

The Harare Fauves

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Art history is replete with examples of almost magical eruptions of talent and creativity occurring in specific cities at specific moments in time, which are later left to art historians to unpack and explain. Florence in the 1500s, Paris in the 1850s, Amsterdam in the 1600s, Munich in the 1910s, New York in the 1960s-80s.

It is accurate to say that to date, the history of painting, and oil painting in particular, has been shaped and represented by a particularly European vision and perspective. It is equally accurate to say that the centers of creative gravity in the world have shifted over the past several decades and when history of painting in the 21st century is written, it will reach Beijing, Sao Paulo, Bangkok, Buenos Aires, Addis Ababa and Harare.

An unlikely candidate for becoming a flourishing art center, the capital of Zimbabwe has over the last decade, undergone a remarkable transformation. After years of economic adversity and political stagnation, which left the local art scene isolated and under-resourced, the small but resilient art community rebounded with a verve for international engagement.

The end of the second decade of the 21st century sees Zimbabwean contemporary art punching well above its weight in the international ranks, with numerous artists of the younger generation represented in major museums and international biennales, among them Misheck Masamvu, Moffat Takadiwa, Portia Zvavahera, Gresham Tapiwa Nyaude, Gareth Nyandoro, Wycliffe Mundopa, Helen Teede and Virginia Chihota.

Even more remarkable is that painting has become the flag-bearer of contemporary art in the country. Remarkable because aspiring painters in Harare face enormous challenges, and expense, in obtaining both instruction and material. And yet it is painting, which has proven to be a space for speaking most powerfully and passionately about political, cultural and economic turmoil in the country. Equally, it is the culture of Zimbabwe and its circumstances which have created an opportunity for developing a potent new visual vocabulary and an approach to painting, which we can now begin to speak about as 'the Harare school'.

Zimbabwean cultural norms prioritise maintaining peaceful relations in the community, saving face and avoiding conflict. The politically sensitive climate has only reinforced these imperatives in social and public conduct and communications. Ironically, this has made painting the ultimate medium for social and political commentary for artists like Mundopa and Nyaude, whose figurations are only superficially representational, while being in fact metaphorical, symbolic and conceptual. Mundopa's women are symbolic of the people of Zimbabwe, abuse, prostituted and perverted by the need to survive, while having to find beauty and retain their will to live in absurd and destructive circumstances. Nyaude's works are replete with visual references to urban slang and traditional proverbs speaking with irony and cynicism of the way politicians toy with the lives of ordinary people. For Teede, the tensions of the present day are refracted through the prism and metaphor of the land and landscape as a stage of conflict, and ultimate attachment for Zimbabweans of all colours.

The passions and dramas reflected in the works of these three artists, are real, immediate, potent and relevant. They are a rich source of inspiration for Zimbabwean artists. It is difficult to make trivial work in difficult times. In a removed context, their works might be compared to the French Fauvism or German Expressionism in their defiant use of colour and figuration and in their struggle and attempt to impact change. These artists are well aware of the history they inherit as painters. However, in Harare today, they are building a new future for painting.

By Valerie Kabov - Curator, Editor-at-Large Art Africa Magazine, art historian, critic and co-founder of First Floor Gallery Harare in Harare