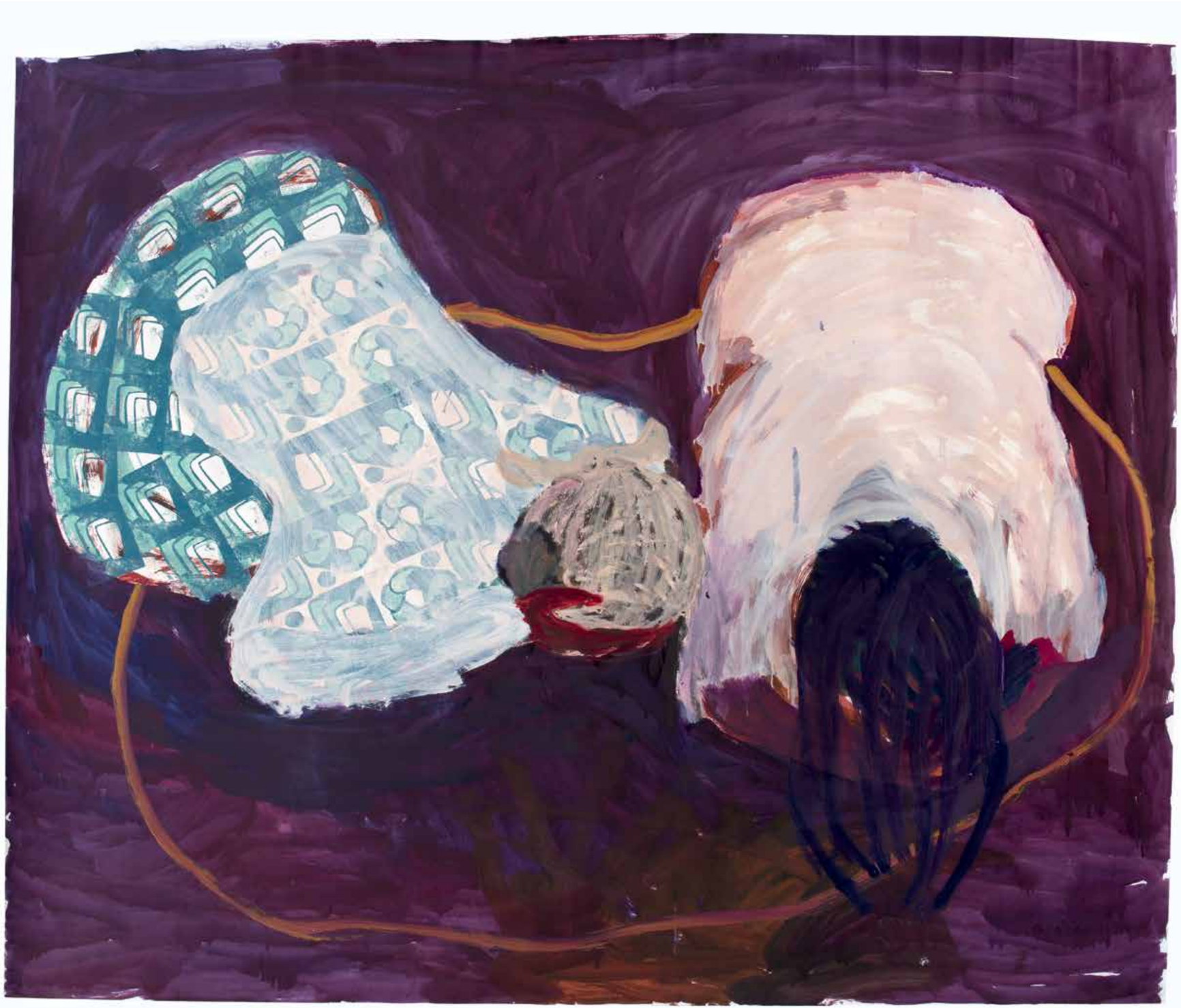
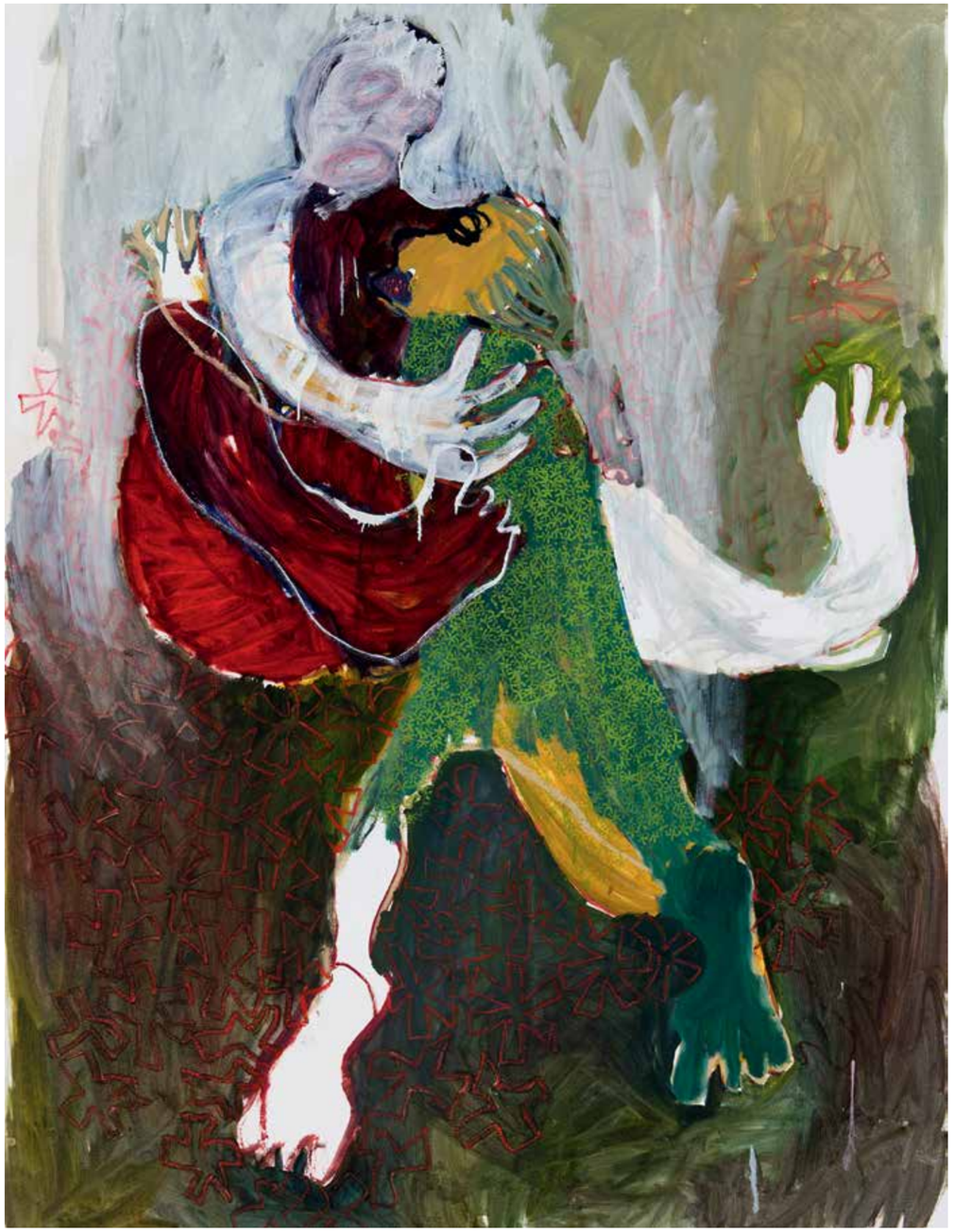
Portia Zvavahera by Netsayi



PANERIMA RAKAKOMBA, 2014, oil-based printing ink and oil bar on paper, 49⅜ × 59⅛ inches. All images courtesy of the artist and STEVENSON, Cape Town/ Johannesburg.

I CAN FEEL IT IN MY EYES, 2015, oil-based printing ink and oil bar on canvas, 64⅝ × 82½ inches.



Harare-based artist Portia Zvavahera paints life-size characters in bold and dramatic configurations, their physical and emotional strain almost palpable on the surface of her large canvases. Moments of distress or pain are pictured in exuberant colors and cheerful patterns, while joy or ecstasy may appear before murky or gloomy backgrounds. Sometimes it is hard to discern whether the people in her compositions are celebrating or mourning, or both; above all the paintings exude the intensity of the characters' experiences and their deep absorption in the depicted scenes.

Zvavahera's protagonists are mostly women, doing things only women do, like giving birth or mothering their children. Other female figures are involved in traditional and religious rites, such as walking in wedding processions or kneeling in prayer. These individual and communal rituals reflect a blend of indigenous Zimbabwean beliefs and Christian faith and speak of a devotion that is genuine to the artist's own life and her cultural upbringing.

At age twenty-eight, Zvavahera represented her country at the 2013 Venice Biennale as a participant in the exhibition *Dudziro: Interrogating the Visions of Religious Beliefs*. Her paintings at the Zimbabwean pavilion stood out with both their spiritual focus and their raw and down-to-earth physicality. Particularly before the backdrop of Venice, a city filled with centuries worth of religious symbols—from sacral architecture to devotional objects to paintings commissioned by the Catholic church—Zvavahera's compositions haunted Western biennial visitors with their primal and unmediated iconography of the body.

Zvavahera's rough brushwork, along with her figures' dynamic gestures, ghostlike faces, and expressive limbs, suggests that she abandons her paintings at the point of highest tension. At times the scenes appear as if painted in haste, as if to capture the pinnacle of drama before it would pass, or before a dream would fade from memory seconds after waking. The artist attempts to seize these moments of unadulterated emotion or subconscious experience before analysis and interpretation—in order to transfer them onto the canvas without loss of subliminal textures.

Zvavahera's use of color is simultaneously sophisticated and intuitive. Darkness and light exist closely side-by-side, both physically and spiritually. Luminous areas seep into deep shadows while vibrant floral-patterned robes contrast with thick, impenetrable backgrounds of blues, browns, and blacks. There are no hard lines and the demarcations between colors and shapes are often vague, which lends the works a cohesion and fluidity that feels intimate and compassionate. Many of Zvavahera's compositions are dance-like and they evoke a rhythm and tonality that is undoubtedly related to music.

Zimbabwean singer and composer Netsayi has admired Zvavahera's work for years and welcomed the opportunity to meet the artist in Harare to ask her some questions that also concern Netsayi's own creative process as a musician.

— Sabine Russ

NETSAYI [CHIGWENDERE]: So you work inside a crate.

PORTIA ZVAVAHERA: In a container.

NC: Isn't it hot?

PZ: Yeah, it's hot. I don't like to spend too much time in the container because I'm so busy with my kids. Sometimes I go in and work just for a few minutes and then I go back, do something else . . .

NC: With the kids?

PZ: Yeah, with the kids. And then I go back, just like to and fro.

NC: For the whole day? I try and do that but it doesn't really work for me as a musician. Maybe writing needs a different concentration. With painting you can go in and out.

PZ: You can be thinking while you're doing something else. You need to refresh, you need to move away from the painting and think about it.

NC: What's your husband's name again?

PZ: Gideon [Gomo].

NC: Do you both work at the same time?

PZ: No, I'm mostly with the kids. He's a sculptor and he works with stone. He shouldn't have kids around him.

NC: Because of the powder?

PZ: Yeah.

NC: Before starting this recording we were laughing and talking about you becoming famous. So when did it start? When did you sign to Stevenson gallery? Is it exclusive?

PZ: I signed with them, like just "after famous." (*laughter*)

NC: After the Venice Biennale? I remember talking to Doreen [Sibanda], the Director of the National Gallery of Zimbabwe, and she was very excited about Zimbabwe being invited to the Biennale. How did you get invited?

PZ: I didn't know the curator, but I got an invitation.

NC: Okay, and then your work was seen there by Stevenson gallery from Cape Town and they signed you?

PZ: Yeah, in 2013.

NC: And when did you graduate from Harare Polytechnic?

PZ: 2006.

NC: So it's been ten years of working.

Were you ever signed to a gallery before that?

PZ: No.

NC: So how was that? And how is it going now?

PZ: It was not easy, considering the economy of Zimbabwe. I'd been showing my paintings with the National Gallery and Gallery Delta here. But the market in Zimbabwe—it's not easy to sell, unless you go cheaper. With a gallery you can at least make a living. Having Stevenson in South Africa, it's better in terms of sales, but I have to push myself to produce more and more because people are wanting to buy my work. Obviously, it's not that easy—

NC: To generate more work? Why?

PZ: There is a thinking process involved. You don't just paint, you know. As for my paintings, they have to come from within me.

NC: Do you have a cycle for producing new work? I myself need a lot of gestating. I don't produce like Tuku [Oliver "Tuku" Mtukudzi]. He's got hundreds of songs. He just writes like this. (*snaps*) Whereas some people have a cycle only every five years. What about you?

PZ: I have a cycle, I should say, because my work is all about my life experiences. I paint mostly painful moments. It's like a healing process. My happy moments are difficult to paint. Sometimes I can paint them, but not very often.

NC: So the happier you become, the worse a painter you're going to be?

PZ: I don't know! (*laughter*)

NC: Just kidding. So how does it work with the gallery? Do they say, "When you're ready to exhibit, you let us know"?

PZ: It's like this: If I'm to have a solo show they tell me eight or nine months before, and then I prepare for that show. If they have art fairs coming up, they ask me if I want to participate. Or they ask if I have anything in my studio, and if I do, they might come here and see and then they can collect. So it's actually flexible.

NC: I really love your work but I find it a bit scary.

PZ: Oh, it's not that scary anymore. It's getting better. (*laughter*)

NC: Is it? What's been the transition? What were you painting before that people might have responded to in the same way I do?

PZ: Most people found my paintings scary. And about these new works many people are saying that they are fully changed. Before, I used to paint my dreams. I sleep and when I wake I don't forget my dreams. I make a sketch in my sketchbook. Later I just transfer the dream onto the canvas. But now, I kind of join together the dream and my experiences with my husband and everyone else around me, to make a painting.

NC: It's like coming more down to earth.

PZ: Yeah.

NC: A lot of the reviews that I was reading in *City Press* and in some of the New York publications, they were talking about love and loss and they didn't refer that much to the spiritual component. Maybe because I'm Zimbabwean, I'm looking at the pictures and I'm picking up a person with white skin in a dream, and I don't know if it's universal—

PZ: The symbols?

NC: Yeah, the way you would read this as a Zimbabwean. Do you think people in the States are looking differently at this picture?

PZ: It may differ because we all have our own backgrounds. I'm a Zimbabwean and I should show in my paintings where I'm from. I used to paint animals. And, as you know, in our culture, when you have a dream about dogs, cows, or whatnot, it means an evil spirit is coming to attack.

NC: So when you show in the Western world, or when Western people buy your paintings, they get to understand that a dog in a dream symbolizes evil spirits. But what is it like for you—actually processing and experiencing that? What do you think your dreams are for? Of all the painters, on the continent or in the world, you're becoming well known for painting this type of stuff. Do you ever think, What does it mean?

PZ: Yeah, I've thought about it and I think maybe it's a new way of painting that I've taken on, mixing printing and painting. And I can express, emote into my paintings. You can feel something with certain paintings, and with others you just look at colors.

NC: But don't you think an image embodies a spiritual quality that can be transferred? People can look at these things and find them quite scary. If I had that dream, I'd wake up in the morning and run to church.

PZ: I wake up and I pray after the dream. That's what I do. (*laughter*)

NC: But in the spiritual realm, don't you think there's a knowledge that these paintings are going to be painted? We're living in the physical world, right? But then you make these paintings—I mean given the frequency and your ability to capture these things, do you ever think, What's going on?

PZ: What's going on in the spirit world?

NC: Yeah. I think about that as an artist, I wonder, What's my function? Why am I a medium for these thoughts and ideas? And why are they interesting to people in America or in England or elsewhere?

PZ: I think that people can relate to what I'm experiencing. You can have dreams and not know that you have them. I think dreams have something to do with the physical world. The dream is like the prophet, telling you about the future, about what's going to happen or what is causing something to happen in the future. We all sleep; we all have dreams.

NC: It doesn't happen to everyone.

PZ: It doesn't? Really? So it's like a gift.

NC: Or to some people it happens and they don't—

PZ: —remember.

NC: Or they don't make a connection. Maybe Zimbabweans take their dreams

The dream is like the prophet, telling you about the future, about what's going to happen or what is causing something to happen in the future.

HIS PRESENCE, 2013, oil-based printing ink on paper, 59 1/10 × 44 9/10 inches.

left:
I CAN FEEL IT IN MY EYES, 2015, oil-based printing ink and oil bar on canvas, 97⅘ × 65 inches.

opposite:
NDAKAVHU-MBAMIRA, 2014, oil-based printing ink and oil bar on canvas, 62 × 43⅗ inches.

LABOR WARD, 2012, oil-based printing ink on paper, 57⅘ × 47⅘ inches.

more seriously, or take them as signs of something. That's very much culturally normal. We put those dreams into a spiritual context—it's not random. So what's your own response to these dreams? Maybe it's too personal what I'm asking.

PZ: For me, the dreams are like future-telling, letting me know what to do next or what's happening in the spirit world that I should be aware of. And then I should take action in prayer.

NC: I really wanted to hear about that because I'm similarly translating things. Although not in the same way as you do, I am trying to process things that are going on in the spiritual realm and to make a reality of them. They somehow collide in my art.

PZ: It's difficult to translate that realm.

NC: Sometimes I wish I knew what I'm actually contributing to the world as a musician. I just became an artist because that was what I was good at. And then suddenly people are appreciating it and I'm wondering: What am I putting out there and for what? Do you know what I mean?

PZ: Yes. I have a good example. I had a dream that they wanted to take my children away from me. I had to fight very hard in the dream to get my kids back. I got them back and when I woke up I made this painting of me hugging two of my kids together. Then this guy came into the gallery. He lives far away from his home in Angola, and when he looked at the painting, he thought about his family and how he wants to hug them and be with them. He bought that painting and he feels like he's with them now. So it's like a healing process to him. You never know what a painting can do to a person.

NC: I wanted to ask you about that conflict between being an artist and the business side—signing to a fairly prestigious gallery or label or whatever, and then having to engage with being interviewed and asked to explain your work. I'm going to the States in October and the PR people from the production company said, "Can you write a little bit about these songs for the program that you're presenting?" And I thought, I don't have anything to say. The songs are the songs and, as much as I talk, I made the songs so the songs could speak. I don't really want to start explaining now what the songs mean.

PZ: I think people have to listen to the songs and then they can translate them in whichever way they want, in their own understanding. That's what it should be.

NC: So is it easy for you to move between the worlds of being a painter and being a public figure of sorts, responding to things, doing interviews or photo shoots? Some artists don't want to deal with the press or they don't want to do Facebook and blah blah . . .

PZ: I don't do that. I also don't like to do interviews. I don't like talking too much. I don't even enjoy going to my own exhibitions. If I am to go there, I just want to hear people tell me what they think while looking at the paintings. That's what I want to hear. But sometimes when I'm flexible, I accept interviews because I can learn from them as well. That's when some questions come and later, while I'm doing a painting, I might wonder, Why did she ask me this? Why am I doing it? And then you get to process your work. But if I don't want interviews, I don't do them. (*laughter*)

NC: For most artists, it's a dilemma. Your answer makes sense to me. So what are you working on now?

PZ: I'm not working. Since my last solo show I haven't produced anything because I don't know where to start now. But soon I'll come up with something, I'm sure.

NC: So when did you finish the work for the exhibition that just happened in July?

PZ: June. Yeah, most of the paintings I did in June.

NC: Really?

PZ: Because I had so much time to think about what I was going to produce. So I painted most of them in June.

NC: And this, having known that you had eight months?

PZ: Yes. (*laughter*)

NC: That's funny. We're exactly the same.

PZ: When I'm under pressure I produce a lot. When I'm relaxed, I don't.

NC: Wafting around, everything else is more interesting than painting. So what does your family think about what you're doing?

PZ: At first, they wanted me to do something else. Like I'm good at hairdressing, so they wanted me to do both, hairdressing and then painting part time. But I kept insisting on studying art. Then later on, I won some awards and I would help them. They are quite happy about it now.

NC: I think for African families . . .

PZ: You have to get employed. Yeah.

NC: Art as a profession is something most people in Zimbabwe just don't understand. My undergrad degree was in painting and my parents were like: "You're doing a Popii degree?" (*laughter*)

PZ: That's terrible.

NC: Yeah, but it also puts you in a funny place. I suppose you have to really want to do it and, in a way, that makes you a better artist. Tell me about how you make these layers of stuff. You print these patterns on paper and then you stick the paper on the canvas?

PZ: I print right to canvas.

NC: Oh. Of course you do. But how do you get such vague edges?

PZ: It's block print with cardboard applied directly to the canvas. Let's say I want to print this patch—I have to leave this space open and then, when I'm printing, I make sure I don't mess around it.

NC: Do you make a stencil or do you just do with it patience?

PZ: It's a stencil.

NC: Oh, okay. It's so beautiful. It reminds me of Gustav Klimt. What do you think when people are comparing your work to these well-known artists?

PZ: I never thought I could be compared with an artist such as Klimt. It's a big one. When I started doing this, I wasn't into the paintings of those people I get related to. But then as time went on, I had to see their works and see what people are talking about. For me it's not easy looking at paintings because then I end up—

NC: —being influenced?

PZ: Yeah, which I don't want. I just browse and read about other artists. And then I live it.

NC: When you were at Poly [Harare Polytechnic], didn't you have to look at other people's work? Didn't you have modules where you had to reference other artists?

PZ: We were not looking that much at certain artists' works or doing research on them. We were sent to look at the changing exhibitions at Gallery Delta, which shows artists from here so we would know our backgrounds.

NC: That's great. That's why you guys have got such style.

PZ: I don't think they wanted us to have a Western background because it's not us. Like this verse in the Bible that says, "There's nothing new under the sun." We are all taking from the past and we are doing it again and again in different ways.

NC: If you look at whose work is traveling and moving around in the world, there's only a few of us. As artists, you and I are part of a minority.

PZ: You really have to make sure that what you put out is not poison to the world!

NC: What is your art school's role in your understanding of art and your success as a painter?

PZ: The students have to respond to the teachers. If they don't, they remain students and won't become successful or anything.

NC: So were you responding well to your teacher?

PZ: Yeah. He was so hard on us.

NC: In what way?

PZ: We would make prints and after we'd done our assignment he would look and tell us to start again. "It's not what I want." And we would start over and over again until we got what he wanted.

NC: Did you understand at the time what he wanted?

PZ: In the end, yeah.

NC: What was he looking for?

PZ: A print has to be smart. It has to be very clean. If you drop something on the print, then it's a reject. So, even when he was teaching us the technique, if you didn't do it the way he wanted it, then you failed. He was good.

NC: When you go for artist residencies, what's their value for you?

PZ: When I went to Greatmore Studios in Cape Town in 2009, things were very difficult here in Zimbabwe, you remember. Here I didn't have materials to work with. So I applied in South Africa and was accepted. They give you materials and a space to work. That's the advantage of it. And then the interactions, you get to know what other people are doing.

NC: Do you fall in love with any of your pictures and don't want to sell them?

PZ: I fall in love with most of my paintings. But often I have to let them go. Some I've kept and they are at my mother's house.

NC: Does your mom understand your work? Or does she say, "Hey, Portia . . ."

PZ: "What are you doing?"

NC: She says that?

PZ: Yeah, she does. And my father is like, "Why don't you go to this place I saw, it's a beautiful landscape. There are big mountains and it's so nice, Portia. Go there." And I'm like, "No, I don't want to do that."

NC: What do you say to your mom?

PZ: I explain my paintings to her. She often wakes up and tells me about her dreams and then I try to come up with an explanation.

NC: For things that were confusing? So the answer's always in you.

PZ: Yeah, so it's better for me to just wake up and say, "Help me, God. I don't want this, this, this."

NC: It's easier to depict trouble, to manifest conflict, right? But then, the whole form of explaining your troubles might be problematic.

PZ: There's this guy who was building our house. His wife was four months pregnant and she had diabetes. He goes to mass at the Apostolic Church and they told the wife not to go to the hospital. She didn't go and then . . .

NC: The baby died?

PZ: No, both of them. Just because of those prophets. So in the world we are living in, so many false prophets are arising. It's difficult to really tell who the true prophet is and who is not. You're better off not going to the prophets but being by yourself together with God, you know, communicate with God. We were given so much power by God. We can say whatever we want and we can have it so easy, just like that. But it's difficult to practice it.