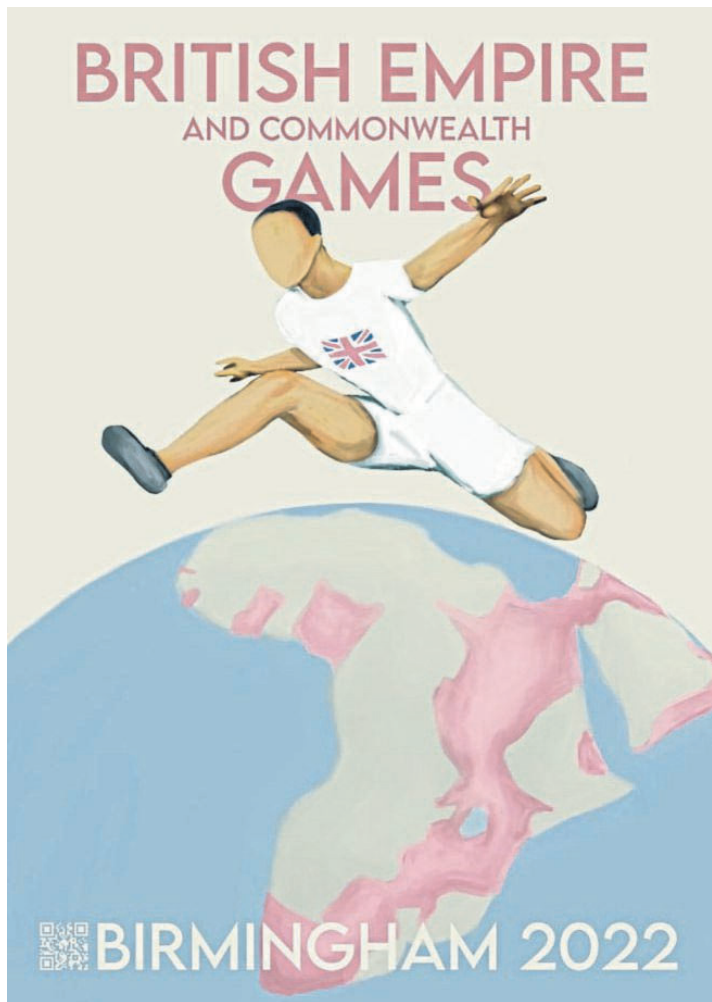
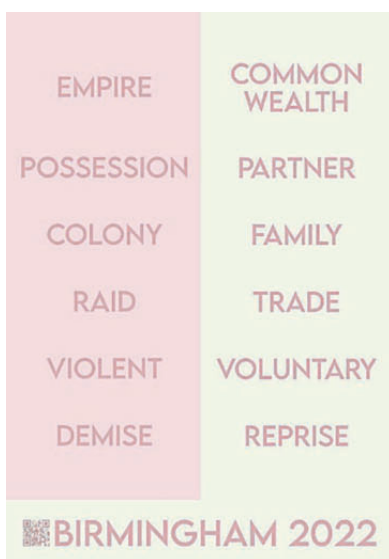


ART



ON THE MARK

SA artist Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi had her work on display at the UK's Commonwealth Games this month – casting a critical eye at their history.
By **Graham Wood**



Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi's posters interrogate the Commonwealth Games. Pictures: SUPPLIED

Below: A still from 'The Same Track', 2022, digital video and sound, which Nkosi calls an 'archival mash-up' of historical footage of the games.



that was to work with the tools of 'promotion' myself: film, posters, online media, and language."

If the promotion of the Commonwealth and the games had been about "framing and reframing history", she would interrogate the framing business.

The video work, titled *The Same Track*, is what she calls an "archival mash-up" of historical footage of the games going back 70 years cut with images of political, economic activity in "various British colonies and Commonwealth states". There are people working in mines, farms and plantations, clips of royal visits, and so on. A mesmerising leitmotif of athletes racing around a track, but with the athletes themselves erased – just a blur being followed around the track – holds it all together.

In her commentary on the video, Nkosi says that "removing the athletes for me lays bare what is around them: What is the structure that holds the spectacle? What happens when you remove the spectacle? What remains? And what is revealed is an economic relationship and a political relationship."

Similarly, the posters she designed play around with the language and imagery associated with the games – referencing historical posters and empire more generally – to tease out and question what the games actually mean, what their function has been over the years and how they relate to the projects of empire and colonialism.

One, of a hurdler straddling the globe, combines aspects of a "promotional poster for the games in Sydney, Australia, in 1938, which shows a hurdler striding across Sydney harbour. The second is the famous cartoon showing mining magnate and politician Cecil John Rhodes straddling the African continent with a telegraph wire in his hands".

Nkosi is emphatic, however, that she is not interested in these works being didactic. For her, showing these artworks at the games is about being "able to see something from a new angle, or to make a new connection. And, of course, as an artist interested ultimately in people and human connection, I want to share what I'm finding with others," she adds.

Whatever is to become of the games, she has decided, is not for her to say. In this instance, however, the games have become a catalyst for that very conversation.

equationsforabodyatrest.com

Earlier this month, during the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham, the UK city was dotted with elements of a kind of "multisite, multimedia public artwork" by SA artist Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi.

Her works, under the title *Equations for a Body at Rest*, consisted of a video screened in public spaces around the city, a series of posters on billboards, and a website. These installations formed part of the Commonwealth Games Cultural Festival that dovetailed with the games.

Nkosi was originally approached to participate by the public-art organisation Eastside Projects, which was looking to respond to a call for submissions from the main festival organisers.

"For the past few years my work has engaged with sport and athleticism from various angles, including the idea of the spectacle, and how human beings fit or don't fit into that," she says.

Nkosi was awarded the Tollman art prize in 2019, and her first solo exhibition, *Gymnasium*, at Stevenson Johannesburg in 2020, raised her profile considerably. *Gymnasium* dealt particularly with the world of elite gymnastics.

Her approach to sport, beyond what she describes as her interest in "the possibilities of human movement", however, also concerns race. In the catalogue for *Gymnasium*, she writes about the performative aspects of black identity in historically "white spaces", such as gymnasiums, and approaches sport as "a metaphor for larger structural and social dynamics".

Like a lot of British institutions – such as the National Trust having to come to terms with many of its historic homes being linked to the slave trade; and museums filled with looted artefacts – the games find themselves reckoning with their heritage.

At first, Nkosi was hesitant. "I naturally associate the Commonwealth with British Imperialism," she says.

Looking into the games a bit more, however, she was struck by its ambiguous place in the SA imagination. SA was banned from the games under apartheid, and readmitted in 1994, so, as Nkosi explains, "the Commonwealth became linked, in the public imagination, to freedom and democracy".

Yet, the fact remains that it's *raison d'être* was "[a] PR exercise carefully conceived and orchestrated to help Britain maintain 'friendly' relations with

its former colonies, for economic reasons.

"It isn't at all controversial to say that the Commonwealth was a way for Britain, which was at that time losing its direct control of the colonies, to keep ties with these countries in a way that would be beneficial to itself," she writes in an account of the genesis of the project. And the games certainly played a role in maintaining the sense of prestige nations felt in belonging to the Commonwealth.

She realised she didn't know quite what to think. "In the end it was curiosity that tilted me towards agreeing to participate," she says.

As she began her research – much of which is shared on the website – she found herself asking why the Commonwealth still existed. Looking ahead, she pondered what form it might take in future. Would it survive? "What is

going to happen?" she wondered. "Who is going to determine this? Is it someone else? Or is it us?"

As an artist, she also found herself asking, as an athlete might: "What happens when we use our gifts within the structures of the games and the professional art world?"

And that, in a nutshell, gave Nkosi her subject. The title, by the way, is drawn from Newton's Law of Inertia, which states: "A body remains at rest, or in motion at a constant speed in a straight line, unless acted upon by a force."

"I realised I wanted to interrogate the way the Commonwealth presents and promotes itself, mostly through the games, but in other ways too," she says. "And, ultimately, I decided that the best way to do



Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi's work on display at the Commonwealth Games Cultural Festival, which dovetailed with the games in Birmingham, UK, in early August. Picture: STUART WHIPPS