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Portia Zvavahera



The path of the heart

This interview with Portia Zvavahera begins in a cafe in Braamfontein, following the opening of her 2017 solo exhibition, *Take Me Deeper*, a week after Zimbabwe's emancipation from Robert Mugabe. With this event still orbiting the global news cycle, forming a pressing point of conversation with expatriated Uber drivers, the question inevitably arises of the artist's thoughts as a resident of the capital city of Harare. She responds with benign indifference. Later, in discussions about symmetries between cultures, she remarks that 'there's nothing new under the sun'. Changes in government, the tabulations of policy and systems managed by bureaucrats are not part of Zvavahera's ambit. Her frames of reference are the subconscious and ineffable.

From her first solo exhibition with Stevenson, *Mavambo Erwendo (Beginning of a Profound Journey)*, to her most recent, Zvavahera has looked at marriage, birth, isolation and the various forms of love; along the way her typically female figures have transformed into archetypal expressions, shifting from the realm of the personal to the transpersonal to explore the relationship between God and Self.

Zvavahera luxuriates in the ephemeral. Her imagery is founded on her dreams, nature, narratives from the Judeo-Christian Old Testament and indigenous African religions. The ways in which dreams and visions catalyse her paintings is rooted in her relationship with her grandmother. She recalls, 'When we woke up every day, we would tell each other our dreams. Transferring the energy of my dreams into my paintings has helped me heal myself, and remove the negative energy from my nightmares.' Zvavahera describes her paintings as prayers. Titles such as *Zvakandivinga Muchadenga (Air Spirit Bird)*, *Onaiwo Vana Vangu (Watch over My Kids)* and *Ndakukurwa (Something Is*

Taking Me) suggest her paintings are outpourings from an expanding universe of love and struggle. Regarding these titles she says, 'As I'm making the paintings I'm thinking about the dream. The dream brings out the title.' The visible object is the residue of a process that begins inviolably inside her mind. Despite her visual exuberance and resonant gestures, her works are barometric and intuitive, functioning as registers of her particular devotions.

In *Nine Weeks*, Meleko Mokgosi remarked, 'Why painting? Again this I do not know. One of the enjoyable things about being an artist is that we can produce things that are closely connected to our desires and demands, even though these can never be known in their entirety.' Mokgosi approaches his heavily researched paintings as studied chapters in a central thesis, and Zvavahera treats hers as prayers – yet the statement of the one is embodied by the other, narrowing the imagined distance between dogged intellectualism and sacrament. In this conversation, Zvavahera traces evolutions in her practice, observing: 'Now it's all about the way I see God around me and inside me, and how I want to worship Him. It's about the way I'm connected to Him. I found that I can't really talk about somebody else's faith. I'm mostly looking at my faith now and the problems that I'm facing, and how I can connect to God so that He can also respond to me in the way He wants to respond.' The beseeching nature of her works is a celebration of unknowable things.

In *Seven Days in the Art World*, Sarah Thornton concluded that 'any individual artist can have many nebulous places within them'; after these nine weeks, conversation with Zvavahera signposts the intricacies of these places. Her words suggest that a keenness of subjectivity can transcend the ambitions of critical and material endeavour, as she notes: 'We have things that we want, but through our hearts. We should follow those things.'

Sinazo Chiya:

You've been on a couple of residencies recently. How was your experience at the Gasworks in London last year?

Portia Zvavahera:

It was fun. It was challenging. It was experimental. At first I didn't like the experience, because people kept coming into my studio.

They'd just show up?

Asking questions. I'm not used to that. Somehow thinking about my work limits me. I want to be in my studio and just produce my work. So I learnt the lesson that I have to produce my work and at the same time be able to speak about it.

When I spoke to Claudette Schreuders for this book she said she wasn't a big fan of doing interviews because the moment she says something or sees her words on paper she ends up changing her mind. In your interview with Netsayi in *Bomb Magazine* you also said that you're not a big fan of doing interviews. What makes you push past your reluctance to do this kind of thing?

I realised that I had to face my fears. If I keep quiet people won't know. So I have to say something – but I cannot say the next thing I want to do otherwise I won't do it.

You used the word 'experimental'. Can you tell me more about the experiment of using maize meal in your painting?

Before I went to London, I had felt stuck in my work. I don't want to keep doing the same stuff over and over again, I want to do new things. I used my time in London to talk to people, go to galleries, search for new avenues. I found myself talking about textiles, wallpaper designs, India ...

How did those conversations translate into your work?

Zimbabwe still produces commercial batik fabrics; they do batik on tablecloths and stuff like that. In London I bought maize meal when I was homesick, and I wanted to make sure that I used it all up. The only way I could do that was to make porridge and make a maize batik – we call it a sadza batik. I also had some designs that I wanted to do on a larger scale, for which the blocks I had been using were too small. The batik was a solution.

Do you plan your paintings with sketches? Drawings?

I do. I record my dreams in sketches.

And those become the paintings?

Indirectly. I try to develop one dream into a number of paintings, because there's a story that I want to tell. Even if it is a nightmare, I want to paint something that is very positive.

So you turn the negative into a positive thing?

I might paint the actual dream, but I change it somehow. I don't want to portray the negative aspects of the dreams.

Why dreams?

My grandmother believed in dreams. When we woke up every day, we would tell each other our dreams. Transferring the energy of my dreams into my paintings has helped me heal myself, and remove the negative energy from my nightmares.

I'm curious about the role gardens play in your work. What is it about that imagery that you find so inspiring?

In London I would go to the garden every Sunday because I didn't go to church like I would back home.

So the gardens were your church?

Yes. When you see flowers there smiling, there is God.

In your earlier work there was a lot of recognisably Christian iconography – lots of crosses and people who seemed to be worshipping inside churches. Now it seems like a new form of spirituality is coming through that's more about people worshipping in nature. What does that mean for you in terms of your faith and its movement?

At the time I painted the crosses I was doing some research on certain churches in Zimbabwe. Now it's all about the way I see God around me and inside me, and how I want to worship Him. It's about the way I'm connected to Him. I found that I can't really talk about somebody else's faith. I'm mostly looking at my faith now and the problems that I'm facing, and how I can connect to God so that He can also respond to me in the way He wants to respond. Now I can feel how protected I am by God, so I'm no longer looking into other people's ways of connecting. But when I went to India, it was there. You can't avoid it.

That brings us to your residency in Bangalore early this year. What did you connect with there?

Everything – the way they worship, the festivals ... it all felt so familiar. Like for example, in Zimbabwe, people used to wear bangles of some sort for rituals, including newborn babies. Now people are no longer doing it – it's taboo because people are becoming more Christian and they are sort of hiding these things. But when I went to India, it's *there*, you just see it. They are not hiding anything. So it felt like I had gone back to the past when I was in India – it was a very interesting experience.

How has this experience influenced you visually? Are you translating the connection that you perceived into the work you are making?

I was a bit confused by what I saw. When we are in church we're told it's taboo to worship idols but in India you see people who are dedicated to that. It seems to me that however you choose to worship, it's the same. Like with the bangles and everything that is done in India, it's also there in our culture in Zimbabwe. It's like all cultures are connected because we come from the same God.

How does this relate to the centrality of dreams in your work?

I believe that I have a connection with the Master through sleeping and dreaming. I'm being told my future. It's best that I trust what I see in my visions. In Zimbabwe there are a lot of false prophets who come to you and say all these crazy things and want money. But then we also sleep, we dream ... We have things that we want, but through our hearts. We should follow those things.

Have you ever noticed a shift in the quality or feeling of your dreams when you are travelling in different places?

In India I stopped dreaming for the whole month. It was so painful. You sleep and you wake up with nothing. In India there was a lot to see, in the churches, everywhere, and maybe my mind was busy digesting the things that I was seeing. The designs I saw in the signs and the colours and everything around me ... There was a lot to see, so maybe that's why I couldn't dream. I remember just one dream that I had in India. I saw my family suffering and the next morning I had a phone call saying that my brother is not feeling well. That's the only dream I had and it's from that that I started to make the paintings.

Is this the dream that influenced the new works with the image or icon of the bull?

Yes. In India they see the bull as a holy cow, as a god. When I see a bull in my dreams, it's not that at all. It's spiritual but evil. I know there's going to be a battle in the future when I see a bull in my dreams. So there was a lot of confusion for me.

The triptych that you made for the Berlin Biennale was called *Hapana Chitsva (All is Ancient)*. What is the significance of the title in relation to the bull and the battle?

In Zimbabwe we have people who put spirits on bulls, and the bull becomes a god in the family. Whenever they want something they have to worship the bull in order to get it. And in India they are doing the same thing. They do all sorts of things because it's a god, you know. So for me, looking at it as a whole, it's like it's the same everywhere. There's nothing new under the sun.

How do you generally choose your titles?

As I'm making the paintings I'm thinking about the dream. The dream brings out the title.

You alternate between Shona and English. Is that out of choice? Does the painting choose its language?

I'm always thinking in Shona. Even as I am speaking right now, I'm thinking in Shona. The English titles come because people want to understand what I mean. I dream in Shona and everything is Shona.

Do you feel like you were influenced by all the colours and the different fabrics you got to interact with in India?

It was so much fun for me. It was the best place for my work, I think, because every day you are looking at colour. We have colour in Africa, but we no longer wear colours like they do in India. We're no longer so into designs. I like floral designs ... they attract me so much, but I cannot wear a floral dress. I don't know why I like flowers so much!

The printmaking technique has long been part of your practice. Are there any other styles or technical influences that you are curious about or things that you'd want to investigate after your time in India?

They were making designs with silk yarns ... It would be nice to learn more about that. The fabrics are so unique. We used to have that back home, but people are no longer doing that because there are lots of cheap, disposable products now. I want to bring back what our great-grandmothers used to do.

Are there other materials or mediums that you are curious about?

Maybe making the batiks on cloth and the prints on cloth, then making something out of it ... but the problem is when I say what I want to do, I never do it. In London I saw an exhibition by Louise Bourgeois. It inspired me to make sculptures. When I saw her work, it felt like a premonition of where I would be in 10 years' time. That's the feeling I got. But because I've seen it now I don't want to go there. It has already been done.

But you can always do it in your own way.

I could, but I haven't found that way yet.

How do you feel about the placing of works in a space – do you enjoy that process?

For my previous exhibition in Cape Town, *I Can Feel It in My Eyes*, I wanted to make sure everything was hung exactly as I intended. For the more recent show I let the gallery hang it. Perhaps because it was a more experimental body of work, I was less attached to the overall installation. I just had to come and turn that one painting.

Tell me about that. You moved the orientation from vertical to horizontal?

That painting is called *Rebirth*. It was too direct when it was vertical. Now that it is horizontal, you need to search for certain things. Gideon, how would you explain it?

Gideon Gomo:

It's different looking at a framed painting hanging on a gallery wall. When it was hanging there, Portia got a communication from the painting. I wouldn't say it was intuition. It was the painting telling her 'I want to be like this'.

**That is beautiful. So do the paintings speak to you?
Is there always a communication between you
and the painting?**

There is.

GG:

She resolves experiences in her life through paintings.

In the making of the painting?

GG:

Exactly. The making of the painting resolves the problem. When I'm at home, there are times that I won't go into the studio. The energy there is not resolved. There's this understanding between Portia and the painting that it doesn't want me there.

No external forces.

GG:

Not even the kids, or the phone. She is in her own world.

**Painting as prayer. Is it the spiritual relationship that
grounds you every time?**

Every time. Sometimes I feel weak. Those are the times that I hate the most in my life because I don't dream.

You feel weak when you don't dream?

Spiritually weak, fragile.

**The work is so grounded in the spiritual world. It makes me
wonder about form and technique, about colour palette and
gesture and brush stroke. How does that fit into all of this?**

I experiment, and then I just continue with the mistakes that I make when I'm working.

So it's always experimental?

I think I'm always searching for new things. Things that are revealed to me. I don't think about what colour I'm going to use on the painting. I just end up with a colour on my palette.

So when you want purple, you just want purple?

Yeah. I just want purple.

**Does the size of your paintings have a metaphorical or
deeper meaning for you? Does the image say it needs a
smaller or bigger size, or is it more of a practical choice?**

I never started big. I started small, but going back to painting smaller pictures again after discovering the freedom of large paintings feels restrictive. But I don't really choose. It happens randomly, depending on what I have in my studio.

It's also intuitive?

Yes.

There's a question I've asked some of the other painters in this series: how do you know when a painting is finished?

It calls me. When it says 'stop', then I stop.

I know you've worked in a container, you've worked in a funeral parlor. What's the studio looking like right now?

It's our house.

How is it to work at home?

At first I was excited, but now I realise it comes with distraction. I see dishes that need to be done – I have to go and do them. So I'm thinking of looking for another studio somewhere else.

Do you plan on travelling again soon?

Maybe ... I have been dreaming a lot since I came back so I need to start working again.

We're all very excited to see what happens.

Hahaha. I am also.