Zimbabwean Painting after 1980

by Doreen Sibanda

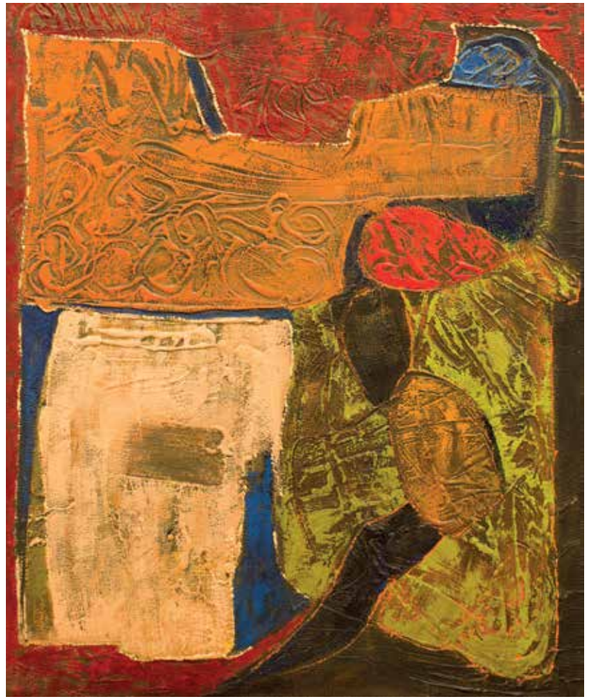
The story of the development of painting in Zimbabwe provides a very real view of the many aspects of growth and change in the country that one would not otherwise expect to glean through the medium. It reveals a story of dreams, of conquest, of resignation, of contestation, of resistance and of triumph. Of course, Zimbabwean painting did not begin with the arrival of the 'other'. As outlined in Raphael Chikukwa's essay, it has a very long and compelling history. The arrival of the settlers brought a different kind of art, one that was largely focused on documentation and topography. This art revealed as much about the settlers as it did about the natives and their subsequent relationships, contestations, and reconciliations.

In the world of the arts, the practice of modern painting in Rhodesia was very much the preserve of the white artists, while black artists were widely recognised as sculptors. The discipline of modern painting had been firmly established during the settler regime and although most painting was of the amateur variety, there was an established body of painters that had settled across the country, who worked at immortalising the beauty that they experienced in the land. Landscape painting was well-loved and pursued by the Rhodesian painters, perhaps as a subconscious way of establishing some sort of authority or ownership over the land—an entity that embodied their dreams of beauty, lordship and leisure.

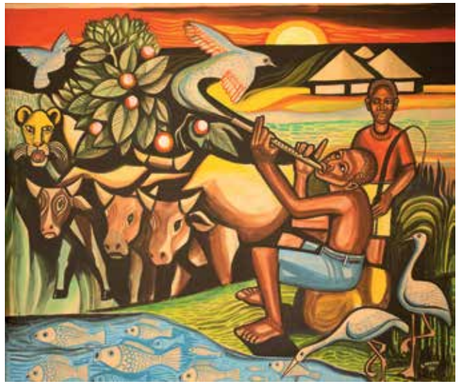
Most Rhodesians were familiar with popular viewing spots, particularly in the Eastern Highlands, which were depicted by their revered artists. In addition, most of the Rhodesian dwellings and buildings were adorned with these works, either in their original or reproduced forms. Had the settler painters inserted figures into the landscapes, the question would have been which people to select. The few figurative paintings usually portrayed the activities and lifestyles of the settlers, who were often portrayed as wielders of power, while their native charge were often portrayed in the remit of their service. Many of their heralded Rhodesian public figures were immortalised in paintings, some of which can still be found today in the House of Parliament, but mainly in the annals of the National Archives.

The first major painter to disrupt the status quo was Marshall Baron. A master of abstraction, Baron's seething commentary sought not only to question the establishment, but to also find joy in the unfolding dynamics of the country following the open declaration of contestation and confrontation. Several artists residing in Bulawayo looked up to the new direction and boldness represented by Baron, and this became the direction they would largely embrace throughout their careers. Of course, the broad approach was individually refined by each artist according to their own creative abilities and interests. Hence the artists influenced by Baron's broad abstraction were those domiciled in Bulawayo. They included Stephen Williams, Helen Lieros, and Rashid Jogee. The black painters in Bulawayo were greatly influenced by the early art teachings offered at Cyrene Mission and later by Mzilikazi Art Centre, with its preference for watercolour renderings of a new peopled landscape, depicted as an idyllic pastoral existence in a romantic setting. For decades this style remained largely unchanged. It was only the artist George Nene who was able to move from the biblical to a more localised narrative, capturing the liberation ethos and post-independence story.

By 1980, the stage had been set for a new painting to emerge from both communities. Led by Baron, white painters realised that if they were to be taken seriously, the narrative portrayed had to change. The black painters embraced the medium as a means to express their understanding of the changing lifestyle; their relationship with the settler; and their increased urbanity. On the one hand, credible black painters reflected a nostalgia for the rural lifestyle, as well as its traditional and geographical realities. On the other, the fascination and embrace of this new urbanity was reflected in depictions of nightclubs, the impact of Western jazz traditions, as well as a newfound appreciation for the



Marshall Baron, *Design for Communication*, 1969. Oil on canvas, 127 x 107 cm. Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Zimbabwe, Harare.

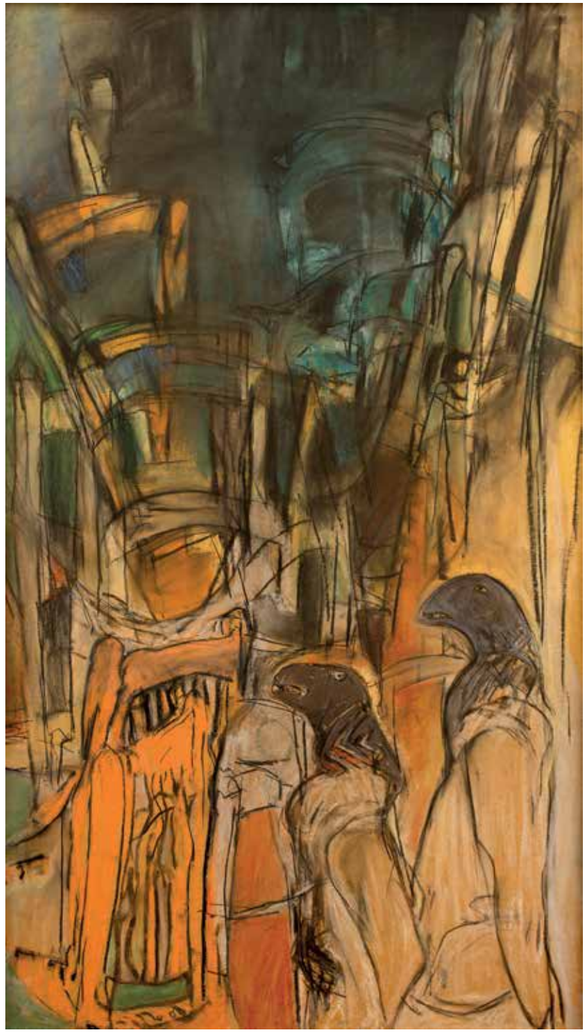


George Nene, *Song of the Herd Boy*, 1986. Gouache, 48 x 57 cm.
Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Zimbabwe, Harare.

landscape as something beyond the mere means of production. Paintings on both sides of the spectrum were not only produced but exhibited as well, with some even conscripted into the annals of the National Gallery's Permanent Collection. Several of the settler painters were joined by their native colleagues as the different styles, content, and techniques enjoyed visibility and documentation. Black painters who had work in the National Gallery's Collection at this time included Kingsley Sambo, Charles Fernando, Thomas Mukarobgwa, and Joseph Ndandarika, amongst others. Their work fit into the above-stated categories of broad expressionist painting, taking delight in the materiality of the paint and simple figurative drawing. These were not young artists, but artists that had started their work well before Independence.They are the authors of early Black paintings that had developed through the influence of the Moreau-style Workshop that was presided over by the National Gallery of Zimbabwe's first Director, Frank McEwen, way back in the 1960s.

The introduction of the BAT Workshop School in 1981 by the National Gallery sought to impart formal art skills like colour theory, analytical, and figurative drawing to primarily black artists, who had hitherto received little opportunities to pursue modern art training. In other centres for the development of painting, other styles and influences came to the fore. The BAT Studio introduced rudimentary formal art training and attracted many would-be artists to hone their skills. Throughout the 1980s, British Caribbean artist and Chief Instructor Paul Wade yielded much influence over his young charges, who embraced a new kind of art based on an exploration of the reality of the lives they lived. Sculpture was also part of the curriculum, but unlike the Workshop School—that had followed a largely Moreau-esque approach to teasing out the subconscious musings—more emphasis was placed on two-dimensional expressive forms. The deliberate formal exercises imparted by Wade led black painting students to explore and lend validity to their way of life, their values, and their reality.

Several non-native artists also began to cast their glance at the African reality and to celebrate this from the outside. In contrast to the previous narrative, when Black life—other than that of servitude—was largely absent, these artists revelled in idyllic celebration and rural engagement. Though somewhat voyeuristic, the newfound insights were explored and appropriated by several accomplished artists. Such works provided an interesting bridge between the two groups. Strong proponents of this genre included Rose West; Cecile Macquire; Stephen Williams; Thakor Patel; and Berry Bickle, amongst others. There were also many who followed this trend on a more commercial level, elevating the painting of wide-eyed poor children and buxom mothers with babies



Berry Bickle, *Lizardman and Chair*, 1986. Pastel on board, 144 x 80 cm. Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Zimbabwe, Harare.

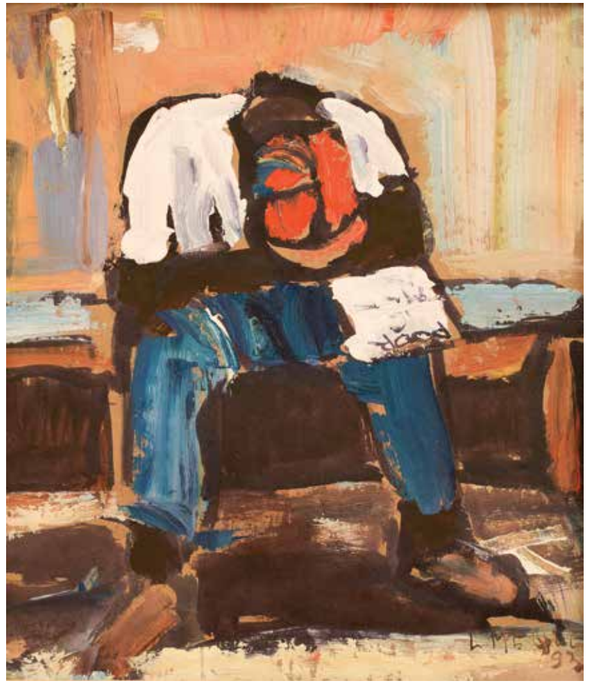
on their backs that played to the tourism stereotype of life in Africa.

By the mid-1980s young African painters began to take painting seriously, following the influence exerted by the BAT Studio as well as other centres and studios run mainly by established artists. Helen Lieros' studio supported and encouraged many young artists, some of whom had received formal training and exposure at the BAT Studio, such as Luis Meque; or others who had started attending her Saturday art class sessions, such as Richard Mudariki, Misheck Masamvu, and Greg Shaw. Other centres offering art tutoring included the Peter Birch School of Art, with its more commercial orientation, and the Harare Polytechnic, which initially focused on graphic design, but was to later open a Department of Fine Art in the late 1980s. The pursuit of painting enjoyed a favourable following from the mid-'80s, influenced by the increased recognition awarded to black painters through increased acceptance into exhibitions and their subsequent documentation in exhibition catalogues and other media.

Another factor that exerted some influence was the regular visits to the country by established artists from surrounding African states and those further afield. Several visited the newly independent country in search of camaraderie with fellow artists

of Africa. Artists such as Valente Malangatana Ngwenya and Naguib Elias of Mozambique; Twins Seven Seven of Nigeria; Henry Nkole Tayali of Zambia; and Ablade Glover of Ghana visited the country in the early years, conducting workshops and demonstrations that were to have far-reaching influences. The new painting style that emerged from this period has a growing following amongst black artists, particularly the younger ones. Several had experienced the new and raw teaching of the BAT textile artist Paul Wade and the newly opened Department of Fine Art at the Harare Polytechnic.

Another factor that was to influence the growth of painting was the establishment of the *Pachipamwe* Workshop, as a part of the Triangle Workshops, established by Anthony Caro and Robert Loder in England. They provided the perfect vehicle to strengthen the new crop of black painters by providing a lens on new possibilities, new content, and access to wider groups of associates and artists. Several artists began to emerge at the cross-section of these engaging and original interventions. Painters like Chikonzero Chazunguza were among the leading figures, and soon other younger painters came onto the scene. Some of them were Shepherd Mahufe; Doris Kamupira; Hilary Kashiri; Bulelwa Madekurozwa; Anthony Bumhira; Percy Manyonga; Lovemore Kambudzi;



Luis Meque, *Poor*, 1993. Oil on paper, 33 x 29 cm. Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Zimbabwe, Harare.

Charles Kamangwana; Odiola Vhurinosera; and George Churu, amongst others. This crop of new black artists created a buzz. Their work celebrated the persistence of high-density life with all its challenges, and provided a fresh insight into contemporary urban black life for the first time.

The cross-fertilisation of ideas and characters beyond the restricting arena of stone saw several new and exciting painters emerge, together with other two-dimensional artists. Almost as a reaction against the pretentious images of happy Africans that had hitherto occupied

many a painting, the tough township life was at the centre of their practice. The harsh reality of urban life was aptly depicted by the painters. With it came an insight into the sense of hopelessness, resignation and the prevailing desire to escape. A far darker picture than that depicted twenty years earlier by Kingsley Sambo was emerging. The work of the nineties largely represented a world of despair, not unexpectedly, due to the rise of the HIV/AIDS scourge, and other deadly diseases that were robbing young people of their lives and reducing life expectancy to the thirties! It is no wonder that this morbid reality became the prevalent preoccupation of the art of this era. The most influential amongst this ilk was Luis Meque, a sole figure with an intelligent and studious observation of the human figure and its atmospheric surrounds. While pockets of formal training within the country existed, it is only later that training was introduced at universities, and even then, in a somewhat limited manner. By the turn of the new millennium, painting as a practice was well established in Zimbabwe and the depth of its establishment had become very clear. Though few artists had received international acclaim (as had been the case with the early sculptors), there was a clear trajectory and enough work to establish a clear art historical narrative that was able to identify the main influencers and players within the genre.

Most painters complemented their formal training with workshops and residencies to get their careers off the ground. The downturn in the economy post 2000 did not help the situation and many would-be artists found themselves retreating from the sector as it became difficult to find a market for their work. The itinerant travellers, collectors, buyers and dealers had reduced their visits to a mere trickle. Due to the difficulty of regularly obtaining expensive art supplies, the tradition of using found and recycled materials for art was established.

The experimental approach of mixed-media sculptors like Tapfuma Gutsa and Keston Beaton, and the influence of other centres that made use of found and ready mediums, began to leave its mark. Some early leading painters like Obert Muringweni were influential. He introduced sand and earth onto his canvases in order to allude to the surfaces of early rock arts painted on the granite stone caves of the region. The revisit to the *Pachipamwe* model of residency took place in the early 2000s when Chikonzero Chazunguza and Gemma Rodrigues organised a new version called the *BataPata* workshop, which was an experimental and international event for artists to live and work together. Several other initiatives occurred to strengthen the contemporary arts of Zimbabwe. At the time, the country was slipping deeper into economic hyperinflation, and the country took on a new spotlight and interest for others. Several platforms opened up for artists as a result. Some were genuine, while others witnessed the growth of unscrupulous activities designed to relocate artists and raw materials overseas in exchange for meagre salaries or allowances. In addition, academia began to express an interest in the arts, with the Polytechnics consolidating their Fine Arts faculties and the new Chinhoyi University of Technology offering degrees in Fine and Applied Art for the first time. This became a big step forward from the more informal and unaccredited training opportunities available hitherto.

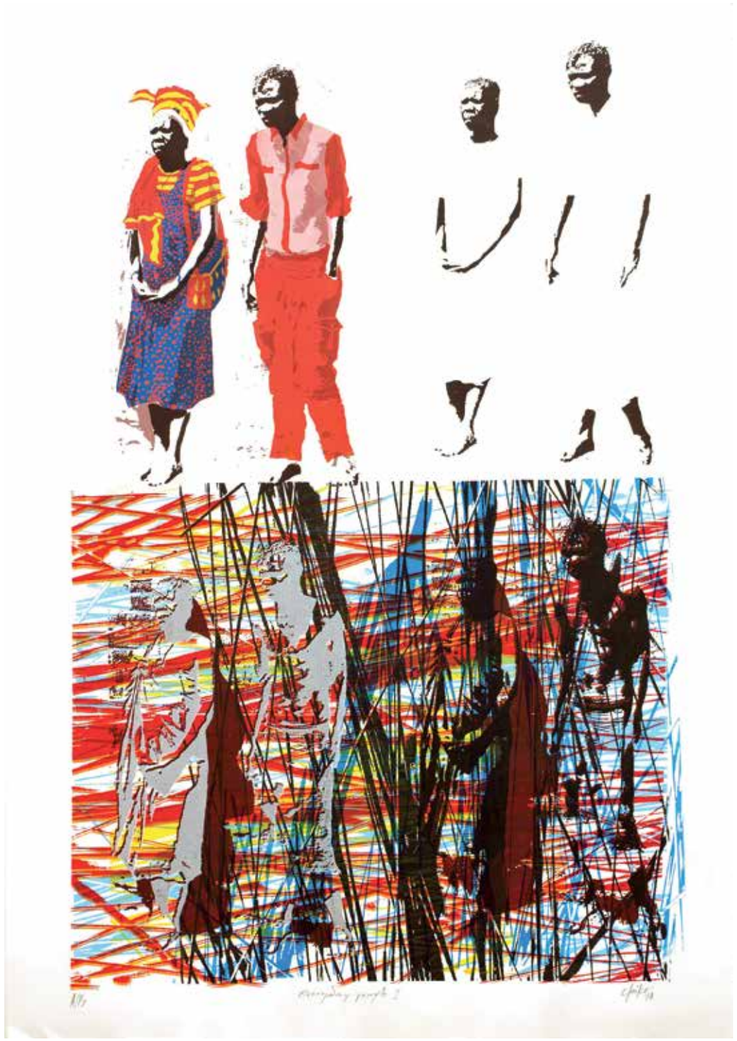
A few artists were now enjoying international acclaim including Berry Bickle, Chikonzero Chazunguza and Helen Lieros. Shielded from the mainstream difficulties of township life, Bickle was able to devote her practice to a personal exploration, building a body of work resulting from archival research underpinned by the history, philosophy and identity of her heritage. Her work has largely been about the exploration of her own identity and her place in Africa (p. 112). Chikonzero Chazunguza was also one of the few artists who embraced alternative

representations and explored printmaking and painting to flag and foresee the massive land disputes that were to begin after 2000.

The years 2005 to 2010 marked the biggest and most significant downturn in arts production, which yielded to the pressures of a shrinking market and shattered economy. In the townships of Harare, the period leading up to 2005 had been marked by unsanctioned building activity to buttress against the diminishing economy. This was largely fuelled by sanctions imposed by the West as punishment for Zimbabwe's Land Reform. The expansion of widespread informal infrastructure was seen as a way to hedge against diminishing financial activity with a view to maximising rentals on existing property. Operation Murambatsvina—a demolition crackdown designed to clear the city of unauthorised structures—had a devastating impact on small, mainly backyard and township studios and galleries that had been created to boost small art businesses, especially in the high-density suburbs. The upshot of all of this was the destruction of many independent art stations, while others closed down in the midst of the action. Many artists were unable to restore their operations and, as a result, turned to other means of earning a livelihood.

After the introduction of the new currency in 2009, the country began to reverse the local economic freefall, and the Zimbabwean dollar was replaced by the US dollar as a legal instrument of trade and commerce. This immediately brought economic stability and predictability. Thus the next five years provided the opportune time to reverse the trends that had led to a downturn in the number of practicing artists, as well as the seeming stagnation of growth in the local art practice. Several factors have served to strengthen this trajectory. These include the continued presence of a few art spaces and the opening up of new ones; increased documentation and publication of information on art and artists; new interest in the art discipline by institutions of higher learning; improved and consistent media coverage of the arts; as well as positioning to take advantage of international opportunities, networks, and platforms. The effect has been to announce the return to business for the arts in Zimbabwe. An increased artistic intellectual rigour and energy has led to improved curatorial practice, marketing, and the renewed global interest in art coming from Africa. While some galleries and spaces for artists closed their doors at the turn of the millennium, a few remained open and some relocated their operations overseas. Gallery Delta remained, offering support and a market to a few established and young artists through their consistent programming. They had established loyal audiences and a penchant for identifying and nurturing young talent. Their market mix largely worked for them as they were able to offer smaller and affordable work to a buying and discerning clientele that could afford to take risks on obvious talent before prices increased. The National Gallery also entered a new phase of offering their art school students the opportunity for artist-in-residency attachments as well as availing studio space to a small number of deserving artists. Some of these were David Chinyama; Masimba Hwati; Misheck Masamvu; Virginia Chihota; Victor Nyakauru; Portia Zvavahera; and Gareth Nyandoro.

In 2009 the National Gallery decided to launch a new open call for artists to submit work for the once-off *Live 'n Direct* exhibition, conceived by leading artist Tapfuma Gutsa, who at that juncture worked in the National Gallery as the Deputy Director. *Live 'n Direct* was conceived as a call to artists to return to work, offering a whopping first prize of ten-thousand US dollars. The strategy worked.



Chikonzero Chazungunza
Everyday people
2016
Print on Fabriano
119 x 86 cm
Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Zimbabwe, Harare

Many artists responded and all manner of works and artists resurfaced, restoring faith in their abilities and the need to keep working. The top three prizes went to Gareth Nyandoro (for his installation *National Recyclinization*), Chenjerai Mutasa (for his installation *Taza (the visionaries for a unified Zimbabwe)*; and Misheck Masamvu (whose painting, entitled *Sweat and Bad Breath*, took third prize). Several artists submitted installations for the show and this was to widen the practice that hitherto had only been embraced by a small number of artists, most of whom had enjoyed international exposure. The *Live 'n Direct* experiment affirmed that artists remained resilient and that the few outlets that had emerged or remained open to them had done good work by continuing to provide opportunities and renewed confidence. In 2010, the National Gallery engaged established curator Raphael Chikukwa, who had just returned from a study break overseas. There he had become involved in the various conversations around the need for better African representation in the field of contemporary arts, following the outcry about the nature of African representation during the exhibition of *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989) in Paris. The conversations were carried forward as some of the groups of emerging African curators in the diaspora returned to their respective countries in order to attempt to correct the misconceptions, working from the centre out. Most of them have created successful centres on the African continent for art production and awareness, as well as developing significant centres for the exploration of contemporary thought.

Chikukwa's return to Harare saw him set in motion the goal to create a Zimbabwean Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, as it was obvious that one pavilion for all of Africa was unacceptable. His various conversations with established African art curators and critics ensconced in the diaspora made his idea to push for a Zimbabwean Pavilion reasonable. Seemingly, we had the caliber of progressive and talented artists to call upon. With an established backing (in the form of the National Gallery) and with assistance from partners, the 2011 Zimbabwean Pavilion became not only a possibility, but a success. It opened a bigger conversation on how Africa was to be represented in future international biennales. No longer were Africans willing to be thrown into a single pavilion, but each country began to dream of its own pavilion just like everyone else. The 2011 Zimbabwean Pavilion was themed *Seeing Ourselves: Questioning our geographical landscape and the space we occupy yesterday, today and tomorrow*. It featured the work of four artists: Tapfuma Gutsa, Berry Bickle, Misheck Masamvu and Calvin Dondo. The second Zimbabwean Pavilion in 2013 was installed at the 55th Venice Biennale and was entitled, *Dudziro: Interrogating the Visions of Religious Beliefs*. It featured the work of artists Portia Zvavahera, Voti Thebe, Rashid Jogee, Virginia Chihota and Michele Mathison. Zimbabwe returned to Venice for the 56th Biennale and presented the works of three artists: Chikonzero Chazunguza, Masimba Hwati and Gareth Nyandoro. All three shows were curated by the National Gallery's Chief Curator, Raphael Chikukwa and commissioned by myself. Participation in Venice has had some very important spin-offs for most of the artists, who have received attention from various established regional and international galleries and collectors. Several of the artists have been invited to participate in prestigious galleries and exhibitions in various parts of the world, while some of the artists have been singled out for international awards and acclamation.

Participation in Venice has provided welcome opportunities for several artists whose practice had arrived at a form and content that would connect with

global ideas, media and communication that often characterise the experimental and bold works featured in the prestigious show. Through its experimental artists, the presence of the Zimbabwean Pavilion at the Venice Biennale has been a shrill and credible voice, received with success and renewed interest in the arts and artists of Zimbabwe. Most of the exhibiting artists returned with a new pride and sense of purpose. The Zimbabwean Pavilion came at a critical moment in the life of the country. Diplomatically speaking, the Pavilion speaks of Zimbabwe's readiness to re-engage the international community in a mutually beneficial way. The selection of artists for such a platform can be fraught with difficulties. The last selection was identified by an advisory committee, created to examine possible candidates based on the capacity of their practice to resonate with the thematics of the Biennale as well as the Pavilion curator's vision and interpretation. It has become increasingly clear that a number of artists that exist both inside the country and in the diaspora have used these last few difficult years with uncanny focus, and have not only built respectable bodies of work, but have also worked with professional galleries and agents to establish and build their careers. The internal efforts to identify and forge a presence for Zimbabwe has been matched by a similar effort in the diaspora that has generally exceeded all expectations and attempts to minimise and sideline all things Zimbabwean.

By way of conclusion, *Five Bhobh* is a fitting platform through which to interrogate the development of this relatively new modern art form. From a discipline that was largely amateur in practice and limited in content, the oeuvre has expanded and deepened to be able to reveal a great deal about the journey of Zimbabwe as a nation. Its growth has also challenged strict definitions of painting in terms of form and content, and has had an impact on archival, social, and political messaging.

One of its most endearing qualities is its capacity to express so many facets of life in, or touched, by the country, its culture, and more so, extending these facets beyond their previous physical and usual expectations.

Artists are producing bold, vibrant and exacting works that invite the viewer into a world of life-changing emotions, drawn from elements in the real and physical world. At the same time, they provide stirring insights powered by the spiritual world that supports it. We are elated to have the opportunity afforded to us by Zeitz MOCAA to share, and hope that the insight provided will win more support for our journey in the future.

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