

WAITING FOR THE MUSE

Unique Afro-expressionist style

I CAN FEEL IT IN MY EYES. An exhibition of paintings by Portia Zvavahera. At the Stevenson gallery until August 29. LUCINDA JOLLY reviews.

THE Zimbabwean painter Portia Zvavahera does not pursue her paintings. She waits for them to come to her. And while she waits for them to arise she won't look at the work of other artists, preferring to busy herself with the domestic tasks of a wife and mother, cleaning, tidying and cooking. And when the spark of the paintings come through dreams, prayer or strong feelings, she is totally present, as attentive as the lover to the beloved.

Zvavahera's approach of allowing is rather an old fashioned one when compared to our contemporary notions of pushing through and churning out body of work after body of work, exhibiting on the tail of the one before, the endless need to produce and consume that is our current zeitgeist and lot. "Stoking the star maker machinery behind the popular song", as Joni Mitchell, singer-turned-painter was fond of singing. Zvavahera's way is one far more reminiscent of ancient Mediterranean cultures.

In her TED talk, *Your Elusive Creative Genius*, author Elizabeth Gilbert explained how rather than being an embodiment of a creative or genius, the Ancient Greeks believed that the artist was visited by the spirit of creativity or daemon which came and went as it pleased.

On a more contemporary note, Zvavahera's *modus operandi*

reminds of one of America's best loved poets, the late Ruth Stone. In conversation with Gilbert, Stone explained that she would feel and hear a poem coming at her from over the Virginia landscape like a thunderous "train of air". She felt she was being chased by the poem and if she wasn't fast enough to get pencil and paper, it would simply barrel right though her and continue looking for another host poet. Sometimes Stone would manage to catch it by the tail and transcribe it onto paper backwards. There is a sense that although culturally and physically miles apart Stone and Zvavahera have lots in common.

The starting point for this exhibition has its source in a single dream. Zvavahera who sleeps with her sketchbook under her pillow in readiness, dreamt that she was embracing the man who would become her husband. For the artist, this body of work painted in a combination of oil based printing ink, oil bar and cardboard block prints is "plain and simply" about love.

These latest paintings show a shift from previous darker works which were painted in a room in a funeral parlour at a time when the artist was besieged by dark dreams and affected by the distraught energies that accompany the bereaved.

The passionate couplings in these paintings are staged against an abstracted Edenic background of Harare's National Botanical Gardens, a lovers rendezvous. They show a fusion of the artist's love of textiles, in particular the current fashion in Zimbabwe of floral dresses, the wedding dress and the

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LARGE FORMAT: *I Can Feel It in My Eyes*, 2015, uses oil-based printing ink and oil bar on canvas.

foliage of the gardens. The dream begins with the personal, but its various renditions of couples passionately engaged suspended against a pulsing background of bruised dark purples, reds and blues lead suggests a wider context of the human need to bond with another.

What is fascinating – resonating with Jung's idea of the collective unconscious which transcends all cultural divides – is the unexpected

reference to medieval woodcuts of the divine marriage of the passive white queen and the active red king floating above a landscape found in alchemy. Zvavahera's paintings parallel this image's psychic implications, the archetypal fusion of male and female whose true offspring, not a child but the reconciliation of all opposites. In spite of the prevailing premise for artists of Africa to be Afrocentric in reaction to a dark Eurocentric past, Zvavahera's major influences are not culturally specific to Africa. She does however point out that Africa is full of colour and is also inspired by popular textiles. In terms of artists, her influences lie with the teutonic artists of the past. She cites the influences of Austrian Gustav Klimt and Viennese Egon Schiele.

More specifically in terms of this body of work are Klimt's *The Kiss* and Schiele's *Death and the Maiden*, which was in turn influenced by Klimt. Klimt's *The Kiss* is a milder and far more decorative version of Schiele's interpretation of death as a large eyed man in an army great coat biting down in a Dracula-like manner towards the neck of a woman. The painting suggests not only the death of a personal relationship with Schiele's muse and model Wally Neuzil, but also on a

wider scale the death of old Europe at the beginning of World War 1. The topic of both these paintings, death and the maiden, has been the subject matter of many northern European paintings for half a century. An element of eroticism was later introduced by artists such as Klimt, Schiele, Oskar Kokoschka, and of course Edvard Munch.

Although Zvavahera does not mention him as an influence, Oskar Kokoschka's *The Tempest*, also known as *Bride of the Wind*, with its tattered shards of icy blues is a strong parallel. Like Schiele, Kokoschka painted this after separating from his great obsession, Alma Mahler the composer and widow of Gustav Mahler.

Using the same subject matter of death and the maiden, it is as if Zvavahera is conversing with Klimt and Schiele over an expanse of time, gender, space and cultures, responding, drawing inspiration and finding her own meaning as the female protagonist in her uniquely Afro-expressionistic style.

Her paintings may be closer to Schiele's stylistically in both their gestural quality and expressive distortion of limbs, feet and hands. Her love of pattern and textiles acknowledges Klimt's influence. In the field of emotional sexual relating, Thanatos is never far behind Eros. But unlike the sexually anxious atmosphere and pathological pairing found in the work of her historical influences, the intense couplings of her paintings are wonderfully direct and celebratory.

Zvavahera is one to follow.
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SCREENED: Gigantic flowers seclude the subjects in their private love. The couples seem oblivious to the gaze of the outside world.



ABSORBED: Portia Zvavahera's paintings depict lovers in ecstatic embrace in the lush gardens of Harare's Central Park.