

## Cinga Samson: *Iyabanda Intsimbi / The metal is cold*

October 16, 2021-January 15, 2022

The FLAG Art Foundation, 545 West 25<sup>th</sup> Street, NY

The FLAG Art Foundation presents a solo exhibition of new work by **Cinga Samson**, on view from **October 16, 2021-January 15, 2022**, on its 9th floor. Produced over the past year, *Iyabanda Intsimbi / The metal is cold* comprises 26 oil paintings, including a cycle of portraits and large-scale group scenes that the artist states, "explore the nature of violence: its laws, its flair, and its finality." Favoring subtle menaces over obvious instances of brutality, Samson commands an elegant language that acknowledges the allure of a decaying, picked flower and the flesh of a butchered animal. Retaining some key elements of his practice—stern figures, lush settings, and somber moods—*Iyabanda Intsimbi* insinuates those daily threats that pass by almost unnoticed but impact so much in our lives.

The expanded text below by Johannesburg-based writer, essayist, and cultural critic Lwandile Fikeni delves into the conceptual underpinnings of Samson's new body of work and includes excerpts from interviews with the artist in his Cape Town studio.

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### *Cinga Samson: Iyabanda Intsimbi / The metal is cold* at The FLAG Art Foundation

By Lwandile Fikeni

For the heart, life is simple: it beats for as long as it can. Then it stops. Sooner or later, one day, this pounding action will cease of its own accord, and the blood will begin to run towards the body's lowest point, where it will collect in a small pool, visible from outside as a dark, soft patch on ever whitening skin, as the temperature sinks, the limbs stiffen and the intestines drain. These changes in the first hours occur so slowly and take place with such inexorability that there is something almost ritualistic about them, as though life capitulates according to specific rules, a kind of gentleman's agreement to which the representatives of death also adhere, inasmuch as they always wait until life has retreated before they launch their invasion of the new landscape. By which point, however, the invasion is irrevocable. The enormous hordes of bacteria that begin to infiltrate the body's innards cannot be halted. Had they but tried a few hours earlier, they would have met with immediate resistance; however everything around them is quiet now, as they delve deeper and deeper into the moist darkness.

—Karl Knausgard, *My Struggle*<sup>1</sup>

At first glance, Cinga Samson's paintings are simple scenes of contemporary African life. A figure poses languidly, looking straight at us with vacant eyes that glow softly; a group of men and women gather at some unknown place, with a mountain looming over their heads and the freeway speeding across the plain behind their gathering. The "moist darkness" of the pictures transforms these otherwise everyday scenes of life into intimations of something ominous lurking beneath or existing just beyond the surface representations that meet the viewer. In the pictorial realm of the painting, the gaze of the viewer is treated as a violent intrusion. The figures, as though found by a lost traveler, turn their gothic gaze from whatever it is they're doing, to meet the viewer's intrusive eye. This tension between the art object and the subjective gaze of the viewer is coded in the language of death and violence that the pictures express, and the exhibition explores.

"Intsimbi ebandayo" (cold metal) signals the coming of death.<sup>2</sup> It is a piercing environment through which death delivers itself, it is the sounding of the death knell, tragic and lyrical – not unlike Paul Célán's *Death Fugue*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *My Struggle*, by Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgård (b. 1968), comprises a six-book autobiographical series outlining the "banalities and humiliations of his [Knausgård's] life," his private pleasures, and dark thoughts; first published in 2009, the series was completed in 2011.

<sup>2</sup> "Intsimbi ebandayo" is a phrase IsiXhosa phrase. IsiXhosa is an Nguni language (the same family of languages as isiZulu and siSwati) spoken mainly in South Africa's Eastern and Western Cape provinces.

<sup>3</sup> "Todesfuge" (Death fugue) is a German language poem written around 1944 by Romanian poet Paul Celan (1920-1970). First published in 1948, "Todesfuge" is renowned for its description of horror and death in a concentration camp.

Grief is a trace of the tremor which the violence of death leaves in its wake. All death has a touch of violence, even the quiet ones, and maybe more so them. It's a sudden, formless grief, soothing and painful. "I went through these moments of meditating on violence in the period I was creating these works," Samson says. "I was thinking why is life designed like this? Why is life designed with this flaw...this element that one is disposable?"

This feeling of disposability and the acute anxiety it produces in our hearts, is what the artist seeks to bring to relief on his canvasses. In Samson's hands, the specter of death is both foreboding and inviting, beautiful and dangerous, as all beauty is. With little flecks of unnatural light, the paintings invite the viewer to look closer at the mute palette, the rendering of form, and the layering of texture. The near absence of light creates a certain, unnamable discomfort. It is this unease, which permeates all the work, which one might term "intsimbi ebandayo," the cold metal rendered with a cool elegance and grace—a veil of beauty which masks immanent violence.

"I wanted the feel of the show to be as though you've just stumbled upon a scene you weren't supposed to see," Samson says.

As in that moment when we see someone about to get hit by a speeding car and there's nothing to be done about it, in *Iyabanda Intsimbi / The metal is cold*, the viewer is treated as a voyeur to an unseemly scene. In pointing us to these images, the artist doesn't ask us to rebuke or to judge, but rather to look (if we dare) and to reflect. Even cold blood has a "moist darkness" that we can appreciate aesthetically, without inferring any political or sentimental motives.

Be that as it may, violence remains a kind of language à la K. Sello Duiker<sup>4</sup>: in Francis Bacon's hands it mangles the faces of his figures; with Cinga Samson it is treated with a fitting stillness and detached fascination. In our daily lives, it lurks around the corner and it lives inside each of us.

#### **About:**

**Cinga Samson** (b. 1986) is an artist living and working in Cape Town, South Africa. After discovering an art studio for the first time at 19 years old, Samson has recently established himself as a fresh voice in contemporary painting. Working with oil paint the formal, diligent way, Samson produces contemporary African scenes and portraits. Samson has held four solo exhibitions at blank projects (Cape Town), as well as a 2020 solo at Galerie Perrotin (New York). His work has been included in numerous art fairs, group exhibitions, and public institutional collections. Samson is represented by White Cube, London.

**The FLAG Art Foundation**, founded in 2008 by art patron Glenn Fuhrman, is a non-profit exhibition space that encourages the appreciation of contemporary art among a diverse audience. FLAG presents four to six exhibitions a year that include artworks by international, established and emerging artists, borrowed from a variety of institutions, galleries, and private lenders. FLAG invites a broad range of creative individuals to curate exhibitions and works in-depth with artists to provide curatorial support and a platform to realize their own solo exhibitions. Based in Manhattan's Chelsea art district, FLAG and its related programs are free and open to the public.

*Cinga Samson: Iyabanda Intsimbi / The metal is cold* was organized by The FLAG Art Foundation with the generous support of the artist, his studio, and White Cube, London.

Join the conversation online and follow FLAG's Instagram (@flagartfoundation) and Twitter (@FLAGartNYC) and use the #CingaSamson hashtag when posting.

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<sup>4</sup> K. (Kabelo) Sello Duiker was a contemporary award-winning South African novelist. His debut novel, *Thirteen Cents*, won the 2001 Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book, Africa Region. His second novel, *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, won the 2002 Herman Charles Bosman Prize.