BRIDGING THE CONTEMPORARY

Zvikomborero Mandangu

Visual art in Zimbabwe goes back as far as the 12th century AD, which was when the Zimbabwe Bird was created. This symbol has become the national emblem, and it holds a very important place in the history of art and culture because it reveals an urge to create beautiful, religious and ornamental objects. Several variations of this stone carving have been found as hand-held ornaments or trinkets that had a role similar to Western and Eastern prayer beads. The bird provided a basis for craftsmen to develop a tradition of carving that went on to transcend the generations.

The advent of colonialism saw a shift from a lifestyle that involved subsistence agriculture to a commercial form of agriculture and industrialisation. This shift created a new social, economic and political social profile. From the onset, the black population found itself excluded from this polity. This meant that the black population was economically exploited and that the social and political practices of their past underwent systematic cultural extermination.

The establishment of Rhodesia and Nyasaland[1] turned Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) into a centre for trade and industry, due to its proximity to South Africa. Moreover, of the three countries, Southern Rhodesia had the largest white population. In 1922, the British South Africa Company's rule came to an end and self-governance was pronounced following a referendum that applied to the white settlers. These decisions made two things clear; the first was the settler population's reluctance to join the Union of South Africa which threatened their control over the means of production. The second point was a move towards a re-union with Northern Rhodesia, which the settlers objected to, because they considered their neighbour backward and burdened by a huge annual deficit.[2]

There was also a reluctance on the part of the Zimbabwean black population to work in mines and industry.[3] The need to follow the South African model of importing indentured labour became a main focus as Southern Rhodesia's settler community set out to regulate the numbers of incoming black workers in order to stabilise a self-governable enterprise.[4]

Indentured labourers from Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland constituted a considerably larger population than the white settlers in their respective areas during this time. Very little cultural degradation had occurred. With this single step of establishing autonomy from its neighbours, the Southern Rhodesian framework served, ironically, to initiate the movement of migrant workers to South Africa, which stimulated the exchange of ideas and created a cosmopolitan class amongst the black community.

1 Rhodesia consisted of Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), Nyasaland (Malawi) and Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe).

2–4 Gale, W. *Deserve to be Great*. Stuart Manning: Bulawayo, 1960.

This cosmopolitan class began to engage in civic action and to form unions, while observing new tastes and practices, and naturalizing these practices within their own contexts. The transmigratory exchange between territories in South and Central Africa would later develop into the artistic pursuits of the black segment of the Rhodesian population. This exchange took the form of arts, crafts, myths and legends.

These transmigratory cultural exchanges are heavily evident in the development of Zimbabwean Stone Sculpture, notably the Tengenenge[5] sculptural community, where immigrants like Lemon Moses and Kakoma Kweli worked in the same space, freely circulating ideas with local masters such as Joseph Ndandarika and Henry Munyaradzi. Tengenenge thus became a thematically-aware centre, where most of the work that was produced dealt with moral issues or anecdotes through beauty and form.

The majority of the work that came out of the sculptural community addressed issues such as the transformation of men to beasts, or, in other instances, expressed possession by metaphysical forces. The chief initiator of this metamorphosis of the art movement in Rhodesia was Frank McEwen, the first Director of the Rhodes National Gallery (now the National Gallery of Zimbabwe). McEwen took note of the exchanges that were occurring between different African cultures and found an opportunity to blend them with Western ideas about production that were based on Gustave Moreau's atelier method. With a crop of African artists, he went on to set up the Workshop School at the Rhodes National Gallery, which ushered in the age of Modern Art that was to evolve into contemporary art within a few years.

A PORTRAIT OF MODERNITY IN CONSERVATIVE RHODESIA

By the end of the 1950s, the art scene was moving in a direction that suggested progress. Artists from different creative communities were continually contributing to this developing fraternity. The man at the centre of this boom was Frank McEwen and, despite criticism of his outlook on art, his manipulation of tastes created a juggernaut which moved fearlessly through the Rhodesian art scene. McEwen was, however, viewed by white artists as a figure which did not support them and was too supportive of abstract styles. Trevor Wood and Tom Maybank were two examples of his preferred artists from the white community; arguably, the remainder felt alienated from the Rhodesian art scene.

McEwen built a bridge to contemporary art through his exploits. His role in the entire scheme of things was directed by his love of experimentation, as he banked on the effect of combining artists from many nations under one roof. The Workshop School sought to empower artists by offering them an experience of open learning and working, and became a testing ground for the ideas he had taken from Moreau. Through his mediation, McEwen sought to resuscitate a long-dormant culture, which he linked to the monolithic society of Great Zimbabwe, as Zilberg has pointed out.[6]

The idea was to establish an art form that preserved an air of 'African' energy and, needless to say, sculpture became the vehicle for McEwen's project. During that period, it was normal for black artists to be excluded from the artistic matrix, so the introduction of very exotic forms of artwork served certain tastes well. McEwen was considered provocative, because his approach involved challenging the traditional tastes of a predominantly white bourgeoisie.

Conventional styles of painting, involving realistic landscapes and detailed portraits, were replaced by an alternative aesthetic.[7] The Rhodes National Gallery was filled with local artworks, as opposed to work from the rest of the world. This produced dismay among every level of the white public. However, McEwen's move instilled new ways of seeing and appreciating art for Rhodesians,[8] as his outspoken hatred of airport art[9] gave further impetus to the development of black artists.

He believed that black artists were forced to produce work that was bracketed as kitsch[10] by white colonists instead of pursuing subjects that referred to or expressed facets of local culture. According to McEwen:

"In the present it has, unfortunately, like most parts of Africa, an unlimited flow of commercial 'airport art', consisting of shiny, often lathe-made figures and spidery, coloured knick-knacks painted on black paper, also produced en masse and sold, as it were, by weight. This places the African artist in a difficult position because if he has instinctive skill, as many more have, he has even more legitimate reasons for exploiting it than his dealer-ridden colleagues have in Europe."[11]

His execration of the 'airport art' sector was enshrined in his understanding of the consumer culture that Rhodesia subscribed to at that time, which was retrograde, especially at a time when an art gallery had finally been built for the benefit of the public.

McEwen also initiated the Annual Exhibition as a way of displaying the latest work by artists from around Rhodesia. It featured artists such as Thomas Mukarobgwa, whose compositions are grounded in nature, Sylvester Mubayi, with his fluid anthropomorphic figures, Trevor Wood, with his surreal compositions laced with myths and hieroglyphics, and Tom Maybank, whose work strips away form and emphasises light and darkness through line.[12]

These artists were representative of a trend to use stylistic features that shifted away from notions of 'good art' in Rhodesian eyes towards a more conceptual, innovative and faintly naive approach to Modern Art. This idea of modernity was introduced by McEwen to justify the above-mentioned point about the Zimbabwe Bird, and its direct contribution to the marketing of Zimbabwean Stone Sculpture.

Borrowing classic themes from Great Zimbabwe and fitting them into a contemporary context

5 Tengenenge is a Guruve (formerly Sipolilo) based Sculpture Community founded by Tom Blomefield in the 1950s.

6 Zilberg, J. Till Forster and Marina von Assel ed. *The Radical Within the Museum: Frank McEwen and the Genesis of Shona Sculpture as a Cultural Struggle at the Rhodes National Gallery. Art in Zimbabwe.* Iwalewa Haus: Bayreuth, 2001.

7 Aesthetic (also esthetic); concerned with beauty or the appreciation of beauty.

8 Arnold, M. Anita Nettleton and David Hammond-Tooke ed *A Change of Regime in Rhodesia and Zimbabwe.* A.D. Donker: Harare, 1985.

9 A form of kitsch; see next note.

10 Kitsch (German) Art, objects, or design considered to be in poor taste because of excessive garishness or sentimentality, but sometimes appreciated in an ironic or knowing way.

11 McEwen, F. *In Search of Art in Rhodesia.* Horizon: Salisbury, 1960.

12 Lieros, H. Cyril Rogers, ed. *The Current State of Zimbabwean Painting in Southern African Art.* National Gallery of Zimbabwe: Harare, 1992.

would work advantageously for the dissemination of art but that notion would have been thwarted by the number of artists who were of foreign origin. The likes of Kakoma Kweli and Henry Tayali bore testament to this.

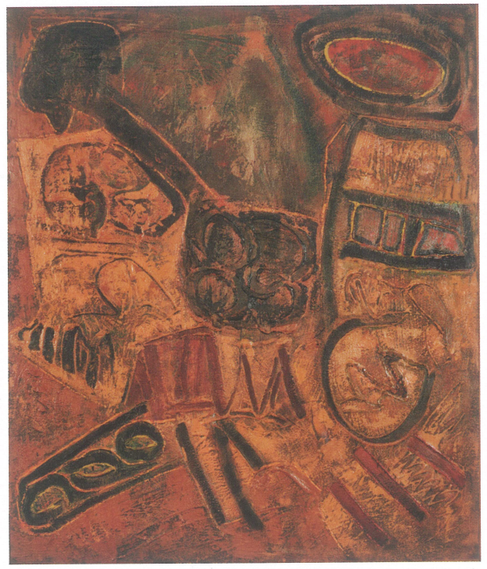
Ultimately, the approach that was adopted entailed artists who shared a common cause; this became Frank McEwen's legacy of socio-political resistance through the production of art and the cross-pollination of culture. The question now moves to the heterogeneity of ideas and McEwen's aim of creating a single conceptual lineage with regard to the Stone Sculpture Movement, which itself had to choose between tradition and modernity.

It is noteworthy that several sculptors managed to break away from this homogeneous stream; Nicholas Mukomberanwa comes to mind, on account of his shift towards almost minimalist work that had little in common with folklore. Mukomberanwa's work was a push in the direction of Contemporary art, away from the themes and styles of the rest of the first generation guild of artists.

BARON OF BULAWAYO

After the fall of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland in 1963, art was in the doldrums. A system that did not support McEwen's arts initiatives had come to the fore by 1964. The race relations that had been established through art and paraded internationally were in a critical condition, aggravated by the Unilateral Declaration of Independence and the sanctions that were imposed on Southern Rhodesia.

McEwen's work as Director of the Rhodes National Gallery became increasingly difficult, and his focus shifted towards individual artists who were creating works of art that resonated with social and political events. Marshall Baron was a lawyer by training who had won a scholarship

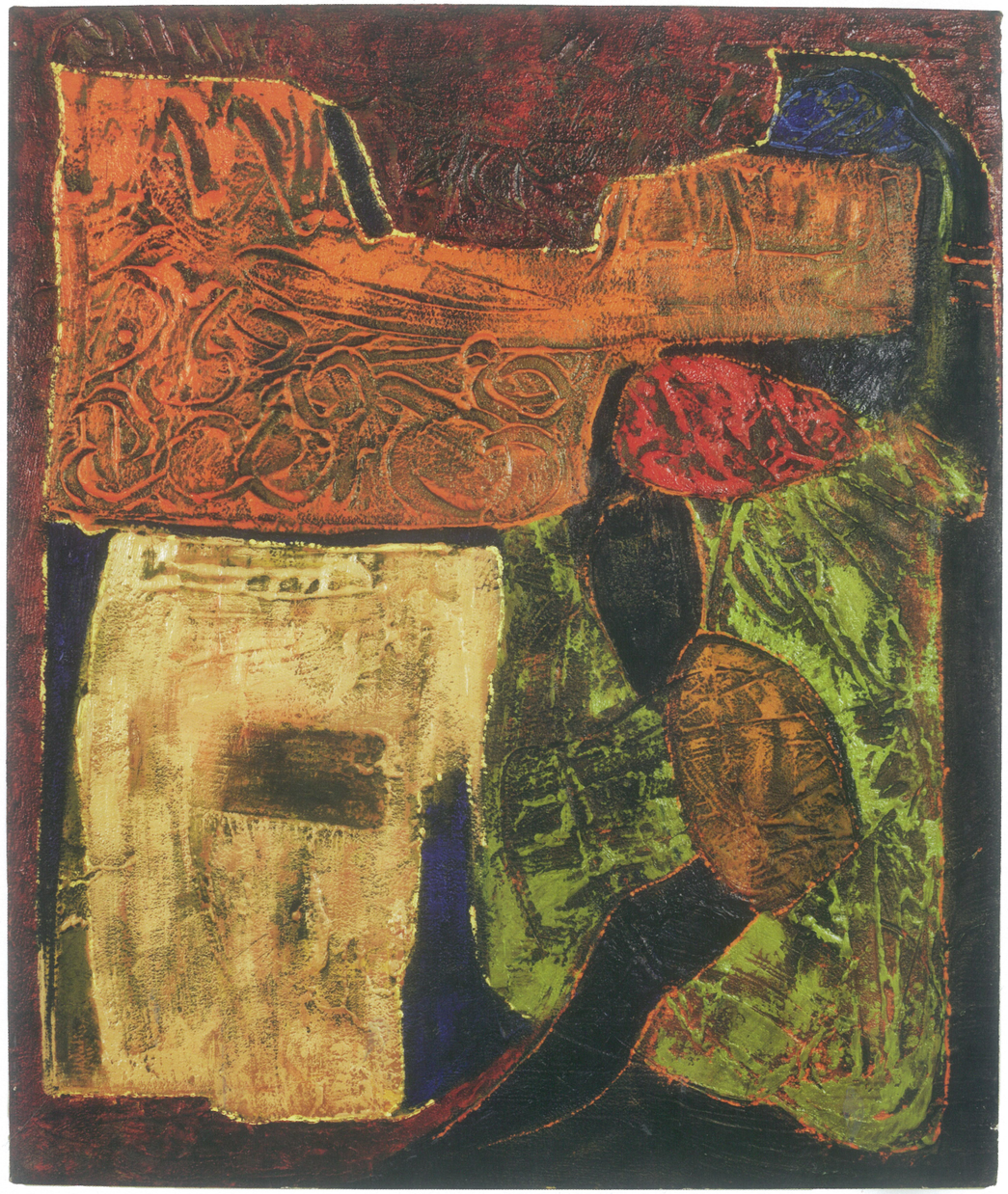


Marshall Baron, Tropic Threshold, 1969, oil on canvas, 125 x 105 cm, National Gallery of Zimbabwe Archive

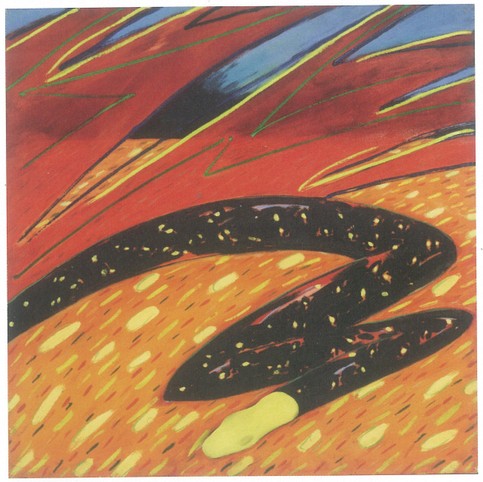
to study art in the United States. His influences included Abstract Expressionism, and his work acquired expressive and emotional features that were derived from deconstructing conventional art forms, as in his painting *Design for Communication*.

The non-configuration of *Design for Communication* means that its capacity for expression is based on colour alone. The superimposition of warm and cool tones suggests the interaction between different parts. The fields of colour contain different types of strokes, so the texture varies. The chalky border serves as a field that contrasts and blends with the rest of the work. Baron was shifting away from the modernity that McEwen was marketing, notwithstanding the fact that his work was heavily influenced by Modern Zimbabwean Stone Sculpture, hence a continuous mimicry of stone-like forms in his paintings.

When compared with a painting by Stephen Williams, who was Baron's protégé, ressemblances in



Marshall Baron, Design for Communication, oil on canvas, 127 x 107 cm, National Gallery of Zimbabwe Archive



Stephen Williams, The Storm, oil on canvas, no dimensions, National Gallery of Zimbabwe Archive

style and abstraction of form can be observed. The landscape moves ponderously, with the dominant warm colours and hints of cool brush-strokes and gold precipitation falling on a neutral, dark horizon. The ochre foreground is similar to Baron's usage in *Tropic Threshold*. Both works feature heavily expressive landscapes, which, in addition to their powerful hues, delineate the landscape they represent, namely a volcanic eruption.

Baron placed art in a context, which ensured that the content of his work was personal and unrestrained, to the extent that most of it was highly critical of the Rhodesian Front government of the day[13]. The difference between McEwen and Baron may perhaps be described as follows: McEwen used the community of artists around him as labourers to construct the pyramid that is now his legacy, compared with Baron's scarred and deeply solitary way of addressing the flaws of a society that was suffering the evils of war and economic sanctions. While the former sought to gain profit and credit as an innovator, to appeal to the buyers of Modern Art, the other exposed the government's flaws from the wilderness, to the fury of a broken system. Viewed in this light, Baron inspired his contemporaries and a crop of younger artists such as Williams and Jogee, which set artists moving towards an emotive engagement with society.

Marshall Baron thus provided the emotion for the Contemporary art scene through his artworks. The form they assumed fitted into the historical context that underpinned the sculptural skills which McEwen found among local black artists. Baron's paintings seem to have set a precedent by converting the Zimbabwe Bird, a national emblem, into a painting. In the 1970s, Baron defined art as a vehicle for freedom, which makes the distinction between pre-colonial and post-colonial artists easier to explain.

THE ARTIST IN PRE AND POST-INDEPENDENT ZIMBABWE

During the Unilateral Declaration of Independence era Rhodesia was subjected to United Nations Sanctions which greatly affected the marketability of art. In 1966, a guerrilla war was fought by the forces of ZANU and ZAPU and for the next decade, civilians were recruited into the Rhodesian Defence Forces.

Rashid Jogee[14] is a figure who stands at the centre of this battle of ideologies; black against white, capitalist against Marxist, and pacifist against imperialist. As an exponent of works by his mentors Marshall Baron, Paul Goodwin and Stephen Williams, Jogee found himself caught up in a racial war, with no affiliation to either side. Furthermore, he was conscripted into the Medical Corps by the Smith regime while teaching at the Mzilikazi Arts and Craft Centre in Bulawayo.

The horrors he witnessed during the war became part of his narrative; his work presents an exploration of his Muslim identity and Indian heritage, expressed through a mire of colour and calligraphic strokes. Jogee attests to conflict as the ingredient that makes humanity valuable and valid; an appreciation of the value of life which can quell war.

Following the philosophy and liberal leanings of his role model, Baron, Jogee combined Eastern philosophy with Zimbabwean Stone Sculpture, just as his mentor had combined the same sculpture with Western philosophy. Jogee chose to incorporate elements of Stone Sculpture into his paintings as he considered it brilliant, and because it showed no Western influence.

Jogee was traumatised when Independence came and he witnessed the 'die-hard white supremacy' of the preceding era evolve into the Black Economic Empowerment and Indigenisation agenda of the new dispensation, which seemed to him to be as challenging as the white conservative culture system he had survived, after the horrors of war.

The War of Liberation was an upheaval for many artists, who were living in the rural areas; a story that defines the social and economic impact on the artist in the run up to Independence is Brighton Sango's.[15] Sango's transition from the war-torn north of Rhodesia (formerly Southern Rhodesia) to the city did not help him achieve his work. Baron, Jogee and Sango were footsoldiers in the same artistic struggle.

It could be argued that the politics, social and cultural framework of the Smith regime had opened their eyes in a traumatic way. Their artworks were to become brutally honest and definitive, conveying messages that were reflected by the rifts between men. One could see how Sango, like Baron and Jogee, was an artist affected by war. A war that stopped him from being the man he truly was. A war that stopped him from being an artist.

Sango decided to seek solace in the bush; ironically, this was the hotbed of war. There in the bush, Sango came to develop his own sublimely cubic style, which broke with Traditional Stone Sculpture. Although he had learnt basic techniques from Bernard Matemera, Sango was obliged to leave the Tengenenge Sculptural village on account of his mentor's haunting influence on his own style.[16]

The owner of the Tengenenge Sculptural community is said to have, on one occasion, called Sango to a meeting when Matemera was present. Statements suggest that Sango was asked to hand over his sculpting tools by the proprietor, who gave them to Matemera. The truth of this incident cannot be verified, and it could be fanciful. However, Sango's departure from Tengenenge may have been incited by just such an event.

However he developed his complex form, it paved the way for the ingenuity of an ever-growing Contemporary art scene. In particular, Sango's Cubic style provided the breakthrough to sculpture that was tantamount to the contribution that Baron's abstraction made to painting.

13 Williams, S. Cyril Rogers, ed. *The Art of Western Zimbabwe in Southern African Art*. National Gallery of Zimbabwe: Harare, 1992.

14 Jogee, R. 'Mawonero/Umbono Interview' interviewed by D. Roth and Z. Mandangu *Mawonero/Umbono*, 10 October 2013.

15 Guruve Ltd *Unique Contemporary African Art* 2008 http://www.guruve.com/Gallery/Artists/brighton-sango.

16 [Source 1] [*Research on Brighton Sango*] Harare, 2013.

BRIDGING THE CONTEMPORARY

After Independence, the general public was finally charged with the grim reality of coming to terms with a crisis of expectations. All the opportunities that had been promised to the masses were nowhere near materialisation. In essence, the art fraternity which had celebrated independence with the same expectations of success, following the lifting of sanctions against the incumbent Smith regime, looked forward to the new dispensation with buoyant optimism.

The established artists from the first generation of sculptors and painters were, in one way or another, immune to the exhausting conditions of the Post-Independence order. The younger artists however, faced bleak conditions. A string of works ensued, which were deeply reflective of the new order in the same vein as George Frederic Watts' (1902) *Physical Energy*. (National Archives of Zimbabwe Collection.) This bronze statue functions as political propaganda, which is equally reflected in Barnabas Ndudzo's *Nehanda*. Both works carry socio-political messages that could be linked to the two racially diverse ideologies they represent.

Watts' equestrian sculpture established the ideal relationship between conqueror and servant in light of the pure, nude, muscular rider's ability to control the far larger beast with relative ease. The musculature[17] of the sculpture suggests potential motion, with the taut left foot of the beast suspended in a way that distributes weight to the rest of the sculpture.

The riders' facial expression is calm and analytical, his eyes stare into the distance, and the overall composition is an ode in bronze to the finality of death and aspiration, and the transience of individual goals. The *Nehanda* sculpture was erected to reflect the values of the Zimbabwean revolution.

The Nehanda sculpture follows Charwe, a 19th century spirit medium who led the rebellion against the British, which was known as the Chimurenga. The sculpture may represent Charwe's words before she was executed, which claimed that her bones would rise again to lead the next war. The Nehanda sculpture may be an emblem of the spirit's bones rising, and a representation of her determination to watch over future generations. Both works are powerfully nationalistic and each in its own right sets the tone for all the artwork that would be successful in either dispensation.

The implementation of the First Five Year National Development Plan was scheduled for 1986–1990[18]; and Stephen Williams noted that little investment or allocation of funding for the visual arts had ever been proposed by the Government. In his argument, Williams states that the Government policy document only assigns a few hundred words to culture.

This may have influenced the Contemporary art scene's inclination to engage with socio-economic matters as it tackled grassroots issues, like rising poverty and poor standards of living. In independent Zimbabwe, the desolate situation forced the arts into a sceptical mode. Through the efforts of artists who had acquired an international appeal, namely Berry Bickle and Tapfuma Gutsa, a regional network in the form of the Pachipamwe Workshop was created.

The Pachipamwe Workshop was initiated in 1989, and the crop of artists that participated in the workshop is now the current generation of highly reputed artists. Keston Beaton, Coster Mkoki, Rashid Jogee, Richard Jack, Coleen Madamombe, Adam Madebe, Brighton Sango and Eddie Masaya all participated in the Pachipamwe international artists' workshop.

Pachipamwe was set to take Contemporary art to a different level, and the possible reason for its failure to proceed was the elapse of the First Five Year National Development, which paved the way for the Economic Structural Adjustment Program (ESAP). Arguably, there was no provision whatsoever in this programme for the arts, and its main clusters concentrated on national priorities.[19]

The key objective of the ESAP was to enable industry to function at a high output once again. Interestingly enough, government subsidised the economy with money that was being lent at rates lower than the rate of inflation. Although the intention of the ESAP was to improve the standard of living for the impoverished Zimbabweans, efforts at stemming an-ever inflating dollar and failing industry were of no avail. The deteriorating situation and the ensuing gloom produced more and more unemployed school-leavers; naturally the artists played observer to this constantly deteriorating situation.

Joseph Muzondo's Mixed Media sculptures utilised glass, wood and stone in a particularly unconventional manner and his artworks are representative of Zimbabwe's experience in the course of two wars in two decades[20]; honest interpretations through works such as *The Last Warrior* and *Nuclear Bomb Catastrophe* describe the burden that war imposed on society. The skewered and disembodied nature of his work presents a society in breakdown, without the capacity to stand up. Each and every aspect of society would go on to fail.

This work steers away from the socio-economic human gloom, and centres on the effect of human existence on the ecological system. The contrasting landscape and figure suggest an incoherence between the two objects; the rhino is possibly away from its biome[21] due to human encroachment or perhaps fleeing the continuous hunting that has led to its eventual downfall and endangerment.

Churu could possibly be using the rhinoceros as an illustration of the self-destruction that can befall man once he engages in an unjustifiable rate of consumption, leading to the direly depressing situation portrayed in Meque's *Poor*[22] which shows the blunt reality of the situation during the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme. It presents a bleak picture of an ever-worsening economic situation.

17 The muscular system of the body or its parts.

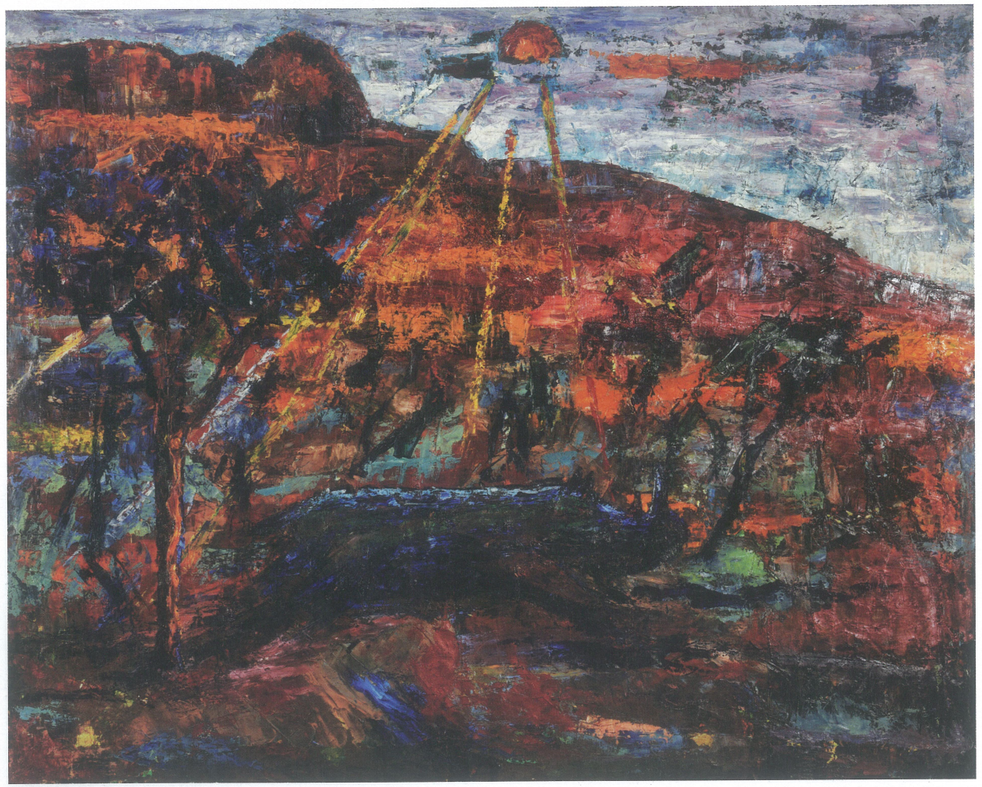
18 Williams, S. Preben Kaarsholm ed. *Art in Zimbabwe from Colonialism to Independence. Strategic Development in Southern Africa*, Baobab Books, Harare, 1991.

19 Moyo, T. *Economic Structural Adjustment Programme: The Economic and Social Impact*, University of Zimbabwe, Harare, 1997.

20 The War of Liberation against the Rhodesian regime started in 1966. The War intensified in the 1970s just before Independence in 1980. In 1980, a dissident war in Matabeleland was ignited after 1980 broke out and lasted until 1987, when a unity pact was signed.

21 A major ecological community.

22 Louis Meque's *Poor* [Acrylic on Card] 1993, National Gallery of Zimbabwe Permanent Collection, Harare.



George Churu, Black Rhino 2, 1991, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Zimbabwe Permanent Collection, Harare

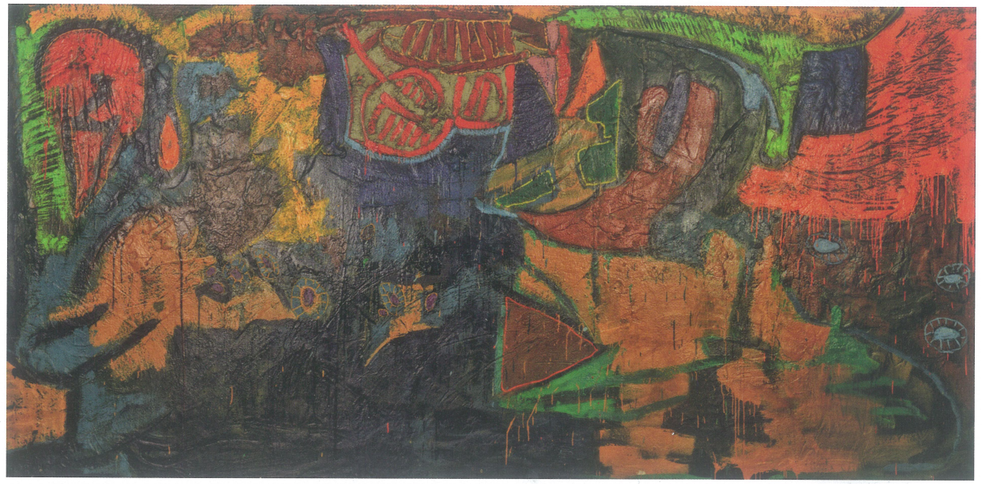
Art became the caption to an era, and from McEwen to Meque, history can be grasped through the work of these artists.

As from 1995 onwards, Zimbabwe began to lose a stock of artists to the scourge of HIV and AIDS. They also fell victim to lifestyles that were notably adopted from the wider socio-economic environments that they criticised but could no longer be a part of.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary art in Zimbabwe can arguably be said to have started at the point where every aspect of Modernity was abandoned by one artist, who sought to break with tradition. If Modern art merged with tradition through McEwen's atelier approach at the Workshop school, then Baron arguably established the point at which the Contemporary art movement began in earnest. This shift was driven by his introduction of Abstract Expressionism to what was then Rhodesia.

Baron's interpretation of the sculpture movement from ancient times establishes a well-versed account of tradition meeting Modernity. Williams, Goodwin and Jogee's adaptations of their mentor's philosophy has bolstered the rise of Contemporary art.



Marshall Baron, Untitled, 1977, oil on canvas, 177 x 366 cm, National Gallery of Zimbabwe Archive

The works of Marshall Baron sent shockwaves through the Modern Art scene in Zimbabwe, triggering the Contemporary art scene. Sango and Mukomberanwa's works were auxiliaries to sculpture and their work was infused with different philosophies. They abandoned the traditional notion of African art as exotic in Western eyes and made art for art's sake.

The focus on the manifestations of the Contemporary art movement was now due to the fact that aesthetics were not the key means of evaluating art, as that meant succumbing to Modernity. The ability to express the occurrences that were affecting society and the artist in terms of colour and form became a central theme; Jogee, Bickle, Gutsa, Williams and many other artists broke with tradition to discuss issues that were more personal than just painting landscapes and conventional portraits.

Framing the Contemporary was a shift that merged the traditional with the expressive. Painting and sculpture in Zimbabwe became a vehicle for expressing meaning, and a unifying factor for society. From Baron to the present day, art has served as a time capsule which offers a window to the spirit of different eras. The passionate metaphysical, expressive style which may be assigned to the period between 1976 and 1978 marks the birth of the Zimbabwean Contemporary art scene. This was the dawn of Contemporary art in a country that identifies itself with an artwork that is its national symbol; the Great Zimbabwe Bird.