

# Spectacle, scrutiny and sleights of hand: Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi's *Stadium*

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The body of the athlete, in art history, often represents an ideal, the ultimate to which the human body may be perfected. The painter, sculptor and photographer act on the right of access to this body, presenting it as a cipher for the closest mortals may come to achieving divine beauty. Portraying athletic bodies in artworks has also been a way of drawing attention to the artist's skill, their ability to capture straining muscle and the athlete's will; often it is about redirecting the gaze and adoration to the artist's prowess.

The athlete is expected to invite – if not enjoy – the intimacy of scrutiny; it is as if in attempting to journey towards the limits of the human body's ability, they open themselves up for dissection. Those who judge athletic feats are given the right to critique, to attach numbers, to the athletes' performance. Audiences, too, feel invited to inspect the movements of sinew and joint as the athletes endeavour towards fulfilling expectations. Positioned for view on the arena, their bodies become objects towards which audiences may fully fix their gaze without shame. Envy, longing and desire are deflected into the imperative to assess the athlete, to point out their errors. Perhaps that allows the viewer to feel some semblance of power over them: *the idealised figure is imperfect after all*.

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Umbrella of cover

Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi's focus, as a painter, is not on a single athlete's performance, nor on any individual body, but on the pressures created by public performance, as well as the structures of the collective: the team. The visual narrative is often directed towards the canopy that community provides, to the refuge athletes find alongside fellow competitors, who understand what it means to perform – not only to work incessantly and single-mindedly towards extraordinary goals, but also to be positioned for inspection and judgement.

Although Nkosi is also known for portrait painting, the distancing created by the near absence of facial features in her paintings of sporting events frees audiences from the desire to direct their attention towards individual subjects. The focus is, instead, on the collective experience – both the performers and the watchers, what they create together, and the power relations in this dynamic. While the athletes' bodies, and their superhuman abilities, are the focus of every eye – and every lens – there are many contradictions in how power works, or expresses itself, in the arena of competition.

The spectators' gaze is often erroneously thought to be directed only at those who embody power – someone we desire to possess, control, or be. When we watch athletes in competition, and the seemingly

impossible accomplishments of their vital, powerful bodies, it seems that it is they who embody power. But the origin of the gaze is more often where power is truly located. Nkosi's work reveals that the athlete's power exists in relation to those who evaluate them – whether in the form of the long table of judges often depicted in her *Gymnasium* series, or the officials in her more recent *Stadium* works. Sometimes, the judges are not visible in Nkosi's paintings; at others, the presence of an evaluator is reduced to a foot, peeking out from under a table. Whether visible, abstracted, or out of frame, the evaluator-judges – and the power they represent over the lives of the athletes (as public performers) – are ever present.

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The right to opacity

In *Poetics of Relation* (1990), the Martiniquais cultural theorist and poet Édouard Glissant (1928–2011) called for “the right to opacity for everyone” (*le droit à l'opacité pour tous*). Arguing for this right, he added, is to argue for irreducibility; it is “not merely [agreeing] to the right to difference but, carrying this further, agree[ing] also to the right to opacity that is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy, but subsistence with an irreducible singularity”<sup>1</sup>.

Colonial and white supremacist encounters with the “other” have always been characterised by the desire to map, document, control and contain. They require that the “other” be available to scrutiny: “If we examine the process of ‘understanding’ people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought,” Glissant pointed out, “we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency.”<sup>2</sup> This expectation – that the “inscrutable” natives subject themselves to the X-ray of the colonial gaze, and make themselves available for examination, dissection, evaluation – is not only reductive, but dehumanising. It expresses confusion when it encounters something outside the normative range – and the usual response to that inability to comprehend is to attempt to control, to punish, to excise that excess.

As a tool of postcolonial resistance, the right to opacity is an ethical and political claim. Operating in arenas where the power imbalances are deeply lopsided – where to occupy the focus of the gaze gives one the semblance of power (in being the object of desire), but not the power to direct one's life – opacity becomes a tool of self-protection. This practice – wilful, purposeful inscrutability – becomes calculated weaponry against the violence that comes with expectations for transparency.

Perhaps, when we encounter the opacity of Nkosi's athletes, it may encourage us to reflect on the external

structures that create the violent processes and erasures that athletes are forced to encounter. It may turn our gaze towards our own inner lives, and the ways in which we, too, are routinely violated by others' scrutiny, and how we, in turn, violate others with the expectation that they be totally available and comprehensible to us.

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*Stadium*

The paintings in *Stadium* grew out of a short film the artist made in 2022, as part of a broader public art project created to coincide with the 2022 Commonwealth Games. Titled *The Same Track*, the film uses select clips of archival footage of Games athletes, spectators and administrators cut together with images of economic and promotional activity in various British colonies; the conjoined fragments explore the structures through which the Games reinforce extractive relations through symbolic and ceremonial repetition and refrain.

Where unequal relations exist, as sociologist Marcel Mauss argues, it is even more important to foreground ceremony and excess, to “display generosity, freedom, and autonomous action, as well as greatness”, all while obligating compliance. It is through ceremonial and excessive gift-giving that the “mechanisms of obligation, and even of obligation through things ... are [still] called into play”.<sup>3</sup>

On the surface, the Commonwealth Games are centred on performances of athleticism and ceremonial displays that speak of relational ties, largesse and generous inclusion. But spectacle also ensures that the violence at the heart of Britain's relations with its former colonies remains concealed. Athletes, as idealised figures, unwittingly bear the symbolic burden of being the shiny objects essential for the conjuror's act.

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In the seven paintings in this exhibition, Nkosi examines the drama of a single moment during a track and field event, as viewed from several angles and perspectives. Anticipation is palpable in each synchronous chapter of this visual narrative, even though the athletes themselves are only present in one scene.

A woman in a tailored jacket – hair parted through the middle, held aloft in a neat bun – cups binoculars to her eyes. A bespectacled woman with cropped hair, wearing a sleeveless blue blouse, holds her camera close to her face, right index finger already hovering over the shutter release; her companion – a pastel pink suit jacket thrown loosely around her shoulders – seems more relaxed. In another scene, members of the press huddle on the track, cameras poised towards the “action”. Behind the photographers, far from the range of their lenses,

distant palm trees stand serene against a pale blue sky. Their unruly fronds seem all the more out of place here, in the midst of this constructed order and heightened anticipation – their presence hints, perhaps, at a less-often-photographed world beyond the confines of the stadium.

The tunnel through which the athletes ceremonially enter the space of competition – the lowest point of the stadium, allowing maximum visibility from the stands – was, earlier, the likely focus of all those eyes and lenses. Now it is empty, a passage that suggests – again – a less visible world. Behind the podium, which awaits triumphant athletes, the great shadow of the grandstand looms. The spectre of the stands, positioned behind the podium, tells another story – that the audience, cheering, judging, is the dark shadow behind all temporary triumphs.

Then, Nkosi's painting of the runners. Although the race is, nominally, the centre of the drama, the painting of the runners is, tellingly, the smallest canvas in the sequence. The diminished dimensions of this work accentuate the thesis that athletes are hardly the repositories of true power. Their bodies appear to will themselves forward; legs stretching, arms whirling wide as a windmill's, their necks and heads straining. Look closely and the construct of competition is revealed as a façade. The athletes are not in their lanes; their limbs, in places, overlap mischievously. One athlete at the front of this tight pack, positioned on one of the innermost lanes, appears to be running particularly comfortably – if sprinting can ever be “comfortable”. The roar of the crowd, shutters, and whatever social and financial rewards may have been dangled in front of her have been reappraised. All of that has been evaluated as briskly as the cameras trained on her are able to read, resolve and capture rapidly transforming information. Everything has been compartmentalised into an assigned space of non-interference; nothing is in her way. All that is in *her* viewfinder is her agency – the magical ability to centre oneself as the sole location of all that is possible – and the moment of meditative space that the track offers. The space between her meditation and everything that swirls around it – inside the stadium, and beyond its limits – is itself charged with possibility. It is here, in between the pieces of this fractured, fluid moment – that Nkosi situates the viewer.

1 See Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2006), 190.  
2 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 189–90.  
3 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge, 1990), 29.



Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi, *Equal Elevation (Silver and Bronze)*, 2023, oil on linen, 100 × 100cm