



Traditions of Abstraction: Feeling Our Way Forward

by Gemma Rodrigues

'Now you should find your own way, how to do things in order to develop.'

Thomas Mukarobgwa, artist (1924-1999)

'... you have to have harrowing fights and hair-raising panga duels with the language before you can make it do all that you want it to do.'¹

Dambudzo Marechera, writer (1952-1987)

As the exhibition *Five Bhoobh* attests, painting in contemporary Zimbabwe and its diasporas is dazzlingly plural in its methods, ideologies, and thematic concerns. This essay offers a preliminary look at one particularly influential and enduring approach toward painting within that mix, starting from the mid-twentieth century: abstraction. Within this category, I focus on how an expressionist strand in painting—characterised, for example,

by gestural, 'free' brushstrokes; non-naturalistic colours; revelling in the materiality of paint, canvas, paper and other substances; and lyricism combined with a general serious-mindedness—came to feature powerfully, and in distinctive ways, in this small corner of Southern Africa.

From Thomas Mukarobgwa's oneiric experiments with oil paint during the 1960s, and Marshall Baron's 'drip' paintings or Helen Lieros' densely textured canvases of the 1970s, to Wallen Mapondera's and Portia Zvavahera's deeply personal experiments with materials, colours, and imagery of the mid-2010s, expressionist approaches to abstraction have provided successive generations of Zimbabwean artists with ever new and flexible ways to mediate the relationship between self and the external world. In the varied contexts of Zimbabwe's complex history, this external world has been notably marked by the imprint of state power; the exigencies of urban and rural life; and contested ideas about cultural

¹F. Veit-Wild and E. Schade (ed.), *Dambudzo Marechera (1952-1987): Pictures, Poems, Prose Tributes*, Harare, Baobab Books, 1988.

and historical roots. Concepts and experiences of selfhood have undergone—and continue to undergo—radical reformulation. Artists' socio-political concerns and the often charged local environment in which they worked, I suggest, have also meant that expressionist approaches to abstraction became a vital means for exploring and signalling different kinds of freedom, and the interconnections among them: artistic freedom; expressive freedom; individual, social, and political freedom. During the anti-colonial struggles of the 1950s, through post-independence euphoria and the growing pains of post-colonial Zimbabwe feeling its way toward a more just and prosperous future, abstraction in painting has never been 'art for art' but always a deeply committed exercise. In spite of this commitment to the outside world, it is important to note that, unlike in a number of other African nations, painting was never promoted as a vehicle for articulating a national identity. Instead, painting (as well as other art forms, including writing and drama) largely constituted a space where individuals worked out their own relationships to the world around them.

In Zimbabwe, twentieth and twenty-first century abstraction represented a culturally hybrid approach to art-making. Artists absorbed globally circulating ideas about art and self-expression and re-made them according to local visions and demands. These interpretations sometimes mingled modernist approaches with existing indigenous ideas about creativity, artistic identity, and spirituality. Over time, a constellation of key mentors and institutions have shaped and re-shaped these approaches to art-making and ideas about art. At Harare's National Gallery School and BAT Workshop School; the Art and Design department of the Harare Polytechnic; the National Gallery in Bulawayo; and Gallery Delta, artists could embark upon technical and formal experiments involving

abstraction, nurture evolving ideas about art and its place in society, and develop their identities as artists—all the while working in close proximity to one another. Frank McEwen, Helen Lieros, Marshall Baron, Paul Wade, Chikonzero Chazunguza, and, more recently, Misheck Masamvu, are among those individuals who, at different times and in different ways, have championed expressionist approaches to abstraction as a basis for socially relevant art-making, and had an influential role as mentors.² Through their work, a new set of ideas around the relationship of the artist to society, and about what art could (or should) look like, took root.

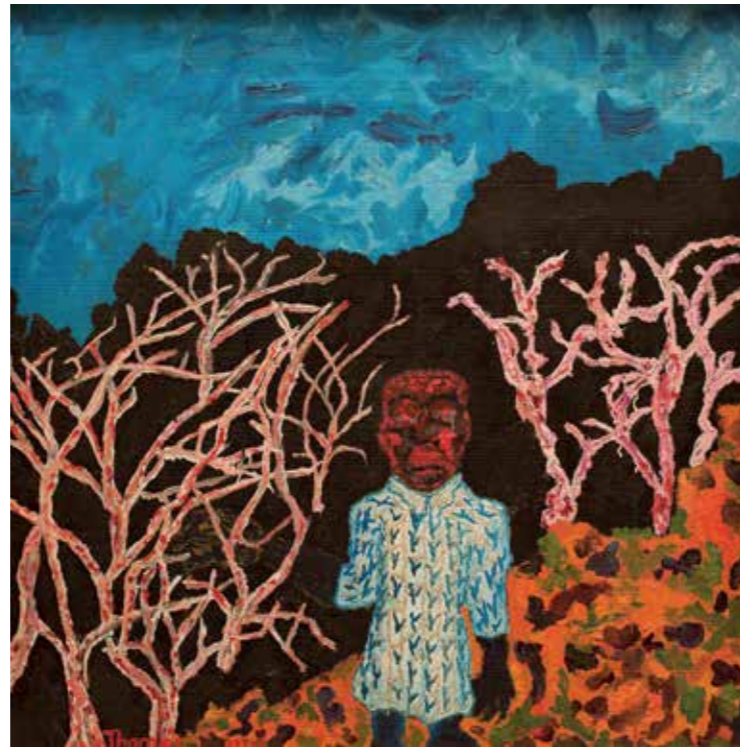
In 1957, Frank McEwen became the Founding Director of the National Gallery of Rhodesia and opened the National Gallery Workshop School, whose first, modernist-inspired experiments were in oil on canvas. McEwen introduced new concepts of painting which were dependent upon an interiorised concept of the self, and stressed the need for artists to 'reach inside themselves for the source of their creativity.'³ Gestural styles, 'free' brushstrokes, and thick, impasto surfaces became signature visual tropes of the Workshop School. By signifying spontaneity and an intuitive process, these expressionist approaches were seen as offering a window into the inner emotional and cognitive world of the artist. The idea of 'painting from within' also privileged new ideas about originality. In this light, art not only provided an index of an individual, but also of the self as the source of art that was as singular and distinctive as the individual who created it. In the words of Thomas Mukarobgwa, a beneficiary of the Workshop School and one of Zimbabwe's first internationally recognised painters:

²Disclosure: I am among Lieros' former students.

³S.L. Kasfir, *Contemporary African Art*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1999.

We want to do something absent, which you can bring from your mind into your eye, and you talk with it until the last of your work and you can say, 'Yes, I've finished.' And that work which you finish can also say 'yes' to you when you have finished it in the way you feel, because it has been created by your spirit ... when you're trying to do work on behalf of someone, that's not yours.⁴

The gestural styles and non-naturalistic approaches that typified painting in the National Gallery School could not help but assume strident political connotations in the context of Rhodesian white settler society. The settler state did not view its African subjects as intellectually, culturally, or artistically equal. Nor did they view them as equal human beings, with inner lives, desires, beliefs, and yearnings worthy of recognition and respect. In both form and content, this style of painting foregrounded African interiority and was profoundly disturbing to the settler order. Unsurprisingly, McEwen was blacklisted by the Rhodesian government and eventually stepped down as Director of the National Gallery. Indeed, anti-colonial thinking of the preceding decades had been closely linked with new understandings and ways of expressing African subjectivity. The Workshop School's approaches to art-making were in many ways analogous to the activities and shifts in concepts of selfhood already taking place through the rise of local, African Christian churches and new forms of African literary output. Mukarobgwa and his peers took up McEwen's ideas about



Thomas Mukarobgwa, *Baboonman*, 1971. Oil on canvas, 60 x 60 cm. Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Zimbabwe, Harare.

expressionism and abstraction, using them to give visual form to a modern, liberated self. As the twentieth century pastor and anti-colonial activist Thompson Samkange once said: 'Are we not also men?'⁵ The example of Mukarobgwa's expressive line and dream-like depictions of the world finds resonances in the work of many later artists, including Luis Meque, Ishmael Wilfred, Misheck Masamvu, Portia Zvavahera, and Mostaff Muchawaya.

Active during the same period as Mukarobgwa, the Bulawayo-based activist, lawyer, and painter Marshall Baron also embraced an expressionist approach to abstraction. Baron's work was poorly received by Rhodesia's conservative white-settler elite, who largely preferred to purchase anodyne still-lives and

⁴ *Ibid.*, page 72.

⁵ T. Ranger, *Are We Not Also Men? The Samkange Family and African Politics in Zimbabwe, 1920-64*, Portsmouth, Heinemann Books, 1995.

landscapes of local artists. Responding to a conservative critic in the local newspaper in 1969, Baron wrote:

Finally, just for the record, I can draw. I do not claim to do so especially well, because my interest is not to render images from the phenomenal world, but to create an iconography of the imagination, to find viable plastic metaphors for the inner world – the hopes, loves and experiences which constitute the ultimate realities for us all ...⁶

Baron played an active role in liberal politics. He was an outspoken critic of racial segregation and, as a lawyer, frequently represented clients of colour. In this context, it is easy to see how Baron's engagement with abstraction was not simply an artistic exercise but a choice based in the complementary relationship he perceived between political progressiveness and artistic experiment. For Baron, white Rhodesia's political and cultural conservatism were intimately intertwined. Remaking society and exploring new artistic territory were both projects that could be seen to have advanced together. During the time of sanctions and censorship, Baron sought to keep abreast of international developments in the field of art and attended the Skowhegan Summer Art School in Maine, USA, several times during the 1960s, where he encountered the work of artists such as Jackson Pollock and Hans Hoffman. We see Baron's direct legacy in the work of at least one artist active today,



Marshall Baron, *Sonne*, 1971. Oil on canvas, 106 x 106 cm. Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Zimbabwe, Harare.

Bulawayo-based Rashid Jogee, who freely cites Baron's example as a powerful influence. Jogee's massive, gestural, colour-field compositions share many qualities with Baron's later works but evoke a sense of boundlessness and freedom that is particular to Jogee's oeuvre (p. 218). Jogee's paintings' typical lack of representational elements carries within it the suggestion of a pre-verbal, universalising visual language—one which has the capacity to transcend the divisions of race and defy the social conventions and repressive racial laws that kept like-minded individuals apart.

Lyricism and free, gestural brushstrokes are joined by a third element frequently deployed in local traditions of

⁶ M. Baron, 'Quote was Plea for Tolerance', *The Bulawayo Chronicle*, Bulawayo, 02 May 1969, <http://www.marshallbaron.com/quote-was-plea-for-tolerance/>, (accessed 25 July 2018).



Helen Lieros, *Christ Untitled*, 1981. Oil on canvas, 112 x 86 cm. Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Zimbabwe, Harare.

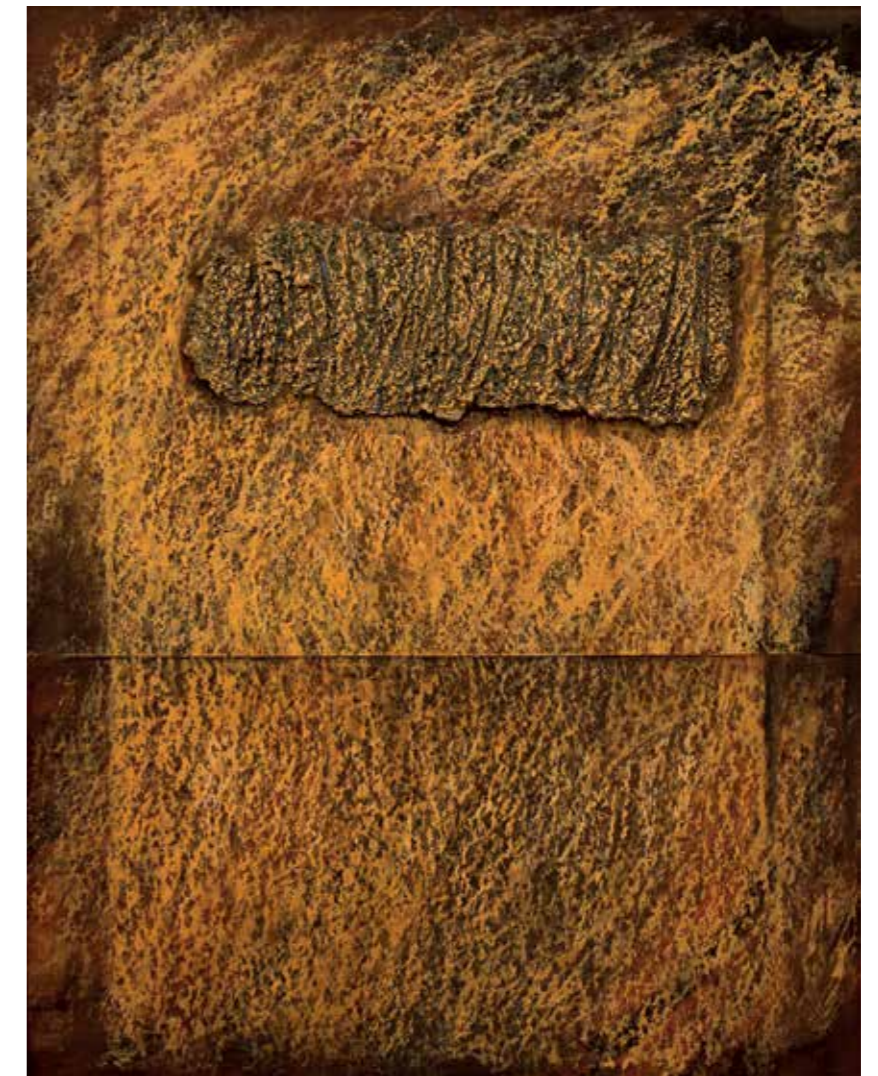
abstract painting: texture. Collaging materials, layering paint, cutting and tearing paper and canvas, and experimenting with dust, chalk, and powdery pigments are some of the methods artists have used to build up the surface of their images and mobilise our tactile senses. On her return from art school in Switzerland during the 1960s, Harare-based Helen Lieros began using experimental combinations of oil paint, paper, and pigment to create unevenly textured images. In later paintings such as *Christ* (1981) and *Wheat* (2005), for example,

Lieros combines a search for her own personal, mythologically-based imagery with a conceptual language whose power is based in an appeal to our tactile senses. In Lieros's paintings, textured surfaces don't just evoke specific things—dried earth, long grasses, air, fire, animal feathers—they also draw our attention to knowledge derived from 'feeling' the world, referring to our capacity to feel both with our senses and with our emotions. In Lieros' work, a call to see the world 'feelingly' functions both as an aesthetic strategy and an ethical position. It suggests an art of 'feeling the world' that also allows us to 'feel' our way among others. That we should find her influence in so many younger artists is unsurprising, given that she has taught and mentored an unusually large number of local artists.

Lieros' work finds a number of overlapping conceptual and aesthetic resonances in the work of a younger generation, including Hilary Kashiri, Greg Shaw, Wallen Mapondera, Gareth Nyandoro, and Helen Teede. Shaw's *Legacy: The Red Fence* (2017) offers an image of a bloodied landscape (p. 122); while Mapondera's *Musha Waparara* (2018) offers a devastated informal urban settlement (p. 109). These works are not just intellectual responses. Through their use of texture, they evoke a sense of our embodied nature and make us

aware of our senses. Their appeal to a shared baseline of sensory experience hints at the possibilities for a new kind of communication that might occur between people (rather than just with individual subjects) without denying the history and circumstances of specific events, such as alienation from land or the demolition of informal urban homes and businesses.⁷ By appealing to touch and feeling, the knowledge such abstract images offer suggests a space of potentiality rather than an all-knowing diktat; the basis for new forms of mutual relation in which individuals are both more sensitised to one another and more equal. Rather than a future that appears hopeless and foreclosed, they suggest a space for freedom.

⁷ My discussion of touch and feeling in relation to aesthetic activity is influenced by D. Russell's *Tact: Aesthetic Liberalism and the Essay Form in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2017.



Helen Lieros, *Wheat*, 2005. Mixed media, 109 x 86 cm. Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Zimbabwe, Harare.