OF HEROES AND HEROINES: A SLAVE ODYSSEY
JUAN STOCKENSTROOM
My work is informed by my upbringing and experiences as a person of mixed race and heritage (termed “colored”) in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. I extract from my life experiences to create my work.

I work under the moniker of a fictional character called King Champion. King Champion is the finder and custodian of ancient stories. What stories, you ask? The lost and distorted historical narratives of the African continent and its diaspora. Stories our ancestors buried to keep them safe from a gaze that distorted them. Stories about who we are and who we come from. Stories about where we come from and how we came to be.

King Champion is a listener, a seer: an artist whose ear stretches through time to bring history into the present. Listening for the stories of men and women who are ready and wanting to speak now, who want us to hear and remember them. King Champion searches for the invisible stories that line our streets and sing in the wind. He collects the songs and phrases, the images and memories. One by one, he remembers them with brush on canvas, with acrylic and ink, with words etched into images.

King Champion’s canvasses are mirrors through time, showing you histories you might not know, that live within and around you. And, like a mirror, each image offers a different reflection to whoever chooses to stand before it. His stories are not easy to read. Where you might find comfort and affirmation, another might be confronted and questioned. However, King Champion is not concerned with your reading of each story – his work is simply its re-telling.

In this way, my work is multi-layered. My paintings are reconstructions, remixes and re-imaginings of these historical narratives. I juxtapose these visual images and portraits with mythology, handwriting in multiple languages, symbols, cryptology, gang culture and high culture. Thus, presenting ambiguous narratives, and creating a Visual Creole.

Juan Stockenstroom is a South African artist, born in 1982 in Cape Town, where he grew up. He started out working in the medium of photography and digital art. However, after a number of years in this medium, he found it limiting and so abandoned it. In 2018, he started working in painting, finding this medium more expansive and thus more suitable for exploring the themes and ideas with which his work is concerned.
OF HEROES AND HEROINES: A SLAVE ODYSSEY
2018 - 2019

Is a non-linear continuous and interwoven body of work created at the beginning of 2019 by the artist. It is made up of singular paintings which are all connected containing multiple extracts of larger themes and narratives which have then been split up and reconfigured, acting like a jigsaw puzzle. Rich with historical references from various countries in Africa and its diaspora, as well as contemporary cultural notes from his mixed heritage and home country, South Africa, Stockenstroom’s colourful and animated canvases, appear somewhat imposing and demand the viewers’ attention. The common thematic denominators stringing the work together is slavery, heroes and heroines. Stories of various little-known modern and historical subjects juxtaposed with personal commentary that in some cases draws parallels to both historical and modern-day western culture. In the series the artist employs both roughly drawn and graphic imagery to engage with the audience; depicting struggles both internal and external between the old and new.

Striking in saturation and violently raw brushstrokes the visuals are combined with pasted scraps of recreated historical archival documentation and symbolic text, pushing the viewer through an enigmatic frenzied visual universe which at the same time is somewhat familiar.

The use of the same vibrant language is a constant element narrating a different story within each painting. Visually, the works have layers of bold colours and as the texture thickens the velocity builds up. Colours are placed on top of each other, without being blended, as they come straight from the paint tube. On the surface, the content is presented to the viewer as edible snapshots and soundbites. Yet upon further investigation, a much deeper narrative appears. The closer one looks at the paintings the more the viewer finds to explore and question. Characters peer from dark hidden corners while words, symbols and barely familiar text appear beneath layers of bold primary colours.
Hottentot Venus, 2019
Acrylic, oil, 24K gold leaf and ink on canvas
70x50cm

Sarah “Saartjie” Bartman was a South African Khoikhoi woman who was exhibited as a freak show attraction in 19th-century Europe under the name Hottentot Venus. “Hottentot” was the name for the Khoi people, now considered an offensive term and “Venus” referred to the Roman goddess of love.
The Scramble for Azania, 2019
Acrylic, Ink on canvas
100x70cm

This work explores how the continent of Africa was occupied, divided and colonised by Western European powers during the period of the New Imperialism, between 1881 -1914.
Ma se kind (Mothers child), 2019  
Acrylic, oil stick and ink on canvas  
100x100cm

This work explores the relationship between mother and child, investigating themes of slavery, addiction and death. It also examines the lives of Ellen Pakkies and Margaret “Peggie” Garner - Mothers who ended the lives of their own children due to extreme circumstances.

Death and the Kings Grey Hair , 2019  
Acrylic, oil stick and ink on canvas  
100x100cm

This work is inspired by the writings of Nigerian Poet Denja Abdullahi. Death and the Kings Grey (of the same title) is a play woven around a “Jukun myth of young kings and short reigns”. The play opens in a controversial circumstance over the supposed long reign of King Esutu, which is against the tradition of the land.
Martha Grey, Countess of Stamford (c. 1838 – 21 August 1916) (born Martha Solomons) in Cape Town, South Africa. She was the daughter of a freed slave. In 1864, she met the Reverend Harry Grey, a clergyman from Cheshire in England and a cousin of the 7th Earl of Stamford. Harry Grey was sent to the Cape on a remittance as a result of habits his family thought dishonourable. In 1880, Harry and Martha were married; they lived in Wynberg, Cape Town. Martha bore Harry three children. Upon the death of the 7th Earl, the Earldom of Stamford passed to Harry Grey, and Martha became Countess of Stamford.
This work juxtaposes various historical narratives of South Africa’s colonial history, with present day happenings on the Cape Flats of Cape Town, while also examining various mythological, and ancient texts from the Khoisan, Torah and classical Greek mythology literature.

This work investigates multiple themes of historical and current narratives within South Africa, which include the 1950’s Group Areas act, the discrimination and commoditization of African hair and hair products and the high crime rates to which South Africans have become desensitized to.
Imma keep dancin , 2019
Acrylic, oil and ink on canvas
150x120cm

This work investigates the history of Islam and slavery in South Africa. It examines various historical narratives in relation to the covert use of melody and dance as a practice of religious worship and resistant protest.
Pretty Boy, 2019  
Acrylic, oil and ink on canvas  
59x42cm

This work depicts the character “Pretty Boy” found in the novel - Buckingham Palace - District six by South African Writer and academic Richard Rive.

King Sugar, 2018  
Acrylic, oil and ink on canvas  
41x31cm

This work explores the historical role of the sugar industry in South Africa, juxtaposed with what “appears” to be a boxer sitting on his corner seat in-between rounds at a boxing match.
This work explores the representation and often lack of people of colour within classical ballet. It pays homage to the early pioneers such as Janet Collins to modern day principle dancer: Misty Copeland.
An Inconvenient Truth, 2019
Acrylic, oil stick and ink on canvas
150x120cm

This work examines multiple themes which include classical African literature, homophobia, the Atlantic slave trade and the covert use of racism in popular culture.

Mestizo Castico, 2019
Acrylic, oil stick and ink on paper
42x59cm

This work explores the abolishment of the slave trade in South Africa in the 1800's, juxtaposed with references to modern-day human trafficking.
Unsung Hero, The Revolt, Act 1, 2018
Acrylic Olistick and Ink on Canvas
52x42cm

This work explores the life of Louis Van Maritius – a slave from Mauritius who lead the first slave revolt in 1808 in the Cape of Good Hope.
This work explores the often overlooked characters in the boxing world known as Journeymen. A Journeyman is often brought in as a “lamb to the slaughter” to fight a favoured fighter. His main purpose is to lose.

This work explores identity politics within one of South Africa’s most heterogeneous ethnic groups termed as “coloureds” (mixed race).
Queen Mulatto, 2019
Acrylic and ink on canvas
76x60cm

This work explores the shrouded figure of Queen Charlotte, better known as Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz the wife of King George III.
This work on canvas explores the slave history of the island of Madagascar.
Alpha Black Gold, 2019
Acrylic and ink on canvas
29x29cm

This small work on canvas pays tribute to Josia Thugwane - The first black South African to win gold medal at the Olympic Games.

The Professor, 2019
Acrylic, oil pastel and ink on canvas
100x100cm

This work depicts Azumah Nelson - a Ghanaian former professional boxer. Widely considered the greatest African boxer of all time. His ring name was dubbed the professor as he often “schooled” his opponents in the ring.
Fleeing Freeman, 2019
Acrylics, oil stick and pastel on canvas
29x42cm

This work depicts the journey of a slave brought to “The Cape of Good Hope” during the 1800’s and how he bought his freedom.
Berman Contemporary is rooted in the growing understanding of the cultural richness and diversity of South African contemporary art. The gallery’s collection centres on a vibrant group of artists living and working in South Africa.

Through studio visits, the gallery establishes connections to artists from all walks of life whose unique artistic processes celebrate their historical and cultural heritage and give voice to their complex societal realities, evoking an active and interpretative experience for the viewer.

Berman Contemporary was established to promote the work created by these local artists. The gallery further aims to establish a synergistic network between South African artists and their global contemporaries, many of whom evidently want to engage with the current South African art scene – not only as observers, but as active analysts, experimenters and contributors within this context and with this specific audience in mind.
BERMAN CONTEMPORARY
SOUTH AFRICAN ART
bermancontemporary.com
gallery@bermancontemporary.co.za
+27 (0)84 843 8302
bermancontemporary