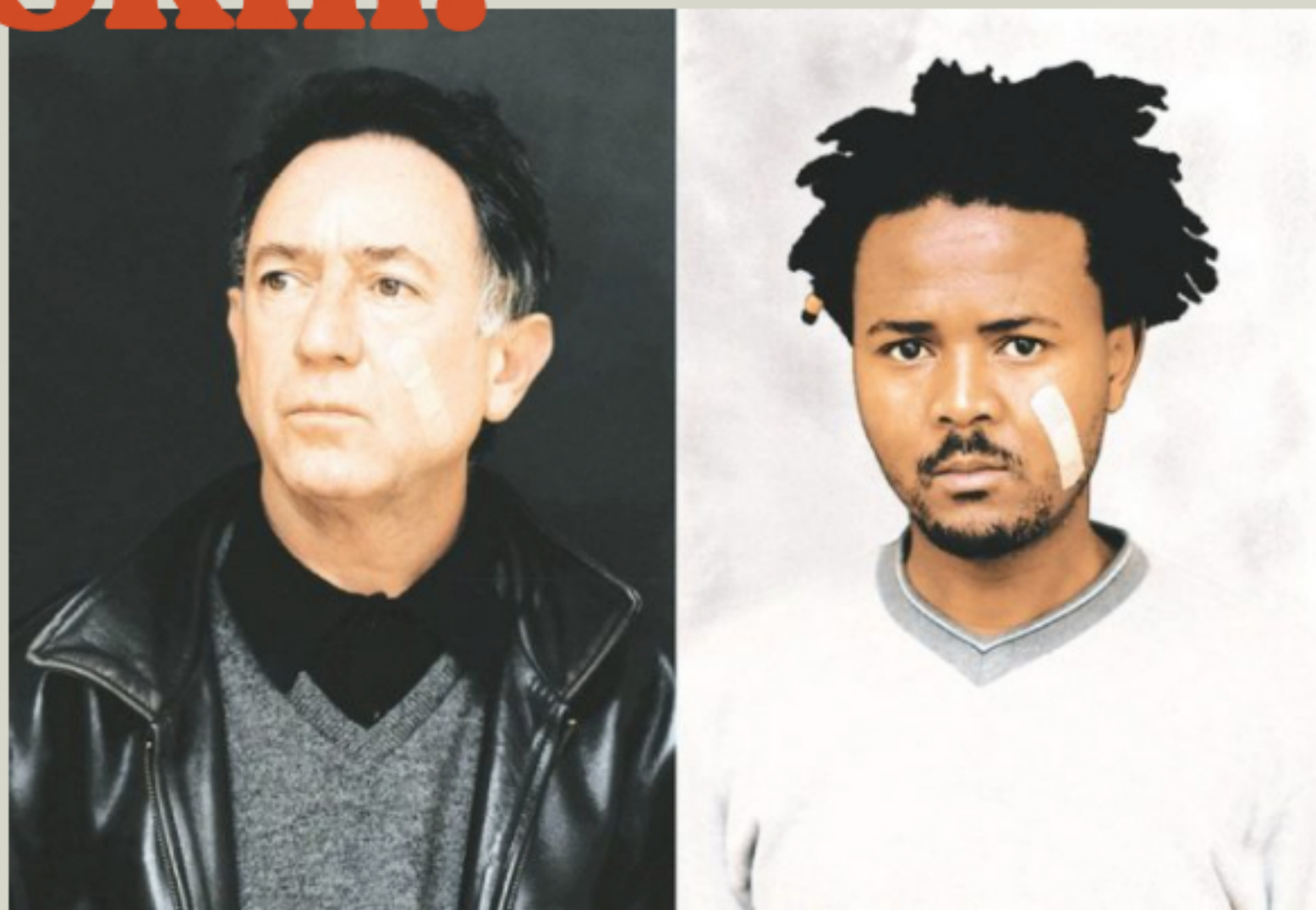


# Colouring Skin:



## On Tizta Berhanu, Thembinkosi Goniwe, and Dada Khanyisa

A feature by **Misha Krynauw** on the 11th of January 2021. This should take you 4 minutes to read.

The word 'colour' adapts to many interpretations; to pigment, to fill with, or even to justify. Its linguistic arch envelopes our intent as we assign it to navigate our underlying beliefs. When combined with the word 'skin' as a prefix, the term becomes a summation for a source of issues embedded deeply in the history that framed the creative experience for artists and audiences alike. These frameworks imposed limitations on the understanding of skin and of colour, furthering the agenda of a racist regime that trickled down into every facet of the human experience; forming an ever-evolving obstacle course for those who do not align with its definitions.



Tizta Berhanu, *Together*, 2020. Oil on Canvas, 140 x 140 cm

Tizta Berhanu's show, 'Hëber', includes pieces such as *Together* and *Sharing Grief*, works that use colour and skin to convey themes more aligned with Berhanu's personal vision of community and emotional vulnerability. The result is a juxtaposition of hue and shadow-work, creating a sense of comfort between the collection of subjects in each piece. 'Skin' in Berhanu's artwork doubles as a means for the audience to also gauge the mood of the piece; using the meaning of colour here as a language to convey the minds of the subjects, not necessarily just their bodies. Berhanu also drives home the affecting radius of human emotions through colour in the work here too,

as the group of people embracing refract and reflect the chosen tones amongst one another – speaking to notions of empathy and sympathy that swell in these physical displays of emotion. Berhanu defines intimacy this way; in the emerging lines between the bodies and emotions, and rephrases the ideas and implications of trust and physicality by pulling all these aspects into a convincing argument for an ideal sense of community.

Those who have had the privilege of attending art classes are likely to know that 'skinny-colour' became the name of a specific wax crayon in their art supplies. It's well-known which colour monami<sup>1</sup> it is; the too-pink, peach colour that was assigned the authority of default when colouring the skin of chosen art subjects. A [case study](#) by Neeske Alexander and Elmarie Costandius in 2017 focused on grade three learners' "attitudes and perceptions regarding race and skin colour through art processes and discussion", hoping to unpack the effects of the 'skinny-colour' monami on these young students. The case study reported that "learners [participated] in the naming of 'human colour' or 'skin colour' in a manner that [reflected] 'whiteness' as a dominant narrative and that they [viewed] the white population as the majority. The learners' perceptions that 'there are more white people than brown people' could be caused by their experience in a mostly white environment as well as visual influences that promote 'whiteness' as dominant (including western media)."



Tizta Berhanu, *Sharing Grief*, 2020. Oil on canvas, 110 x 110 cm

While interrogating what he described as, "unspoken racial constructs that are visible and implicit in our 'post-colonial' and post-Apartheid era," Thembinkosi Goniwe's untitled side-by-side portrait from 2000, which formed part of a project called 'Returning the Gaze', makes direct contact with the rippling ramifications of the institutionalisation of racism. The effective use of contrast creates a platform to delve into ideas of colour and skin in a more literal capacity. 'Skin' here is a purposeful statement; a spotlight and a segue to a rising list of interpretations and conversations. There is a directness in gaze and subject matter that addresses the world which is made up of similar normalisations such as the 'skinny-colour' monami and asks about its long-standing effects. It asks what will exist in its stead, what could have existed, what is yet to exist. The two portraits also flag that these issues permeate other fields as well; the inclusion of a plaster diagonally down the cheek of each subject, and the colour of this plaster only matching the skin-tone of the white man of the left is another indication of the scale and pervasiveness of the issues at hand.



Dada Khanyisa, *Group Chat*, 2019. Acrylic and mixed media on wood, 83 x 109.5 x 5cm

In other instances, artists have made use of various mediums and textures to depict the intersections of art, skin, and colour. Dada Khanyisa's most recent solo showing titled 'Good Feelings' is another of the artist's offerings using wood, paint and portraiture. *Group Chat* is a perfect example of how Khanyisa's use of wood sculpture and paint elevate ideas of 'skin' and 'colour'. Khanyisa's craftsmanship adds nuance, depth, size and texture to the subject's skin; the wood catching and refracting overhead light as the three subjects give the audience their side profiles. The density of the wood, and its use as colour and to be the skin, alongside the medium's connections to nature collects intersecting ideas and holds them in. It ponders our ideas of what would justly represent these notions, represent us and our wholeness in art. Khanyisa's work is testament to releasing art of limitations; in all their forms – from the 'skinny-colour' to the 'monami' itself.

Before dismissing the colour of plasters or wax crayons it is imperative that we interrogate them as symptoms induced by a larger, still present issue facing our collective identity. To hold institutions accountable, and work on solutions that empower artists, students, audiences, and teachers alike to create a platform removed from base-whiteness upon which we can all be accurately reflected. Upon which we can be accurately seen, shown and understood.



Tagged: [Dada Khanyisa](#), [Thembinkosi Goniwe](#), [Tizta Berhanu](#)