

A NEGLECTED GENERATION AT THE MERCY OF THE HOST

by Gina Maxim: Artist, Curator and Co-founder of project space and residency programme Village Unhu in Harare

In the past few years, Misheck Masamvu and I have attempted to answer the question of *what comes first, the human being or the art?* Or rather *what makes us human?* His most recent response being, “the age of you is the amount of time you take to do your work”, which has now made the question no longer viable. It becomes clear to us that actually the two are deeply interwoven and inseparable from one another; not only are they dependent on one another for something even as simple as content, but they rely on each other to inform how we engage with the world around us. As Masamvu has joked, “painting should never spoil a good day... it should allow you to find all of the shapes of the day”. Having spent the last twenty years developing a visual grammar for his painting, a task which has kept him on his toes, this latest body of work emanates from past experiences and his life but also offers a release or an insight into that which best defines today’s trajectory. A trajectory that exemplifies evolution within a world characterised by searching, reflecting, questioning, unearthing, being frustrated and ultimately finding resolution through action.

Thinking about these ideas, I find myself returning to the artist’s words: “the last tool that many have been left with is prayer and fasting, searching for the deliverance from either the physicality or spiritual space.” We are aware that we can reach out to spiritual space that provides the much-needed solace from the current turmoil, but how might we find sanctuary in the physical world when the idea of progression has become life threatening? It almost seems easier to remain hushed or silent because it provides safety. However, luckily, few have chosen to remain silent or have their voices muted when trying to promote discussions surrounding the past, the present and the future of our democracy. Masamvu describes this quite poetically as “trip[ping] over history... [and] stripping the decadent practices”, but with actions taken we see the consequences.

Despite the fact that Masamvu refuses to acknowledge being a political artist, there are incidents where he has been unable to turn a blind eye and to simply “witness the consequence”. These feelings and frustrations towards the “remnants of old behaviour” from those in ‘power’ has given birth to works like *Whispers in the Mist* where these misdeeds must be confronted, challenged and made visible. As Masamvu writes in the poem that accompanies this exhibition:

*The question is
How much appetite do I still have?
To draw inspiration from the past
Or do I still feel empowered by ticking the checklist?
Without paying heed to the consequences that may fall?*

Through the process of creating his body of work, I asked him about his most noted poem from 2016 entitled *Still Still*– which we both agreed was a greeting. Zimbabweans have a knack for doubling words ‘Hi Hi’ or ‘fine fine’. And *Still Still* even today remains a way of not confirming over being good or bad. A constant reminder of struggling that ‘I am still at it’. We accept these responses without

synthesizing them. We spend a great deal of time meandering over other pleasures before we become open and honest towards the initial response. Do we fear to hear the absolute truth? Are we worried to expose ourselves should we be confronted by the true answer? And this is where we might return to the initial question posed in my essay because painting allows Masamvu to draw out what is hidden within the canvas, as opposed to being guided by the intent and preconceived idea. Painting becomes the inherent evidence between intent and what is drawn out from the subconscious.

For someone who is still adamant that his painting is not political, he does not shy away from intimate and revealing themes or subject matter. Again, I return to my initial question of the entangled interplay between human experience and art and I cannot help but think back to the months leading up to the exhibition. Our relationship with each other was tested; something that Masamvu calls a 10-year relapse. There are skeletons in our cupboards and this time they came to feed in gulps and large chunks. Masamvu asked for time, repeatedly – time to die and a time to transform. As a result, this body of work is poignant – each painting embodying a sense of liberation, a dream and illusion and subjecting you to your own intellectual consideration. But the works remind us that they are still parables and passages, repeatedly. It was a war space and not once did he back down.

While looking over this body of work and studying it in greater detail, I have been struck by how these works have been charged with so much emotion – the picture planes are filled with struggle, a degree of turmoil and so much demand. There is an organised chaos to the paintings where they initially appear to go in many different directions, but still confined to the perimeters of each canvas. And yet, something my eyes constantly return to are the figures in Masamvu's works – these subjects that best allow him to express, interpret and read the moments around him. From the repetition of these figures to the hanging feet, and even the words deeply embedded within the brushstrokes of the oil, the paintings in their complexity take ownership.

A neglected generation at the mercy of the host stands to echo the exhibition title *Talk to me while I'm eating*. We simply have become a neglected generation only waiting to be invited to the dinner table and to only be at the mercy of the one who has invited us. We wait. We are beckoned to speak more. Then we are told to stop for a minute, and we watch them swallow. We wait. We try to add another sentence, they pause, they chew, they swallow. We wait. The sound of the cutlery against the plate provides a buffer to what we have to say. We wait. We wait for them to finish eating so that our plight can be heard. We wait. We have become obedient to normalcy and we are beginning to question the difference between sacrifice and contribution; gift and help; shame and liability; forgiving and forgetting; and listening and understanding. All we want to say at this table is simple, we see that you took a sacrifice but accept honestly the state that we are in.