



**THERO MAKEPE**

IT'S NOT GOING TO GET BETTER





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**THERO MAKEPE**

6 June 2025 – 31 July 2025

**UCT Centre for African Studies - CAS Gallery**

Harry Oppenheimer Institute  
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Upper Campus  
Rondebosch, Cape Town

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**VELA  
PROJECTS**

**THERO MAKEPE**  
**IT'S NOT GOING TO GET BETTER**

LIST OF WORKS



***Broken Hearts***, 2024  
Pigment print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag  
100 x 75 cm  
Edition of 5 plus 2 artist's proofs  
Aluminium and wood frame with glass



***Lerato***, 2024  
Pigment print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag  
100 x 75 cm  
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Aluminium and wood frame with glass



***Civil Obedience***, 2024  
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***Modimo a mo Tlamele***, 2024  
Pigment print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag  
49 x 38 cm  
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***Insurance***, 2024  
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***Mokgokolosa***, 2024  
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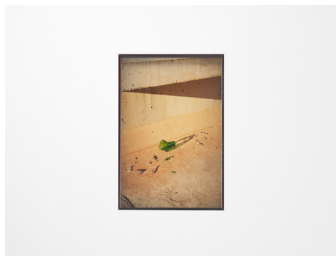
***Moral Compass*, 2024**  
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***The Place that Dried Up*, 2023**  
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***Re Mmogo Akere?* 2024**  
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100 x 75 cm  
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***Shattered Dreams*, 2023**  
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34 x 26 cm  
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Vela Projects is proud to present *It's Not Going to Get Better*, an exhibition by Botswana-based artist **THERO MAKEPE**, with the **Centre for African Studies (CAS)** at the University of Cape Town.

Originally premiered at Vela Projects in 2024, this presentation arrives at a particularly significant moment and in a particularly resonant space. The Centre for African Studies has long been a site of rigorous intellectual and artistic inquiry, grounded in the critical traditions of the global South. We are excited to see Makepe's work engaged in conversation with such a dynamic academic community.

*It's Not Going to Get Better* is crafted as response to a wave of global electoral fever. 2024 was a year which saw more than 100 countries, and approximately half of the world's population, heading to national polls. Focusing on the Botswana General Elections, Makepe interprets the tenor on the ground of a country that is often held as the poster child of a peaceful African democracy. Despite promises of freedom and opportunity, in this late-capitalist moment, the lead-up to the election seemed bleak.

The exhibition title, drawn from "*Remorseless*," a rap song by Billy Woods, explores the pessimism and disillusionment of Millennials and Gen Z who, as so-called 'born frees,' have been promised a better life and upward mobility. Makepe seeks to capture a mood that reflects

the murky and shifting nature of the oppression faced by younger generations. In the words of Lee Chan Dong, the Korean film director of *Burning* (2018), one of the cinematic inspirations for the show, "*There is an ambiguity in the world we live in that seems to reflect no clear answer to the questions we have today. I feel like young people have realized that there's something wrong in this world, but it's very difficult to figure out exactly what is causing the problems and what lies underneath.*"

Throughout this exhibition, Makepe pursues a constructed mode of image-making—a style he developed during previous bodies of work such as *Fly Machine/Mogaka* (2018) and *We Didn't Choose to be Born Here* (2020–2022). Much like a painter 'creating something out of thin air,' Makepe enjoys staging tableaux that support his narratives, existing deliberately in the ambiguous space between documentary and fiction. These scenes draw from the everyday experiences of life in the city, but they seem heightened, amplifying the underlying sense of tension and unease.

His figures often appear in moments of stasis, suggesting a lethargy born from despondence. For instance, in the image entitled *Mokgokolosa* (2024), which translates as *A Downward Slope*, a man is seated behind a drum set. His eyes are downturned, his hands are folded in his lap, and he is surrounded by everyday objects. Despite being too

old for teenage dreams of stardom, behind him burglar bars are spread out in a starburst above his head. Part saint, part martyr, he appears to be waiting for something to happen.

In the image *Re Mmogo Akere? (We are together, right?)* (2024) a man stumbles on the sidewalk at sunset while, nearby, another man is fixated by his smartphone. This staging may reflect a sense of limbo or entrapment that is often felt by people who live local lives but are simultaneously engaged in a constant intermeshing of global culture, news, and social concerns. As Makepe aptly observes:

*We are participants and bystanders at the same time. There's a conundrum of being concerned about international affairs while ignoring the pertinent issues right in front of you.*

In the contemporary world, we are able to connect with and respond to news and information from all over the globe, but attention to our immediate environment becomes diverted. We are immobilized with choice and consumption at the cost of social life. To quote Lee Chang Dong once more, "It seems that the world we live in continues to become more and more sophisticated, convenient and cool on the outside, but there are so many problems underneath that we can't really discern."

A consequence of this context is a pervasive shift from communalism to individualism that Makepe explores throughout the show in works such as *Moral Compass* (2024). The scornful expression on the finely dressed woman in the foreground seems to suggest that even the elite are not at ease. Whilst this shift may be felt worldwide, Makepe argues that it is particularly resonant within the African continent:

During pre-colonial Africa and even during the liberation struggles on the continent, there were collective goals that people organized towards. But now, that's not the case; problems are more individualized. Because the problems are trapped within individuals, people are far more isolated and prone to nihilism.

In response, Makepe emphasises the collaborative nature of his practice. He uses family and close friends as models and will tap into their experiences, stories, and memories. In his words:

*Whilst some images I make are highly staged or fictional, others are more rooted in reality, as I photograph people I know personally in situations they find themselves in regularly. In either scenario, the subjects of my images are conduits for broader social contexts in Botswana that relate to their social class, gender, or age.*

One may consider *Modimo a mo Tlamele* (2024), which Makepe shot with the assistance of his uncle. An elderly man stands with his hands



clasped in front of his tucked shirt, a single crutch hangs from his right forearm, and his eyes are closed. The title, which translated means *God Protect Them*, has a somber yet defiant tone. Despite appearing to be in pain, a warm glow lights one side of the man's face, suggestive of the divine, while he is placed in the quietness of a cleanly swept pavement at sunset.

Makepe's images, sometimes quiet, sometimes dominating, show the lives of everyday people and depict scenes that are indeed beautiful, but remain tragic and problematic. The scrutiny of Makepe's lens makes us consider the lives we live. Rather than condemnation, Makepe's photographs ask that we take the time to look at the lives of those around us, both known and unknown.

In relation to his home country, Makepe seeks to expand a contextual understanding of Botswana. He hopes to offer a counter-narrative for a country which seems to be predominantly depicted for its wildlife, natural beauty, and rural culture. Despite this, there is, for Makepe, a sense of emptiness and alienation within its urban life. Through his lens as an auteur, Makepe provokes:

*I don't aim to provide solutions, but I ask why things will not get better... Ultimately, it's not clear exactly how to move forward; it's all a mystery, and that's what's central to my work.*

Now, at the end of 2024, the pessimism of the title may seem particularly piercing. Botswana's elections delivered an unprecedented defeat of the ruling party that has governed in Botswana since the country's independence 58 years ago. It was a landslide victory for Dumo Boko, aged 54, for whom young voters made up about a third of the more than one million people registered to vote in the arid and sparsely populated country.

Even Makepe is hopeful that this change may bring marginal gains in freedom of expression, voter suppression, and political engagement amongst a population that he describes as more passive than those of its neighbours in Southern Africa. Still, it is a future which, at best, remains unclear.

We believe that Makepe's work, rooted in place, rich with ambiguity, and committed to critical seeing contributes meaningfully to ongoing conversations about how we think, study, and imagine Africa in the present and the future.

We invite students, faculty, researchers, and the wider public to engage with these works, not only as photographs, but as provocations toward reflection, recognition, and the reimagining of collective futures.



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Hennessy

WATCHDOG  
MAD MAX  
MAD MAX  
MAD MAX

PSP  
PSP

Dulux  
Capitol PVA  
Dulux  
Capitol PVA

Long  
Candy





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## **THERO MAKEPE**

Thero Makepe was born in 1996. He was born and raised in Gaborone, Bostwana. Currently, he lives between Gaborone, Cape Town and Johannesburg.



#### GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2024 – *Process Projected: Tender Photo*, What Is Happening Here Gallery (Amsterdam)
- 2024 – *The Purpose is Discourse: Curators' Kiki*, Stevenson (Johannesburg)
- 2024 – *Foam Talent 2024-2025*, Foam Museum (Amsterdam)
- 2024 – *INDEX*, Latitudes Art Fair (Johannesburg)
- 2024 – *Becoming Visible*, Autograph (Online)
- 2023 – *Yo O Sa Leleng*, Botswana National Museum (Gaborone)
- 2022 – *Good Neighbours*, NIROX Sculpture Park (Johannesburg)
- 2022 – *The Botswana Pavilion: Maš(w)i a Ditoro (tsa Rona)*, Sakhile&Me (Frankfurt)
- 2021 – *Unfinished Camp (with the Botswana Pavilion)*, The Shed NY & Art Basel (New York and Basel)
- 2021 – *Joe Prussian presents PREMISE*, The Box (Cape Town)
- 2020 – *Contested Space: Water Is Land Is Air*, Latitudes (Online)
- 2019 – *Michaelis Grad Show*, Michaelis Galleries (Cape Town)
- 2019 – *The Botswana Pavilion: Subjective Nationhood*, Botswana National Museum (Gaborone)
- 2019 – *The Room*, BG Gallery (Santa Monica)
- 2019 – *The Botswana Pavilion: No Return*, Gallery MOMO (Cape Town)

#### SOLO EXHIBITION

- 2024 – *It's Not Going to Get Better*, Vela Projects, (Cape Town)

#### GRANTS AND AWARDS

- 2024 – Prince Claus Seed Award
- 2024 – Foam Talent
- 2023 – Der Greif Guest Room Scholarship
- 2022 – The Claire and Edoardo Villa Will Trust
- 2020 – Blurring The Lines, Paris College of Art (Finalist)
- 2019 – The Tierney Fellowship Award
- 2019 – Simon Gerson Prize

#### RESIDENCIES

- 2023 – The MEP residency: Gervanne Collection + Matthias Leridon, Cité internationale des arts (Paris)

#### COLLECTIONS

- The University of Cape Town Works of Art Collection
- Javett-UP

#### PUBLICATIONS

- Foam Magazine #65: Talent
- GIDA Journal Vol. III
- Blurring the Lines 2020
- Contemporary&
- Aperture Magazine

# VELA PROJECTS

## GALLERY INFORMATION

Vela Projects is a fine art gallery based in a 19th-century building in the centre of Cape Town presenting local contemporary artists.

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## FOR ENQUIRES PLEASE CONTACT

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