

ARTFORUM

Bogosi Sekhukhuni

FOXY PRODUCTION

So much for small talk. For his solo debut in North America, Bogosi Sekhukhuni positioned the exhibition's unwieldiest artwork at the gallery's entrance. The video by NTU (Bogosi Sekhukhuni with Nolan Oswald Dennis and Tabita Rezaire) *Thus Saith the Lord (Overunity)*, 2015, opens with a narrator arguing in voice-over that science's rationalist paradigm fails to account for the multiple historical figures who have attributed their major discoveries to visions or dreams. Blurry jpeg portraits of Dmitri Mendeleev, Srinivasa Ramanujan, and Albert Einstein flash across the screen, leading finally to Sangulani Maxwell Chikumbutso, the Zimbabwean founder and chief technology officer of Saith Holdings. Energetic and voluble, Chikumbutso tells his life story, invoking both Nikola Tesla and Bible scripture to explain how a religious awakening inspired him to develop cutting-edge technology. A second video documented Chikumbutso's employees reciting prayers in Saith's corporate showroom. They murmur and gesticulate with focused fervor as they circle a car, a helicopter, and other Saith-brand products.

"Things are a bit stale," said Sekhukhuni in a 2014 interview. "The '80s babies have become complacent and maybe too comfortable in this weird role of the artist as social commentator but not social reimager." Sekhukhuni was referring specifically to the cultural climate of Johannesburg, where he is part of the generation of '90s babies who were the first to grow up in a postapartheid South Africa. Nevertheless, his observation reverberates with a question that has lately rattled the humanities more broadly: Has critique run out of steam? Was it merely a function of my being a stale child of Reagan's 1980s that my initial reaction to *Thus Saith the Lord* was to seek from it some comment on faith's persistence in secular modernity, or religion's resurgence in the wake of globalization, or the latent spiritualism of technophilia—all commonplaces I could have gleaned just as easily from browsing the headlines on Huffington Post?

A few Google searches reveal that Chikumbutso has made several implausible claims regarding his inventions. Sekhukhuni edited these out of his video—in part, I suspect, because they would enable viewers to establish a critical distance from Chikumbutso, to write off Saith Holdings as quackery. Experiencing *Thus Saith the Lord* as a project of “social reimagining” rather than as social commentary requires taking Chikumbutso’s vision seriously. His merger of advertising and proselytizing mirrors Sekhukhuni’s own practice of fusing together seemingly incommensurable epistemologies. In the video *Dream Diary Season 2*, 2017, Sekhukhuni stands before a buoyantly animated blue screen and makes proclamations saturated with references to social-media user agreements, postcolonial theory, ancestor worship, DNA analysis, and television end credits. The drawing *Query: where to from*



NTU (Bogosi Sekhukhuni with Nolan Oswald Dennis and Tabita Rezaire), *Thus Saith the Lord (Overunity)*, 2015, digital video, color, sound, 5 minutes 59 seconds.

here? (02-10-17), 2018, annotates the names of Egyptian deities with lifestyle buzzwords such as health and work/career. For *GRAVITY*, 2018, Sekhukhuni plops a bowling ball at the center of an exercise trampoline, a pairing informed by both Marcel Duchamp and a textbook analogy for how planetary masses warp space. Readymade sports equipment transforms into a cosmos-in-miniature.

The overall impact of the exhibition would have been very different had Sekhukhuni opened with *Consciousness Engine 2: absentblackfatherbot*, 2014, the earliest and most autobiographical work on view. The two-channel video shows digital avatars of Sekhukhuni and his estranged father performing a dialogue based on their actual correspondence over Facebook. The back-and-forth is all small talk, mostly about music acts such as John Legend and the Roots. Though related by blood, the pair can connect only through exports from the American culture industry. Underneath *absentblackfatherbot*’s personal pathos lies the assurance that, from Johannesburg to New York, the internet—and perhaps the art market—has become a frictionless conduit for globalized exchange. By contrast, *Thus Saith the Lord* suggests that the era of Facebook is also the era of Saith Holdings, when incompatible worldviews coexist in ways that cannot be simply dismissed as false consciousness or fake news. In place of a welcome mat, Sekhukhuni has laid down an ethical challenge, asking viewers to learn not to believe everything they see on the internet while also embracing multiple systems of belief.

—Colby Chamberlain