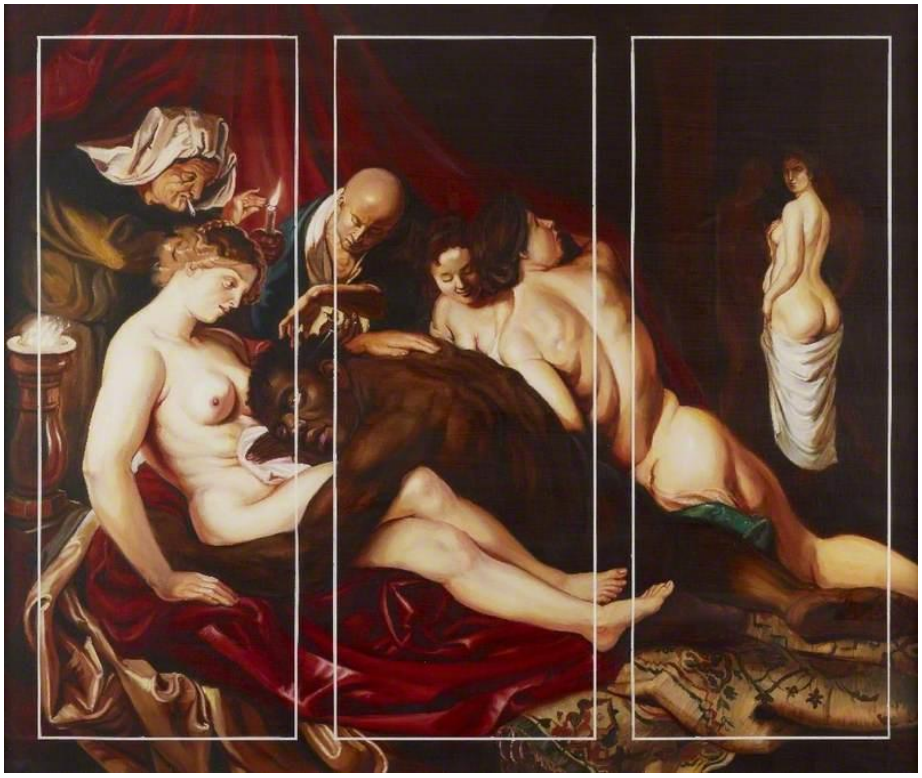


Figure 1.1: Johannes Phokela, *Candle Bathing* (1997), oil on board, 102 x 121.7 cm. Arts Council Collection, London. Photograph: Arts Council Collection.



Figure 2: Peter Paul Rubens, *Samson and Delilah* (1609-1610), oil on wood, 185 x 205 cm. National Gallery, London. Photograph: The National Gallery.

Aim

At first glance, quotations in a postmodern style seem to yield a surface level meaning and are often not taken seriously. For this reason, they are frequently engaged with on a superficial level – this may frame a tendency to perceive such works of art as 'mere quotations'. These works are often glanced over due to an inclination to believe that there is no meaning beyond the literal quoting. However, I emphasise the value of close looking to engage with quotations on a deeper level and aim to provide a methodological approach on how to begin looking at these kinds of ironic works, as not 'mere quotations'.

My primary research question is: How does looking closely at *Candle Bathing* in its ironic quotation of *Samson and Delilah* prompt us to consider the complexities of contemporary South African art in relation to the Western art historical canon, and colonialism?

As part of the above, I ask: What can be communicated by referencing this historical Baroque style? What meaning can be made by contrasting *Candle Bathing* and *Samson and Delilah*? What can it mean to draw on historical Western art in 'postcolonial' South Africa? To what extent can we make use of irony to read *Candle Bathing*?

Rationale

Has it become a trend to rely exclusively on theory to interpret a work and not enough focus on close looking? Close looking is a process for looking carefully in order to understand a work of art on a profound level. This act makes it possible to see things that do not appear at first glance. It requires slowing down to see the details and through repeated looking, layers of complexity become visible. The academic, Tim Stott, refers to, what he terms as "a demand for close looking"; he believes this plea stems from a decline of

considering the visuals and a suspicion that theoretical interpretations are becoming, in a sense, forced (2013:31).[4]

Mieke Bal [5] claims that close looking has, unfortunately, "gone out of style" (2002:10). She argues that it is the work of art that 'speaks' and not necessarily the artist (2002:9-10); for this reason, it is pertinent to look closely at the work. Bal suggests that there is a growing need for examples to reflect on what a work of art can visually 'say'. Therefore I illustrate the significance of close looking and how engaging with a single painting in a very detailed manner can produce a profound level of complexity. [6]

This research is vital because it contributes towards filling a 'gap' in art historical writing. This 'gap' is the absence of African and black 'voices'; an absence of a close engagement with their creative practices. This research contributes to redress the vast imbalances both in South Africa and more broadly in a global sense. There is relatively little written on Phokela's work, and even less written on this particular painting. In *A Fragile Archive* (2013), curator Nontobeko Ntombela writes about the importance of contributing to the writing and memory of South African artists. In a sense, Ntombela refers to the archive as shaping our understanding of artists and art. She emphasises that to understand the past and gain insight, imbalances need to be redressed; we have to reshape the past by including what has been excluded, since only part of our history has been accounted for (2013:5, 7-8). With my research I fill

[4] According to Stott, "sloppy looking" is taking place, which is to quickly scan a work, and in a sense, taking shortcuts (2013:33).

[5] Mieke Bal is a Dutch cultural theorist and Professor Emeritus in literary theory at the University of Amsterdam.

[6] While tutoring second year History of Art students at Wits, they often complain that they cannot write six-hundred words about one painting, claiming it is impossible to write so much about a single work. Students are astonished that I have written so many words, just, about *Candle Bathing* – why is that? Why is it difficult to understand that one *can* write this much about a single work of art? Why do we opt for analysing multiple works, rather than an individual? I aim to demonstrate how rich writing about a single work of art can be. I hope that my paper may serve as an example that one can write an entire paper on one work. However, through my process of studying *Candle Bathing*, it is clear that we may never be able to fully explore a work; as times change meaning shifts.

a knowledge gap since Phokela's works have not been studied substantially, especially not *Candle Bathing*.[7]

Methodology

My sense is that *Candle Bathing* is so rich in interpretative possibilities that only one theoretical framework would limit its reading. Therefore, to answer my research questions, I analyse *Candle Bathing* from multiple perspectives. I take a methodological approach to address my proposition that *Candle Bathing* is not a 'mere quotation' and analyse the painting by combining various theoretical frameworks, particularly: poststructuralism (semiotics), postmodernism (irony), postcolonialism, as well as the idea that a painting can visually propose an argument. Examining *Candle Bathing* from numerous angles results in a number of outcomes, demonstrating the density and value of close looking. My methodology includes: looking closely through different lenses, a qualitative reading, and a comparative analysis of *Candle Bathing* and *Samson and Delilah*. I include a literature review of what has been written on both *Candle Bathing* and *Samson and Delilah.* My process of constructing meaning takes place in each chapter which work together to layer meaning.

[7] The history of art, is predominantly a history of Western works that have been written on extensively, it is therefore pertinent to write about South African works of art in order to redress this major imbalance. Paying research attention to previously marginalised artists are vital. Phokela apparently prefers not to be labelled as a black South African artist (quoted in Corrigall 2009); considered as a contemporary artist, regardless of race, he is noteworthy and his works should be critically engaged with. There is not enough written on his paintings and especially not in this much detail.

Chapter Outline:

In the first chapter, I explain the central concept of 'close looking' and motivate the value of looking closely at a single work of art in order to construct meaning. My reading of *Candle Bathing*, which forms the core of this study, is derived from a detailed intellectual engagement with the work of art, through close looking. It is therefore essential to clarify how to look closely.

In the second chapter, I argue that an image can propose a 'visual argument'. I explore the ways in which an image can 'say' certain things about the society in which it was made and how we can read this argument. The concept that a work of art is making a proposition should be kept in mind throughout this study.

Since *Candle Bathing* specifically quotes a Baroque rendering of an Old Testament story, in the third chapter I study how an understanding of the historical Baroque can add value to the analysis of *Candle Bathing*. I take a poststructuralist approach to lay the basis for my overarching argument, by identifying and explaining my concept of a Baroque visual language, which I employ to read *Candle Bathing*.[8] I incorporate poststructuralism as a theoretical framework, as it allows space for the reader's interpretation and the instability and fluidity of meaning. In this chapter I also introduce postcolonial theory to situate my analyses within a postcolonial context.

In chapter four, I use postmodernism as a theoretical framework and consider how we can read *Candle Bathing* as an ironic quotation of *Samson and Delilah*. By juxtaposing the two paintings, I explore how we can understand the use of irony as a mode to convey criticism in an indirect manner, and how irony can create a sense of complexity. My main focus here, is arguing that by

[8] I construct meaning by bringing my knowledge of the Baroque, and my claim, that the Baroque painterly style can be understood as a visual language, to interpret *Candle Bathing*. I do not claim that Phokela employs a Baroque language, I argue that by reading *Candle Bathing* through a detailed understanding of this language offers a particular kind and useful interpretation – especially within a postcolonial context.

looking closely we can read *Candle Bathing* as commenting on the art historical canon, and as a way to understand the relationship between contemporary South African art and the Western art canon.

In chapter five I return to the notion that an image proposes a visual argument. I query what *Candle Bathing* may propose and employ the vocabulary of a Baroque language to read the painting. I focus on the visuals, look closely, and ask what *Candle Bathing* can argue? Here, I situate my reading within a postcolonial context and interpret *Candle Bathing* as referring to the representation, exoticism and eroticism of race.

Chapter 1

Close looking: Look, Describe, Think

Close looking is the primary method to explore a work of art as extensively as possible. The value of close looking lies in its source, as fundamentally close looking is based on the work of art. To look closely at a work of art means resting all the possibilities, all the questions and all the answers on the work itself. The visual is a 'theory', the visual is 'saying' something, and all one needs to do is look closely. Close looking involves looking and thinking – what do you see, and how do you read what you see?

In this chapter, I define what is meant by the term 'close looking', address what it means to look closely, and explain what it entails to perform a close reading of a work of art. I refer to a number of historians who suggest that close looking has unfortunately been undervalued and forsaken in recent times and importantly encourage a return to this method of analysis.

Close looking is a methodological process to analyse a work of art in a very detailed way. This method, I argue, can result in a tremendously insightful reading. By looking closely, we start to see details which were not obvious at first. Making meaning through a process of close looking starts firstly by looking at the work of art in a focused manner. The second step in the process is describing the work which leads to interpretation. A rich analysis stems from a meticulous description, which is principally based on a focused gaze. In other words, each 'step' needs to be accurately performed, by not spending a sufficient amount of time looking and describing, the interpretation would, in a sense, be shallow.

I argue for a reading that stems *from* the work of art, one that is not merely *about* the work. Close looking, simply put, is to make meaning by engaging

with what we see. Danielle Thom [9] notes that looking is the first step to understanding a work of art (Thom 2014). This first step is also the most vital step to read a work. By not dedicating enough time to look closely, or by skipping this act, the viewer overlooks the visuals, which should be the primary concern.

Unfortunately, close looking seems to have gone out of 'style', it appears that there has been a tremendous decline of looking closely. Tim Stott suspects close looking has been abandoned and that the 'visuals' of an image are not considered thoroughly enough (2013:31). As scholars we need to ask ourselves: Are we *really* looking closely often enough? Museum educator and art historian, Ben Street, raises a similar concern about the apparent loss of close looking in art historical practice. He argues that art historians spend more time writing and discussing works of art and do not often enough look closely (Street 2014). According to Street, today, art historians and students tend to skip close looking and jump directly to interpreting the works (Street 2014). However, before we can interpret, we need to be able to read the visuals. Street proposes practicing visual literacy, which he defines as an "intellectual act of looking" (Street 2014), in other words, close looking.[10] Thus, to be able to read the visuals one needs to be visually literate.

Another historian who asserts that close looking and reading have been neglected, is Mieke Bal (2002:10). According to Bal, images encourage an "intellectual engagement" (Bal 2006); she argues that close looking is a way to *engage* with a work of art (Bal 2010). Bal argues that it is not the artist that 'speaks', but rather, the work of art that is the 'speaker' (2002:9-10). For this reason, Bal urges that the work of art should 'participate' in meaning making.

[9] Thom is assistant curator at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London.

[10] Street is specifically referring to museum education which encourage concentrated looking, and urges that academics learn from what they practice. Close looking produces a more profound understanding of a work, and what Street refers to as concentrated or slow looking, "gets closer to a work of arts 'pictorial intelligence'"(Street 2014). He argues that if we value a work's pictorial intelligence', its visual argument, close looking is the archetypal way to read what the work is 'saying'. Here, Street is referring to Alpers and Baxandall's term 'pictorial intelligence'. For Street the 'pictorial intelligence' of a work is more important than, for example, its historical context and iconography (Street 2014).

Allowing the work to 'speak' calls for, as Bal phrases it: "a qualified return to the practice of close reading" (Bal 2002:9-10).[11] To empower an artwork and allow it to contribute or 'speak' we need to listen, and we can do so by looking closely.

In summary, close looking involves looking, describing, and thinking. It entails engaging with the image through a focused gaze, repetitive looking and reading, and noticing and identifying fine details or nuances. Practising this process allows for grappling with the density of a work – unpacking, unlocking, and revealing the layers of complexity, and the outcome, therefore, is a richer analysis and interpretation of a work of art.

Close looking as a method of interaction with a work of art, particularly for Bal, is a way of understanding what the work can 'say'. Reading a work of art's proposition requires a sophisticated and focused interaction with the visuals – and close looking is of utmost importance for interpreting a 'visual argument'. In the following chapter I elaborate on this notion of a 'visual argument'.

[11] Bal claims that *Reading Rembrandt* (1991) continues to be relevant, since it concerns the manner in which we can read and construct meaning by looking closely at an image, and engaging with what we see (2006:v). In other words, the value of close looking has not decreased and it is still relevant to read a work of art.

Chapter 2

Visual Argument

The key requisite for reading a work of art's visual argument is to ask *what* it is saying and *how* it is saying it. Throughout this research paper, I primarily study *what Candle Bathing* is proposing and *how*? Nevertheless, the interpretation of its visual argument would differ between readers. A visual argument is essentially an argument proposed visually, rather than verbally or textually. Inspired by scholars who point to this concept, I study how an image can propose an argument – to use Mieke Bal's phrase – for "the viewer's consideration" (1989:291). To read this proposition, viewer's need to critically engage with the work, and close looking as a method, is pertinent for doing this.

In this chapter I elaborate on the idea that a work of art can propose a visual argument. I explore theories of visual argument and consider the following questions: How do we read a visual argument? And how do we interpret a visual argument by looking closely?

Bal strongly advocates close looking as a method to actively interact with the work in order to understand what it is 'saying'. She claims that images invite viewers to 'theorise'; and that meaning making should be a dialogue between the reader and the work of art (Bal 2010). In other words, meaning should not be made by forcing a perspective or making a theory fit. Instead, the work should be part of constructing meaning in an interaction with the reader.

Referring to this idea of a 'visual argument' in 'On Looking and Reading' (1989) Bal argues that:

> Images are readings… and through their ideological choices, function in the same way as sermons: not a re-telling of the text but a use of it; not an illustration but, ultimately, a new text. The image does not replace

> a text; it *is* one. Working through the visual, iconographic, and literary traditions that produced it, these images propose for the viewer's consideration a propositional content, an argument, an idea, inscribed in line and colour, by means of representation. By means, also, of an appeal to the already established knowledge that enables recognition of the scene depicted. And paradoxically, this recognition is an indispensable step in the communication of a new, alternative propositional content (Bal 1989:291).

Bal suggests that images, like literary texts, propose something to the reader. Indeed, she claims that images "have as much to say as texts" (Bal 2010). Similar to the way in which a literary text forms an argument, an artwork can visually produce a proposition in a visual medium. They have structure, content, 'font', particular 'wording' and phrasing, and so forth. Understanding a textual argument requires a set of skills and acquired knowledge, involving a form of critical thinking and inquiry: in what language is it written? Who is the author? When was it published? What can the title suggest? In what context was it produced? In the same way, we have to ask questions which engage with the visual argument.

How does an image make an argument and how do we begin to 'look' for this proposition? Bal mentions that it is "inscribed in line and colour" (1989:291). It is not limited to this, but she points to a route of where to 'look' in the image. It is 'written' through, for example, layout, composition, juxtaposition, medium, scale, tone, subject matter, form, style, content, and so forth. Each element plays its role to produce a 'message'. These components can also be understood as a visual language which forms the 'medium' to communicate with the reader.[12]

[12] For Bal, the interpretation of a work's visual argument is also based on the reader's knowledge (1989:291). The knowledge required to recognise the scene in *Candle Bathing* and to strengthen the reading of its inscribed proposition, includes, but is not limited to: the fact that it quotes a canonical painting (*Samson and Delilah*) by a Baroque artist from the seventeenth century. It refers to the Biblical story of Samson

After creation, the 'text' or work of art, is released into the world. Roland Barthes argues in 'The Death of The Author' (1977) that: "it is the language which speaks, not the author" (1977:143). Barthes and Bal's reasoning is quite similar – that it is the work or its 'language' which speaks and communicates with the reader, not its creator – in this way, the work of art and its visual language takes on its own 'life'. Following Barthes, the 'death of the author' gives 'birth' to the reader (1997:148). This poststructuralist concept can make us think of the artwork's visual argument as almost 'drowning' the artist's intention. The meaning produced is not necessarily based on the artist's objective. Instead, it is what readers perceive the visual language is saying. However, the reader's understanding of what it communicates would be greatly influenced by their context, as each 'word' may mean different things in various contexts. In *The Practice of Theory: Poststructuralism, Cultural Politics, and Art History* (1994), Keith Moxey explains that the meaning of a text – or work of art – would be understood differently in various contexts and by each reader (Moxey 1994:3). My reading of *Candle Bathing* is indeed influenced by being in a previously colonised country, and this knowledge clearly 'drives' the way I perceive the painting. [13]

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and Delilah from the book of Judges; it involves an understanding of the narrative and its symbolism. *Candle Bathing* not only quotes the subject matter, but is itself painted in a Baroque style and therefore knowledge of the Baroque and a Baroque visual language can add tremendous layers of meaning. An awareness of the historical socio-political context of both paintings is essential.

[13] The semiotic theories I refer to seem to stem from, and might have developed from Panofsky's theories of iconographic and iconological interpretation. Panofsky writes that iconography concerns the subject matter and meaning of works, "as opposed to their form" (1955:26). Panofsky identifies three stages of analyses: the pre-iconographical description (the "primary or natural subject matter" which is a "pseudo formal analysis" (1955: 28-33,40); the iconographical analysis (the "secondary or conventional subject matter" comprised of "images, stories and allegories" (1955:28-31,40); thirdly, the iconological interpretation (the "intrinsic meaning or content", involving the identification and interpretation of "symbolical values"(1955:28-33,40). For Panofsky, "iconology...is a method of analysis which arises from synthesis rather than analysis" (1955:32). He explains that an iconological interpretation requires "more than a familiarity with specific themes or concepts as transmitted through literary sources" (1955:38). The stress placed on the context of the work by the historians I refer to, and the contextual analysis I perform in this study fits within Panofsky's approach to iconology – which considers the broader socio-

How Do We Read a Visual Argument?

In 'Arguing Art' (2014), Arlene Archer and Joni Brenner also engage with the notion that an artwork "can propose an argument" (2014:57). In their article, they explain the importance of context and how it affects our understanding of a work's visual argument. Particularly in relation to exhibition display, Archer and Brenner explore how meaning can shift when analysing works individually versus comparatively (2014:61). They claim that "paintings placed together produce new meaning" (2014:61) and so reading works intertextually yields meaning which is only possible when read in relation to one another. When viewed separately our understanding of a particular painting would differ. When performing an analysis of two works of art in relation to each other, one begins making "immediate connections and associations" (Archer & Brenner 2014:65). It seems that for Archer and Brenner, the interpretation of a work's argument is often "contextually determined" (2014:57-60). This is especially evident in my analysis within a postcolonial context. I consider both the time period in which *Candle Bathing* was produced and the current moment in which we read the painting. Similar to Bal's view, that meaning making should be a 'dialogue' or interaction (Bal 2010), Archer and Brenner argue that the viewer, or 'readers', "are crucial participants in meaning-making and always complete the artwork" (2014:64). In essence, they argue that to be able to read the work's proposition demands a critical engagement (Archer & Brenner 2014: 66) – and close looking is such a manner.

In 'Toward a Theory of Visual Argument' (1996), David Birdsell and Leo Groarke argue that context plays a vital role in how meaning is shaped.[14] They define

political context and historical conditions of the time and place in which the work was made. An iconological interpretation is in a sense reading the combination of all these elements, the 'symbolic' reading.

[14] Birdsell and Groarke are specifically speaking of visual argument in relation to design and mass media communication (1996:1), as in advertising for instance, and not specifically from an art historical perspective. Nonetheless, their concept is relevant for thinking about how an image might propose something to the viewer.

context as involving "a wide range of cultural assumptions, situational cues, time-sensitive information, and/or knowledge of a specific interlocutor" (1996:3). In order to interpret the "visual modes of reasoning and persuasion" by which works of art (or in the case of their study, advertising messages) make meaning, the reader requires certain tools (1996:1).

Birdsell and Groarke claim that creation of visual meaning happens in a very similar way to the creation of semiotic or linguistic meaning. They argue that 'words' do not carry meaning, instead, the way in which they are interpreted produces meaning (1996:3). In a mode somewhat different to semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure's argument that the *signifier—signified* relationship is arbitrary (1960:67), Birdsell and Groarke propose that 'visual meaning' is not, in fact, arbitrary (1996:2-3). That said, they acknowledge that interpretations may vary since meaning is produced in particular situations (1996:2-3). Birdsell and Groarke emphasise that 'words' are understood differently in various settings (1996:3), what 'words' signify are therefore contextually determined.

Just as "verbal-claims" or statements are often misinterpreted, so too visual arguments can be misunderstood. To read a visual argument, viewers need to understand the 'visual vocabulary' in an image (1996:2). The visual vocabulary is what transports the 'message'. Since the tools required to interpret a 'visual text' is not innate, the viewer might not be familiar with the vocabulary or not be visually literate. Comparable to learning an oral language and acquiring writing skills, why would one assume to automatically be 'visually literate'? If the reader's proficiency is inadequate, whether it be of a verbal or visual language, the proposition or meaning could be "radically misunderstood" (Birdsell & Groarke 1996:2).

Birdsell and Groarke describe three types of context that are key to analysing a visual argument: "the immediate visual context, immediate verbal context, and visual culture" (1996:3). Following Birdsell and Groakre, we may view the "immediate visual context" as referring to *how* the work of art is 'put-together': the arrangement of the visuals, the relation between formal compositional

elements, and the artwork's 'place' in the world in relation to others (1996:3). For example, the order of frames in a film, which build on each other to project meaning (Birdsell & Groarke 1996:3). The immediate verbal context, according to Birdsell and Groarke, offers "a basis for the interpretation of visual images" (1996:3), this may also refer to the caption of an artwork which plays a role in situating the reader's understanding. The third type of context is offered by visual culture, however, Birdsell and Groarke clarify that it does not directly impact the creation of visual meaning (1996:4). They explain that visual culture has to do with how images reflect "different values, conditions of production, and habits of interpretation" (1996:4). They note that an important aspect of reading a visual argument is being aware that the understanding of certain "elements of the visual vocabulary…changes over time" and various contexts "promote different ways of seeing" (Birdsell & Groarke 1996:4). In this regard, their theory shares similarities with poststructuralism.

The reason why I refer to their theory, is that Birdsell and Groarke strongly motivate that visuals produce meaning and images propose something to viewers (1996:5). They argue, to develop the 'theory of visual argument' readers should acknowledge "the possibility of visual meaning", that images need to be considered in context, and should "recognise the argumentative aspects of representation and resemblance" (Birdsell & Groarke 1996:5).

Unfortunately, the way their text is written is slightly vague, Birdsell and Groarke do not often enough illustrate what they mean. This indicates another way in which this research report fills a lacuna in visual literacy is vital, as I strive to 'show' what *Candle Bathing* is 'saying' and *how* it makes this proposition. Birdsell and Groarke do not fully unpack their ideas, their theory would be more convincing if they focused on a single image to demonstrate their concept. Instead of illustrating what they mean, they attempt to substantiate their claim by comparing the idea of a visual argument to verbal propositions. Their position, that a visual argument is not less significant than an oral argument, is of value, but the shaping of such a theory seems to go astray with their comparisons to verbal propositions. Nonetheless, we should keep in mind that

there are similarities to understanding a verbal argument and a visual argument.

How Do We Interpret a Visual Argument by Looking Closely?

In *Everything's an Argument* (2007), Andrea A. Lunsford, John J. Ruszkiewicz and Keith Walters, claim that:

> "…all language, whether written or spoken, visual or textual, is *motivated*. Because language is a human activity and because humans exist in a complex world of goals, purposes, and activities, language cannot be anything but motivated" (2007:xiii).

In other words, language and the particular combination or phrasing is driven by a specific purpose. There is a reason, a motivation, behind each 'word' and its assembly in order to argue. Each facet is part of a specific visual vocabulary that has been assembled, and each aspect drives meaning – insinuating that *everything* in the composition or phrasing carries meaning. The authors also refer to Kenneth Burke's concept, that language is fundamentally a method of argument (2007:xiii). In this way, we can understand the visual language as communicating between the work of art and its audience. According to Lunsford, Ruszkiewicz and Walters, "all language is open to interpretation" (2007:xiii). The vocabulary used in an artwork may communicate various things to each reader, and as Moxey also argues, each person would interpret the argument, proposed through the language, differently in their context (1994:3).

To conclude, when reading a visual argument, the aim is not to merely analyse *what* the work of art is arguing, but importantly, substantiate *how* the work is constructing or presenting this argument. In this regard, we need to identify strategies and how they are being used to mobilise the argument. It is pertinent to note that everything is charged with meaning. The argument is in some sense written formalistically, through form, the work's structural qualities, and the organisation or combination of these elements – particularly the result of

reading the components in relation to one another. From a semiotic view, think of the elements as visual 'words', and the various words work together to articulate an argument. However, it is not merely a formalist reading, the content, the context of the work, and if the reader 'completes' the work – as Archer and Brenner argue (2014:64) – the reader's context, also plays a crucial role.

To read an image by looking closely, is to allow the visuals to 'speak'. The basics of interpreting or analysing a visual argument, is then to look closely at dark versus light areas, the colour, size, subject matter, details, what is being emphasised in the composition and so forth. What is in the image, the constant or the fixed visuals, leads to the proposition, but the interpretation of it, what the painting is 'saying' is variable and is up to the reader to make sense of.

Deducing from these various noteworthy theories of visual argument I have explored here, to read a visual argument requires: a consideration of the intertextual meaning of the compositional elements within the image, the context of the work and its relation to existing works. Archer and Brenner emphasise the unique meaning yielded when reading works in direct relation to each other. Gathering from Birdsell and Groarke, visual literacy and an understanding of the vocabulary allows the reader to make sense of what is in the artwork; and Moxey emphasises the relativity of meaning. The majority of these theories emphasise the significant role context plays in meaning making and the understanding or knowledge of the visual language.

In the subsequent chapters I read *Candle Bathing* from different angles and in each chapter I emphasise an alternative aspect and interpretation of the differences between the two paintings. In the following chapter I offer a semiotic reading and focus on style and context – the context in which *Candle Bathing* was created and the Baroque era.

In the following chapter I define a Baroque visual language and question how this language can function to propose a powerful visual argument. Following Birdsell and Groarke's requirement – that readers need to be familiar with the

specific visual vocabulary (1996:2) – being visually literate and fluent with a Baroque visual language, allows the reader to consider *Candle Bathing* as offering a potent visual argument. I explore the components of a Baroque language as a system of communication, and I elucidate the 'visual vocabulary' and its typical visual characteristics.

I analyse *Candle Bathing*'s visual argument as arising from the visual components, and explore how this painting can embed a message or 'say' certain things of the society in which it was made. I demonstrate how an understanding of this Baroque language is a tool to read *Candle Bathing*'s inscribed argument – and this particular analysis has not been done before. By juxtaposing *Candle Bathing* and *Samson and Delilah*, I focus on the visuals of each painting, look closely, and ask what can *Candle Bathing* argue?

Chapter 3

THE BAROQUE AS A VISUAL LANGUAGE

How can we employ the historical Baroque style to read a contemporary work of art? Since *Candle Bathing* specifically quotes a Flemish Baroque rendering, I study the Baroque as part of my analysis. In this chapter I lay the basis for my argument by identifying and explaining the concept of a Baroque visual language. To demonstrate how history is still relevant to read a work of art, I study how the Baroque art style operated in the seventeenth century and argue that we can understand this style as a visual language. By viewing this historical style as a visual language, rather than merely a product of a certain age, I claim it may be seen as a distinct entity neither bound to the seventeenth century nor limited to the West. This visual language can be employed throughout time and space. Accordingly, I motivate why this language is particularly useful and relevant within a postcolonial context. In the following chapters I explore how we can construct meaning through an understanding of a Baroque visual language by closely analysing *Candle Bathing*.

The fundamental components of a Baroque visual vocabulary include the following: *chiaroscuro*, *tenebrism*, theatrical devices, excessive drama, exaggerated facial expressions, extravagant movement, lively diagonals, rich colour, and visual rhetoric. This language is visible in the content of the painting, the intertextuality of the visual 'words' or components, the evidence of irregular or twisted aspects, through dramatic contrast, the incitement of emotions, the subjects depicted, the context of the painting and in the way we read it. In what follows I unpack these elements to demonstrate how this language functions.

Since this visual language 'stems' from the seventeenth century, employing it today, in a way, refers to the historical period. In other words, this language can be used throughout time, but there is still an association with the era from which the art style originates. For this reason, this language is a significant tool to employ within a postcolonial context, since it indirectly refers to the seventeenth century, a time of great colonial conquest. I propose that a Baroque visual language can be employed as a strategy to communicate or express particular concerns or viewpoints.

In this chapter, I situate my reading of *Candle Bathing* in relation to postcolonial theory. I take a poststructuralist approach of analysis, identifying and defining the visual language of Baroque painting. I trace the origin of the term Baroque, focussing on the historical Baroque, particularly the Baroque in Flanders. I pay particular attention to the Baroque society and socio-political context of the seventeenth century. Furthermore, I explain the purpose of Baroque art, and the possible deeper meaning of a Baroque painting's visual language. Lastly, I argue that this language is a useful tool for postcolonial artists by referring to Neo-Baroque.

Why a Poststructuralist Approach? : 'I' m Constructing Meaning Here!'

Taking a poststructuralist approach allows for multiple outcomes in meaning making, which is particularly useful for my study, as in the various chapters I interpret *Candle Bathing* in numerous ways, demonstrating that there is not a singular meaning embedded within the work. In *The Practice of Theory: Poststructuralism, Cultural Politics, and Art History* (1994), Keith Moxey explains that semiotics is the "theory of signs" and a semiotic approach conceives an artwork as "a system of culturally and historically determined signs" (1994:31).[15]

[15] Moxey seems to suggest that a work of art can express, and perhaps propagate, "the attitudes of the society" it was created in (Moxey 1994:31).

Structuralism, poststructuralism and deconstruction are all branches of semiotics. De Saussure, seen as the pioneer of structuralism, argues that the sign consists of the signifier and the signified, but the relationship is arbitrary (Saussure in Caws 1988:71-72).[16] In other words there is not necessarily a direct association between the signifier and what is being signified. In *Art History and its Methods: A Critical Anthology* (1995) Eric Fernie writes that "Saussure proposed that language should be studied in terms of its structure rather than content" (1995:352). This is particularly relevant to my claim that the Baroque, as a system of visual language, is potentially more significant than the literal subject matter quoted through the painterly language. This idea of studying the 'structure' of language, can be understood as referring to the *way* in which this Baroque language is assimilated and functions, and *how* it 'carries' or communicates meaning. Fernie adds that poststructuralism shifts the "stress from the author to the reader", in short, "meaning exists between the reader and the text" (1995:353). Fernie's claim is that meaning is not something that can be *found* in the text, but rather is *constructed* by the reader. In other words, meaning is endless, each reader or viewer brings to the text different understandings and produces different meanings. [17]

Moxey notes that a poststructuralist approach entails no limit to interpreting signs, insinuating that an infinite amount of meanings may be produced (1994:51). Taking a poststructuralist approach invites and emphasises the significance of the reader's interaction with the text as producing meaning. Thus, I am constructing meaning through my scholarly interaction and engagement with *Candle Bathing*. My reading includes bringing my knowledge, and my claim of a Baroque visual language being a critical tool, to make meaning and interpret the painting through close looking.

[16] In *Structuralism: The Art of the Intelligible* (1988) Caws explains and writes an overview of Saussure's concepts on structuralism.
[17] Roland Barthes' seminal text, *The Death of the Author* (1977), highlights the value of each reader's different and multiple interpretations.

Postcolonialism

I take a poststructuralist approach, but my reading of *Candle Bathing* is also situated within a postcolonial context. In *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (1996), Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins claim that "post-colonialism is…an engagement with and contestation of colonialism's discourses, power structures, and social hierarchies" (1996:2). I situate my reading of *Candle Bathing* within a postcolonial framework in order to read the painting's relation to certain prejudices and socio-political circumstances of the current moment, and as still embedded in detrimental colonial thought. In other words, racial prejudice in the present is based on historical colonial stereotypes. The value of postcolonial theory is its recognition and contestation of the lingering socio-political effects of colonialism, and its ability to critically destabilise the West's dominant colonial ideologies.[18]

Anne McClintock describes post-colonial theory as striving to overturn the construction of Western history, specifically regarding its associated binaries (self/other) (1992:85). In 'The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term "Post-Colonialism"' (1992), McClintock addresses the idea of parallel histories which challenges the problematic notion that history is a linear "passage". McClintock problematizes the 'shift' from colonialism to postcolonialism and worries that the term "post", as it implies that colonialism is 'over', prematurely celebrates the end of colonialism and conceals the continuities of colonial power (1992:87-88). Many countries are still affected by colonialism and currently experience its 'aftermath'. In a South African context, McClintock's idea of the 'continuities' of colonialism is very relevant. I situate *Candle Bathing* within the complexities of a postcolonial state, which includes the marginalisation of the art canon. I interpret *Candle Bathing* as referring to the

[18] While postcolonial theory is not the focus of my study, it is a useful perspective from which to approach *Candle Bathing*. Reading *Candle Bathing* within a postcolonial context, by which I mean in the state after having been colonised and the 'aftermath' of colonialism. Here I am particularly referring to South Africa as a postcolonial country.

aftermath of colonialism, in the sense that postcolonial countries, including South Africa, are perhaps still entrenched within colonial thought, including: racism, racial stereotyping, othering, dehumanising Africans and so forth.

In, *On the Postcolony* (2105), Achille Mbembe rhetorically questions the 'differences' between colonialism and postcolonialism (2015:237). He asks:

> Have we really entered another period, or do we find the same theatre, the same mimetic acting, with different actors and spectators, but with the same convulsions and the same insult? Can we really talk of moving beyond colonialism? (Mbembe 2015:237).

He problematises the illusion of a 'postcolony' by suggesting that not much has changed; that we have not really experienced the shift from colonised to un-colonised. Isabel Hofmeyr explains that Mbembe confronts the complex issue of "postcolonial power" in order to deal with crucial matters today (2015:vi). Previously colonised countries might be 'decolonised' and may have gained their independence, but one has to ask to what extent they have really been liberated from colonial power. This power 'hangs in the air', it is racism, it is hate speech, it is projected by colonial monuments and by Western languages (Afrikaans, English, French) – we speak the coloniser's language. The consequences of colonialism are so vast that previously colonised countries might be in a similar 'space'. With the same derivative ways of colonisers, are we repeatedly 'colonising' ourselves, by perpetuating colonial behaviour in daily bigotry?

The above mentioned postcolonial theorists point to the complexities of a postcolonial state. How can we study *Candle Bathing* as engaging with some of these issues? Using the cited postcolonial and poststructuralist framework, I apply the characteristics of a Baroque visual language to read *Candle Bathing* within the contemporary context of South Africa. In order to read this painting through a Baroque visual vocabulary, we first need to be familiar with the context from which this language originates; and it is this context which makes this language so relevant to read *Candle Bathing* today.

'An Irregular Shaped Pearl'

Numerous scholars have speculated about the origin of the term 'Baroque'. The term has been described by art historians as referring to something irregular, twisted, grotesque, imperfect, a cunning idea, or tortuous process of thought (Kitson 1966:10).[19] Today 'Baroque' generally refers to the dominant art style of the seventeenth and eighteenth century in Europe (1600-1750) and the term has certain aesthetic associations (Janson & Janson 1968:405). In other words, when we hear 'Baroque' we think of the historical art style and its typical visual characteristics, but how does the term 'baroque' relate to the visuals? [20]

In what way can the etymology of the term contribute to an understanding and 'sculpting' of a Baroque visual language? Today, its synonyms are, for instance, 'exaggerated' or 'elaborate', which are clearly based on the art style; however, what 'Baroque' *refers* to is quite interesting. As noted earlier, the term originally denoted an irregularly shaped pearl (Janson & Janson 1968:405). A pearl points to something of value, beauty and riches. Does its irregular shape point to a fault or a uniqueness? Either way, it is alluding to something curious and thought-provoking, to a level of unusualness. The term

[19] Art historians Horst Woldemar Janson and Dora Jane Janson claim that the original meaning of the word 'baroque' or the Portuguese word 'barroco' meant: "irregular, contorted, grotesque" (1968:405). Former curator of the Louvre, Germain Bazin, adds in *Baroque and Rococo* (1964) that 'baroque' meant 'imperfect' (1964:6). English art historian, Michael Kitson, argues that 'barroco' can also be understood metaphorically as referring to a "tortuous" idea or "process of thought" (1966:10).

[20] Nonetheless, the Baroque is in a sense a constructed period and 'periodisation' is not a neutral classification, and is quite arbitrary. The scholar, Calvin Seerveld explains that periods are investigative "devices" and theoretical tools to identify connections (1980:143). Periodisation is a 'strategy' to identify similarities associated with a particular time and space, and Scottish literary critic, Alastair Fowler, notes that certain styles are "culture-bound" (1972:492). Classifying 'periods' makes it easier to distinguish between innovations and different styles, but 'periods' are not definite classifications and are often redefined (Fowler 1972:496). However, the problematic aspects of 'periodisation' is not the focus of my study. Notwithstanding this critique, when I refer to the Baroque, particularly a Baroque visual language, I mean the art style and not the period.

implies a deviation from the 'norm' and urges us to pay close attention. It indicates that *this* 'pearl' is not what it seems to be at first glance.

If we view the term's metaphorical associations as part of a Baroque language, then the twisted, irregular and grotesque parts, are worth considering. What about *Candle Bathing* is irregular or twisted? There is a twist to the Old Testament story, the narrative of Samson and Delilah is no longer Biblically accurate and it is quite unconventional to depict Samson as black. 'Irregular' also implies asymmetrical, and the composition is visually weighted to the left. A 'twisted' thought suggests a rather vile or sickening thought, often in relation to something sexual, like an incest fantasy, for instance. Is the multi-racial orgy supposedly sickening? [21]

Candle Bathing is a 'twisted' quotation of *Samson and Delilah*. 'Twisted' is also literally referred to as a nude's twisting lower body, painted in a manner that makes it seem contorted. The result of manipulating the Biblical story is that it prompts a different and unusual reading of it; the 'twist' is the moral message. Considering Baroque as also associated with the grotesque, I argue that we may view the art style as not striving for perfection or the ideal, but rather something 'beautiful' but twisted. We can interpret Baroque as not representing beauty but showing a different angle, bringing grotesque elements to the surface.

[21] I address this later in relation to lingering colonial thought and apartheid in South Africa.



Figure 1.9: Detail of Johannes Phokela, *Candle Bathing* (1997): Contorted Body.

It is worthwhile to think of Baroque art as not being what it seems at first glance, as hiding something beneath the literal. A Baroque visual language is consequently capable of simultaneously presenting beauty and the grotesque. However, the grotesque would be concealed within beauty because the grotesque is beauty's ulterior version. Beauty is the superficial which viewers encounter at first glance; to 'see' the grotesque, is at the expense of an intellectual effort. In a way, there is an element of duality – a constant play between the two.[22] For this reason, close looking is a significant method to 'read' how this language functions. In my research I strive to show what is hidden within *Candle Bathing,* in other words, to bring to the surface an ulterior version of the apparently beautiful quotation.[23]

This language has a literal and metaphorical aspect. Literally, it is the painting manner, it shapes the composition and portrays the typical Baroque formal characteristics. Metaphorically, the language prompts deeper interrogations

[22] In the next chapter I refer to irony as having an element of dualism; so this view adds a complexity to reading *Candle Bathing*, and in conflict with *Samson and Delilah*.
[23] I address this kind of interpretation in more detail in the following chapters.

and a closer look at certain aspects of the painting. Understanding this language is the key to unlocking the most profound reading of the 'text'.

The idea that a Baroque language can present both beauty and the grotesque, implies that Baroque art can do or 'say' something beyond the literal. By quoting a 'beautiful' canonical painting, *Candle Bathing* may signify the art historical canon; but what is the ugly side of the canon? The 'beauty' in *Candle Bathing's* composition, may for example, be the nude figures which allude to historical nude paintings in the art canon. On the other hand, the grotesque element to this 'beauty', is perhaps how the 'other', especially the 'black body', has been eroticised and stereotyped in Western historic paintings. Can it also point to the marginalisation of African artists?

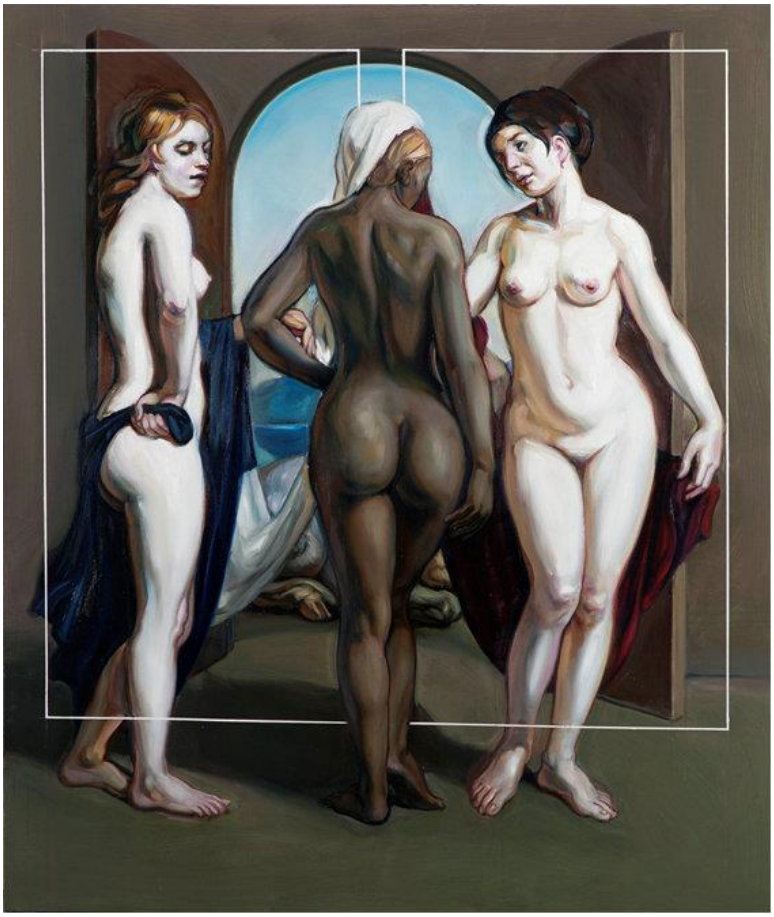


Figure 3: Johannes Phokela, *Flight of Europa* (2015), oil on canvas, 200 x 170 cm.

Photograph: Gallery AOP

Mary Corrigall suggests that Phokela questions the "sacredness of beauty" in his appropriation of Rubens' *Three Graces* (1639) (Corrigall 2015). However, her comment is not intended to be a critical consideration of the play between beauty and the grotesque, but instead proposes that Phokela's painting *Flight of Europa* (2015) portrays the nude figures as representing beauty. Her short text, it seems, is a quick reference to the theme of 'beauty' as represented by The Three Graces in art history. Corrigall adds, that beauty is also presented in relation to race (each grace is of different race – white, black, and 'coloured'/'mixed race'). *Flight of Europa* might also problematise the idea of beauty as represented through the canonical theme – the Three Graces – by altering the race of the middle figure. The Graces are typically presented as three plump white nudes and this alteration of race might subtly question the 'purity' of their beauty, and importantly, the 'purity' of their race. Do all three graces need to be white? What happens when one grace is black, or of mixed race, do they still represent beauty? [24]

However, how we understand Baroque visual language today, stems from its historical purpose. To recognise its relevance and suggest how we can employ it, one needs to understand the milieu from which it stems and its association with power.

[24] A 'coloured' or 'mixed race' grace can very subtly and indirectly point to colonisers who had children with local people in South Africa. Professor J.D. Omer-Cooper explains that there were originally far more white men than white women in the Cape colony, and "sexual relationships between persons of different race were very common" (1994:30). He clarifies that "three-quarters of the children born to slave women at the Cape up to 1671 were of mixed descent" (Omer-Cooper 1994:30). We can view *Flight of Europa* as possibly pointing to the 'beauty' of racial diversity in South Africa; the 'grotesque' side of racial diversity might be racism.

The Flemish Baroque and its Relation to Power

The Baroque emerged in the late sixteenth century. Vernon Hyde Minor explains, in *Baroque and Rococo: Art & Culture* (1999), that this period had great religious, political and economic turmoil (1999:41).[25] It was at this time that the Protestant Reformation developed which rejected the Roman Catholic Church's power and strict doctrines. The Church responded with the Counter Reformation as a measure of rejuvenation (Janson & Janson 1968:405). The turmoil of the reformation (1517-1648) was not limited to Italy; the uproar in the Netherlands resulted in a split between the Northern and Southern province. Minor clarifies that the Southern Netherlands (Flanders) was strongly Catholic (1999:181), thus Baroque art in that region was Catholic. [26]

This turmoil continued into the seventeenth century and Baroque art became a tool to exert power. It was a pertinent time for the Catholic Church to

[25] Bazin clarifies that the Baroque originated at the end of the sixteenth century in Italy (1964:7). According to Minor, the theologian Martin Luther's (1483-1546) *Ninety-five Thesis* – which he delivered to the church in Wittenberg in 1517 – and the development of the printing press, potentially initiated the Protestant Reformation (1999:41-42). Luther criticised the Roman Catholic Church's immoral actions, and rejected their power by arguing that they manipulated the Bible in "self-serving ways" (Minor 1999:41-42). Minor explains that the Church responded to the Protestant Reformation by calling the Council of Trent (1545-1563) (1999:42). John Schloder describes the Council of Trent as a method the Catholic Church used to re-establish their rule, by stressing their key doctrines rejected by the Protestants (1984:11). According to Schloder, the Counter Reformation was to re-establish the Catholic Church's rule by requesting strict adherence to their key doctrines, which also applied to art (1984:11). This religious rivalry later resulted in the "Thirty Years' war" (1618-1648) (Minor 1999:43).

[26] The Netherlands in the sixteenth century was ruled by Habsburg Spain (De La Croix et al. 1991:750). However, Minor illustrates that the Netherlands rebelled against the Spanish power and Philip II's oppressive actions to counter the Protestants, resulting in a split between the Northern and Southern Netherlands (1999:181). The Southern Netherlands surrendered to the Spanish power and the Habsburg dynasty, and was ruled by Spanish Archdukes (Minor 1999:181 & Bazin 1964:63). The Northern Netherlands established the Dutch Republic as part of "the House of Orange". Since Philip II and thus Spain was strongly Catholic, the Southern Netherlands was Catholic (Minor 1999:181), while the Northern Netherlands was mainly Protestant (Bazin 1964:63). Bazin describes the Southern Netherlands as comprising of Flanders, Brabant and the Walloon districts (1964:63); generally referred to as Flanders; and declared themselves as Belgium in 1798 (Minor 1999:181).

reinstate their power and Baroque art seems to reflect their claim to power. Minor elucidates that as the reform became more radical, images of those in power became increasingly vital (1999:217). Consequently, Baroque artists were mainly commissioned by those with power, the "court, aristocracy and the Church" (Kitson 1966:8). Both Minor and Herbert Read agree that the Baroque culture in Flanders, was absolutist, that is to say, Baroque art reflected the ruler's power (Minor 1999:43 & Read 1965:333).[27] During this period there existed a belief that rulers held authority due to a 'divine right' (Bazin 1964:10). This appears to assert their rule as veracious and inflates their power. Bazin elucidates that this belief stimulated extravagant display which was often expressed in Baroque paintings (1964:10). By overstating the ruler's power, Baroque art functioned as propaganda. In other words, through paintings, artists strove to convince the viewer of the ruler's great power and his right to rule. [28]

The Baroque art in Flanders functioned in a manifold way. Since the Spanish Archdukes, who reigned the Southern Netherlands were strongly Catholic (Minor 1999:181), Flemish Baroque art perhaps reflects both their power and enforces Catholicism. The Biblical 'message' would likely have been manipulated to inflate the King and the Church's power in a covert manner. Catholicism might have functioned as an instrument to control the masses, and rather than portraying God's message, paintings subtly conveyed the ruler's dogma. By communicating the aristocracy's philosophies through righteous imagery, it made their worldview appear as 'truth'. Flemish Baroque art could then indirectly function to inflate Catholicism, the Church's power, and the power of the ruler. As such, paintings could function as persuading the viewer that God chose the Archdukes to reign, which establishes their 'divine right'

[27] Baroque art is a reflection of a variety of aspects; it is partly the Catholic reaction to Protestantism and reflects the Counter Reformation (De La Croix et al. 1991: 752). Kitson outlines the seventeenth century as an era of power and authority, which is visible in the principle of the 'Divine Right of Kings', which included the Church's assertion to manipulate information to their philosophy (1966:11).

[28] This notion of a 'divine right' to rule, may also link to the West's assumed power to reign and colonise territories; acclaiming superiority to colonise 'uncivilised'.

and convinces the viewer to accept the ruler's 'veracious' reign and respect God's wish. In other words, paintings likely promoted Catholicism to covertly propagate absolutist power. [29]

Janson and Janson claim, however, that Baroque art is not merely the product of religious or political changes, it is an autonomous feature amongst other aspects of the seventeenth century. The Baroque art style itself is an element that separates the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Janson & Janson 1968:405).[30] If Baroque art is an independent feature, and not simply a result of events, it can raise the question whether the visual language was actually developed on its own as a clever and powerful tool, which could be used and manipulated to suit and argue for certain beliefs or ideologies. In this way, a Baroque language is a strategy to communicate, and this language can implicitly convey certain concerns or perspectives.

[29] According to E.H Gombrich "absolute monarchs and their courts" were "supported by the Catholic Church" (1968:300). It seems that the Church still yielded a sense of power over kings.

[30] Other elements include the Catholic faith regaining power, absolutism, and the innovative "role of science" (Janson & Janson 1968:405).

"A Spiritual Battle"

The upheaval in the sixteenth and seventeenth century was based on a struggle for power.[31] Minor describes this period as a time when European national powers began dominating the world through colonisation (1999:41), and, of course, South Africa was included in that process.[32] Although the Catholic Church lost territories in Europe to the Reformation, Bazin argues that the Church still had a dynamic sense of universality, which was reinforced by its global spread (1964:11). A significant aspect of this global spread involved the missionaries who fought a "spiritual battle" to "convert the natives to the Christian religion" (Bazin 1964:11). The Church's expansion was neither peaceful, nor done out of goodwill, but rather based on establishing global power. The French historian Victor-Lucien Tapié argues in *The Age of Grandeur: Baroque and Classicism* (1960) that missionary work was closely associated with "armed conquest" (1960:238). Tapié claims that Europe became infatuated with religion, asserting that "conquest must be done in the name of Christendom" (1960:238). According to Tapié, it is no coincidence that the period of "great discoveries" is also the era of religious reformation and counter-reformation (1960:238). In other words, this universal spread of Catholicism in the seventeenth century, did not coincide with colonialism by chance rather, religious reform was an excuse to dominate larger territories to enhance Catholic power. From this perspective, Baroque paintings of Biblical

[31] The Protestant Reformation rejected the Catholic Church's power, and the Church responded in a manner to regain power. This power struggle was later expressed in the Thirty Years War.

[32] The colonial history of South Africa is long and complex, but the first settlers arrived during this time. According to Professor Omer-Cooper, in 1652 Jan van Riebeeck arrived at the Cape of Good Hope (South Africa); Simon van der Stel was the 'second founder of the Cape', and the Dutch east India company's possession of land grew from then onwards (1994:17-19). Eric Walker writes that the Dutch occupation of the cape was from 1581-1679; and colonisation was about 1679-1717 (1968:iv). Walker explains that the "majority of the ancestors of the present Afrikaner folk in South Africa", arrived in the seventeenth century (1968:47-48).

imagery are also images of power; indirectly these paintings allude to the Catholic Church's assertion and reinforcement of power.

Philippa Hobbs and Emile Maurice state that the seventeenth century "was a period that witnessed a flowering in trade, science and art, and the rise of the Netherlands as a global super-power" (2009:sp). Professor Omer-Cooper explains that in 1652 the first Dutch settlers arrived at the Cape of Good Hope (South Africa) (1994:17-18). Hobbs and Maurice reason, that "Phokela tackles the coinciding of these events – the colonisation of Africa and Dutch artistic success" (2009: sp). Clive Napier explains that by the nineteenth-century "European powers…partitioned Africa with such haste that this process is often referred to as 'the scramble for Africa'" (1990:56). According to Napier, this subdividing "resulted in institutionalised political, economic and social control by these European powers" (1990:55).[33] The prominent white lines painted onto *Candle Bathing*, can perhaps point to this 'scramble for Africa', by visually alluding to partitioning and subdividing. Bruce Haines suggests that Phokela's white grids refer to the "discovery of longitude... that had this mapping discovery not been made, the extent of colonial exploration would not have been so comprehensive and mercenary" (2002:50).

The Church's rule and Western power disseminates and is firstly 'expressed' as Christian missionaries. Christianity spread with colonisation, and South Africa was one of the 'victims' that fell prey to the missionaries from the Netherlands. The art historian, Karen Von Veh, proposes in 'Transgressive Christian Iconography in Post-Apartheid South African Art' (2011) that Biblical imagery

[33] In terms of the socio-political effect of colonial rule, Napier explains that a major remainder of colonialism has to do with religion, clarifying that with colonialism Africa was introduced to "two of the world's major religions, Christianity and Islam" (1990:84). Christian missionaries introduced "European languages, like English" (Napier 1990:85) – a major remainder of colonialism – which is evident today, since English is South Africa's *lingua franca*, and the primary language of government, business, and universities (Napier 1990:85). Today English is a "compulsory subject in all schools, and the medium of instruction in most schools and tertiary institutions" (South Africa 2015).

can act as an instrument to critique "social power structures" and "perceived social inequalities" in contemporary South Africa (Von Veh 2011: iii & 5).[34]

A reason why Biblical imagery can be a vehicle to transport critique, is that Christianity is closely associated with South Africa's colonisers, and as such associated with colonial power. The subject matter of *Candle Bathing* indirectly serves as a reminder of Western power and South Africa's settlers. For this reason, such imagery can be employed to allude to the spread of Christianity associated with conquest. In the subsequent chapters, I query how this perception of dominance instigated by missionaries influences our reading of *Candle Bathing*. I propose that an awareness of this history unlocks a greater opportunity to construct complex meaning. What makes a Baroque language particularly relevant within a postcolonial context, is that we can employ this language – once used to exert aristocratic and the Catholic Church's power – to critique conquest. In other words, we take this Western expression of authority and use it against 'them'.

Although contemporary South Africa is 'officially' decolonised, South Africa is also in a position of 'post'- apartheid.[35] Christianity may also be associated with the apartheid government. Susan Rennie Ritner claims that the Afrikaner values were mainly established by the 'Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk' (Dutch Reformed Church), which dates back to 1665 (1967:17). Ritner adds that the Church insisted on increasingly stricter delineations of apartheid and strongly

[34] Von Veh specifically studies how the parodic use of Christian imagery is a method South African artists may use to respond to apartheid (2011:6).

[35] Initiated by the National Party, who came to power in South Africa in 1948 and ruled up to 1994, apartheid and the National Party's ideologies were based on racial segregation (Kotze & Greyling 1991:4, Weisse & Anthonissen 2004:2). The National Party's power led people to believe that their ideologies and aim was to strive for utopia. Apartheid supposedly strived to avoid further conflict between cultures and different races, and ideally envisioned that people of different races would independently and separately run their own area (Weisse & Anthonissen 2004:2). The National Party propagated the idea that if races mixed the conflict will become stronger and will only bring misery to everyone (Worger et al. 2010:102). Unfortunately, often striving for utopia leads to dystopia - the violence and brutality of the apartheid regime, and the protests against it was possibly a form of dystopia.

influenced the government's mission of separating races (1967:17). [36] The National Party implemented numerous laws to ensure that they stay the ruling party and to promote 'Afrikaner nationalism', and as such made use of propaganda. The National Party exercised hegemonic power, this need for domination and power, and their attempt to persuade people to see the Party's beliefs and ways of seeing as 'natural' and 'right', seems reminiscent of the Catholic Church's effort in seventeenth century Europe – as the Church also made use of propaganda to 'lead' people to Christ and that Catholicism was the 'right' way. In this sense, propaganda and persuasion, shares its purpose with a Baroque visual language, since they aim to convince the viewer of a particular position. Having situated the era this Baroque language stems from, and what it alludes to today, what does this visual language comprise of?

[36] It is quite ironic that black people were not allowed entry to the Dutch Reformed Church, since colonisers came to 'enlighten' Africans with Christianity.

Painting by Candle Light

Heinrich Wölfflin was one of the first academics to differentiate between Renaissance and Baroque art.[37] Wölfflin developed classifications and criteria in his book, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art* (1932)[38] to distinguish between Classic and Baroque art. He classified Classic art as linear and Baroque as painterly (1950:15). For Wölfflin, the major development from the linear to the painterly style, was that light, colour, and composition, did not only create form but became elements on their own (1950:16-19). [39]

Returning to the idea of a visual argument (detailed in chapter two), a proposition is communicated, not only with the content, but *how* the elements are presented and arranged. An artwork argues not only by what is depicted but by way of illustration. Art historian Michael Kitson stresses in *The Age of Baroque* that the "dramatic power" in Baroque painting is based on the manner of representation and not merely the subject matter (1966:41-42). Flavio Conti elucidates that the crucial aspect of Baroque painting, even more significant than the subject matter, is *how* something was represented (1979:40). Vital to understanding the visual language of Baroque painting, is that this language was not employed and merely popular for its aesthetic appeal, the language itself communicated something to the viewer and was

[37] Wölfflin specifically analyses the formal characteristics of seventeenth-century Baroque paintings, which is one way of considering the art style. He contrasts style by referring to five categories where he traced the developments of: the linear to the painterly, plane and recession, closed and open form, multiplicity and unity, clearness and unclearness (1950:14-16). Following Wölfflin's formalist principles, Baroque paintings are characterised by unstressed edges, as emphasising depth, as having an element of recession, being open in form and demonstrating harmony (1950:15-19). He explains that the linear style "sees in lines" and the painterly style "sees in masses" (Wölfflin 1950:15-19).

[38] I refer to the 1950 translated version.

[39] *Gardner's Art through the Ages* (1991) edited by Horst De La Croix, Dian Kirkpatrick and Richard G. Tansey, defines Baroque art as: dramatic, elaborate, dynamic, theatrical, passionate, sensual, opulent, extravagant, and versatile (De La Croix et al. 1991:750-752).

a powerful tool to sway an audience. In this way, a Baroque language can propose a dominant visual argument.

As I argued earlier, a visual argument results from a variety of things, one of which includes context – the work's relation to visual culture, for instance, and the intertextuality of the compositional elements. From a semiotic perspective, Saussure asserts that:

> "…language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others" (Saussure 1960:114).

It is the specific phrasing of 'words' and the selected vocabulary which communicate; the 'words' read in isolation would be interpreted differently and not necessarily yield a visual argument since a proposition results from the structure of its "interdependent terms" (Saussure 1960:114).

A Baroque visual language aims to overwhelm the viewer with its vivid components, functioning harmoniously to communicate or propose a particular perspective about socio-political matters. Baroque art functioned as propaganda to convince an audience of the authority's worldview as truth; the visual language projects this embedded power by overwhelming the viewer.

Each component of the visual language has a purpose other than the literal. For example, *tenebrism* a term derived from the Italian word 'tenebre', is a visual technique used by Baroque artists, which implies darkness and despair (Minor 1999:164). *Tenebrism* is associated with harsh shadows incorporated into a composition to create an atmosphere to depict violence or passion, and in a typical Baroque painting, strong characters are depicted in action and emerge from the shadows (Minor 1999:164-169). Linked to *Tenebrism* is the use of *chiaroscuro* – harsh light and shadows were used as an element of composition (Wolfflin 1950:16-19), to highlight something in order to draw the viewer's attention to it. Minor explains that the dramatic light and shadows were used to highlight particular components within a painting – much like a

spotlight (1999:29). In other words, the composition had symbolic highlights, which pointed to key elements within the painting. The artist did not only literally throw light onto an object, but metaphorically shed light on something.

Minor argues that excessive drama in Baroque painting is emphasised by *chiaroscuro*, rich colours, expressive use of paint and lively diagonals which pull the observer into the painting (1999:28-29). He adds that Baroque artists strived to depict action in an explicit manner, and so painted scenes to illustrate the moment the action is taking place (Minor 1999:29).[40] Bazin describes this attempt to depict action as a "composition-in-movement" style (1964:6), which is clearly visible in *Candle Bathing*, a scene portraying an 'orgy-like' interaction and the act of cutting Samson's hair.[41]

A Language of Persuasion: How does it Argue?

According to Kitson, Baroque paintings were aimed at the viewer (1966:41-42). They were not merely images to glare at, they functioned in an intricate and multifaceted manner to visually persuade viewers.

The components of a Baroque visual language function to draw the viewer's attention, and importantly, prompt them to read the visuals and actively engage with the painting. Kitson suggests that Baroque art's visual 'strategies' appealed to the senses – Baroque art was not only visually mesmerising, but encouraged a psychological interaction (1966:70-71). Read explains, in *The Styles of European Art* (1965), that the action and anguish in Baroque art was meant to entice the viewer's emotional response. Kitson argues that in the seventeenth century Baroque paintings were a "means of propaganda", and strove to convince the viewer by engaging with their mind through their

[40] Read argues that movement in Baroque paintings was communicated by, for instance, contrasting light and dark, and near and far (1965:333).
[41] Baroque art also intended to stir emotions like passion, rather than experiencing the "calm rationality" associated with Renaissance art (De La Croix et al. 1991:751).

emotions (1966:12-15, 41-42). [42] Since Baroque paintings were aimed at the viewer, the focus was on their reality, and not necessarily the literal painting (Kitson 1966:16). In this way, we can read *Candle Bathing* as not merely about a Biblical story, but about the contemporary viewer's postcolonial reality.

For art historian Michael Levey, Baroque art was created to engulf the viewer with "emotional truths" and was meant to astonish and instruct (1968a:209). In other words, to forcefully persuade viewers the Baroque visual language covertly 'instructed' viewers by overpowering their thoughts. In order to 'argue', and in order to be persuaded viewers had to recognise their own feelings and emotions in the subject depicted (Kitson 1966:12-15). Subsequently, artists employed techniques to make Baroque paintings more appealing to the viewer's emotions (Kitson 1966:15). Expressive and exaggerated facial expressions paired with dramatic and extravagant movements were meant to visually lure the viewer's attention and prompt the viewer into feeling the emotions of the subject (Kitson 1966:15 & 38).[43]

[42] In *Baroque Imagery* (1984), John E. Schloder describes Baroque paintings in Catholic territories, as a form of propaganda to drill the Catholic Church's doctrines into people, evoke moral reactions, and supposedly bring worshippers closer to God (1984:11). Conti describes Baroque art as a creative device the Catholic Church used, which called on imagination, and aimed to overwhelm the viewer (1979:4).

[43] Drama in Baroque paintings is heightened by "psychological and theatrical devices" (Kitson 1966:41).



Figure 1.6: Detail of Johannes Phokela, *Candle Bathing* (1997): Facial Expressions

In *Candle Bathing*, Delilah is pale and her facial expression seems to suggest that she is overwhelmed, tired, sexually exhausted, or perhaps even sad. Samson's facial expression may lead us to think he feels a profound sense of powerlessness, staring hopelessly into the distance. As a result of a Baroque visual language, which includes the dramatic draping of nude figures and exaggerated facial expressions in *Candle Bathing*, techniques to heighten the viewer's emotional response, the viewer is urged to recognise their own emotions and identify with the subjects. Maybe the hopelessness and powerlessness of Samson should be felt by the viewer. Later, I elaborate on this line of argument.

Exaggerated facial expressions and dramatic movement should also be read in relation to visual rhetoric. Visual rhetoric also forms part of a Baroque painting's visual language. Minor explains that rhetoric refers to the "ancient art of persuasion" and is a powerful device in which objects evoke a meaning other than the literal, to persuade or influence the viewer of a particular position (1999:17-20 & 158). Minor outlines rhetoric as comprising of: "the end and the means" (1999:157). Persuasion is the "end" of rhetoric, the "means" is

the way it is communicated (Minor 1999:157). I argue that this visual language communicates the persuasion, but in a postmodern context, the 'end' is relatively open to interpretation.[44] A Baroque language may serve as a method to deal with complex issues and convey critique covertly, therefore I also urge that postcolonial artists can employ this language to offer a powerful visual argument. Minor suggests that in the seventeenth century rhetoric was a language and a form of communication – implying that Baroque artists possibly employed it to convey cultural values and beliefs to viewers (1999:20,207).[45]

A Baroque visual language is intended to persuade viewers of an ulterior view, historically to 'see' the view of the ruler, and today it can be used to expose an assumed 'truth' or particular concern. Minor argues that visual rhetoric can stimulate the viewer to think beyond their "normal ways of thinking" (1999:20-23). "Normal ways of thinking" may refer to how certain beliefs and value systems have become naturalised and people have become accustomed to these particular ways of seeing or thinking. Often, these false naturalisations were initiated by those in power. By referring to South African art, Von Veh argues that "…by parodying sacred imagery these artists are able to disturb complacent viewing and encourage viewers to engage critically with some of its underlying implications" (2011:iv).

[44] The "end" is the intention of, for example a painting and its ability to convince the viewer of its credibility (Minor 1999:157). The 'means' involves: "language and imagery, the conventions, the metaphors, the allegories, the iconography and the style" (Minor 1999:157).

[45] Minor adds, that historical Baroque artists also dealt with dogma and "the power of institutions" (Minor 1999:207).

Neo-Baroque: The Revival of the Baroque

The term 'Neo-Baroque' implies a revival of the historical Baroque. In *Baroque New Worlds: Representation, Transculturation, Counterconquest* (2010), professors Lois Parkinson Zamora and Monika Kaup claim that Neo-Baroque is the re-emergence of "Baroque forms of expression" in the twentieth century (2010:1). Zamora and Kaup argue that this revival of the Baroque is connected to the seventeenth century, but importantly, the purpose of Neo-Baroque, is "distant from the monarchical, Catholic, colonising origins of the Baroque" (2010:2). [46]

Editor of *Baroque Tendencies in Contemporary Art,* Kelly A. Wacker argues that the Baroque should be thought of as an attitude, that the "Neo-Baroque is a postmodern manifestation, and Neo-Baroque artists have sought to incorporate or reflect upon the past" (2007:4-5). *Candle Bathing* is an example of both incorporating and responding to the past – specifically dealing with South Africa's colonial history. According to Zamora and Kaup, the Baroque may be thought of as 'continuous', as a force not restricted to the seventeenth century and Neo-Baroque operates within a "postmodern aesthetic" (2010:9-11). Most importantly, Zamora and Kaup claim that Neo-Baroque functions "as a postcolonial ideology aimed at disrupting entrenched power structures and perceptual categories" (2010:sp). This is what makes this 'revival' of the Baroque particularly relevant to this study. By drawing on Rubens' Baroque painting and echoing its Baroque stylistic qualities in the contemporary moment, *Candle Bathing* disturbs the historical 'message'. It brings to the surface the latent colonial power and Catholic dogma so subtly present in the biblical imagery. What makes a Baroque visual language so relevant today, is that historical Baroque art – linked to a peak of Western power and expansion – was a mode to express and propagate rulers' worldview. Today this visual language functions to challenge these naturalised ideologies. This language

[46] Zamora and Kaup do not specifically focus on visual art or art history, as the text is mainly about Latin American writers and the New World, Americas. However, this text is vital to situate how Neo-Baroque functions in the contemporary.

may prompt viewers to question this era's expression of power and the consequence of their colonial conquest. I argue that employing a Baroque visual language in the contemporary simultaneously refers to the era it stems from and may critique the effects of that era's domination on the present.

For Jose Lezama Lima, Neo-Baroque is "the art of couterconquest"; he elaborates that the Baroque is modified to "represent their [the colonised subject] own distinct cultural identities" (Lima in Zamora 2010:209). By refashioning a Baroque visual language for contemporary use, especially within postcolonial contexts and employed in a critical manner, to, for instance, reflect on the violent colonial history, the Baroque can function as a form of counter-conquest. Zamora and Kaup argue that this contemporary Baroque has shifted from "a colonial mode to a postcolonial one, from a seventeenth century instrument of empire to a contemporary instrument of cultural revision and renewal" (2010:2). They emphasise that these contemporary expressions are "models of reconquest", "rebellious forms that take back the New World from its European colonisers" (2010:7).

Zamora and Kaup suggest that reviving the Baroque within a postcolonial context is a response to the colonisers, a statement of "cultural autonomy" (2010:8). Neo-Baroque encourages "artistic resistance to colonising" models, and so it can "reclaim histories and traditions", by modifying these models for contemporary usage (2010:8). In other words, by taking a Western 'method' of expressing power and beliefs, contemporary artists take a stance and reclaim histories and their society. In contemporary South Africa, Baroque language may function as a tool for cultural renewal. This language, can once again, be an act of assertiveness, as taking a stance of power. Deducing from Zamora and Kaup, the historical Baroque mainly signified conquest, and Neo-Baroque may in some sense signify counter-conquest (2010:8). By using this monarchical seventeenth-century expression in a postcolonial context, it may be understood as confronting colonial ways.

The Contemporary Baroque in South Africa

The revival of the Baroque or Neo-Baroque has not been studied extensively in relation to South African art. However, Lisa Greyvenstein writes about Neo-Baroque in terms of contemporary South African performance art in 'Steven Cohen, Nandipha Mntambo: Neo-Baroque Hybrid Forms' (2014). Greyvenstein suggests that Neo-Baroque works have layers of meaning, and artists aim to "engulf the viewer in their displays" (2014:64). She argues that South African Neo-Baroque artists combine numerous socio-political situations from the past, in order to comment on current circumstances (2014:66).[47] Similarly, Xavier Gamboa describes Neo-Baroque art as raising "awareness of controversial issues" and thus, linking art and purpose, in the sense that Baroque art can function as a "political instrument" (2012:42-43& 70).

In a way, the purpose of a Baroque visual language has been inverted in Neo-Baroque; by doing so, it can reflect on the past in a critical manner to comment on the present. Since the Baroque is one of the most lavish eras of displaying and expressing power, by returning to this mode and adjusting this expression, it may point to an awareness of the harsh consequences of this era's colonial domination.

Baroque art, whether historical or Neo-Baroque, is meant to offer "a sense of engagement" and to persuade the viewer to see beyond their normal ways. Within a postcolonial context, it could encourage the viewer to question their current 'postcolonial' reality, and perhaps create an awareness of the continuities of colonialism. This contemporary trend of drawing on a Baroque visual language, requires the reader's intellectual and emotional engagement. In a similar way to the historical Baroque, Neo-Baroque artists combine "various references to engage viewers and push them into questioning their own reality about the world" (Greyvenstein 2014:69). Edward

[47] Greyvenstein makes connections between the historical Baroque and elements which Neo-Baroque South African artists use, these connections include: aspects of detail, complexity, lavishness, extravagance, and excess (2014:64), all which are evident in *Candle Bathing*.

Lucie-Smith notes in *Rubens* (1960), that the visual characteristics of the Baroque visual language I am arguing for make the "spectator no longer spectator, but participant" (1960:15). The viewer's attention is lured in by its formal components, the sense of visual detail, the drama, the energy, the lighting, the colour, the movement and the facial expressions, to ultimately get the viewer to question their beliefs. And this is where the greatest power of Baroque as a visual language lies, its ability to overwhelm and instruct the viewer with visual force. The visual language of Baroque painting is a significant strategy that postcolonial artists may employ to comment on and critique controversial issues, whether in the past or the present. Fundamentally, Baroque art has layers of meaning, and by looking closely one can read these various layers of meanings in *Candle Bathing*.

To briefly conclude, the historical context in which this Baroque vocabulary originated, was a time of turmoil; during this period Christianity spread alongside colonial conquest. Early Baroque paintings were commissioned by those in power and were also intended to convey a propagandist 'message'. The importance of using this Baroque visual language today, lies with the Baroque era's correlation with South Africa's colonial history. In this chapter I established that quoting Old Testament narratives, particularly from Baroque paintings, in the contemporary may act as a reaction to the past and an instrument to convey criticism. *Candle Bathing*'s Biblical subject matter may allude to colonial power and perhaps also to the National Party's implementation of Christianity and the Dutch Reformed Church's role in apartheid.

In the next chapter, I extend this line of argument and analyse *Candle Bathing* as an ironic quotation of *Samson and Delilah*. I demonstrate how a Baroque visual language can be applied, using a poststructuralist method of analysis, as a significant 'tool' to make sense of *Candle Bathing* in postcolonial South Africa. An awareness of the fundamental components of a Baroque vocabulary assists the reader in knowing which aspects to pay detailed attention to, and their role in proposing an argument.

Chapter 4

Irony

Through a close analysis of Phokela's painting *Candle Bathing* (1997) which quotes Rubens' *Samson and Delilah* (1609-1610), I argue that by reading *Candle Bathing* as ironically quoting *Samson and Delilah* to transport critique, *Candle Bathing* is not a mere quotation. In order to substantiate my claim, I illustrate how irony as a mode to interpret a work of art, allows for a deeper interrogation of this kind of quotation. I explore the use of irony in relation to satire and postmodernism; specifically how irony can convey criticism in an implicit manner. In this chapter, I argue that we can read various layers of meaning by analysing *Candle Bathing* through an understanding of irony. By employing a Baroque visual language, my sense is, that we can read *Candle Bathing* as indirectly referring to South Africa's history; and explore how irony may be used to comment on contemporary socio-political issues.

In this chapter I question what meaning can be derived from a comparative analysis of *Candle Bathing* and *Samson and Delilah,* within a postcolonial context. I contrast the paintings in order to see how conflict creates meaning. By juxtaposing them I focus on the elements that Phokela has adjusted or added in comparison to *Samson and Delilah*. Reading *Candle Bathing* in 'conflict' with and as ironically quoting *Samson and Delilah* my sense is that *Candle Bathing* can be interpreted as addressing the art historical canon, marginalisation, colonialism, and socio-political issues in contemporary South Africa – such as lingering colonial thought and the canon's prevailing power.[48]

[48] Keith Moxey briefly describes the art historical canon as the "most naturalised of all art-historical assumptions" (1995:392). He explains that the canon 'offered' "standards of excellence" (1995:397) and included only "certain artists and works regarded as appropriate for art-historical study" (1995:392). This scholarship, containing celebrated and extensively studied artists and works of art, has predominantly centred on European male artists. As a consequence, it casts a shadow on artists not deemed 'worthy', resulting in a largely overlooked history. This is likely one of the most problematic and pertinent issues we still encounter. It seems that postmodern works

I investigate how quoting a work from the art historical canon engages with the canon in a critical manner. I study in what varying ways we can view *Candle Bathing* as pointing to and commenting on the art canon. I argue that by reading *Candle Bathing* through an understanding of a Baroque language and as ironically quoting a canonical painting, *Candle Bathing* can be understood as critically emphasising a sense of tension between Africa and the West. I argue for the value of employing irony as a mode to interpret this type of work in a postmodern style, to read beyond the literal and show how irony functions in critical manner.

History, History

The majority of texts about Phokela, stretching from 1998 to 2015, suggest that his paintings are open to rich interpretations, yet, many critics merely point to significant attributes of his work, but never really argue and substantiate their observations. In this research I take the opportunity to explore and argue for how we can understand what *Candle Bathing* is 'doing' through an understanding of irony.

London based art critic, Bruce Haines, writes that Phokela's paintings "are as much about the violent and twisted history of the Dutch in South Africa as they are about the history of painting" (2002:49).[49] Haines suggests that Phokela's work reflects on not only the history of painting and the art historical canon but also on colonisation in South Africa.[50] His proposition sets the tone of this

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of art scrutinise precisely this, to create an awareness that this process of including and excluding, deeming value, and so forth, is indeed still active. In this study, I view *Candle Bathing* as critically referring to notions associated with the 'selection criteria' of gaining canonical status, in some sense. This includes the ranking of originality and authenticity, the idea of a 'genius' artist, and perhaps indirectly questioning the assumed 'greatness' of these canonical artists and their works. *Candle Bathing* may also deal with 'selection' issues in terms of race and geography.

[49] Haines is one of few critics who have written about Phokela's works on more than one occasion.

[50] However, Haines does not argue this substantially, he seems to merely prompt such an interpretation.

chapter, since I primarily explore how we can read *Candle Bathing* as referring to and commenting on the art canon and colonial power, by making use of irony as a mode. Phokela describes his own work as:

> "…a contemporary take on Old Dutch and Flemish Masters, where I take on what is perceived to be Europe's grandiose history of art as a medium to convey values and ideals represented within a global context of cultural elitism" (Phokela quoted in Hobbs & Maurice 2009).

Phokela appears to collapse time by bringing historical paintings to the present through his reinterpretations. Art history appears to be a mode to communicate with the viewer. The specific paintings Phokela quotes indirectly refer to South Africa's first colonisers, and it is my sense that *Candle Bathing* can and should be read as challenging certain colonial beliefs, many of which are still embodied in present day South Africa. By bringing the past into the present, he allows the contemporary reader to compare the eras and question what, if anything, has changed from being colonised to post-colony?

Bronwyn Law-Viljoen, academic at the University of the Witwatersrand and editor of Fourthwall Books, also perceives Phokela's work as doing something beyond the literal quotation. Law-Viljoen describes Phokela's work as not merely ironic reinterpretations of iconic paintings within the Western art historical canon, but suggests that he investigates art history (2009:10). Phokela quotes, not only, the subject matter, but as Law-Viljoen explains, Phokela adopts the painterly style of the Old Masters (2009:8). Law-Viljoen writes that Phokela adjusts his quotations to suit South Africa's context: in *Tender Loving Care* (2006) Phokela appropriates Hogarth's work, *O, the Roast Beef of Old England* (1748) (2009:8).[51] Phokela in a sense redirects Hogarth's satire, as Law-Viljoen notes, he adjusts this quotation to comment on "race and privilege" (2009:8-9). A significant aspect which Law-Viljoen raises, is that Phokela's work has an element of 'spot the difference' – pointing out that Phokela changed

[51] Hogarth was an English artist who made use of satire to critique socio-politics, and he intended *O, the Roast Beef of Old England* to be a comment on socio-political issues in England, specifically on famine (Law-Viljoen 2009:8-9).

one of the white characters in the scene to black. She adds that the element of 'spot the difference' requires the viewer to figure out what is different in Phokela's work in comparison to the work he is quoting (2009:10). The concept of 'spot the difference' is vital to interpret his works – specifically because he only makes minor adjustments and does not alter the entire composition. Such slight alterations prompts the viewer to become a reader, and look closely. For this reason, as part of my comparative analysis, I refer to the semiotic notion of *difference*.

"A Frame Forces you to Look" [52]



Figure 1.1: Phokela, *Candle Bathing* (1997), oil on board, 102 x 121.7 cm. Arts Council Collection

The prominent white grid may be interpreted as a frame and invite close looking. To engage with the visuals of *Candle Bathing*, the reader has to look *through* these frames. Art historian Yvette Greslé suggests that Phokela adds a frame to demarcate an area and show the viewer something or direct the viewer's engagement (2006:67). Phokela indicates that these geometric frames allude to a deeper meaning, they are a device to "challenge the viewer's perception of the image and form beneath" (Phokela quoted in

[52] Phokela quoted in De Villiers-Human (2010:40).

Haines 2003). Phokela says that the grid is meant to literally act as a frame, to give the "work a sort of focal point that can stimulate the viewer's reaction" (quoted in Haines 2003). Again, this seems to prompt an intellectual engagement with the painting's visuals.

Phokela states: a "frame forces you to look" (quoted in De Villiers-Human 2010:40). In terms of reading *Candle Bathing*, this frame is another 'clue' to reading its proposition; the grid possibly points to important aspects which shape the argument and require deeper interrogation. In a Baroque visual language, *chiaroscuro* is one way of drawing the reader's attention to aspects in the composition. We can interpret this grid as, in some sense, 'highlighting' elements within the scene by literally framing them. The frames might be indicating what the reader should pay detailed attention to, encouraging one to ask: What are these grids framing? What are they pointing to, literally and metaphorically?

Paul O'Kane argues that Phokela employs art history for conceptual reasons and his works prompt postmodern readings (1998:103-104).[53] He advocates the idea that Phokela's white grids, or margins, metaphorically illustrate 'marginalisation' – the West's marginalising of other cultures and artists, for instance. O'Kane suggests that the grids deny a visual reading and compel the viewer to see the conceptual meaning of Phokela's work (1998:103-104). Haines also asserts that the white grids prevent "the viewer's eye from focusing clearly on the content painted on the surface of the canvas" (2002:50). In contrast, I argue that they do not prevent this, the frames, in fact, invite close looking. These grids are so prominent that they shout "look at me!", and plead for a detailed engagement by the reader. By literally dividing and framing the composition into thirds, one is encouraged to look *through* these frames. However, the areas where lines intersect or 'obscure' minor parts also carry meaning.

[53] O'Kane claims that postmodern thought frees one from a one-sided history governed by western men (1998:103).

These white lines possibly also suggest the 'line' between the past and present. O'Kane describes Phokela's works as presenting the continuities of the past (2009:65), and this is especially the case in contemporary South Africa with its colonial history. O'Kane suggests that Phokela's work signifies that the past is still "alive and well" (2009:65). We can read *Candle Bathing* as presenting the seventeenth century and Rubens to the viewer, but by adding recognisable imagery for a contemporary viewer, within the same picture frame, Phokela is presenting the contemporary, too (O'Kane 2009:65-66). Alternatively, O'Kane suggests that the white lines can also refer to the 'line' or border between the self and the 'other' (2009:66) – I explore this notion in the subsequent chapter.

In an essay in the book accompanying Phokela's exhibition, *I Like my Neighbours*, O'Kane compares Phokela's white frame to the modernist painter Piet Mondrian's grids, which function to remind the viewer of the surface of the painting, suggesting that the surface of the painting is more significant than the subject matter (2009:65-66). Oil paint as a medium is also emphasised. O'Kane claims that because Phokela uses oil paint, he signals that nude painting was done only by Europeans and in this way Phokela attempts to diminish the idea of 'black art' as exotic or primitive (1998:103). We can also read the white frame in *Candle Bathing*, as drawing attention to and emphasising the painting technique, which is characteristic of a Baroque painterly style.

For Haines, the grid destabilises the painting and confirms the fact that *Candle Bathing* is a reproduction, and establishes Phokela as an independent artist (2002:50). Phokela positions himself as an autonomous artist in relation to Rubens by adding the white grids, which characterises his art during this stage. Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu speculate, in *Contemporary African Art since 1980s* (2009), that the white grid accentuates Phokela's "pictorial constructs and the constructedness of the history he examines" (2009:44). In other words, it exemplifies that nothing about the art canon is 'natural', it is fashioned – artists have been included and excluded by those in power.

We can read the placement of this white grid structure on a quotation of a canonical painting as pointing to the constructedness of the canon. Haines suggests that Phokela's reinterpretations of Old Masters, "query illusions of aesthetic purity and notions of cultural authenticity" (2002:49). This may well be the case, as Madan Sarup claims, postmodern art often questions the perception of the 'genius' artist and the concept of originality (1993:132). According to Sarup, postmodernism overturns the notion of originality by promoting the idea that art "can only be repetitious" (1993:132).

Postmodernism and the Art Historical Canon

Art theorist, Rosalind Krauss, claims that postmodernism "challenges traditional and institutional power" (Krauss in Sarup 1993:173). By quoting a Western historical painting, and giving it an ironic twist, *Candle Bathing* might indirectly comment on the canon's power. Sarup suggests that postmodern theory has to do with critiquing "universal knowledge and foundationalism" (1993:132).[54] Within the canon, there was also a ranking of canonical works. Moxey explains that works deemed worthy had a "hierarchy of genres" and history painting (religious/Christian imagery) was deemed most significant (1995:393). Sarup adds that postmodern art is also "the collapse of [the] hierarchical distinction between elite and popular culture" and often makes use of parody, pastiche, irony, reflexivity, quotation and allegory (Sarup1993:132). These forms are often ways of attacking the canon's bias, and of challenging ideologies and value systems.

Satire, parody and irony can be a critical tool with which to comment on current issues. Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel suggest that postmodern artworks can function as a form of "social critique" (2013:31). They describe postmodern artists as regularly quoting from the past and "vernacular culture with an attitude of irony or parody" (2013:27). Robertson and McDaniel reason

[54] Sarup adds that postmodern art is the "deletion of boundary between art and everyday life; a stylistic eclecticism and mixing of codes" (1993:132).

that postmodern artists that quote 'original' works from the canon appear to question the canon and the concept of originality, and indeed, might suggest that originality is irrelevant (2013:27).

Shooting At the Canon with the Canon

Mackenzie Moon claims that by incorporating numerous elements referencing Africa and the West, Phokela demonstrates "cross-cultural exchanges between Africa and the West" (2008:9-12). [55] According to Moon, postcolonial artists employ the "visual power" of familiar works from the canon to impact and confront the viewer (2008:8-9). To quote a work from the canon, Moon explains, is also meant to "undermine or complicate historical and contemporary understanding of Africa and the West" (2008:8-9). Perhaps the longstanding misperception of African art being primitive, might be complicated and critiqued through *Candle Bathing*. Similar to O'Kane, Moon suggests that by quoting canonical artworks, the artist strives to diminish "stereotypical notions of African art" (2008:86).

It is possible that today, the story of Samson's life could also indirectly refer to the art canon. Art historian, Madlyn Kahr, suggests that Samson was a 'popular' figure in Western art, she states that:

> The Old Testament tragedy of Samson had been richly represented in art from the Romanesque period to the Renaissance, mainly for its evocation of the Passion of Christ and its association with heroic virtue. The episode of Delilah's treachery was a favourite for centuries (Kahr 1973:240).

[55] Moon is Professor of Art History at the Rollins College, Florida.

Phokela's use of the Samson narrative, which has been so prevalent throughout Western art history, makes explicit reference to the art canon.[56]

By quoting works from the canon, Moon suggests that artists want viewers to "reconsider original works" (2008:10). Consequently, by quoting a canonical work, Phokela "plays with this notion of original works versus copies" (Moon 2008:70). In other words, by quoting Rubens' *Samson and Delilah*, *Candle Bathing* can "comment upon the disparities between original versus copy" (Moon 2008:70-75). The idea of quoting is complicated by the fact that Phokela is not only quoting the subject matter of the 'original' *Samson and Delilah*, but reading *Candle Bathing* with a Baroque visual language further complicates the idea of quoting, since Phokela also paints like the Old Masters.

Oh the Irony! Looking Closely While Smoking

Irony and parody are 'subspecies' of satire (Chatman 2001:28) and they can act as modes to critique socio-political circumstances. In order to construct layered meanings by analysing *Candle Bathing* through an ironic mode, knowledge of how irony functions is required. Because we are familiar with irony, in some ways we do not always interrogate it with depth and nuance. The cultural theorist, Claire Colebrook insists in *Irony: The New Cultural Idiom* (2004), that irony can generally be understood as "saying what is contrary to what is meant" (2004:1). *Candle Bathing* might be 'saying' look at Rubens' *Samson and Delilah*, but actually, it is not merely about the literal painting, and this is where irony becomes intriguing. In 'Postmodernism and Postmodernity' (2009), Professor Bran Nicol claims that 'self-reflexive' irony can be an "empty practice of recycling previous artistic styles" (2009:1). This interpretation could be a reason why we do not always take irony as seriously as we ought to. However, Nicol continuous, conversely, it can also be "a valid form of political

[56] Kahr argues that numerous seventeenth-century paintings of Samson demonstrate "how adaptable the subject matter was", employed for various religious purposes and the representation of Samson varied aesthetically (1973:241).

critique" (2009:1).[57]An important aspect Nicol points out, is that postmodernism functions through 'intertextuality' where meaning is created in relation to other works (2009:6).

How can we understand the use of irony in quoting *Samson and Delilah*? And how can we make use of irony to read *Candle Bathing*? Neil Schaeffer describes irony as having an element of dualism (1975:180). Two meanings exist simultaneously: the literal surface meaning and the intended 'true' meaning (Schaeffer 1975:180). Schaeffer argues that meaning results from the tension between the two. However, he explains that with complex irony the intended meaning is multifaceted and not necessarily the polar opposite of the literal meaning, thus open to interpretation (Schaeffer 1975:181-184). The literal or surface meaning is what the viewer encounters at first glance (Schaeffer 1975:184). To be able to read beyond this, the viewer has to shift and become a reader, which requires an intellectual engagement. Schaeffer phrases this quite thought-provoking, he states: "There is tension in the double message of irony, the true meaning is discovered beneath the language of the literal meaning" (1975:180). Although in postmodern discourse it is problematic to classify any meaning as 'true', I interpret Schaeffer's mention of 'truth', in relation to my study, as not a grand claim of finding 'truth' but rather implying an unveiling of something – referring to an 'intended' or profounder meaning beneath the 'deceiving' literal, which may vary according to each interpretation. In some sense, the Baroque painterly style in which *Candle Bathing* is painted might be part of the literal quotation of *Samson and Delilah*'s representational style. However, we should not disregard this visual language as merely part of the literal, it can point to the deeper meaning, by showing and directing the viewer, where and how to look.[58]

[57] Nicol writes that postmodernism "favours bricolage or pastiche to original production, the mixing of styles and genres, and the juxtaposition of 'low' with high culture…postmodernism is playful and ironic" (2009:2).

[58] Schaeffer argues that 'dramatic irony' is when two separate events, appearing as "isolated representations of reality", representing different societies, politics and morals, are juxtaposed. According to Schaeffer, by juxtaposing the two situations, the

The Belgian comparatist, Jean Weisgerber, writes that satire and irony can be a way to communicate a type of attack (1973:157). Weisgerber explains that with irony the attack is disguised, whereas with satire the attack is overt and blatant (1973:157). An interesting way to think of *Candle Bathing* employing irony, is that "satire makes the reader aware of truth, and irony of the way to truth, both at the expense of an intellectual effort" (Weisgerber 1973:157).[59] In other words, by reading *Candle Bathing* through irony, there is not merely a single 'truth' or single deeper meaning, irony allows the reader to find their own way, through a process of engagement, to multiple interpretations. Again, 'truth' can refer to the deeper meaning beyond the superficial quotation. Because *Candle Bathing* is not blatantly showing the 'truth' (the underlying 'message'), it requires a method to read it. With irony the 'intended' meaning seems slightly obscure; the 'truth' might be what the image is implicitly proposing or revealing. The reader has to critically engage with the work to bring its meaning to the surface. In this manner, irony is particularly useful in relation to close looking and a poststructuralist reading; there is no single meaning, only interpretation based on the reader's knowledge and context.[60] Irony therefore shows the reader a way to arrive at the deeper meaning; but there is not a single nor obvious 'true' meaning.

Literary critic, Seymour Chatman, describes parody as a skill, and exists in the "tension between a known original and its parodic twin, and therefore a parody must use enough of the target text to be recognisable to its audience"

'intended' deeper meaning comes forth and is 'revealed' (1975:185). By contrasting *Samson and Delilah* as representing the seventeenth century versus *Candle Bathing* representing contemporary South Africa, we may start to see continuities of the past.

[59] This is not meant to imply that there is a single 'truth' to anything, but rather as an attempt to show viewers an alternative view of an issue, by usually exposing the naturalisation of certain belief systems.

[60] In this paper, my aim is not to necessarily differentiate between satire, irony, and parody. My intention is to explore these concepts, generally, as being able to transport critique. Thus, when I speak of irony, parody, or satire, I mean a mode or vehicle, to convey criticism. To explore irony as implicitly transporting critique, I refer to satire and parody, to situate irony as a critical device.

(2001:28).[61] Similarly, Karen Von Veh claims that it is imperative that the "viewer has knowledge of the original" (2011:12). In effect, to read meaning and *Candle Bathing*'s 'commentary', phrased simplistically, the reader has to be familiar with the work being quoted and its overtones.

"All That Pink Flesh, All Those Buxom Nudes" [62]

To understand what *Candle Bathing* is quoting, knowledge about Peter Paul Rubens and the context in which *Samson and Delilah* was produced, is a vital route to construct meaning. The seventeenth-century Flemish painter, is hailed by numerous scholars as one of the greatest canonical artists. Rubens' paintings often responded to the socio-politics of his time. Edward Lucie-Smith argues that the artist embedded public statements into his paintings, which could be read as a reflection of the political tensions of the time (1961:15). Rubens himself played a noteworthy political role in the socio-politics of his time, he was respected as court painter to the regents of the Netherlands, and a trustworthy adviser and ambassador (Janson & Janson 1968:421 & Lucie-Smith 1960:10).[63]

[61] Keeping the general composition similar to *Samson and Delilah*, ensures that the viewer recognises the quoted work. Using Chatman's terms, *Candle Bathing* is the "parodying text" and *Samson and Delilah* is the "original text" (2001:28).

[62] Gilles Neret describes Rubens' style as recognisable by: "All that pink flesh, all those buxom nudes!"(2004:7).

[63] Rubens was trusted by the "royal patrons in matters of state", and on numerous occasions assigned great diplomatic duties (De La Croix et al. 1991:780). Rubens was court painter to the dukes of Mantua, to Charles I of England, to the Queen of France Marie de Medici, the "permanent court painter to the Spanish governors of Flanders" and the King of Spain's adviser on collecting art (De La Croix et al. 1991:780). Former Chief Curator at the Royal Museum of Fine Art in Brussels, Paul Fierens, clarifies that in 1609 Rubens was employed as court painter to Archduke Albert and his wife Infanta Isabella, the daughter of Philip II, who ruled the Netherlands under command of Spain (1968:234). Diplomatic duties gave Rubens access to "the royal households of the major powers", and so obtained numerous commissions internationally (Janson & Janson 1968:421). Also being an art dealer, Rubens grew to be a wealthy man.

Rubens' painting represents the story of Samson and Delilah from the book of Judges. The scene represents the betrayal of Samson by his lover Delilah, and portrays the moment his hair is cut, which stripped him of his power. *Samson and Delilah* has a complex and controversial provenance. Flemish historian Carolien De Staelen points out that the painting has been the topic of debate regarding its authenticity (2004:467). At issue is the uncertainty of the movement of the painting between 1641 and 1929. De Staelen notes that *Samson and Delilah* was commissioned by Nicolaes Rockox, the *buitenburgemeester* of Antwerp, for the Great Parlour of his town house (2004:467). The complexity of its provenance originated when Rockox died in December 1640. De Staelen claims that his possessions were sold at auction in 1641 at the Vrijdagse Markt but it is not known who purchased Rockox's painting, and this is when we lose sight of it (2004:467). De Staelen traced the movement of *Samson and Delilah* in order to confirm whether the painting currently hanging in the National Gallery is in fact that of Rubens. Eventually De Staelen minimises the gap to fourteen years, but she admits that "there is no hard evidence" to confirm its provenance precisely from when *Samson and Delilah* was auctioned in 1641, in order to confirm if it is the original in the National Gallery (2004:468-469).[64]

The uncertainty of *Samson and Delilah*'s authenticity, and the mission to confirm whether it is the original in the National Gallery or not, point to the perceived value of an original by the 'genius' Rubens. This may signal that what is reckoned valuable is shaped by the art canon, enforcing a hierarchy of canonical artists and original paintings. It suggests that if this painting was not Rubens', but rather, a reproduction, it might not be deemed as worthy, and this is what postmodern works may criticise. As discussed in chapter three, Baroque paintings often implicitly referenced power, dealt with circumstances during the time in which it was produced, served as propaganda, and coaxed viewers to convert to Catholicism. If there is a political assertion entrenched in

[64] De Staelen traces it presumably to Maria de Sweerdt's inventory of her possessions in 1655 (2004:468-469).

Samson and Delilah, it points to an ulterior version or interpretation beyond the literal story. This information makes the quotation even more interesting – what exactly is *Candle Bathing* quoting? The subject matter? The uncertainty of its originality and showing the problematic aspect of the idea of a genius artist? Is the quotation referring to 'high' versus 'low' art?

Rubens explored a broad range of themes, but often painted Biblically-derived imagery, thus, there were numerous other works Phokela could choose from.[65] By specifically referencing *Samson and Delilah*, it prompts the reader to engage, not only with Christian imagery, but specifically with this Old Testament story. What can the story of Samson and Delilah add to our understanding of *Candle Bathing*? The most obvious themes symbolically present are: sex and power. The Biblical context positions this intimacy as sin, and the narrative points to power relations between two nations (Israelites and Philistines).

Spot the *Difference*

What is the difference between *Samson and Delilah* and *Candle Bathing*? It is essential to realise that each component which has been included and excluded, adds to our understanding of *Candle Bathing*'s visual argument. Everything carries meaning and nothing should be taken for granted. Primarily, meaning exists between the tension of the original work and the ironic quotation; therefore it is vital to read the two intertextually.

To see how meaning can be made by contrasting the two paintings, I also refer to the theory of *difference*: that meaning is constructed by knowing the difference between things. This notion is useful in order to 'spot the difference' between the original work and the quotation. According to Saussure, meaning is produced by the pairing of elements, in other words *difference* (Saussure in

[65] Also, this particular painting was commissioned, in a sense for private use, and not directly created for propaganda by the Church.

Caws 1988: 83).[66] Saussure's concept of opposition is the setting of one thing against another. *Difference* is used as opposition, and opposition confers value; the binary opposition is the means by which units have meaning (Saussure in Caws 1988:79).

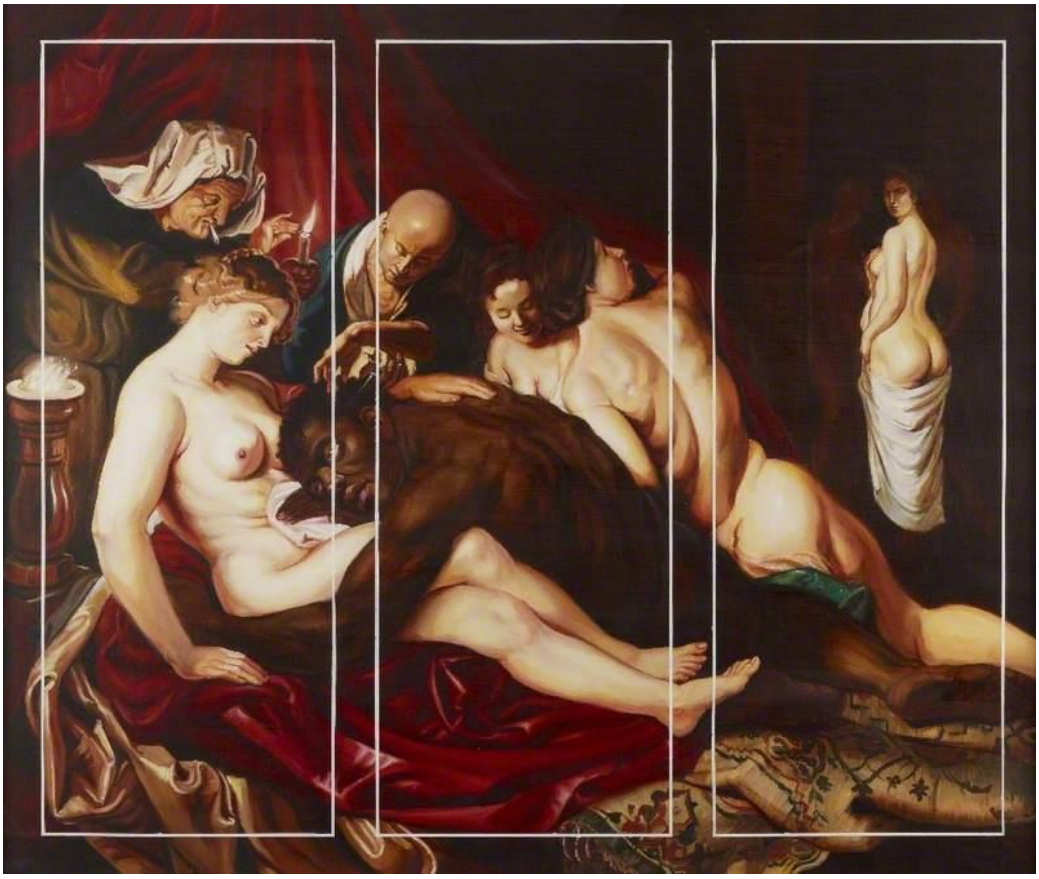


Figure 1.1: Johannes Phokela, *Candle Bathing* (1997), oil on board, 102 x 121. 7 cm.

[66] Meaning comes from understanding what a thing is not rather than knowing what it is. An example would be; I'm alive because I'm not dead, I'm a woman because I'm not a man. The binary system is a pair of related terms that are opposites. An example of binary opposition is the presence-absence opposition, as in one is in the absence of the other (Caws 1988:79).



Figure 2.1: Peter Paul Rubens, *Samson and Delilah* (1609-1610), oil on wood, 185 x 205 cm.

In general, the composition in *Candle Bathing* is similar to *Samson and Delilah*; however, *Candle Bathing* includes a rather large number of figures, of which the majority are nude. In both *Samson and Delilah* and *Candle Bathing*, the protagonists are presented in strong lighting. Rubens has stressed the use of *chiaroscuro* throughout his composition, each figure has dramatic light and dark patches, whereas in *Candle Bathing*, the key protagonists are depicted generally in brighter light. There are slightly less harsh shadows on the figures, which results in a more dramatic contrast between bright figures placed against, and in contrast to the dark background. In *Samson and Delilah*, the characters seem to merge and blend with the dark composition. However, in *Candle Bathing* the background is made darker and 'irrelevant' objects are excluded, replaced with dark masses, and deep red patches. The figures are

therefore highlighted and pushed forward, to more prominently emphasise their presence. Rubens spotlighted Delilah's breast, her face, her hands, her right shoulder, and her vibrant red dress. As a result, Delilah's petite face, her elegantly composed hands, her exposed breast, and rich dress is accentuated. In this way, Rubens subtly creates a sensual feeling. In *Candle Bathing*, the viewer is bombarded with a sexual feeling because all the nude figures appear 'spotlighted'. The placing of certain figures in strong light shows the viewer who the key protagonists in the scene are and draws the viewer's attention to them. Their dramatic facial expressions are also highlighted, which, as mentioned in the previous chapter, was a classic Baroque technique used to make a work more appealing to the viewer's emotions.

In both paintings, Samson is lying on Delilah's lap. On closer inspection, in *Samson and Delilah*, Samson's eyes are closed, as if in a deep sleep; whereas in *Candle Bathing*, his eyes are open, although, with the white grid-like frame placed over Samson's eye, it is difficult to tell if he is wide awake or not. 'Cutting' through Samson's eye may allude to 'limiting someone's view'. It can metaphorically refer to limiting what viewers are allowed to see, especially in relation to media or in constructing a particular view of something.

Phokela alters this story slightly by presenting Samson with his eyes open, suggesting that he is awake. Although seemingly minor, such an alteration has a dramatic effect on how the viewer reads this story. Depicting Samson being stripped of his power, while asleep versus awake, can say something about his state of mind. In both cases Samson is overpowered, but being awake during this horrendous act, suggests that Samson felt powerless before they literally stripped him of his strength. It seems slightly gentle and less dramatic to portray Samson asleep during this act, suggesting that when Samson wakes it is already over. Rubens' Samson need not be awake and experience this trauma; whereas in *Candle Bathing* Samson is conscious in the moment and feels every second of losing more and more strength.

After a few centuries, Samson's eyes are finally open – this difference may indicate the shift in time and gaining an awareness of the trauma: the suffering, the ordeal of being betrayed, invaded, stripped of power, being chained, and taken hostage. It could refer to being awake to the vast consequences of colonialism; now 'we see' and comprehend the immense aftermath. Africa has awoken, and gained consciousness of the effect of colonial conquest. By contrasting the two paintings, this difference is quite eerie; imagining a very slow process of waking over years, to finally reach this point in time to gain alertness and mindfulness.



Fig 1.2: Detail of Phokela, *Candle Bathing* (1997): Samson



Fig 2.2: Detail of Rubens, *Samson and Delilah* (1609-1610): Samson

Samson's facial expression appears to be one of exhaustion or hopelessness. Surrounded by white figures, Samson's expression suggests that he is aware of what is happening to him. Samson's arm hangs lifelessly in *Samson and Delilah*, but in *Candle Bathing* he is holding on to Delilah, his arm is around her lower body. Holding or clutching to Delilah could be read as holding on to hope, holding on to the betrayer or alternatively signifying that Samson is still

conscious. It may evoke a sense of connectedness, a hold or relationship between the West and Africa; perhaps indicating that letting go or breaking free from colonial power is a very slow process.



Fig 1.3: Detail of Phokela, *Candle Bathing* (1997): Elderly Lady



Fig 2.3: Detail of Rubens, *Samson and Delilah* (1609-1610): Elderly Lady

Vanitas and *memento mori* paintings were generally meant to convey the meaninglessness of materialistic possessions and pleasures; objects were meant to symbolise the vanity of wealth and inevitability of death (Vanitas Still life Painting 2015). These worldly pleasures were symbolised through luxurious fabrics (Vanitas Still life Painting 2015). In both paintings, the figures rest on a large golden honey colour fabric, which touches another fabric with intricate patterns. The large luxurious fabrics could symbolise earthly pleasures; in *Candle Bathing*, it might be read as referring to riches through colonial conquest.

Still included, is the elderly lady in the far left of the composition, holding a lit candle, shining a light for the Philistine cutting Samson's hair. Throughout the seventeenth century, a lit candle held great symbolic meaning. In a *memento mori* painting, a burning or lit candle could symbolise the inevitability of death or passage of time (Vanitas Still Life Painting 2015). In this way, the lit candle included in *Candle Bathing* can also symbolise the passing of time, perhaps pointing to the passage of colonialism to postcolonialism, or apartheid to post-apartheid, from seventeenth century to contemporary South Africa.

Phokela has also added a cigarette to this old woman. Metaphorically, the elderly lady is shedding light on this act of stripping power; perhaps as an older generation inspecting the younger. The cigarette can function as a clue for the viewer, a hint to the contemporary, so that if there was any confusion that *Candle Bathing* was indeed a seventeenth-century painting, the cigarette would 'correct' the viewer. The cigarette may also hint to the idea that the painting is not about what it appears to be at first glance; pointing to an ironic mode. Giving a cigarette to the old woman could also be a humorous act, as Karen Von Veh suggests: Phokela uses humour to "leaven the seriousness of his subject matter without diluting its impact" (2011:82). Even though she holds a candle, she is not really 'doing' anything, she seems to observe while smoking. Are we, as viewers, to identify with her? Are we standing idly by as observers in a country filled with social inequalities and lingering effects of colonialism? Are we shrugging our shoulders and having a smoke carelessly?

A lit candle may also signify the presence of God. Through closer inspection, *Candle Bathing* alludes to Christianity in numerous ways. Since everything carries meaning and is relevant to read a work of art's visual argument, the candle, still incorporated and lit, adds to the painting's proposition; the candle hovers over the figures.[67] Can it point to the fact that colonisers brought Christianity to South Africa through conquest, and evoke the idea that traces of colonialism are still hovering in contemporary society?

In *Samson and Delilah*, Rubens depicts Delilah wearing a red dress, but Delilah is nude in *Candle Bathing*. Yet, Phokela has not excluded the redness of her dress, now, it is a drape on which Delilah sits. Indeed, Phokela adds even more red to the composition by excluding the purple drapes above the figures in *Samson and Delilah*. How can we read this difference between nude and clothed Delilah, and the amplification the colour red?

[67] In the left corner, in both *Candle Bathing* and *Samson and Delilah* is a lit lamp, which in terms of *vanitas* paintings, symbolised life (Hobbs and Maurice 2009:sp).

The Old Testament Story of Samson's Great Strength

The most obvious theme presented in the Biblical story of Samson, is power. Samson is described as a Nazirite devoted to God, with extraordinary strength (Judges 13:5). Samson was to be both a leader and a hero; the Bible states that Samson was born to lead, "delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines" (Judges 13:5). In this view, Samson being the leader meant to free the oppressed, he might have served as an image of hope. What makes this narrative relevant in a contemporary South African context, is that it may symbolise a theme of oppression and importantly, deliverance from this domination. In this way, it might signify South Africa's colonisation and independence, and the oppressed during apartheid. Since in 1997 South Africa was so recently lead to freedom, this quotation is particularly relevant and interesting. Although the long path to freedom was rather complex, Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress (ANC) played a crucial role; it is therefore important to note that it was a black 'hero' – hence a black Samson. If not for Madiba, South Africa might arguably have not necessarily gone this route to democracy.[68]

Unfortunately, the great leader is first seduced and overpowered by Delilah. Samson met Delilah, from the valley of Sorek, and fell deeply in love with her (Judges 16:4). Delilah was later bribed by the Philistines for information on where Samson's great strength lay, and what the secret to his strength was, so that the Philistines could overpower him. Eventually, Delilah swayed and persuaded Samson to tell her the truth behind his great strength and power, and ultimately, betrayed Samson (Judges 16:4-18). In this sense, the story is also pointing to persuasion, similar to a Baroque visual language's purpose.

[68] The end of apartheid was more complex than I present it here, but the intricacy of the negotiation is not the focus of my research.

The Old Testament states:

> Samson tells Delilah the secret to his power: "no razor has ever been used on my head"... "If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as any other man" (Judges 16:17).
>
> "After putting him to sleep on her lap, she [Delilah] called for someone to shave off the seven braids of his hair, and so began to subdue him…and his strength left him. Then she called: Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" (Judges 16:19-20).

After being stripped of his power, the Philistines apprehended Samson and gouged out his eyes, then they took him to Gaza and chained him (Judges 16:21). Miraculously, Samson's hair grew back, and with his hair he regained his strength. Ultimately, Samson gave up his life by pushing the central pillars of the temple in Gaza to have the temple collapse and kill the Philistines along with him (Judges 16:21-30). Delilah shouting "the Philistines are upon you", is quite a provocative and dramatic statement. The statement suggests he is to be mastered, to be overpowered and overwhelmed. However, it also alludes to time, in the sense that the enemy is not coming, the enemy is already upon you; you have already lost and been overpowered – possibly evoking the idea of colonisers being 'upon' Africa, metaphorically covering Samson's body and strength, and so the land of Africa.

Exploiting 'Samson' (Africa)

If we interpret Samson as metaphorically functioning as Africa, the white figures in the scene may represent the West, the 'enemy', presented here in lieu of the Philistines. Read from this perspective, the scene might allude to colonial domination overpowering people in Africa. *Candle Bathing* was created merely a few years after the 'end' of apartheid and the first democratic election in 1994. Contrarily, *Candle Bathing* can also be read as representing the 'grasp' white men had, or perhaps even read as suggesting, that although apartheid has legally ended, the white man still yields power; and this could have particularly been the case in 1997. The antagonist cutting Samson's hair and stripping him of his power, is a bold white man - the typical antagonist of apartheid. The instrument the antagonist is using (scissors) might not be a deadly weapon, and Samson is clearly bigger and stronger than him. This suggests that the power the white man is holding here is not necessarily enforced with violence, but subliminally, a type of mental and emotional control and power – the victim is made to feel powerless. In a sense, this could be hinting to social inequalities and racism – a black man, once again, at the hands of a white man, being overpowered through an act of dominance.

Samson: Hero or Victim?

Kahr argues that in the seventeenth century, Samson stood for the ideal patriotic activist, and paintings of him possibly "served for propaganda during the war against Spain" (1973:252). The various stories of his life, particularly of his heroic deeds, suited the turmoil of the seventeenth century, particularly after the Twelve-Year Truce in 1621 up and to the Peace of Munster, ending the war in 1648 (Kahr 1973:252). Kahr states that "the model of the hero fighting the oppressors of his people would certainly have been associated with defiance of the Spanish rule" (1973:252). Artists have interpreted the life of Samson quite differently; Samson was both illustrated as an overpowered

victim and as a strong hero freeing the oppressed, standing for liberation (Kahr 1973:252).

Samson – signifying colonised Africa – is presented as a victim in *Candle Bathing.* He is portrayed as weak and powerless in the hands of Delilah, who may symbolise colonial power. This particular rendering might therefore illustrate the triumph of colonial conquest. However, his opening eyes might suggest a possible rise and future victory of Africa. Similar to Samson regaining his strength in the Old Testament story, it might point to Africa regaining power and breaking free from colonial power. In this way, we can also read *Candle Bathing* as implicitly pointing to the fall of colonial power in South Africa. Here it is clear that a work's visual argument is layered and complex, since the way we understand aspects are multifaceted and may be interpreted in more than one way; for instance, Samson can be understood as both victim and hero, depending on how he is presented in specific paintings.

It seems odd that 'the strongest man that has ever lived' is conquered and overpowered by his enemies cutting his hair – most likely meant metaphorically – but the case stands that Delilah, a woman, swayed and betrayed him. Why would a man with such great strength allow himself to be overpowered? E. Tietze-Conrat asserts that Samson was generally depicted as being overwhelmed, but his body's strength is also emphasised (1932:246). Why so? Is it to show that Samson had a choice? That he was complicit and allowed to be overpowered? Did he secretly hope that although he told Delilah his secret, she would change her ulterior motive and not betray him? In *Candle Bathing*, Samson is still holding on to Delilah, is this an attempt to hold on to hope? To have faith that she will not betray him, but she betrays him anyway.

This narrative also stresses Delilah's power of sexual seduction. According to Kahr, the story came to represent how man was a "helpless victim of the malevolent woman" (1973:241).

Bal suggests that the story demonstrates the supposed power a woman has over a man:

> The story of Samson and Delilah is a paradigm of a woman's wickedness. The combination of seduction, unfaithfulness and treason is an unavoidable and fatal one. However strong a man is…he will always be helpless against a woman's strategies of enchantment. Once seduced, he will be betrayed (Bal 1984:347).

Bal also questions why Samson never accuses Delilah of betraying him, and why Samson tells Delilah the true secret of his strength if he knew it would mean to be overpowered? (1984:347). Again, if we view Samson as signifying Africa, the seduction by white Delilah can signify the grasp the West had on Africa; that there was no escape. Bal notes that only Delilah's version of the scenario is told, Samson's perspective of the "main event is never represented" (Bal 1984:348). The silence of Samson, could according to Bal, signify consent (1984:359). A silent, voiceless black Samson in *Candle Bathing*, could be pointing to the silence and voiceless African artists, those who have been marginalised, and the absence of these artists in the canon. We might also read this as pointing in general to the way in which history and the art canon has been recorded; by those in power, told from their perspective.

Another significant element to the story of Samson and Delilah, is that Delilah is also a Philistine. In fact, all three women Samson had an affair with were Philistines. In other words, the Philistines in this story – the enemy - are foreigners in relation to Samson, an Israelite. Bal identifies common aspects to all three stories of Samson's women. Delilah, like Samson's first 'wife', was also willing to "make a deal with her fellow countrymen, who want to destroy Samson" (Bal 1984:357). Similar to Samson's second lover, Delilah is bribed, and was after money (Bal 1984:357). This further strengthens the idea that Delilah may indirectly stand for the colonisers in *Candle Bathing*.

'The Three Graces'

By now we are aware that Samson is being overpowered by the Philistines. As Kahr explains, the "threat to Samson is reinforced" often by the enemy emerging from behind curtains (1973:244). Similarly, in *Samson and Delilah* the 'enemy' awaits in the doorway, but in *Candle Bathing,* it is not the Philistines, instead, it is three women emerging from dark shadows – reminiscent of the art historical theme of the Three Graces.

In what way can we understand the insertion of this motif, referencing the Western art historical canon, within a contemporary South African work of art?

By placing the Three Graces in the position of the 'enemy', we can read these figures as possibly presenting the Western art canon as the 'enemy' or as a metaphor for colonialism and colonial power. The Graces may therefore metaphorically allude to colonial power. It may also point to the larger implication of the Western art historical canon, since the canon may refer to 'colonial knowledge' and perhaps a type of power in the art world. 'Coloniality' may also be alluded to; Professor Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni describes coloniality in 'Why Decoloniality in the twenty-first century?'(2013), as the "global power structure that sustains asymmetrical power relations between the Euro-American World and the Global South" (2013:11). Ndlovu-Gatsheni claims that coloniality "survives colonialism" – it is evident in books for instance; "we breathe coloniality" (2013:11,13).

Inserting this imagery in a contemporary work, positioning the canon or 'coloniality' as a threat lurking in the background, may be read as a comment on the consequences of colonialism on the current moment and the prevailing power of the canon. It may draw the reader's attention to the 'hovering' of the canon, lurking in the contemporary, and we should not underestimate the role it still plays in knowledge spheres and the art world.

This juxtaposition could persuade the reader to reflect on this particular setting, which contrasts the Western canon and postcolonial South Africa in the same

picture 'frame' – forcing the reader to read them in relation to each other. It may also persuade the viewer to question whether their own way of looking and thinking about this work might be affected or influenced by the art canon and colonial knowledge.



Fig 1.4: Detail of Phokela, *Candle Bathing* (1997): Doorway



Fig 2.4: Detail of Rubens, *Samson and Delilah* (1609-1610): Doorway

A nude female figure slightly behind Samson, looks back, drawing the viewer's eye to where she is looking. In the far right section of the composition, a semi-nude female figure, grasping a white linen draped just beneath her bottom and slightly wrapped around her legs, glares at the viewer over her shoulder,

from a darkened corner. Her pose is seductive and evokes historical and traditional nude painting. The figure is standing in the entrance of a door, and by looking closely, two ghostlike figures seem to emerge from the shadows on either side of the white female nude figure. Although a bit unclear, the two figures seem completely nude. Here, the colour red is repeated again, the two ghostlike or shadow figures emerging from darkness, seem to have a red tonality to them.

Candle Bathing may be read as referencing and critiquing the art historical canon in multiple ways, some of which I have already indicated. Since oil painting evokes traditional Western paintings, by incorporating typical 'Rubenesque' women into the composition, it may further hint at the tradition of nude painting by wealthy Westerners. By specifically including 'Rubenesque' women, Rubens is emphasised as a seventeenth-century Flemish and Baroque painter – which may be read as indirectly referring to the Dutch colonisers of South Africa. However, plump fair skinned nude figures are also typical of the Baroque painting style, and so *Candle Bathing* is emphasising this subject matter.

Figure 4: Peter Paul Rubens, *The Three Graces*, 1630-1635, oil on wood, 220.5 x 182 cm. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid. Photograph: Museo Nacional del Prado.



Although not exactly alike, these figures also reference The Three Graces, or the Greek Charities, a popular motif throughout time within the Western art canon. Interestingly, Rubens also created such a painting titled the *Three Graces* (1639). In 'The Three Graces: Composition and Meaning in a Roman Context' (2002),

Jane Francis describes these figures as a popular motif and a stylistic phenomenon which Roman artists from the late-Hellenistic era quoted from Greek themes (2002:181 & 188). The standard Three Graces composition consists of three figures and two vases covered in drapery (2002:184). In *Candle Bathing*, the three figures are placed in a doorway with draperies appearing to hang vertically from the ceiling, which may be read as the draped vases. The Three Graces are generally interpreted as symbolising "fertility and growth", which according to Francis, is associated with the goddess Aphrodite and her handmaidens (2002:185-188). Leading from this thought, we might read the trio of figures in *Candle Bathing* as suggesting a critical need and demand for growth and expansion of the canon. Although, if we interpret the shadow figures as 'handmaidens', it would be implying that they are inferior to the central highlighted figure, which can be read as the West or the canon, meaning that marginalised artists are supposedly the handmaidens. [69]

Francis explains that The Three Graces are canonised and are the "embodiment of grace, beauty and charm" (2002:192). Although, Francis distinguishes between the Three Graces, which have a set composition, and the Greek Charities, which do not have a fixed composition throughout time, they are related (2002:191). The main difference is that the Greek charities each had an individual identity, but the Graces are nude and anonymous (Francis 2002:196). Fundamentally, the Graces emphasise "unity above individuality" (Francis 2002:197). In this sense, the trio of figures in *Candle Bathing* can be read as representing a unity, as in African artists, and not necessarily a particular artist. The Three Graces are described by Francis as a universal, yet flexible motif which can be manipulated to suit various contexts and can challenge the viewer (2002:197). According to Francis, the Graces are associated with marriage (2002:197); perhaps this may imply a need or a plea for a 'marriage' between parallel art histories, of the West and Africa. Some of the various meanings the Graces may produce are: "domestic

[69] In a later work, Phokela explicitly references the Three Graces in *Flight of Europa*.

happiness in life and death; the charm, grace, beauty, goodwill, and prosperity of society and its individual members; and a close connection with Aphrodite" (Francis 2002:197). Although the Graces originate from a particular era, Francis argues that the motif holds "artistic roots to remind the viewer of its antecedents, the draped Charities of the Greek world" (2002:198). Thus, The Three Graces also fall within the canon, and being associated with Greek and Roman art, it may be read as referencing what was perceived as the ideal and best version of art.

However, if we read the nude figure in the far right as evoking nude paintings from the canon, the shadowed figures might be suggesting the shadowing of for example Africa in relation to the West. The majority of African artists have been marginalised and cast aside into the shadows, perhaps this is suggesting the canon is still marginalising artists. The shadow figures may also imply a dark double, which perhaps suggests a misconception that postcolonial artists quoting canonical works, are falling in the shadow of the Old Masters in the art historical canon, as never being in the 'spotlight', always in the shadow. We can read *Candle Bathing*, from a postcolonial context, as referring to the prejudices of the art historical canon and perhaps subtly suggest that it might fall in the shadow of Rubens' *Samson and Delilah*, the 'original'? Moon explains that the canon represents the power art history "continues to exert" (2008:20). By referencing the canon, *Candle Bathing* may be read as confronting the viewer about the continuing power the canon exerts and still holds over African art and marginalised artists. *Candle Bathing* may also be confronting the viewer, particularly those with misconceptions of contemporary African art, to prompt them to think beyond their belief of African art being exotic or primitive.

Conclusion

In this chapter I considered irony as a *way* in which *Candle Bathing* may communicate. Through this detailed analysis I strove to show that *Candle Bathing* is not a 'mere quotation' when read through an understanding of irony, as a mode to convey criticism. I analysed *Candle Bathing*'s visual argument, by looking closely, as predominantly engaging with the art historical canon. Since irony seems to function through an element of duality, to read beyond the literal, the original work and the quotation need to be read comparatively. It is arguable that Phokela had a specific audience in mind, an audience with certain knowledge; an audience particularly aware of the art canon, and of the colonial and apartheid history of South Africa. For irony to function, the viewer has to be familiar with the work being quoted. The power of irony is attained through duality, or conflict with its opposite, and the value of irony is that it provides a double message. Literally, *Candle Bathing* 'describes' *Samson and Delilah*, but it may serve as a platform to comment on something much larger. Perhaps the white frames in *Candle Bathing* can be read as pointing to and 'exposing' this false naturalisation of the canon; it may prompt the viewer to critically re-examine and query the canon's power yielded today.

With an ironic mode, readers are shown a way to 'truth', and in *Candle Bathing* it might be the harsh realities of today, like the continuities of colonialism in South Africa and the power the West still holds. Phokela painted *Candle Bathing* so short after apartheid, that we cannot take the socio-politics of South Africa for granted. The white grid-like lines in *Candle Bathing*, could be pointing to the content being from both the past and present. The imagery continues across the borders, it is not precisely isolated to three images in frames, which may indicate the crossing and meeting of the past and present – perhaps showing the still evident social and power inequalities in South Africa.

I have illustrated how *Candle Bathing* can also be read as referencing colonial domination. Colonialism is alluded to through the 'colonial' painting style –

stemming from the Baroque era – the time in which South Africa's first settlers arrived. This domination is also referred to with the Biblical narrative when reading 'black' Samson as metaphorically representing Africa. Delilah, motivated by riches, can be interpreted as colonisers overpowering Samson (Africa). Quoting an Old Testament narrative, specifically painted by a Flemish Baroque artist who often embedded political statements in his work, makes this quotation particularly applicable to contemporary South Africa. Bringing the past – the imagery referencing colonial conquest – into the present may point to the remainders and vast consequences of colonialism still evident in South Africa. In addition, Phokela's alteration of Samson's state – depicting his eyes open – may signify Africa regaining power and independence, overcoming colonialism and apartheid.

Perhaps a significant, yet overlooked quality of *Candle Bathing's* proposition, could be that by quoting a canonical work, it is raising awareness that the canon still exerts and yields power over the viewer. For example, Pablo Picasso's cubist work exhibited next to African masks, do not 'raise' them to fine art. The African masks are essentially there to support Picasso's innovative work and his inspiration from the visual properties of the African masks. Now, I pose to you, if *Candle Bathing* is exhibited alongside *Samson and Delilah*, is it merely a quotation? Would *Candle Bathing* be demonstrating the 'profound' influence Rubens has had on marginalised artists? And thereby confirm its worthiness in the canon? Is there a play between inferiority and superiority?

Chapter 5

The Eroticism and Exoticism of Race:

Using a Baroque Visual Language as a Way to Construct a Visual Argument

In this chapter I extend the idea that *Candle Bathing* (1997) is proposing a powerful visual argument. I argue that we can read this proposition, through an understanding of a Baroque visual language, as addressing the representation, eroticism and exoticism of race. This chapter contributes to illustrate how rich *Candle Bathing* is and that it is not a 'mere quotation'. I consider a theme of sensuality and eroticism, and explore how both the Old Testament narrative of Samson and Delilah addresses immorality, and how the adjustments in *Candle Bathing* in comparison to *Samson and Delilah*, point to the exotic construction of black figures in colonial and art history.

A work's visual argument is activated by looking closely. What can *Candle Bathing* signify when read within a postcolonial and post-Apartheid context? To analyse *Candle Bathing*'s visual argument, I look closely at the particular decisions Phokela made. However, the painting's argument is not necessarily driven by the artist's intentions, but by the 'end' product: the artwork takes on its own life and we query what does it 'say'?

How do we read *Candle Bathing*'s visual argument?

In my analysis, I explore how an image can embed a message or 'say' certain things of the society in which it was made. In this chapter I keep in mind Birdsell and Groarke's notion of a visual argument, in 'Toward a theory of Visual Argument' (1996). To briefly recap from chapter two, Birdsell and Groarke stress the importance context plays in shaping meaning (1996:3). They emphasise how 'words' mean different things in various contexts (1996:3); and that the reader's interpretation is based on their setting.

To read *how Candle Bathing* is proposing a visual argument, I look closely through an understanding of a Baroque visual language, particularly regarding colour, composition, subject matter, and so forth. The way in which the painting argues is through the formal arrangement of elements, and so on, the understanding of that argument is up to the viewer to interpret the visual formulations. It is vital therefore vital to look closely, *how* has it been included and *how* are these details presented?

How do we start to read a painting's visual argument through a Baroque visual language? How does the vocabulary function as a system to communicate? The 'composition-in-movement', is the broad imagery and 'tells' us what event is taking place – it sets the stage. What is happening? Samson's hair is in the process of being cut, which strips him of his strength. The subjects' facial expressions 'carry' and project the sombre tone, it sets up the idea that this is an unfortunate event and prompts a gloomy or melancholic response from the viewer, a sense of empathy. Their facial expressions indicate how the viewer should feel about this scene. Part of the vocabulary, is the use of *chiaroscuro* which spotlights elements; these visual aspects are of importance in carving the proposition, therefore we should pay close attention to what is being spotlighted.

"A 'Native' Clubs a Coloniser to Death"

In *Contemporary African Art since 1980* (2009), Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu comment that Phokela's choice of the particular works he quotes are significant, as these seventeenth century works coincide with South Africa's first Dutch settlers (2009:44). A few years after creating *Candle Bathing*, in *South Pacific Seascape* (2012) Phokela seems to directly allude to a form of racism and 'othering'.

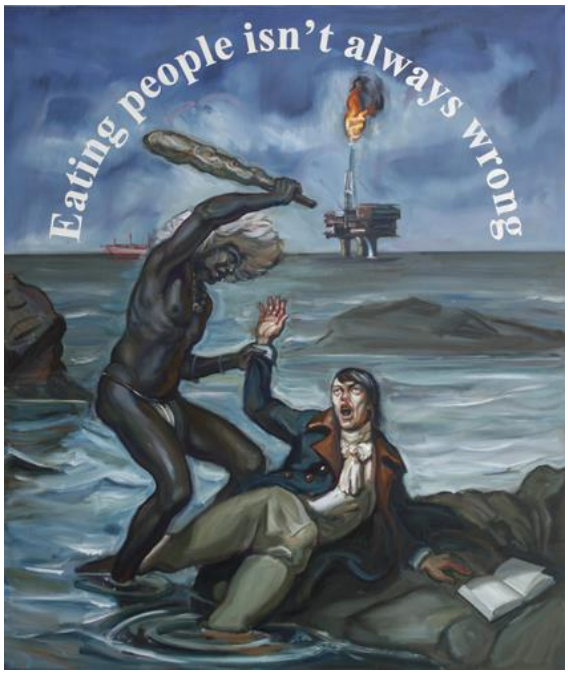


Figure 5: Johannes Phokela, South *Pacific Seascape* (2012), Oil on canvas, 200 x 170 cm. Photo: SMAC Art Gallery

The curator, Brenton Maart, wrote in the exhibition catalogue of *Imaginary Fact: Contemporary South African Art and the Archive* (2013), that in *South Pacific Seascape* "a Polynesian native clubs a European shipwrecked sailor to death" (2013:17). The text in the painting reads: "Eating people isn't always wrong". The shipwrecked European represents the coloniser. In his artist's statement from the exhibition, Phokela says:

> *South Pacific Seascape* was inspired by "a tabloid newspaper article on the subject of cannibalism as practiced, historically, by non-European, indigenous tribesmen in far-away lands…prior to their indoctrination by western or oriental monotheistic values of Christianity or Islamic morality: (Phokela 2013:129).

Maart comments that the work references historical notions of the uncivilised 'other' (2013:17). In line with my argument, Maart adds that Phokela's works rebel "against today's remainders of European colonial action, being and thought" (2013:17). By indirectly referencing colonialism, Maart suggests that "Phokela underlines his key intention: to question the insidious system of colonial values that perpetuate themselves through symbols, signs and icons, regardless of lineage, race, social or economic status" (Maart 2013:17). Unfortunately Maart merely suggests that Phokela's work can function as rebelling against contemporary residues of colonialism, he does not fully substantiate his view.

By referencing the Western historical ethnographic view of the African 'other', *Candle Bathing* is alluding to the complexities of South Africa as a postcolonial country. McClintock stresses that being in a post-colonial state does not erase colonialism (1992:87-88), the traces of colonialism are still evident in South Africa. Reading *Candle Bathing* through a Baroque visual language, we should pay attention to what is highlighted, literally and metaphorically shedding light on things of society. By highlighting aspects, the work can be read as 'showing' issues to prompt the reader to see and think beyond their normal ways; to not accept a postcolonial state by ignoring the realities, but instead be critical and aware of the remains and consequences of colonialism, colonial thought, and apartheid. [70]

[70] The traces of colonialism are still present in South Africa, as Maart phrases it, "in being and thought" (2013:17). For example, South Africa has numerous monuments in 'memorial' of colonisers and settlers, such as the Rhodes Memorial, the 1820 Settlers Monument, which implicitly praises the English language and British colonisers; and although both Afrikaans and English are recognised today as South African languages, the 'Afrikaanse Taalmonument', is also still in a sense, a daily reminder that our colonisers brought Afrikaans to South Africa – or at least Dutch, which Afrikaans developed from. The Huguenot Monument in Franschoek also memorialises the "cultural influences" the French Huguenots had on South Africa when they came here during the seventeenth century (SA Places 2015). The Castle of Good Hope, a star fort, in Cape Town, which was built in the seventeenth century, is one of the oldest colonial buildings in South Africa. The Castle replaced Jan van Riebeeck's fort named the 'Fort de Goede Hoop' from 1652, when he came to the Cape of Good Hope. The Castle

A quite obvious remainder of colonial thought is evident in apartheid – racism. South Africa is not only in a postcolonial position but also in post-apartheid situation.



Figure 1.10: Detail of Phokela, *Candle Bathing* (1997): white line

The fact that the grid-like frame painted over *Candle Bathing* is white could subtly be pointing to the 'whiteness' of the National Party's rule during apartheid. The white grid is also in a sense dominating the space of the painting, it is placed over the figures and particularly cuts Samson's eye, his vision. Could this be a very subtle reference to the aggressive attempt by the National Party to implement their laws and persuade people to obey and *see* the Party's world-view as normal? Is it pointing to the notion of limiting other views, metaphorically alluded to by 'cutting' through Samson's eye? Alternatively, this decision to paint the grid white, could also merely be to accentuate the grid in comparison to the subject matter, as the contrast with white is more prominent. The whiteness of this grid is clearly emphasised by its placement against a darker background – perhaps alluding to binary oppositions of dark versus light, white versus black, and also evoking thoughts of racism based on skin colour. Particularly within a South African context, we cannot take for granted the fact that this grid is painted white.

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of Good Hope was built by the Dutch East India Company from 1666 to 1679 (SA Places 2015).

‘Frame of Mind’

If we interpret the white grid in *Candle Bathing* as a frame, it could be alluding to the idea of one’s ‘frame-of-mind’. We may read racism as a remainder of colonialism, in thought – a mind-set, a frame of mind that unfortunately has stuck in South Africa. This particular mind-set, referring to for example, racist beliefs, can metaphorically be suggested with the white frame posited onto *Candle Bathing*. In other words, if some people are oblivious of the racism still evident in South Africa, and particularly in 1997, *Candle Bathing* might be showing the viewer, by spotlighting different races in these white frames. The result could be an attempt to convince the viewer to see beyond their normal ways, and to recognise the still evident racism in South Africa. Perhaps it could also be read as challenging racist viewers to see beyond their normal ways of racial prejudice.

To frame something already suggests including and excluding things in order to show the viewer something specific, there is intention to framing. What is being framed? What should the viewer see in *Candle Bathing* to read its visual argument? The frames are particularly cropping and focusing on the nude-ness of the figures, and specifically the skin on skin interaction between Samson’s black skin and the female figures’ white skin. By framing nudity, sensuality is emphasised. By framing difference in skin colour, race is emphasised.

Candle Bathing can also be read as commenting on the socio-political context of 1997. During their rule, the National Party framed a particular image of their party, apartheid, and South Africa, by only showing certain things within this frame to society as a form of propaganda. Their ‘frame’ would have excluded certain things, such as great upheavals against their ideologies, to make it seem that there was no rejection of their dogma.

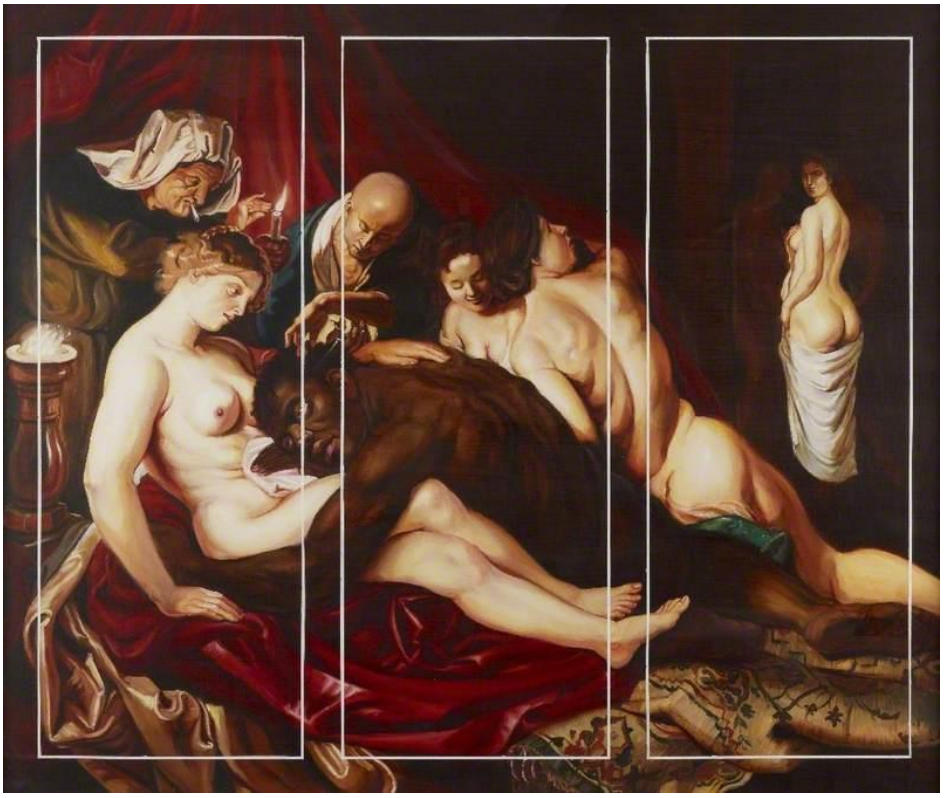


Figure 1.1: Johannes Phokela*, Candle Bathing* (1997), oil on board, 102 x 121.7 cm.

There are three frames in *Candle Bathing*, which draws attention to the number three. Phokela has also depicted *three* white female nude figures surrounding Samson, and added *three* nude figures reminiscent of The Three Graces. The Bible also speaks of Samson's three lovers. The number three*,* in Christianity is quite significant, pointing to the trinity of God, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Bal claims the number three is a "deeply rooted symbol" from the Bible (1984:360). The repetition of the number three, and its association and meaning in Christianity, thus draws attention to Christianity again. Christianity is therefore alluded to in multiple ways, and as detailed in chapter three, the religion is closely associated with colonial conquest – Christianity is clearly another remainder of colonialism. In this way, *Candle Bathing* 'reveals' and proposes to the reader, to gain awareness that Christianity in contemporary South Africa, one of the main religions, is in fact another trace of colonialism – stressing that these remainders hover in the present.

Head of a 'Negro'

In terms of the representation of race in art history, Haines claims that by changing the race of key characters in the works he quotes, Phokela "challenges nationalistic and ethnic narratives around contemporary and historical art…" (2002:49).

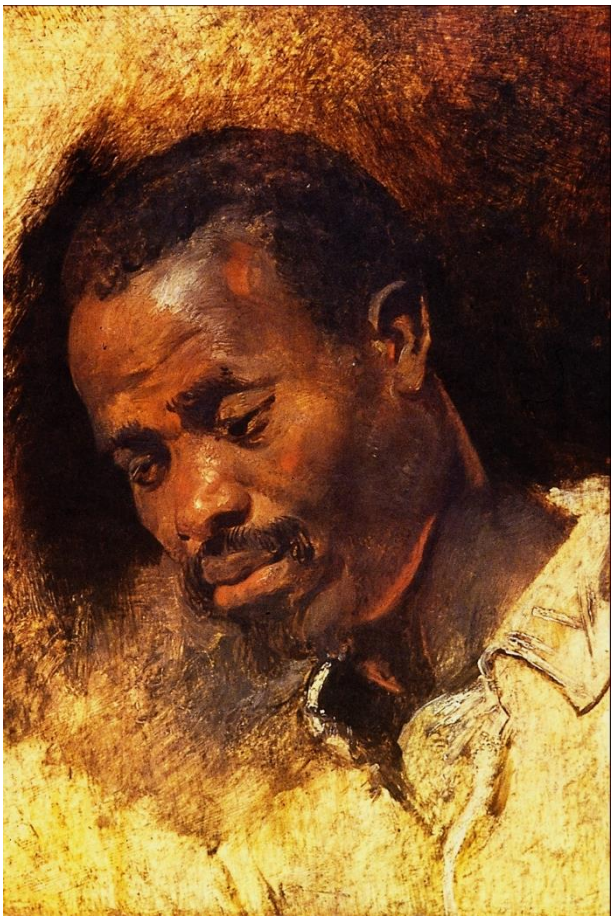


Figure 6: Peter Paul Rubens, *The Study of the Head of a 'Negro'* (1620), oil on panel, 45.7 x 36.8 cm, Hyde Collection, New York. Photograph by Joseph Levy.

In order to address issues of racial stereotyping and racial othering I refer to the painting *The Study of the Head of a Negro* (1620) by Rubens. Painted around the time that South Africa was being colonised, Rubens' study lends itself to a postcolonial interpretation.

It's important to note that even in the title two issues emerge: first, the subject in the painting is nameless, he is just referred to as a 'negro'; and second, the term 'negro' itself could be a form of racism. The painting is only a study of his head, perhaps demonstrating the fascination a Westerner might have with the 'otherness' of a black subject's facial features; searching for, and emphasising difference. It also highlights a sense of 'othering' through Rubens' choice of subject matter.

In 'Representations of Blacks and Blackness in the Renaissance' (1993), Peter Erikson explores typical ways in which black subjects were portrayed in seventeenth-century European paintings. Erikson argues that representation of

black Africans in these paintings was far from neutral and that this imagery is capable of significant complexity (Erikson 1993:515). He suggests that the problematic term, the 'exotic other', is fitting when used to "describe European attitudes towards" black figures (1993:501). The portrayal of black Africans as an 'exotic other' alludes to the sense of supposed European superiority which manifest in these paintings. In his work Rubens often stereotyped black subjects and *The Study of the Head of a Negro* serves as an example of the period's stereotypical approach to African subjects. Erikson explains that one of the key ways in which black subjects were depicted was as an independent artistic subject (1993:504-505), of which Rubens work here is an example.

Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu suggest that Phokela "corrupts" the composition and other aspects of the work he quotes, for instance, by incorporating black figures, or changing white characters from the 'original' work to black (2009:44). As a result, they claim that his works create a "paradoxical, racially tense *mise-en-scene*" (2009:44). In other words, by adjusting such significant elements, like altering the race of main characters, he stimulates racial tension in the composition. This tension is intensified when viewing Phokela's quotation of a work in relation to the 'original'. For example, contrasting *Samson and Delilah* with *Candle Bathing*, the aspect of racial tension is amplified. A simplistic reason is that *difference* creates meaning.



Fig 1.5: Detail of Phokela, *Candle Bathing* (1997): Samson's race



Fig 2.5: Detail of Rubens, *Samson and Delilah* (1608-1610): Samson's race

Samson's hair in Phokela's painting is clearly different to Samson's hair in the Rubens. The author, Simon Kilpatrick, refers to the stereotypical description of black people in South Africa, in his book, *The Racist's Guide to the People of South Africa* (2010). Kilpatrick describes the stereotypical 'black', as "almost always" having "above-average-sized lips and their hair is very curly and black" (2010:11-12). In contrast to Samson's 'blackness', evident in his exaggerated 'African' features, Delilah has a stereotypical 'Western face', with 'fine' facial features and a thin straight nose. Delilah's fair white skin is emphasised by depicting her nude, and so further accentuates Samson's black skin. The deliberate contrast between skin colours serves to highlight 'othering'. In this sense, *Candle Bathing* critically reflects the 'otherness' of Africans to Westerners, by stereotyping and emphasising racial difference.

Although the man cutting Samson's hair appears white, he is depicted as bald, and so limits a complete stereotypical interpretation of his race by speculating on his race based on his hair. Perhaps depicting him as bald is meant to portray the man as neutral, or perhaps hint at his ambiguity. One does not know to which 'side' he belongs precisely, he is clearly helping the Philistines overpower Samson, but it is not clear if he is a Philistine, nor is it clear in the Bible who this

man was. He is merely referred to as "someone" in Judges. The bald man's ambiguity – his identity and role in this scenario – may possibly encourage the reader to consider their own position in relation to this setting and racial stereotyping.



Figure 7: Johannes Phokela, *Chocolat* (2004), Oil on canvas, 198 x168 cm. Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) collection.

Referring to Phokela's painting, *Chocolat* (2004), E. Susanne de Villiers-Human[71] argues that a curtain can point to "invisible events behind it" (2010:41-42). She suggests that curtains can act as a border, and metaphorically point to the division between the self and the 'other', and gaps between the past and the present (2010:41-42). According to de Villiers-Human, open curtains and other openings, are "based on their power to uncover underlying historical and cultural paradoxes and ruptures in the understanding of the process of representation" (2010:42). De Villiers-Human claims that in *Chocolat* the curtains may provoke a sense of anxiety, suggesting that behind the curtain, something is unknown, perhaps pointing to the mystery of 'otherness' (2010:43). The large curtains incorporated in *Candle Bathing*, result in what seems to be, figures floating in between the layered curtains. The shadowed figures on the far right, peak from behind the curtains, and as I have explored earlier, the darker figures might connote African artists and art, and perhaps allude to earlier associations with so called 'primitive' art. The shadowed figures are so simplified that they appear reminiscent of 'traditional' African figures carved from wood. It might suggest

[71] De Villiers- Human is a Professor at the University of the Free State.

that these thoughts of African art being 'primitive' and exotic might still simmer in the background of the art world and scholarship.

There is a constant play between past and present in *Candle Bathing*'s imagery. If we read *Candle Bathing* as challenging narratives about historical and contemporary art – the ways in which they have been positioned and written about, by contrasting 'primitive' art with contemporary South African art – perhaps we should question whether these earlier 'framing' still play a role in the ways in which we view and value African art. This tension of 'primitive' African art placed in the background – perhaps in the past – might encourage the reader to consider whether contemporary African works are still struggling to break free from this 'category' and might still be seen as 'different' and not equal to canonical works of the 'Old Masters'.

Delilah and the 'Negro' ('Othering')

Jacques Derrida, seen as the pioneer in the field of deconstruction, argues that the history of Western thought is founded upon the logic of binary oppositions, and that one term is always given a more privileged position than its opposite (Derrida in Wolfreys 1998:65). Derrida claims that all text can be interpreted by looking at the legacy of binary oppositions (1998:65). Cultural critic, Edward Said asserts in *Orientalism* (1978) that the West has constructed their identity as the 'self' upon the logic of binary oppositions. *Candle Bathing* can be read as subtly demonstrating this idea of binary oppositions. Said argues that the Orient was in a sense created by the West, and was presented as "a place of romance, exotic beings, [and] haunting memories…" (1978:1). Linking to the logic of binary oppositions, in this case, the West has constructed their identity as the 'self', the privileged position in contrast to the 'other'.

The African 'other' also appears to have been portrayed by the West, as its opposite. Tom Meisenhelder evaluates the construction and notion of the African 'other' in 'African Bodies: "Othering" The African in Precolonial Europe'

(2003). Constructing the 'other', Meisenhelder explains, is linked to constructing the self (2003:110). The 'other' is imagined; the African 'other' is not 'real', it reflects the West's constructed self, as an opposite. Within binary logic the self is contrasted to the 'other', civilised is contrasted to uncivilised.[72]

Meisenhelder acknowledges that not all Christians were racially prejudice, but even from a precolonial perspective, he suggests that the Biblical construction of the African 'other', portrayed Africans as:

> …human but heathen, as savage and perhaps evil but open to the 'whitening' and civilising power of Christianity. The African other possessed two moments, a present being that was black and sinful and a potential being that could accept Christianity and become 'whitened' and virtuous (Meisenhelder 2003:103).

In the sixteenth century, the description of Africans by Westerners in search of riches in Africa, was still, according to Meisenhelder, "framed and moulded by the impact of earlier accounts and Biblical stories" (2003:103). Notably, the most stressed difference was that Africans were black, and Meisenhelder

[72] Vital to reading *Candle Bathing* as dealing with issues of race, Meisenhelder argues that the fundamental basis on which the African 'other' has been constructed, is "the colour of the body" (2003:110). This, he argues, is fundamentally, "the core of racist beliefs even today" (2003:110). In constructing the African 'other', the West constructed 'whiteness', referring to the white skin of Westerners, as normal, and understood the 'other' as black (Meisenhelder 2003:108). Essentially, Meisenhelder outlines the African 'other' as constructed in terms of what 'they' lacked – which included lacking whiteness, clothing, Christianity, rationality, and civilisation (2003:108). Hence, the African 'other' is represented and identified by being black, and racism is simplistically, based upon the representation of the 'other's body. Meisenhelder traces early constructions of the 'other' to ancient Greek tales of traveller's, Greek philosophers and poets, who interpreted the West as the center, and Africa as a "marginal and alien place" (2003:101). Originally the Greek version, or image of the African 'other', understood the Westerner as white and civilised, and the African as black and uncivilised, the 'savage' (Meisenhelder 2003:101); clearly based on binary oppositions. Quite shockingly, Meisenhelder summarises that numerous ancient Greek "descriptions of Africa portray it as a land of deformed human-like, but nonhuman, monsters"; adding that Africans "were savages wearing no clothing, sharing wives, and sporting long nails like the claws of beasts" (2003:101).

claims that Christian Westerners associated the colour black, with "being soiled or dirty", and associated nakedness with sin (2003:104).

The 'orgy-like' scene, with Samson in the middle of the nude figures, brings to mind the notion of the 'other' being represented by the West as a sexual beast that cannot control its desires. According to Meisenhelder, the sixteenth-century writer, George Best, describes the African 'other' as representing "sinfulness, disorder, and lust" (2003:104). Best joined the Western construction of the African 'other', based on blackness and nakedness, with sexuality (2003:104). The key characteristics of the African 'other', were identified with blackness and nakedness, which Meisenhelder claims, was to represent their supposed "moral inferiority" (2003:104). Meisenhelder adds that the black skin of Africans was believed to represent "blackness within" (2003:104) – which can possibly be associated with sin; and in this way, the black skin of the African 'other', presumably represents sin.

As mentioned earlier, in typical Baroque language the figures in *Candle Bathing* are depicted in harsh light. The use of *chiaroscuro* results in an interesting play and ambiguity of figures being nude or relatively nude – it is difficult to tell whether, for example, if Samson is completely nude or not. If we should agree that both Samson and Delilah are nude, there is still a small white cloth beneath Samson's hand, on which his head rests. Meaning, that although they are both nude, there is a kind of barrier between their nude bodies, specifically close to her genitalia. By looking closely, another type of green 'barrier' is visible between the nude bodies, particularly where Samson's muscular body seems to touch another nude white figure at a very strategic spot on her body. The result of placing a small 'barrier' between them, is that Samson's black skin does not touch their white skin, particularly close to their pelvis and pubic area. By adding these cloths, which are not present in *Samson and Delilah*, by 'spotting the difference' the viewer's attention is drawn to them. Perhaps we can read this as suggesting a barrier between the West and Africa, the self and the 'other'? It is also odd that these cloths are different colours: one is painted white and the other green. If we read *Candle Bathing*

as pointing to interracial sexual relations, and understand Meisenhelder's explanation of blackness representing sin, perhaps these cloths should be interpreted as an act of sarcasm? *Candle Bathing* might be proposing a sarcastic comment, and implicitly suggest that these tiny cloths are preventing interracial sex, that the cloths are preventing skin on skin interaction between their genitals, and quite cynically remarks that no moral sin is taking place.



Figure 1.7: Detail of Phokela, *Candle Bathing* (1997): Cloth

Following Meisenhelder's rather dismal description, the African 'other' was constructed and thought of as a 'beast-like' savage, dirty, naked – and uncivilised in comparison to Westerners. Most importantly, these descriptions revolved around the African 'other' as being sinful, and only able to be saved by accepting Christianity. From this view, by quoting Christian imagery in *Candle Bathing*, another layer of complexity and meaning becomes possible. By depicting Samson as not only black, but also nude, it seems to emphasise this idea of nakedness and sin; in addition, the Biblical story of Samson and Delilah is also about a sexual sin.

This heightened erotic scene perhaps critically perpetuates the Western construction and image of the African 'other', as sinful, naked, sexual erotic beasts, with numerous wives – suggested with the multiple nude figures. The dirtiness is metaphorically alluded to through an orgy-like scene, possibly representing moral sin. By disseminating this view, *Candle Bathing* might expose this false image of Africans; by transporting this historical colonial

perception to the present, it elucidates the colonisers supposed 'justification' for treating people inhumanely; and what was apartheid based on if not this colonial bias, by treating black people cruelly? In this way *Candle Bathing* exposes where racism in the contemporary 'stems' from – colonial moulds and 'frame of mind'. The painting's title itself may evoke 'cleansing': is 'bathing' ridding contemporary South Africa of racism based on colonial fashioning, or 'cleansing' black people of sin, through Christianity?

The Erotic Awakening of Samson

The story of Samson in the Bible repeatedly refers to Samson's sexual affairs, and presents him as a virile man. However, Bal argues that love weakened Samson and made him defenceless, adding that sex stripped him of his strength (1984:356). The draping of a nude black Samson over a nude white Delilah, results in a very sensual scene, and can be interpreted as pointing to interracial sexual relations. A significant element to the story of Samson and Delilah, is that Delilah is a Philistine. In fact, all three women Samson had an affair with were Philistines. In other words, the Philistines (the enemy) are foreigners in relation to Samson, an Israelite. There is a play between different nations; 'othering' in a sense. To Samson, Delilah and the other women were foreign, but to the women, Samson was foreign. The lovers (Samson and Delilah), can suggest a sexual interaction between the self and the 'other'. Both belonging to different nations: who is the 'other' here? Delilah or Samson? Is the 'self', once again the West, represented as white Delilah, and black Samson, is once more the African 'other'?

Angela Ndalianis argues that "visual and sensorial seductiveness" is essential to Baroque art (2007:xiv). In this way, typical of the visual language of Baroque painting, the sensuality and eroticism are pushed to the extreme in *Candle Bathing* by incorporating numerous nude figures in an orgy-like scene, draped over each other. Rubens depicts Delilah in a vibrant red dress, and although Phokela has depicted Delilah in the nude, he has not excluded the vibrant red.

Delilah sits on a large red drape and by excluding the purple drapes which are visible in *Samson and Delilah*, Phokela has incorporated more red into the composition by adding an enormous red curtain draped behind the figures. As a result, the entire scene is captured in a red chamber; the figures float in an ocean of red drapes.

Mary Corrigall considers Phokela's interest in "greed and excess" as a "theme which manifests as sexual indulgence, articulated through naked bodies" (2009:85). She argues that "sexual desire and control operates as metaphors for colonial governance" (2009:85). The sensuality emphasised in *Candle Bathing*, may refer to colonial greed and power in South Africa, and so by quoting Rubens, might refer to our Dutch and Flemish colonisers. If Samson is read as representing Africa, we can also read the nude figures as representing greed and overindulgence, and so interpret the nude white figures as overindulging in power in Africa. Samson is clearly not in a position of power in this scenario, and is literally surrounded by white figures, dominating the composition, we can interpret this as referring to colonial power, overwhelming and exploiting Africa.

In the seventeenth century the Biblical story held a moral message and referred to sins of greed, over-indulgence, sexual desires, and lust. Madlyn Kahr explains that the society of seventeenth-century Netherlands strove to better themselves and so people were particularly concerned about morals; paintings served to propagate appropriate moral standards (1973:249,255-256). Kahr suggests that Delilah represents evil, pointing to the hazards of sexual relations. The story apparently "responded to a general cultural trend: a concern with the dangers of concupiscence" (Kahr 1973:252) – suggesting sex is sin. Clearly in *Samson and Delilah,* as well as in *Candle Bathing*, we can read notions of lust, sexual overindulgence, and riches.[73]

[73] Another route to reading the story of Samson and Delilah as referring to sexuality, is the association of long hair with unrestrained sexuality. In a more or less psychoanalytic view, the Baroque expert John Rupert Martin, suggests that "Samson's haircut may be understood as symbolic castration" (1983:38). Nancy Huston links hair

In Holland, in the seventeenth century, Kahr asserts that the name Delilah, implied "harlot" (1973:254). Bal claims that Samson resting in her lap, shows that he has surrendered to her, and can be understood as resting after sex (1984:363). Since in *Candle Bathing* Delilah is white and Samson is black, and the story is of an erotic nature, it likely alludes to interracial relationships. Interracial relations in the precolonial and colonial era, from the coloniser's perspective, were frowned upon and most likely perceived as sin, specifically in the Catholic religion.

Particularly in relation to *Candle Bathing*, Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu also seem to point to notions of interracial relationships. They claim that:

> By re-creating scenes of Dutch life in which black people figure… Phokela seems to contest the racially sanitised history of the Afrikaner descendants of the Dutch. Scenes of lounging, naked black men and white woman, by insinuating possibilities of miscegenation among the ancestors of present-day Afrikaners, insinuates a history of South Africa hidden from eyes jaded by myths of racial and ethnic purity (Enwezor & Okeke-Agulu 2009:44).

JD Omer-Cooper explains that when the Dutch "colony was first established" in the seventeenth century the colonists "brought with them attitude of superiority towards persons of darker skin colour" (1994:30). He elucidates that white women insisted on preserving "the elite status of their own children and denying equal rights and privileges to persons of mixed descent" (1994:30). Omer-Cooper adds that "commander van Rheede prohibited marriages

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with sexuality by referring to 'the Samson Complex', and questions why Samson lost his strength when his hair was cut off, Huston queries whether "men's murderous energy" is linked to their "sexual energy" (1985:154). According to Huston, hair and sexuality are closely associated, referring to the fact that the majority of Western armies, shave their recruits on their first day of military service (1985:154). According to the anthropologist, Edmund Leach, in 'Magical Hair'[73]: long hair = unrestrained sexuality; short hair or tightly bound hair = restricted sexuality; and closely shaved head = celibacy" (Leach in Huston 1985:153-154).

between Europeans and freed slaves without European blood even if they were Christian" (1994:30).

Basically, from the seventeenth century up to apartheid, there was still extreme racial prejudice. An underlying aim of apartheid, was, as Omer-Cooper explains, to preserve "racial purity" (1994:196). Omer-Cooper writes that legislation framed "'illicit' (extra marital) sexual relations between whites and Africans criminal" (1994:196), and by 1949, interracial marriage was forbidden by the '1949 Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act' (1994:196). In this way, *Candle Bathing's* proposition draws the reader's attention to these appalling realities. The racism still evident in South Africa should not be taken lightly; racism did not spontaneously find its way to contemporary society, and it is not a mere continuity of apartheid. Racism has a very long and intense colonial history; such as constructing, or framing, the 'black figure' as an exotic, erotic, sexual beast.

By highlighting and literally framing this lustful, skin on skin layering, *Candle Bathing*, evokes historical representations and constructions of the 'other'. Through various visual techniques – which include the subject matter, the manipulations, repeating the colour red, and portraying numerous nude figures – the work emphasises the erotic nature of the Old Testament story. By presenting an orgy-like scene and evoking interracial relations, *Candle Bathing* may thus propose to the viewer, an acknowledgement of how deeply rooted and far back racism and colonial thought is embedded in South African history – and so point to the vast complexities of life in postcolonial, post-apartheid, contemporary South Africa.

The three figures on the far right in *Candle Bathing*, reminiscent of the Three Graces, can also signify sensuality and eroticism. As mentioned in chapter four, Rubens also created a painting titled *The Three Graces* (1632), which supposedly represents Zeus and Eurynome's daughters, "who aroused the sensation of the joy of life" (Aldeasa 2002:82). Rubens apparently stressed their part as companions to the goddess of love, Venus (Aldeasa 2002:82). Rubens

conveyed a way of life, which exalts in the "pleasures of the senses" (Aldeasa 2002:82), but as Kahr explains, in the seventeenth century, "pleasures of the senses" was perceived as sin, and it should actually be avoided (1973:257).



Figure 1.8: Detail of Johannes Phokela, *Candle Bathing* (1997): Frames

Conclusion

Since one of the most vital aspects to a Baroque visual language, is paying close attention to what is brightly lit, the linear frames in *Candle Bathing* are similarly spotlighting elements which are essential in understanding the painting's visual argument. *Candle Bathing* might be challenging certain colonial beliefs, which are still embedded in present day South Africa. Through an understanding of a Baroque visual language, we may read *Candle Bathing*'s visual argument, particularly within a postcolonial and post-

apartheid context, as commenting on South Africa's absurd racism and historical obsession with 'racial purity'. By emphasising sensuality, the painting can allude to official legislation that prohibited interracial relationships. The painting is not just pointing to racial stereotypes, but through its visuals, shows the viewer how race has been eroticised throughout colonial history and likely the art canon as well. This chapter served to elucidate how dense a reading can be when allowing the work's visuals to 'speak', instead of forcing theory. I have reasoned that the differences between *Candle Bathing* and *Samson and Delilah*, when read in conflict, can create meaning.

Candle Wax

In this research, my aim was to look closely and explore the various theoretical frameworks I set out in order to allow for a rich understanding of *Candle Bathing*. Specifically from a postcolonial context, I argue that the painting prompts an engagement with the art historical canon and colonialism. Throughout this report I dealt with *Candle Bathing* as pointing to and critiquing issues of race, marginalisation, the art historical canon and colonialism. My methodology and the theoretical frameworks I set out enabled the answering of the main research question and its sub-questions.

Postmodernism as a theoretical framework has allowed me to read *Candle Bathing* as addressing the Western art historical canon in a variety of ways. By specifically employing irony as a mode and referring to *Candle Bathing* as an ironic quotation, I was able to read it as implicitly conveying commentary on the canon. My approach lead me to interpret this quotation of a Flemish painting as indirectly pointing to South Africa's European settlers and the subsequent events, the consequences of which are clearly evident in contemporary South Africa. The aftermath of colonialism is far too great to deal with in this paper, but I was interested in how this ironic quotation can evoke such ideas and suggest lingering colonial thought as still embedded in contemporary South Africa.

In this analysis, I implemented 'close looking' to explore what *Candle Bathing* can propose as a visual argument. The application of the various theoretical frameworks, allowed me to interpret its visual argument from different angles. The result is that it is not one dimensional or fixed, instead, the perspective from which we view the image influences how we read its visual argument.

In the first chapter I explained the concept of 'close looking' and that scholars, such as Mieke Bal, are calling for a return to this particular way of engagement. I referred to close looking as a method which allows for a profound understanding of the work. Bal advocates close looking as a method to critically engage with a work's visual argument. Indeed, by looking closely at *Candle Bathing* I have gained greater insight; it permitted a very detailed engagement with the painting and illustrated how rich a single image can be. Close looking is therefore a vital step to reading a work's visual argument. Even though close looking is not a new undertaking, by patiently dedicating time to look very closely and construct meaning through this process of focusing on a single painting, I hope that my paper contributes to re-establishing its worth and elucidates why this is such a valuable approach.

In the second chapter I introduced the idea that a work of art can propose a visual argument for the viewer's consideration. Throughout this research I treated *Candle Bathing* as making a proposition, an argument. This approach sanctioned me to 'listen' to what the painting is 'saying', through the use of, for instance: medium, line, composition, colour, tone, subject matter, and so forth. These elements have to be read in relation to each other; and it is up to the viewer to make sense of what is being proposed. Bal explains that "images 'live' within a social, cultural context" (Bal 2006). Context influences the way we understand a work's propositional content; we cannot ignore the context in which it was made and from which we engage with it. In this way, an image can comment on the context in which it 'lives' and reflect cultural values. The content, consisting of a vocabulary, mean different things in varying contexts. For Birdsell and Groarke, It is possible to 'misinterpret' the argument, specifically if the reader is not familiar with the visual language and if not enough time is dedicated to analysing the visuals and considering the 'words' intertextually (1996: 2-3).

In the third chapter I ask: what can be communicated by referencing this historical Baroque style? To answer this, I studied the historical Baroque, its socio-political context, and the era's association with power and colonial

conquest. My research shows how 'history' is still relevant and how we can employ 'history' to read a contemporary work of art. A poststructuralist theoretical framework provided an opportunity to define a Baroque visual language and motivate its relevance. This approach creates space for the reader's interpretation and for the fluidity of meaning. In some sense, a poststructuralist approach forces the reader to consider meaning making through language and syntax; and part of the act of close looking, is to examine the language closely. This mesmerising Baroque language can communicate and it is an influential tool to sway an audience – to 'convince' the reader of a particular position – it proposes a powerful visual argument. Considering the Baroque painting style as a visual language in relation to contemporary South African painting has not truly been considered in this way before. I argue that a Baroque visual language can be used as a critical tool to read beyond the surface; this language points to compositional aspects to prompt deeper interrogations. Through an understanding of how this language functions through emotion, the use of *tenebrism*, *chiaroscuro*, exaggerated movement and facial expressions, and so forth, I was able to recognise ways to interpret insightful meaning.

By using the vocabulary of a Baroque language to interpret *Candle Bathing*'s visual argument, I read the painting as indirectly referring to the seventeenth century, the Baroque society, an era of absolutist reign and the Church's Counter-Reformation, and to colonial conquest. A Baroque visual language permitted a relational reading between *Candle Bathing*, Biblical imagery and the spread of Christianity through colonialism. I analysed the painting as pointing to South Africa's early colonisers – that quoting Biblical imagery in contemporary South Africa may carry its associations with colonialism. It is possible that *Candle Bathing* might be striving to make the contemporary viewer aware of the implications of that era on present day South Africa; perhaps even to question the enduring colonial thought. A poststructuralist theoretical framework allowed for a richly layered reading and resulted in multiple meanings, proving that *Candle Bathing* is not a 'mere quotation'.

In chapter four, I comparatively analysed *Candle Bathing* and *Samson and Delilah* to see how conflict creates meaning. Irony and postmodernism allowed me to explore a relational aspect between *Candle Bathing* and its engagement with the art canon; to read *Candle Bathing* as implicitly conveying criticism, by using *Samson and Delilah* as a platform. This framework allowed me to argue that *Candle Bathing* is referring to the past in a critical manner; I asked: what can it mean to draw on historical western art in 'postcolonial' South Africa? By drawing on such art, the viewer's attention is drawn to the canon, which may allude to the fact that South African art was previously marginalised. Drawing on this today, creates an awareness of the problematic aspects of the canon. By reading the painting through an ironic mode, I have argued that Phokela's work is not a one dimensional nor 'mere quotation', instead, it demonstrates a critical awareness. By quoting canonical works in postcolonial and marginalised countries, such works may take a stance and project a wakefulness to this history and reflect on it.[74] Nothing is irrelevant in reading a work's visual argument, everything carries meaning, and to make the most of the reading, elements should be considered from more than one perspective: which I demonstrate. For example, the subject matter quotes Rubens painting – one way would be to focus on the canonical painting, but to deepen the interpretation, we need to engage with the narrative depicted too – in this chapter I have dealt with both.

In the last chapter I query 'what meaning can be derived from the visual argument proposed by *Candle Bathing*? Here, my analysis is strongly rooted in a postcolonial context, and this theoretical framework allowed me to view *Candle Bathing*'s proposition as alluding to the representation, exoticism, and eroticism of race, specifically of the 'black figure'. I focused on racism, stereotyping and othering. The painting seems to bombard the viewer with eroticism; and the product of the nude bodies in such an orgy-like scene,

[74] When read through irony *Candle Bathing* can question the concept of originality, high versus low art, the power of the art canon and its marginalisation.

emphasises their skin colour – pointing to race. In 1997, and presently in 2016, South Africa still rumbles with a sense of 'racial discomfort'.[75]

Through the application of the various theoretical frameworks, I explored how meaning can be made, by taking a methodological approach to construct meaning.[76]

In summary, my contribution the field is that I address a knowledge-based gap: there is relatively little written on Phokela. I offer an original and extended analysis of a South African artist's work that has not been written on extensively and studied in this much detail. My research offers a meticulous consideration of *Candle Bathing*. By studying this painting I contribute a tremendously detailed engagement and a comparative analysis with Rubens' *Samson and Delilah*. I explore how a work can propose a visual argument and offer a 'how to' read a visual argument. I demonstrate how we can employ 'history' to read a contemporary work of art, by identifying and employing a Baroque visual language. Through my analysis of *Candle Bathing* I strive to validate the relevance of a Baroque visual language to read a work of art. Neo-Baroque has been researched, but very little, if any, is based on painting.[77] I also address a relationship-based gap: Seventeenth century Baroque paintings have been

[75] For example, hate speech on social media. This can point to 'unresolved' issues, and underlying prejudices. However, I have also grappled with the idea of analysing a 'black' South African artist's work, as a 'white' South African. My research was not intended to 'force' my understanding of *Candle Bathing* as 'correct' and I am especially aware of my 'racial privilege' and my position from which I look at the painting. I strived to show that there is space for the reader's interpretation and how looking closely through a methodological way allows for richly layered meaning.

[76] I admit that I could not explore every aspect of *Candle Bathing* as a Masters Research Report is relatively short – but then again a work of art can never truly be studied exhaustively. It would have been interesting to read the painting's visual argument by focusing on the literal painting technique used – to look closely at the physicality and texture of the paint applied – to follow the movement of brushstrokes, to 'see' impasto, for instance. Unfortunately this would likely be based on a 'face to face' basis, as it is difficult to see such details in photographs. A difficulty in my research, was not being able to view *Candle Bathing*, since it is in London.

[77] The main research on Neo-Baroque refers to Latin American writers from the twentieth century and some have dealt with architecture.[77] Lisa Greyvenstein has dealt with South African performance art in relation to Neo-Baroque.

studied in great depth, but not specifically, nor exhaustively, considered with reference to a Baroque visual language in relation to contemporary South African art; and not detailed in relation to painting, and certainly not to *Candle Bathing*. In addition, works quoted in an ironic style, are often not considered seriously in relation to Africa and the west, in a detailed engagement. My research provides a model to begin looking closely beyond the literal quotation.

Through the act of close looking I studied *Candle Bathing*'s visual argument from various angles. I have shown that *Candle Bathing* is not a 'mere quotation', instead, Rubens' painting is a platform to comment on a much larger topic – the complexities of socio-political matters in postcolonial South Africa. Through its ironic quotation we can read *Candle Bathing* as critically referring to the Western art historical canon, particularly in relation to African art and marginalised artists.[78] Throughout art history, the canon has played its role in shaping the way we deem value; Keith Moxey notes that within the canon, history painting (including Biblical imagery) has been deemed more important than still life painting for instance (1995:393). Hence, *Candle Bathing* specifically quotes a painting ranked at the highest value – this is no coincidence.

Most importantly, throughout this study, I have shown various angles from which one can engage with visual argument and these approaches allowed me to read *Candle Bathing's* argument in different ways.

[78] *One such way, is the marginalisation proposed through the white grid-like margins in Candle Bathing.* Within a postmodern style the work may also function to question 'enduring' hierarchies within the canon, such as high versus low art, and as addressing the still embedded prejudice of the canon.

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