

INTRAPARADOX: Interview with Wonder Buhle Mbambo

The Wonder of Comfort

27 November 2020 at about 10:30, BKhz Studio, Johannesburg

Overture

It is always refreshing to become aware of new art, to be acquainted with a new vision. I have had the privilege of sitting down with Wonder Buhle Mbambo. To listen to his life's journey as an artist up to the point where we were sitting down at BKhz Studio for our interview. That Friday morning, thanks to unforeseen circumstances, I arrived at around ten thirty in Johannesburg, Braamfontein, for an appointment that would have taken place at nine.

Earlier on before the scheduled interview, Banele Khoza and I headed out to a café around the corner for some coffee. For me, a few times I have been there has set this part of the corner of Juta and De Beer Streets as a familiar spot for beverages and light meals. This would possibly be my last coffee there under familiar circumstances. But let me not get ahead of myself.

Surprisingly when we arrived at the café Wonder Buhle was there waiting for his second cup of cappuccino. After Banele Khoza introduced us and slipped away I notice that the artist addresses me with the title *my leader* as I took a seat. I automatically accept this as a sign of respect and endearment. If you were to meet Wonder Buhle on one of the street of our major cities you wouldn't be able to guess that he was in the cultural industry. But when he warms up to you he bursts at the seams.

After exchanging geographical upbringings we retire to BKHz Studio. The gallery is in the final stages of preparations and it is bathed in a unique blue that on any given day you would swear it had a hint of green in it. Wearing a denim bucket hat with tufts of dreadlocks peeping, Wonder Buhle reposes on the coach in loose denim jeans. He is wearing a black t-shirt discreetly printed 'Shaka Zulu' in a subtle white font. Outside you can hear the muffled busy Braamfontein traffic whizzing-by. People constantly passes up and down Juta Street. Those who notice us curiously throw us some looks. We are like fish in a gallery bowl. I have always marveled at such interiors which were capable of muffling the outside world yet failed dismally to muffle the noise of the traffic or the squeaky footsteps in the corridors. The artists speaks softly and searchingly for the right combination of words and image to construct his life story...

[Mmutle Arthur Kgokong: Good morning Wonder Buhle] **[Wonder Buhle:** Morning leader how are you?] **[Mmutle AK:** I am fine thank you,] **[Wonder Buhle: Blessed...,]** **[Mmutle AK:** This is a recording for Intraparadox which is a site or a platform where I interview artists with an interests of unearthing their background, their inspiration and their interests. To get to know artists a little bit better] **[Wonder B: ...yes...]** **[Mmutle AK:** and I am glad that you were able to make the time to see me ahead of the opening of your exhibition here at BKHz, you are from KZN?...]¹

WB: ...Yes...

MAK: What difference can you note or notice between your city and this city already?

WB: [*Chuckles*]

Well, first of all thank you very much for - you know - , for this interview. I mean I hardly do interviews especially whereby it is recorded. I always do it via emails to answer

¹ Wonder Buhle's full names are Wonder Buhle Mbambo.

those questions. But to have me on voice it is something I hardly do, it's going to be interesting. However, back at your question, KZN for me it got more sort of like... volume, even the city - the vibration is not the same as here. People are moving around of course but the volume is quite big. The space... Joburg, for me, it is busy. Mostly crowded, the movement is much faster than us. That's the difference

MAK: Well I am glad that you have adjusted to the city and you can even note the nuances, the difference between your city and this city...

WB: yes

MAK: I have looked at your work, your approach to painting in terms of the thick layering of the paint, as well as, - you know - your iconic afros, the iconic black skin and also the texture of the paintings.

WB: yes

MAK: ...but I will like us to visit that a little bit later in our conversation because at this point in time, I would like you to give us a little bit of a background about Wonder Buhle. How was your upbringing? I mean, I read a little synopsis in your catalogue in terms of the inspiration, that your grandmother played an active role in your creativity. And I want you to just briefly give us a brief background on when you were growing up in KZN. What was life like? And your artistic spark, so to speak, when did this spark hit you? When did you decide that you would like to make art one day?

Early years, up-bringing and the international experience

WB: Wow, as you already know I grew up in KZN, outside the city, in the rural side of Durban

MAK: *What was the name of the village?*

WB: The village is called *Kwa-Ngcolosi*

MAK: *Kwa-Ngcolosi*

WB: *Kwa-Ngcolosi* under chief, *Nkosi*, Bhengu. That's where everything started

MAK: *It makes me think of Gerard Bhengu²*

WB: Sure

MAK: *I am not sure whether they are related or not?*

WB: For sure there must be some connections, but it's like *eh* the place, you know rural, its mountainous and we have a dam that is called *Inanda Dam* which is like this kind of blue, blueish in a way but much more darker. Where we used to swim as kids and we've got rivers. There is a river called *UmMshazi* where I did most of the playing. I played with clay, muddy clay. Just like other kids you just want to play, explore and be naughty. I have always been a creative kid, I would come up with trends in my community. *"Now it is time to make those cars using the wire and stuff."* And I would make the best one.

MAK: *you probably learned this from the bigger boys if not from your brothers*

WB: I was the only child in my home back then, so I didn't have siblings. That's why I had to learn most of the things by myself. My grandmother was very hard on me in a positive way. To say *"You have to be strong, you don't have big brothers. If something happens to you outside, you are not going to come home and cry. You have to learn to fight for your self, things like that."* So I have always been that guy who wants to make sure that things worked.

MAK: *you had to be responsible from an early age*

WB: I had to be very responsible because I knew it was only me. I had to be strong. Sometimes you have to wear that face so that people don't come easy at you - *you know* - stuff like that. But it was all like village things, things are still very traditional that side, from stick fighting to fist fighting to street fighting

MAK: *and you were born in the 80s, neh?*

WB: at the tip

[Laughs]

MAK: [Laughs]

² Gerard Bhengu (1910 – 1990) is one of 20th century South African black artists in the league of Gerard Sekoto, Ernest Manqoba and George Pemba.

you were born at a very interesting time in our country's history

WB: at the tip, yah 1989³. So - you know - I saw most of the stuff when I was growing up.

MAK: *Yes*

WB: I grew up from my mother's side; my father was always a person who lived in different places because of different jobs he held. He was working for Toyota, then he stopped. He also opened a panel beater, but he was always moving around a lot..

MAK: Would you say he was an entrepreneur?

WB: Yes, I would say so because that's what he did. He quit his job to do his own thing. But my mom she is actually a *Sangoma*

MAK: *a traditional healer?*

WB: She is a traditional healer and she did not go to school. At the age of ten she had to answer her calling. All her siblings, my uncles and aunts, went to school.

MAK: *and she was older or was she younger?*

WB: She was a bit younger, you know back in the day you only attended school from the age of 12. You will have to be a little bit older to attend school. So when she was just about to go to school the calling came in and she got very sick, she had to leave and spend time ...

MAK: *ayo thwasa*

WB: and spend time with an *Inyanga*. I wasn't there at the time. Remember it is all her, building up herself very like spiritually and then she came back home as someone who started to practice and then she met my father and that's how I came about. What I am trying to point here is that.. I have been

³ In the 1980s South African would witness the states of emergencies as pressure to unseat the apartheid regime reached its zenith. A theatre of oppositional politics emerged between the United Democratic Front (UDF) and Azanian Peoples Organization (Azapo) on the one hand between supporters of the exiled African National Congress (ANC) and Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) on the other hand set in during latter part of this tumultuous decade. Ironically all these political organisation were unified by a quest to dismantle apartheid. Thanks to these political confrontations and the international sanctions; economical and cultural, against South Africa, in 1989 when Wonder Buhle was born, it was on the eve of South Africa's transition towards the release of political prisoners and the talks that followed in the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) as the early '90s set in.

feeling like, not that I'll be a *Sangoma* myself but I became like, almost like a light in the family - *you know* - because things were not going well at the time like in terms of finance, this and that.

MAK: *oh, I see*

WB: After the passing of my grandmother. I am sorry I am very scattered when I tell stories, I am everywhere

[*Chuckles*]

MAK: *It's a very interesting story, you carry on. So when your grandmother passed on was the family in the middle of the challenges or ...I mean your birth as you say, became the light in the family. Obviously you matured while your grandmother was around because earlier on you pointed out that your grandmother was the inspiration behind you, she was somebody who taught you to take life seriously; if I can put it that way, to stand up for yourself*

WB: *yes*

MAK: So will you attribute your discipline - *you know* - when you approach your work, *your discipline*, will you attribute it to your upbringing especially the contribution of your grandmother?

WB: Okay, no, I will get to that in a bit. My grandmother was always at home, my mom had to hustle so that I could go to school. Because she did not go to school herself, obviously she would get a very low paying job. Like being a domestic worker, things like that. Now I am spending more time with my grandmother because my mother is living maybe in Hillcrest somewhere, where she works. That's where everything started to be molded or layered, very like unique textures of upbringing because my grandmother grew up with boys. She grew up with boys in her family and she was raised like a boy and she was very masculine. I learned a lot from that lady, very powerful. And I am growing up around many herbs, because of the nature of my mom's work. There are herbs around, *ku ne Mpephe*, there is this herbal medicine for the teeth, there is this medicine for the legs, and there is this and that medicine. So I am learning all these things

MAK: *the benefits of herbs*

WB: The benefits of herbs. So I was learning a lot, I would see people coming in and out. My grandmother was very good in healing. If you have a sore tooth she would give you a certain herb and you will be sorted. So all those kind of things I think they really build up a lot of layers of myself, I think. The fact that my grandmother didn't like electricity

[*Chuckles*]

MAK: *So she preferred to cook outside?*

WB: *Eh leader it was like a Rondavel. And now we even reached a point whereby we were the only family in the community without electricity. She preferred to have candles. And for me I only realized at a very later stage that she was so spiritually inclined as well, in a way. She liked to do things organically. So here is the benefit; No electricity at home, everything is silhouette, especially at night and I would go outside... one of my friends can tell you because we went to see the place. They wanted to understand the colours that I use in my work.*

MAK: *yes*

WB: *It is a beautiful sky. And when there is a full moon everything is identified by silhouettes. You can see people moving but as silhouettes and there are these beautiful colours, your grey ...*

MAK: *this is an area in KZN near the village where you grew up?*

WB: *this is an area in KZN, because my grandmother's house is next to the mountains. So I had a privilege of just being so close to everything natural. The mountains, the rivers. And then because I am a kid I would see these beautiful things but I did not fully understanding the value of these experiences out of which I developed an interest in learning about the stars, the colours that I would see and everything. This came very later to me. I did not know that all these things were serving my intuition. So here is the catch, my grandmother is making fire to cook. Taking charcoal leftovers, I am scratching the surfaces of the *Rondavel* which are mostly painted in white and this colour. You see this colour is very special to me*



Figure 1. Wonder Buhle. *Comfort* (2020). Acrylic and metallic gold on Canvas. 163 x 330 cm (Reserved)

MAK: *sort of greenish*

WB: *yah this you can say its turquoise and also it is mint-green. Most of the Rondavels in my village are mostly this colour*

MAK: *I saw that on the invitation actually it is this colour if I remember correctly. It is this colour⁴*

WB: *yah, it is for many reasons. But for me I firstly saw it as the sea's colour, but I realize beyond that that they use it to paint their houses, whereby on a Sunday Izayoni would...*

MAK: *yes! this colour reminds me of a religious sect in our African centered churches in our country...*

WB: *then I went "Ahh..."*

MAK: *What is this colour in isiZulu?*

WB: *Bathi umbala o Phuzi*

MAK: *Umbala o Phuzi, how do you translate it? What I find fascinating about the colour itself it reminds me of the titles of your work that will be featured in your solo*

⁴ This colour that preoccupies part of our conversation at this point in the interview, dominates the picture plane of the image that BKhZ used for the centre piece and the invitation to the exhibition, see Figure 1. Wonder Buhle. *Comfort* (2020). Acrylic and metallic gold on Canvas. 163X 330 cm (Reserved)

exhibition⁵. But we will get to that just before the end of our conversation. I find it fascinating that you have titled your works in isiZulu and the mere fact that the naming in African languages has a bit of sound in it.

So this is a sacred colour?

WB: This is a sacred colour but it also serves the side of aesthetics

MAK: *yes of course*

WB: It is a beautiful colour and it's very calming in a way. So I started to use this colour in 2018. Basically, most of my work have always been like, black, and I will use a little bit of blue because of the *Inanda Dam* I was telling you about earlier. Now that I live in the city I always include some elements from my home into the work that I am making. It is something that makes me feel like I am speaking my language, here it's me. If I am using those things, I am borrowing the elements that I know. Things that played a role in my life always make me feel like I am home.

MAK: So they have become symbolic of who you are.

WB: *Yes, they have become symbolic of who I am.* Especially back in 2018 while I was in the UK. That's when I started to paint mostly. It was a change from working in charcoal most of the time. I was now painting regularly, literally, while before then I have been using charcoals and mixed media. Producing beautiful pieces but I was like, "*I want to paint now*". But I also turned to painting for other reasons as well. For instance, when I tried to ship the work it will be teared up a bit and in creases and I didn't like this. I realize that the work was gaining value now and I needed to protect it. So I needed to switch to canvases and all that. I wanted to bring elements that would be just alien to the European space so that they can feel my uniqueness that I am here to tell my story from the way I live it, not ...

MAK: *how did the show,... it is in the UK, how did the show perform, how was your work received in the UK? What was the response?*

⁵Here I am referring to the the catalogue that went into e-circulation prior to the opening of the exhibition. Most of the works featured in that catalogue were documented as private collection except the work, *For the I Will Stand (2018)*, which is indicated as belonging to the artist.

WB: *Eish man, the UK of course, those people know nothing about us and it's always like, they will always try to feed words to your work and like "Wonder's work is about identity", I don't like that.*

MAK: *When people suppose that they can second guess you?*

WB: *Yes they second guess because they are looking at what the narrative is, maybe of African art. So they think everybody is about that. And for myself of course now that the work is contributing to the bigger narrative that is out there about visibility, black visibility in space - this and that but I think when I produce work I don't put myself in that umbrella a lot.*

I always try to be true to the journey that I am personally embarking on, like how I feel about my present time. How are things at home, how I feel about the society and it just opens up to a bigger conversation of course but the first thing is me, how do I feel, does this serve something to me? I won't lie I am all my words. It's like... I am at the studio right now and I have just finished a piece. The feelings are always different

MAK: *you are looking at the work*

WB: *I am looking at the work*

MAK: *...and you are thinking of the process that you have went through*

WB: *you know*

MAK: *when you were painting the work*

WB: *exactly*

MAK: *up to the point where you were frustrated by the work*

WB: *yes*

MAK: *...and then you finish the work and you are now looking at it*

WB: *Now I am looking at it and I am feeling like, healed or that I have moved a step further towards something greater.*

MAK: *That's fascinating and it is something that I have picked up from your synopsis of the catalogue; that your work*

has nothing to do with political positioning. It has nothing to do with that, it is self expression.

WB: You see my leader my main concern is that the space is already cluttered. You are in the city and there is so much energies going on, this and that, the world is messed up - *you know* - you are just in the middle of many wars and the only place where I feel like I can move more purely is when I create and that's some of the reasons why the works are just blank spaces to give them that space of possibilities - *you know*.

MAK: So you have given the work a possibility of being isolated or being read against any other idea out there, for the work to be looked at purely for being a painting or a drawing. *Do I understand you correctly?*

WB: Yes you understand me correctly. It's more like giving the work a space of possibilities to become anything it can possibly become. I guess it is also a response to how things are presented to us in a subjective way like, you have to become this, you have to become that. If you fail to become this you have to become that. How about becoming something that is not on the list? That's the type of freedom

MAK: *unrestricted*

WB: *unrestricted, how about becoming something that is not on the list? It is also a question of what is the purpose of life in general. That's what pushed me to keep the figure alive in a space not in need, looking like it is fine right there⁶*

MAK: *it does not need to be interpreted against political issue, it is an artwork it should be appreciated in its own right as an artwork*

WB: yes

⁶ The work *For the I Will Stand (2018)* can serve as an example of the artist's philosophical approach to art practice of rendering the figure devoid of a setting. It also gives a sample of the kind of work he produced around the UK-Zurich experience.



Figure 2. Wonder Buhle. For The I Will Stand (2018). Mixed media. 210 x 150 cm. Artist's collection, Catalogue.

MAK: Earlier on you spoke about Zurich, that you had an exhibition there and just now you referred to the exhibition in the UK. Tell me what was your experience in Zurich, Switzerland? When you compare the situation there with the UK one, which one came first by the way - was it the UK?

WB: Okay, it was in 2018, the UK came first and then I went to Switzerland the same year. The UK was an art residence, a three months stay at Wheatfield which is in the north. Wheatfield is small ...they refer to it as a poor city. The economy fell down in that city. So it is very like low living. There is a big art centre there which is supported by the Royal Overseas' League in London. So that's how I got connected with them and I got the scholarship

MAK: *this is in 2018*

WB: Yah, it's working in partnership with the university in Leeds. As this was a residency, I only had to do a presentation after my stay. But Zurich was fully concentrated on the body of work now. The experience there, as I was saying earlier, they are not coming from this nature or this background of us. Their understanding of art is slightly

different and even from the submission that I had, I only had to show seven pieces, I submitted ten. I wasn't happy with some of the works that they had selected

MAK: *for the exhibition*

WB: but I understood where they were coming from

MAK: *so you had to compromise*

WB: I had to compromise, I wanted some other pieces which I felt were bold in their narratives which were better than the pieces that they selected.

MAK: *Would you say perhaps that they were comfortable with those works based on the contemporary art scene that is happening there*

WB: exactly, exactly you got that right

MAK: *that's very interesting to know*

WB: that's what I thought, I was like "Oh ok, this is like the same wave they are riding this side." So I get it.

MAK: *henceforth the compromising on your side*

WB: *yes*

Education and Training

MAK: Now tell me, obviously you went to primary school and then you went to high school, you never had art as a subject?

WB: No,

MAK: Primary schooling and high schooling years *neh*?

WB: No never

MAK: No art competitions?

WB: No art competitions, I don't like competitions, I never entered any, but I had an opportunity last year

[Smiles]

MAK: [Laughs]

I can relate to the art competition thing by the way. And then you were in primary school and then you went to high school, your high schooling years fall within which years, when were you in high school?

WB: High school was in 2005, 2006, 2007 and I finished in 2008 and then I took a gap year. I wanted to be a clinical psychologist. My Maths didn't fall under great marks

MAK: Yes

WB: So the university said just go and work on your points

MAK: *upgrade your Maths*

WB: and then you can come back. The other subjects were fine

MAK: You did which subjects?

WB: Physical Science, I was doing sciences

[Laughs]

MAK: *You are a science person!*

WB: Science student, like pure Maths, Agriculture, IT... everything it was a great class. And I was so drawn to Clinical Psychology. I think it is also because of hearing stories when people came to consult my mom with their problems

MAK: *yes, consultations*

WB: But then I wanted to take it to another level

MAK: *but you know, actually the observation that you are making is a very interesting one, because in essence Traditional Healers are actually Clinical Psychologists, if you think about it*

WB: *yes*

MAK: *because people go there when they are afflicted, something is not ok e moyeni*

WB: *looking for answers*

MAK: *or the body, you know, and they are looking for answers and the healer has been trained spiritually and physically and they are able to read the signs. Psychologists are like that they look at how you sit when you talk to them; whether you*

make eye contact or you avoiding eye contact. Do you think this informal training that you got from home had an impact on you when you were studying art? You studied art at which institution?

WB: *During my gap year, trying to fix my physics, I am doing lots of drawings, I sketch all the time. I have enough time. I am only attending one class and after that I am doing drawings. I had a small problem with my ID, you know sometimes it can be delayed before it is issued. I am going back and forth with the Department of Home Affairs and this one day I am at the home affairs with my sketch book. I am sketching the queue and then a random guy comes to me and asks "Hey are you an artist?"*

MAK: *[Laughs]*

WB: *and I don't even know, I am just drawing - you know -*

MAK: *yah, drawing for enjoyment*

WB: *his like "beautiful works, you know there is a place called the BAT Centre by the harbor. There are many artists there; musicians, maybe if you go there you might find something interesting or a class or something". I am like ok thanks and then this guy just bounced. He was coming from prison, he had all these tattoos, earlier on he said "I was in prison and the BAT Centre used to come and help us as inmates with practical art making."*

MAK: *Art Therapy and so on*

WB: *That's how he knew them, and I was like "ok, sharp." And then this person left. He gave me the key though, I felt like he gave me the key*

MAK: *by just having that conversation with you*

WB: *I can't even remember his name because that conversation was short, one minute and then he was gone. After the home affairs thing I went straight to the harbor to look for the place and I found the place. I felt that I was going to become one of them*

MAK: *Tell me, I want to know about the experience when you walked into the space and you saw people doing what you love. They are doing it everyday and they have put all their heart into this*

WB: I saw no kids but matured women and men dedicated to their craft. I knew instantly that I was going to become one of them

MAK: *yes*

WB: Because of the passion I sensed around the space. I moved around and asked questions and they told me that there is actually a class at the centre. That they had one of those nine months classes of art and music. So I was like "*I am going in for Visual Arts.*"

MAK: *and obviously at home they were familiar with the fact that you enjoyed making clay sculptures, that you enjoyed making drawings*

WB: hundred percent

MAK: *and then you started attending the classes.*

WB: Yes I went to the reception and they gave me the application form and explained to me how the program works. There was a class running and I went to see and *yoh - yoh* I went back home, like my heart was pumping and I was like, "*Next year I am going there.*" So this is now two thousand and nine, and I started in two thousand and ten exactly with the BAT Centre

MAK: *ok, so you were waiting for your ID in two thousand and nine when you took a gap year?*

WB: My ID, my Physical Science to be on good marks and then art just came in-between everything. My ID came back and I just left this Physical Science thing and I was like "*Intec College, I am done with you. I am not doing this anymore.*" My mom has been very open about my decisions

MAK: *and your grandmother at that time*

WB: was alive and very supportive. My grandmother did not know anything about school anyway, so... she was just trying to make sure that - *you know* - that I am getting something that will support me for the longest time. So my support was basically from both of them. I had certain things that I wished to do for them. So now the BAT Centre took me in

[Snaps fingers]

MAK: *Twenty ten ...they call it the BAT Centre?*

WB: The BAT Centre, they call it the Bartel Art Trust. It is made up of all the trustees and stuff

MAK: *Yes*

WB: *yah, so it's a... that's experience my leader! I was attending like I was attending an IT school or something*

MAK: *yah*

WB: *always wearing a shirt*

MAK: *you were presentable*

WB: *yah, I wanted to understand*

MAK: *you took it very serious*

WB: *very serious, even some of the guys were laughing at me, they were like "It is chilled man, why are you acting like you are an architect or something?"*

[Laughs]

MAK: *they were amazed by your professionalism*

WB: *exactly, I wanted to make sure that I understand. Already they told us that after finishing here you have a choice. If you become the best student. You get an award with a small studio which you can run for like six months and after that you can see if you can contribute something nyana for the bills - you know - so...*

MAK: *that became the goal, the studio*

WB: *for me it became the goal. They also told us that Durban University had a three year Fine Arts program just like Wits and Michaelis. I was like "there is the light now and I am going to go through everything. That I want the studio as well so that I can just be busy." yah,*

MAK: *and produce*

WB: *yes and it happened just like that, I got in*

MAK: *So in twenty ten you are now at the BAT Centre*

WB: *I am now at the BAT, I have moved from the village and I am living in a township called Mayville which is next to the city, so that it would be easy for me to just...*

[Wags his right hand index finger]

MAK: *to move around*

WB: So here is the thing, Mayville is completely different. It's like your Alexander kind of vibe

MAK: *it is a different rhythm from your...*

WB: It's like your Mamelodi kind of a place

[Laughs]

MAK: [Laughs]

WB: I am like "*What the hell*" and my mom cannot afford a flat and things like that. I have to get what I can get. Something on the budget

MAK: *but she is supporting you*

WB: very supportive

MAK: *you know that is very important at that point in time*

WB: very important, very supportive. I got my backroom shack for five hundred and fifty rand per month, I am sorted. And the

MAK: *you must worry about food [laughs]*

WB: *yah I must worry about food.*

[Smiles]

So I had to adjust, the language is different, the people, the landscape, the culture. It's like, people just do otherwise - *you know* - someone can bang the radio from five o'clock in the morning to five o'clock the next morning. You have to adjust to that and say this is nature - *you know* - all these textures around. So that experience started to become the theme in my work at that time

MAK: *you responded to the stimulation*

WB: I responded to the stimulation, I responded to it. Because I wanted to share *uhm* this experience of adjusting from the rural area to the urban area. I had to translate myself a bit, because now I had to act like them, so that I can blend-in, to be comfortable in the space. Twenty ten I finished,

MAK: *and in twenty eleven you moved into the studio*

WB: I moved into my studio now, I am like "Ok so what's next?"
DUT! DUT for sure, I am applying. Got my interviews of course⁷

MAK: *and you also you presented a great portfolio to them*

WB: Oh! The portfolio was outstanding and they were like, "No, you have been here before and you're coming back?" And I am like "No, I am coming from the BAT Centre..."

MAK: *you have just arrived*

WB: I have just arrived, because already I knew most of the things. I think for the first year thing I was beyond - *you know* - because the BAT Centre offers the same thing. You have your Drawing classes, you have your Art Theory, so you learn anyway

MAK: *It's a school.*

WB: It's a school in a short space of time. I got accepted and I am like "ok, I m ready to start."

[Snaps fingers]

An opportunity came through. I got selected with one of the other artists for an exhibition which was suppose to go to Germany in Bremen to do a mural under the tunnel and my name was on the list. So now it's like, the same week whereby I was suppose to start with school fell on the same week I was suppose to go. And I am like "What am I going to do? I am not going to miss this opportunity to go over seas."

[Laughs]

And I am like "Over seas, school when I come back"

MAK: [Laughs]

you left?

WB: I left yah

MAK: *So you went to Germany?*

WB: I went to Germany for like two weeks. I wanted to experience and understand - *you know* - like how broad art can

⁷ DUT: Durban University of Technology

go. I had never been on the plane before, never... so I wanted all this experience. So I went there. It was a total different space you know, everything. We did the mural, we met with artists, artists' diners... and all these things. These experiences gave me so much beautiful memories. Then I came back. Of course when I came back I couldn't make it to school and I was like "Oh, I am going to go next year."

[Chuckles]

"I had to just be at studio and work"

MAK: *This is twenty eleven.*

WB: All in twenty eleven. I made connections in Germany with some of the guys who are pushing. Some are old and some are young. So we like talk via emails now, I am starting to become an artist honestly - you know - boom there were classes from the African Art Centre held in partnership with Durban University on weekends. The African Art Centre was working with the department of Fine Arts at DUT to bring at least ten guys to do the art classes which were presented only on weekends. I joined that, still in twenty eleven. Now during the week I am working in the studio and on weekends I am attending the art classes, it was back and forth.

MAK: Yes

WB: Then from those classes *uhm* African Centre partnered with Kellogg's. Kellogg's gave them a budget to select four people who were going to be mentored by the Department of Fine Arts, (Durban University of Technology) on a level of like a third year student. Because they realize that we were like going, we were like maturing faster, they might have thought, these guys' needs to get something much more challenging.

MAK: *how many of you who were showing promise in this group, those of you who were identified as guys who were maturing faster ...how many of you were in this 'elite'? Because it sounds like it becomes a bit of an elite group*

WB: Four

[Laughs]

*yah elites, yes - yes. It was four of us, one of them is Sthenjwa Luthuli who is doing very well as well right now. He has just opened a show in Cape Town with *What if The World**

Gallery⁸. So that was like, crazy now. I got selected for that. Now I am no longer at studio even, I am only seeing the studio at night, because I am like studying now. The mentorship it's like an apprenticeship course

MAK: Yes

WB: You have all your printmaking, painting class - you know -

MAK: *it's tight*

WB: sculpture, it's like real

MAK: *it's tight, serious*

WB: exactly, we are with the third year' students and they don't understand who these guys are?

MAK: *they don't know that you are those guys who hit the ground running*

WB: One time! It's like we took an elevator. But not just jumping off things because we already had the basics. But it was like; no it is going to be a waste time to go through all that. But we were very dedicated. You see when the fourth years were like messing up, the lecturer will bring them down to our studio

MAK: *to show them*

WB: They'd say "Look at these guys, they are just here for one year. They are going to be out of here and become artists but you have been here all the time but you can't deliver and it's going to be like crazy".

MAK: *but what did it mean to you when you realize that you are being used as an example of greatness, what did it say to you when you realize that you, being part of this 'elite group' which was there for one year, you were being used as an example. What did it mean to you?*

WB: Yoh leader it meant a lot. For some reason you realize that you just want to be in the background. People will feel some type of way though, especially paying big in tuition fees

⁸ Sthenjwa Hopewell Luthuli (1991 -) was a Runner Up at the SASOL New Signatures 2017 Art Competition with the work *Umbango (Conflict)*. That was the year that saw Lebogang Kganye (1990 -) win the art competition with the animated work *Ke sale teng*. It is interesting that comparatively speaking both Sthenjwa Hopewell Luthuli and Wonder Buhle's work eschew naturalism. Perhaps Luthuli is the extreme of the two.

and all that. It wasn't a good feeling to many of the students. But for me, I already knew from the first day that I want to become - *you know* - I want to become an artist

MAK: *You want to become an artist*

WB: yes and I will have to go all the way. I had to face it as it is and all the challenges and receive the process of everything. So I understood that very well. This was building up to what I really want to become. So I was very excited about everything and the process.

Towards Comfort, the exhibition

MAK: And now looking at this exhibition, would you say it has come about organically. That it gradually ...*how can I put it?* That this event, the way it has come about, do you feel you were working towards this all these years in terms of your hard work as an artist? Because a lot of the making art is hard - *you know* - I mean it is intellectually challenging and emotionally taxing as well. I see the title of the exhibition is Comfort

WB: *yes*

MAK: I would like you to talk about the title of the exhibition and how it came about, I know we are jumping a lot of things now.

WB: *no it's alright*

MAK: I think between your time at Durban University and your Switzerland trip as well as your UK trip

WB: *yes*

MAK: these events are happening just close to each other

WB: *just close to each other, very close*

MAK: *uhm*, tell me about how you got to this point where you started to exhibit seriously. The first major exhibition and then you can build-up up to this point where we are here at BKhz for the *Comfort Exhibition*.

WB: Wow,

MAK: Now you are part of an elite group, some of the students at DUT resent you because they think that you are stealing their lime-light. But you know that you are coming from a very difficult position and you are going to use all the opportunities that you are getting. Obviously you had a good year that year, twenty eleven, twenty twelve. Were there exhibitions that sort of started to expose you to art dealers and people who take art seriously?

WB: Well let me tell you something which was another challenge, so I kept the studio at the BAT Art Center

MAK: *and you were now paying for it. Because I remember you said for the first six months to nine months they were funding you, I remember you said later you had to fund the studio yourself*

WB: Yes I had to fund the studio and my work is not commercial. It is not something that you can buy, it is mostly studies at that time. I am very passionate about getting everything right. I am sharpening the skill basically but the space has tourists coming in and out. Most of the artists that are there are commercial artists and they do a lot of linocuts and paintings

MAK: *so there is fast art*

WB: fast art

MAK: *there is popular art*

WB: they are even doing wild life, my studio is like dark... It's very dark, it is the only studio that is dark with charcoal drawings. There are sketches of the movement of people in the city, like studies all over. I am not even saying that "*I am producing a project on this theme*". But I am just working on different things. The whole idea was getting things right and at that time my work is resembling a lot of other artists' work. I have a copy of a William Kentridge which I have just printed online and I am looking at it, it is in the same medium

MAK: *charcoal.*

WB: I am trying to understand

MAK: *this is the charcoal that when you were young you used to paint the walls with*

WB: fire wood, exactly, and now the excitement is big because I realize that I can push it further. When I was a kid, I was limiting it because I was just doing line drawings and no shading. But now I saw that you can use it this way and that way

MAK: *it's potential*

WB: I saw the potential of it, I wanted to push this further and trust me I did make some inroads. I carved my space with the charcoal, I did. My first solo exhibition was in twenty thirteen which was called *Ukumisa Intsika*. You know *Intsika*? Well *Intsika* is like, you see on a Rondavel house, there is one pillar at the centre of the house which holds together the whole structure of the house

MAK: *it is a very important structure of the house*

WB: very important. That structure is like... you know that's why I like our African aesthetics because they always have much more meaning than just colours and shapes and forms. The Rondavel is like the mother, they call it the mother and the supportive pole is *Intsika* the phallic symbol and it is the supportive element

MAK: *the male symbol*

WB: When *Intsika iwa* the mother

MAK: *collapses*

WB: the whole structure collapses because the mother can carry it up to a certain point but would still collapse. Because of the fall of my grandfather you can say my family structure collapsed

MAK: *the title of the exhibition was biographical*

WB: yes, because of the fall of my grandfather things went a little bit sour at home. Family politics this and that

MAK: *family structure*

WB: yes the family structure collapsed. So after my rise as a grandchild in the family I started to reshape things, and things started to come together so I called my solo exhibition *Ukumisa Intsika* because I was returning the power of my grandfather to the family. I was restoring the person. In that show I was really talking about my upbringing and how I became

the guy who restored the family's dignity. I was talking about all the struggle that I went through including *abo black tax* and all these things. I had a lot of texture in the show. This show was only charcoal drawings. I like the fact that charcoal comes from something that is burnt and fire

MAK: *through its destruction*

WB: destruction... now I am taking the same thing, I am creating an image and I am restoring some of the memories. It was a beautiful show, very powerful and I went overboard with it. I wanted to say everything, like some of things that other artists wouldn't say, other people wouldn't say, like you would be shy to talk about. For me I wanted to move on, I wanted to move on so that I can have my steps right.

MAK: *The way I understand you it is like you were closing a particular chapter in your life*

WB: hundred percent

MAK: *sort of coming to terms with the past*

WB: yes

MAK: *and your role in the present, embracing that role in the present*

WB: yes

MAK: *and this was your first solo*

WB: my first solo and I said it is not for sale. I had that show in a museum in Durban, at the Durban Art Gallery. They gave me a very big circular gallery and I had a small room where I showed an installation

MAK: *this is in twenty ...?*

WB: twenty eighteen⁹

MAK: *this is in twenty eighteen, what was the reception of that exhibition*

⁹ What can be of interest here to the perceptive reader is that there seem to be a silence in the life of the artist between the years 2013 – 2017. These could be the years where the artists was preoccupied with finding their own artistic voice in terms of style and media. Unfortunately our conversation does not probe this area of the artist's life further.

WB: Yoh it was crazy, I was all over the place man, from TV to all these magazines. It was like

MAK: *it sort of got you attention*

WB: a lot of attention and it helped other people to open up about where they are coming from. To embrace everything, don't be selective - *you know* - it's part of the texture of life. So people started to embrace

MAK: *who they are*

WB: who they are - *yah* -

MAK: And then your second solo exhibition followed after this one. Where did the second solo exhibition take place?

WB: The second solo exhibition took place in Switzerland, Zurich. I decided to just go out of the country and it was titled *To Find Me*. I had to find myself, to find me in order to become

[Giggles]

MAK: *who you were meant to become, I suppose - yah*

WB: exactly.

MAK: *and this is where the curator of the exhibition responded from a European context to the work that you submitted. You submitted ten artworks and only seven were shown*

WB: exactly, by the way for my first solo... you know leader when I do a show I really want it to be well executed, I had to commission people who I could work with for that exhibition. The Durban Art Gallery have their own curators and staff but I spoke to *Kuleng Mabaso* from the Michaelis School of Fine Art to curate the show. I booked everything. And I had Carlos, I forgot his surname, at that time he was then working for the Goodman Gallery

MAK: *it's not Carlos Amato?*¹⁰

WB: No, *yah* so

¹⁰ This is a miss from me. Carlos Amato is a columnist who used to write for *The Times*, a daily that used to be circulated by the Sunday Times Newspaper. He has recently turned to producing witty cartoons that respond to our socio-political circumstances and more.

MAK: *he worked on your catalogue*

WB: he worked on the catalogue, I wanted to have a good team for the show and everything had to be archived. I felt like these stories are also for my kids, I've got kids. It is very important to archive the work professionally. I strove for that and the work was well archived. I figured that I am going to find myself in Europe and I wanted to understand certain things about my work.

I now started to question myself a little bit about the elements in my work. Some of the elements started to be randomly thrown into my work and I am like "*What are these?*" My routine is such that I don't work during day light. I start to work around half-past-nine in the evening up to half-past-three or four in the morning. During the day I am meeting up with people or I am just driving to the mountains - *you know* - but half-past-nine, for sure I am at the studio. I started to be fascinated by the process and that's when I started to realize that I am really relying more on my intuition. My intuitive memory because I started to borrow the colours, the silhouettes I was talking about, the blue from the full moon, all those greyish

MAK: *those subtle colours*

WB: those subtle colours I would see when I was young but I wasn't sure about. And I was like "*ok these colours are coming from that*", I took a Karrie James Marshall piece and I pasted it here. I took a lot of images of artists who use a lot black. Of course Kerry James Marshall is one of the guys who came first and just painted black people black-black and I wanted to see the difference. I did not want to be like Kerry James Marshall, I really love his work but I wanted to compare our work and I noticed that this is really coming from this and that from me. I realize that the blue was coming from the big *Inanda Dam* and from the sea which all the time was like, in my view

MAK: *and the green colour from the spiritual attire*

WB: exactly

MAK: *and I am not sure, I notice that, you know African churches are those churches that mix traditional healing and Christianity at the same time and I am not sure where you sort of transported this colour, I still want you to tell me about*

this colour. Because I don't want to make a mistake and assume¹¹

WB: Well the thing is, as you say they can always use it for bold and I didn't want to restrict and say this is specifically from this. I guess I just took it from a functional space

MAK: *I understand*

WB: - yah -

MAK: Finally, when I look at your works; I don't want us to discuss them in detail because the catalogue will speak volume on that. I also feel that people need to look at the work, no need for you to discuss the work in detail. There are, if not two, three icons that recur in your work. It is the afro, and then the open space and sometimes it is textured - *you know* - and then there is the skin, the black skin. These are icons that I find fascinating although more and more artists are starting to dabble especially with the skin. I would like you to talk a little bit about that before we close our talk. The afro, what it implies, the skin tone as well as the wonderful background that you paint on your artworks where it looks like it is flowers

WB: flowers yes

MAK: cow dung texture where you paint roughly, obviously it is a painting. It is a different colour, not the earthy colour of cow dung. Can you talk about that please?

¹¹ The green colour that I was asking the artist about carried the theme of the exhibition. Almost all the walls in the main gallery space were painted with this greenish colour. Especially where the work



Figure 3 Wonder Buhle. *Isibindi* (2020). (Detail)

WB: The afros is more like... I just wanted to paint something that would suggest power and beauty. There is a saying, I don't know if it is used in all our languages *ukuthi, ubuhle bo muntu bo ze zinweleni zakhe*

MAK: *I can translate it in Setswana and say bo pila ba motho bo mo moriring wa gae*

WB: exactly

MAK: *and what about guys like us who don't comb our hair*
[Laughs]

WB: [Laughs]

it is beautiful

MAK: It is a symbol of beauty



Figure 4 Wonder Buhle. *Umnqobi* (2020). Acrylic on Canvas. 50 x 50 cm. Private Collection

WB: It is a symbol of confidence, I can put it like that. I have checked. As I said, I borrowed ideas and elements from different sources. You go to your bible and you have Samson with the hair. He is able to move walls and everything to a make change but they can't cut his hair. He will lose the power if they do. So I borrowed that. I am still doing a lot of research based on the hair, that's why I have an afro myself. Each and every hair has a small hole in it and they grow every night but you can't see and there is an energy that we are able to absorb from the universe through these holes

MAK: *that's fascinating to know*

WB: So I was like "Wow *that's interesting*". I like how the research always push a step further to the truth, the world and the universe. That's why I said I want my figures to have all the powers that they deserve. So I am going to keep the hair.

MAK: *Now I understand. And the black, you know this strong dark skin tone. That's what struck me when I first saw your paintings. Obviously it is images, but the tone itself, when you see the eyes, the eyes sparkle. If the person is smiling you see the teeth sparkle. How did you arrive at the decision*

to make your figures dark skinned? And obviously other artists have played around with this as a feature in their artworks¹²

WB: Okay first of all it was a technical thing because I used to use charcoal as my primary medium. Charcoals are very dark and I have always wanted to have strong images because I knew the presentation would be, like - stronger. I wanted my drawings to be bold. With painting I gained so much confidence in that, I even wrote something a couple of years ago that I wanted to be darker than this. You see that mark? I wish I was this colour

[The artist points at a birthmark on his forearm and laughs]

I guess it's also my own fascination with this, and I wanted to spread it all over and the only opportunity I have is to put it in my paintings. By doing so I realize that it was not only coming from one source. The dark Rondavel house of my grandmother is playing significant role right now. I would just see the figures of people moving as silhouettes and the mountains were black and there would be these colours flowing from the stars, your greys as I mentioned earlier, and your purples and I wanted to take that and

[Snaps fingers]

I started layering it on the skin, that's what created the shading of the surface, of the people that I paint. That's how I arrived at this dark colour. *Yah* I deliberately wanted them to be dark, yes as I was saying

MAK: *yes, very biographical how it came about into the painting*

WB: into the painting

MAK: *you are not emulating anybody - you know - that "So and so painted like this and I decided to paint like this."*

WB: yes

MAK: *it comes from the charcoal technique or the use of charcoal and you have worked with charcoal for quite a long time. Then when you started painting you wanted to carry the dark colour forward*

¹² I had to revisit the question of the dark colour or complexion of the subjects in the artworks because at this point in the interview I felt that we had drifted away from it. That the artist hadn't addressed it clearly.

WB: exactly - exactly, but look at how it has joined the bigger narrative of the black

MAK: *world socio-political issues*

WB: now it is like saying other things and it is good. But I like it that the source is pure. So that's how it became part of my production process

MAK: *the wall paper of the background colour, I always think of it as a wall paper. As you said earlier, and you reinforced my interpretation when you said you preferred to have the figure not to be surrounded by anything*

WB: no recording of time

MAK: *yah no recording of time*

WB: in terms of objects and materials

MAK: *I thought of wall paper when I saw your work for the first time. The textured background, the flowers, and I remember reading somewhere that you like flowers, you love flowers. Not like them. You love flowers and that they have a symbolic meaning to you and it connects to something that your grandmother taught you, if I remember correctly from reading the synopsis*

WB: exactly

MAK: Finally I would like you to talk about that in terms of a feature in your works.

WB: This drives me back to twenty eighteen, that's when I started to use them

MAK: *to incorporate the flowers in your work*

WB: in the work, it happened just after the passing of my grandmother. I was overseas in the studio, still in the UK, and I am just having memories. I am thinking about things she used to say to me - *you know* - her teachings

MAK: *she passed on while you were in South Africa and then when you were in the UK it happened that you started to think about her while you were working*

WB: I wanted something that was going to restore one of the precious memories that I remember. I remember her telling me

not to play with the flowers. You see, back home we've got big open green fields and there were specific flowers that she would say "*Don't play on those ones because I see them as lucky flowers*". And I am like ok, they hold fortunes, all these stories. So I referenced that. Now I am in the UK and there are so many things happening around here and the world in general. I asked myself, "*What can I include in the work to purify the images, the pieces or the figures?*"

MAK: *yah to sort of balance this chaos that is happening around the world*

WB: balance the chaos. I need to balance the chaos that I saw in the world. To give them something that would accompany them to wherever they were going to go from here.

MAK: *uh-huh*

WB: I understood that if the work is going to go to someone's house or a museum

MAK: *it's going to be someone else's joy*

WB: And I don't know what the energy is where the work is going. It could be a family that is a happy family or a fighting family, everything is happening. My wish was for that person to sort of feel the purity, that they are being purified either way

MAK: *healing*

WB: Healing. So I thought about *Impepho*. *Impepho* has a flower as well, like a yellowish flower. But we hardly see it because we always find it dry when we need to use it. It's always dry, so the flower shrinks. But there is a flower there and *Impepho* has a very special meaning as well to communicate with your spiritual entities and I took the flower and I fused it with the lucky flower of my grandmother and I took the star. There is a scientific saying that we are also made up of star dust, so I wanted all the energies and I started to charge the artworks¹³

¹³ Compare Figure 1. Wonder Buhle. *Comfort (2020)*, Figure 4. Wonder Buhle. *Isibindi (2020)* and Figure 5. Wonder Buhle. *Comfort (2020)* detail. Notice the stars in Figure 5.



Figure 5 Wonder Buhle. *Isibindi* (2020). Acrylic and metallic gold on canvas. 221 x 162cm. Reserved



Figure 6. Wonder Buhle. *Comfort* (2020). Detail, notice the studs on the shoulder and knee

MAK: *So there is Impepho*

WB: Impepho

MAK: *the lucky flowers*

WB: and the stars

MAK: *I wish we could know the name of the flower*

WB: The lucky flower. I would have to find the name of that flower because my grandmother wouldn't say the name. If I can find an old lady who can identify it for me

MAK: *because that's indigenous knowledge system*

WB: It is a very indigenous knowledge system. So I fused the three and I came up with the symbols to charge the figures with, to purify them, to give them a guidance and to give them a space of belonging so you can see or track where they belong. It doesn't matter where they are going in the world but if they have this, they will have a sense of belonging

MAK: *yes*

WB: So that's how I reached this part. I always paint them into the work, sometimes in the fabric of the subjects' clothes, sometimes directly on their skin

[*Slaps his forearm*]

If I do that it's like when I am leaving home. If I am in the village and I am embarking on a journey, I have to tell the ancestors, they have to burn *Ipepho*, "*Umfana is leaving now, be with him and protect him.*" It is the same process that I do with the work. The moment I start to layer those symbols it is like I am doing the same process, wherever they are going

MAK: *you are blessing the artworks and the artworks become a blessing to the person who is going to accommodate them in their home*

WB: yes!

MAK: *they are not just artworks*

WB: No

MAK: *they are blessings*

WB: they are blessings, they are blessings.

MAK: Now finally in closing *uhm* tell me about the exhibition, this present exhibition. What do you hope to accomplish with

it. Your third solo exhibition in Johannesburg in a young fresh gallery. What do you wish to accomplish with this exhibition?

WB: Comfort is like, everybody knows Comfort but, I did not want to generalize it in any way. It's like speaking on a one sided story of comfort, I wanted really to give. One thing about me leader I want the work or the projects to always say something about the space that I am currently occupying as a person. With this one, I am realizing balance as I move, let me put it like that, I have to balance my spiritual life with this naked eye, the physical eye that everybody sees objects and materials with.

But I realize that, also very important, that it doesn't matter what you do to feed that spiritual side of yourself but you have to put in time - *you know* - so that it feels like you are living your life to the fullest. So with *Comfort* I want to give people the perspective of texture that I have encountered and I am still encountering in my life. I have pieces that would tell you about my family, like how things are now. Someone who was there during my first solo exhibition¹⁴

MAK: *someone who is following you*

WB: Someone who is following me and now if they are checking on this one they should feel like "Ok." - *you know*- as I said it's a journey. I have pieces from my first solo and second solo exhibitions and the conversations that they carry have modelled-out what is happening now in this show. To give people a perspective but it is really about me being comfortable in speaking my language, comfortable about *uhm* of course my... *how can I put this?*

Mostly I want to say belonging because I realize that I have a lot of people who ask me where am I from and when I say I am from Africa they say "Oh, we thought you were from America or what-what". They don't believe it because my studio is very big, bigger than this whole space and it's like big glasses. My studio is by the beach in Durban and they think I am from overseas and I am home. We have what you have there. Comfort is part of a response to say "You don't need to be in Europe."

¹⁴ By now the reader might have noticed that Wonder Buhle uses the word *texture* when he implies experience or experiences.

MAK: *I get you*

WB: I can still be home and be me

MAK: *be comfortable*

WB: be comfortable in my own pain because I understand. It's like you looking at the country, many bad things are happening. Some of the things we shouldn't be comfortable about but we are because we are so used to this pain

MAK: *it is our staple diet*

WB: exactly! It's like "Oh, eish it's one of those days." But it is something that you need to work out. So *Comfort*, this show, it is touching base on all those things, to be comfortable in pain, to be comfortable in a space where you shouldn't be and in a space where you should be. It is a delay in a process of becoming something new. So it is a very tricky

MAK: *I get you this way: that if you can be comfortable with who you are, be comfortable with your surroundings - you know - then you do not delay the process of what's coming in your life*

WB: exactly

MAK: *because you are at peace with this moment! Well I would like to wish you well with this exhibition, I mean you cannot explain the rationale of this exhibition more than you have. And I think that the people will visit the show and they will look at the catalogue and also read this conversation and a lot of things will make sense to them. But it would be interesting to see a decade of art practice - you know - what kind of a conversation you will be having, to get to know you on a personal level.*

It has been an enlightening experience to hear about your upbringing. The moment the spark of art hit you. Your experience at the BAT Art Center, your enrollment at the program with Durban University of Technology and later on you being featured at a space at the Africa Centre - you know - It talks about an evolution of an artist who is trying to find himself as an artist and refine himself towards perfection and I thank you for staying the course as an artist.

WB: Thank you very much my leader, it has been a great pleasure to have this conversation. As I said, I always do

small pieces to answer questions but to have a conversation like this is good because it also helps me to reflect better about where I am coming from. I am an independent artist, I have never been signed but I have been very blessed with so much opportunities. The growth of the work has been truly amazing, opening many doors for me and because of that I have grown as a person. One thing about artists, of which I have always been fighting in my upbringing is that I don't want only my work to progress. I want to progress in life as well as a person and I have achieved that. Things are moving exactly in the right direction and one thing that I did not mention, one thing that is very important. I have gold in my pieces.

MAK: Oh yes! I have seen there is a piece actually, although I did not want us to take away the surprise. There is a piece called Bayeza, there is somebody who is looking at the far distance



Figure 7. Wonder Buhle. Bayeza (2020). 30 x 30 cm. Mixed media on canvas. Private collection

WB: yes

MAK: there is this gold feel to the work - you know- so what does it signify this gold?

WB: I am sorry to bring you back, it's very important. I had a dream of myself walking by the beach. It is in the morning and

I am walking by the sea shore. Every time the water comes out it leaves gold and it goes back again, you see how the ocean works?

MAK: *yes*

WB: The waves kept doing that and I was picking gold and putting it into my pockets every time and there was a lot of gold and I am walking in it now and I was laughing at what am I going to do with the gold. I am taking the gold, it is all over my pockets now and I can't take more

MAK: *you can't take more*

WB: and then I woke up,

[Snaps fingers]

I had to think "what is this?"

MAK: *uhm*

WB: I went to see someone, I had this dream; can you explain maybe? I am looking for answers. The person said there is no big stories about this. This simply means one thing, wealth. This gold, they explained, is either there was one grandfather who was rich and you don't know about him or your grandmother, your greatest, was coming to visit you in your dream to show you that you have the power to claim the wealth. And I was like "Wow, that's powerful." Of course I would think about our richness as African people

MAK: *yes*

WB: our minerals, our kingdom - *you know* - and I was like I need to use this gold. That's when I started to

MAK: *to incorporate it*

WB: to incorporate it, I had to look for gold paint. In Durban it is very hard to find many materials but I found it and I was like "yes" and I used it and it blended like this with my black figures. So I am managing again with that

[Laughs]

MAK: Well thank you for taking us through that. Wonder thanks a lot for seeing me

WB: *Ngiyabonga kakhulu*

MAK: I wish you all the best in your career. I am hoping that one day again we get to sit and carry the story forward

WB: hundred percent my leader

MAK: thank you,

WB: *Ngiyabonga kakhulu eish, this was nice*

MAK: *kubonga mina*

WBuhle: You see leader I am very bad with story telling, I am good with painting

[Laughs]

I become very scattered but I am glad that I managed to answer some of the questions the way that I feel, to be honest about everything so that you get the real thing. I am sure when you come to see the show tomorrow you are going to feel it on another level

MAKgokong: Yes! Tomorrow I will come and see the show

Wonder Buhle: Thank you.

Mmutle Arthur Kgokong: Thank you.

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The soundtrack playing in the final mix of the audio interview, *Nomaphupho*, from the album *Open Letter to Adoniah (2016)*, courtesy of Sibusile Xaba.

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Figure 4. Wonder Buhle. Umnqobi (2020). Acrylic on Canvas. 50 x 50 cm. Private Collection

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Figure 7. Wonder Buhle. Bayeza (2020). 30 x 30 cm. Mixed media on canvas. Private collection. Catalogue