

## Portia Zvavahera *I Can Feel It in My Eyes*

Stevenson, Cape Town 23 July – 29 August

Portia Zvavahera's exhibition, a series of paintings of figures embracing among the flowers of Harare's Central Park, is a perfect example of the new movement of contemporary Zimbabwean painters. What distinguishes this group from its predecessors is the dramatic difference in their interests when compared to the current trends in South African painting. Whereas most Zimbabwean (largely multimedia) artists of the past 15 years (for example Dan Halter, Kudzanai Chiurai and Gerald Machona) were educated in and influenced by South African art movements, the new crop of painters like Zvavahera, Misheck Masamvu, Richard Mudariki and Wallen Mapondera have not been.

One recent incident that perhaps explains some of the differences between young painters from South Africa and Zimbabwe occurred during a discussion panel at the Cape Town Art Fair some months ago. Here Mudariki had stated that he saw painting as a way of "visually expressing ideas", after which a recent South African painting graduate said to me: "Doesn't he understand that we have moved on from that? That the discourse of painting is no longer

about expressing ideas? Contemporary art is about referencing the problems of the two-dimensional surface and markmaking."

Certainly Arthur C. Danto's definition of the difference between 'modern' and 'contemporary' art begs to differ. That is to say that Modernism was largely underpinned by the lone discourse of painters addressing 'flat surfaces', while contemporary art is defined by 'no single narrative direction on the basis of which others could be excluded'. With a plurality of interests shifting from painted surface to postcolonial politics, it is Mudariki who seems more engaged with a contemporary approach than those young abstract South African artists like Zander Blom and this graduate, who have reduced their practice to the singular modernist concern.

In this regard Zvavahera is no different from Mudariki. Certainly she is interested in visual expression; this much is clear from the title of the exhibition. But her work goes further than that. Although her stated influences may be modernists like Schiele and Munch, she is also clearly influenced in a work such as *I Can Feel It in My Eyes* [26] (all works 2015) by fellow

Zimbabwean Masamvu. Here one sees the round patches of bright colour and the awkward horizontal figuration, almost camouflaged within the patterns, that has been a feature of Masamvu's work for the past four or five years.

But Zvavahera's work is also a complex gathering of other influences and ideas. There are the appropriated African waxprint patterns in paintings such as *I Can Feel It in My Eyes* [25] that are synonymous with Yinka Shonibare; the exhibition's theme, of love set in Harare's own 'Garden of Eden', contains both her much-spoken-of interests in religion and politics; and throughout the dozen or so paintings in the exhibition there is the heavy sense of political and social irony communicated through grotesque figuration, aggressive brushstrokes and opaque purples, reds and blues in works like *I Can Feel It in My Eyes* [20], [22] and [27].

Zvavahera's art, like Masamvu's, has the vitality of an artist influenced by a range of powerful personal, political, art historical, religious and social sources. It is this that not only makes her works contemporary but also makes them objects of profound interest. *Matthew Blackman*



*I Can Feel It in My Eyes* [26], 2015,  
oil-based printing ink and oil bar on canvas, 188 × 265 cm.  
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