



# Committed to the Medium

Valerie Kabov considers the rise of new painting from Zimbabwe

At the recent art fairs in Cape Town and Johannesburg this year, there was something almost peculiar in the cornucopia of art offerings from around the continent; the significant presence of Zimbabwean artists on the South African art scene. This presence has extended so much so that Zimbabwean artists Gerald Machona and Kudzanai Chiurai represented South Africa internationally at the recent 56th Venice Biennale. Zimbabwe's close proximity to South Africa cannot fully explain the prodigious flowering of talent in a country with a population of only fourteen million, whose economic woes have decimated its arts education, resulting in the absence of even a single internationally recognised Fine Art degree programme.

Of particular importance is the emergence of painters from Zimbabwe. Misheck Masamvu has become an established name in South Africa, represented by Blank Projects and presented at art fairs by Goodman Gallery. Artists like Portia Zvavahera, winner of the FNB Joburg Art Fair Prize (2015), and Richard Mudariki have found themselves a permanent home. Given Zimbabwe's historical art reputation being cemented in stone sculpture practice, the rise of painting is somewhat unusual. While sculpture still delivers some heavy hitters, it is the 'non-traditional' and, as some have argued, 'non-indigenous' medium of painting that's creating excitement in local and increasingly international art circles.

The conventional historical view is that the missionaries introduced painting and sculpture in Zimbabwe in the 1930s. Key to this introduction was Canon Paterson, who founded Cyrene Mission School in 1939 in Bulawayo, and Father Groeger, founder of Serima Mission. At both schools, young men were taught painting skills with a view to decorating churches and religious paraphernalia. Canon held the progressive view that given the opportunity African artists could reach the same heights

as Europeans. The generation of artists that emerged from the Missions includes painters like Kingsley Sambo, whose works are in the MoMA in New York. In 1957 Frank McEwan, the first Director of the National Gallery of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) established the studio workshop, sponsored by British American Tobacco, which fostered the stone sculpture practice alongside painting. Still, the medium was not viewed as entirely indigenous.

Zimbabwe's introduction to contemporary art came after its independence, with Gallery Delta's Helen Leiros and artists like Berry Bickle and Tapfuma Gutsa seeking and promoting alternative ways of expression. Leiros in particular taught and fostered modern art techniques and mentored artists of the born-free generation, such as Lovemore Kambudzi, Misheck Masamvu, Richard Mudariki, Virginia Chihota and Portia Zvavahera.

While this history is important, it cannot explain the level of talent and quality of art production in Zimbabwe; these are contiguous with and true property of the culture, values and passions of the people and the times they live in. The medium — painting, poetry, sculpture or music — is in many ways a matter of convenience and availability. When conditions change so can the modes of expression. At its core, Zimbabwean culture is characterised by an ability to appraise life philosophically, with a measure of detachment and a big picture view. This culture manifests in many aspects of Zimbabwean tradition, from the immense importance of avoiding conflict and preserving social relationships, to the sophistication and conceptual structuring of Zimbabwean proverbs, monotheistic spirituality and belief in the sacredness of human life. This culture underpins the incredible perseverance and optimism of Zimbabwean people and continues to inform the new generation of painters,

arguably even more so than all other artists. It can be said that presently in Harare, the medium of painting reflects the tensions, the complexity and the arduous path of the country better than any other available medium. Painting requires idealism — technical, artistic and personal. While the new generation of sculptors in Zimbabwe has, in many cases, opted for found and discarded objects as a resource, inventing their own medium and the method, the painters in Zimbabwe are required to forge ahead with technical, artistic and personal idealism and sacrifice.

Given the cost and availability issues, it is surprising that anyone takes up painting in Zimbabwe today. When making one painting can cost the same as the artist's monthly rent, the choice between painting and eating becomes a real one. Capitulating to these economics, art schools such as the National Gallery Visual Art Studio or Harare Polytechnic have resorted to teaching painting with acrylics and in some cases, even poster paints. While some artists opt for print based techniques as an alternative, there is a younger generation of doggedly committed to the medium. Among those leading the charge are three young artists; Wycliffe Mundopa, Mavis Tauzeni and Gresham Tapiwa Nyaude.

Through the works Misheck Masamvu and Portia Zvavahera, audiences have come to associate new Zimbabwean painting with powerful metaphoric figuration and bold gestural statements in preference to finer detail. Although it is hard to speak about a 'Harare School' or a movement emerging, this ethos of place also informs the works of their younger colleagues, although each is making their own very distinct thematic imprint.

For Wycliffe Mundopa, the Hegelian dictum that art must be of its time and of its place is a most fitting description. Few artists are more passionately committed to being in Zimbabwe





and sharing the pains and the struggles of its people than Mundopa. "This suffering is what makes us," is his motto and the sentiment pulsates in each of his paintings, which spin like a whirlwind through the underbelly of Harare's high-density areas and pain-points. His circus-like colours and twisted lines underscore the razor-sharp social commentary on a world where entertainment and poverty are close companions and where everything can be for sale. In his complex compositions, Mundopa displays his depth of historical research and admiration for the Dutch Masters, Rembrandt and Rubens in particular, by making us feel that if they had lived in Harare today, this is exactly what their paintings would look like. Mundopa's recent show 'Myths of Harare' at Commune 1 Gallery (in Cape Town) and the selection of complementary works on paper at Ebony Gallery, (also in Cape Town) was a runaway success, displaying for the first time Mundopa's prowess in tackling museum-size canvasses. We can only look forward to what happens next for this prodigious talent.

Mavis Tauzeni produces, in many ways, a counter-balance to Mundopa's frenetic subversive carnivals. Her canvasses are immersed in the unsettling stillness of introspection and waters that run deep. Deeply personal, Tauzeni's imagery oscillates between the surreal, futuristic and dreamy. It bears some kinship to the world of Wengechi Mutu,

who Tauzeni cites as a role model. Yet despite its surface otherworldliness, Tauzeni's world is no less of a social commentary, speaking implicitly and explicitly to the difficulties of being a woman — and a woman artist — with an independent and individual journey. While she speaks to the realities of her life in Zimbabwe, the tones and sentiments engendered in her work are immediately empathetic, not only to women but to all of us yearning to break out of convention and social expectation. Tauzeni has already attracted attention for her works on paper, having been acquired by the Fondation Blanchère Collection in 2014, but the artist's true passion is painting. Tauzeni is ready to emerge as a painter of note, with a new exhibition at First Floor Gallery titled 'Eve's Diaries' and comprising major canvasses.

In stark contrast to Tauzeni and Mundopa is Gresham Tapiwa Nyaude. While no less informed by the drama and trauma of daily life in Harare than Mundopa, Nyaude's practice is the epitome of the tongue-in-cheek street smarts that characterise the 'ghetto ethos' of his native Mbare. Visually translating slang and vernacular, Nyaude works in waves to create series of obsessive, thematic paintings, exorcising each subject to exhaustion before subjecting a new victim to his keen wit. His past series include *The Midnight Shoppers* based on the invisible and undocumented night-life of the Mbare ghetto; *Native*

*Advertising*, which confronts us with how the news and media manipulate perceptions of Africans and particularly Zimbabweans, and how the media themselves are manipulated; as well as *Dog's Life*, in which dozens of gleaming canines stare down from canvasses, their grimaces simultaneously accusatory, vindictive, victorious and provocative, the spectral allegory of the 'ghetto hustle.' Nyaude has already garnered international interest, with works from *Dog's Life* having been shown at SMAC Gallery early in 2015 and *Native Advertising* currently on show at F2 Galeria in Madrid, as part of a3bandas gallery festival in the Spanish capital.

Intellectually on point, emotionally powerful and technically adept, this trio of emerging painters is not to be underestimated. Together and individually, they are also role models for their peers to emulate and given what we know about Zimbabwean art and artists, there's more to come.

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