



'Vese Vakandibata' (They All Gave Me Strength)

© Portia Zvavahera, 2016, courtesy of Stevenson Cape Town and Johannesburg

A HAUNTED brilliance issues from the paintings of Portia Zvavahera currently on exhibit at Stevenson Gallery in the hipster enclave of Braamfontein, Joburg.

The show, *What I See Beyond Feeling*, builds on the success and themes of her previous solo exhibition, *I Can Feel It In My Eyes*. While the earlier work celebrated and explored the charmed rapture of love in public spaces — the lush gardens of Harare's Central Park — Zvavahera's new work takes an otherworldly turn.

Her characters and motifs are rendered in the fluid, indeterminate visual language of dreams. The result is a morbid world of floating beings that are as sublime as they are unnerving. Zvavahera describes the pictures as an attempt to capture "what I see with spiritual eyes".

Her painterly language is often forceful and borderline violent, thanks to her use of gestural, heavy-handed and vigorous brush lines. She peoples her large

canvases with figures that float like ghosts or dancing spirits. They are draped and blanketed by finely detailed lace that is code for both her lover's wedding gown or a veil of privacy. The fabric has a sinister resonance too though, in the way the artist controls its repeating pattern to give it a loose, organic balance.

Zvavahera's painted world is always dark. Her charmed, draped figures float in a sea of purples, crimsons, and other cloudy washes of thinly layered paint.

Size is central to the power of her work. The paintings are massive and loom with spectral energy. Larger than life-size, the canvases stare down dwarfed visitors to the cavernous gallery. Consider *Sacred Vessels*, which

depicts a feminine apparition with others huddled at its feet. They are like children around a maternal protector; or are they? Their abstracted limbs lend them an ethereal form. Nothing feels

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certain.

In *What I Saw*, her floating figures contort with gaping mouths and missing body parts. Here the textured lace takes on the haunted form of smoke or auras. The principal character is winged and faceless with outstretched arms that may be

aggressive or welcoming.

Similarly, in *Ndakadeedzera* (I shouted) the artist presents us with a figure that cuddles or strangles a screaming companion. Viewers never know if the characters are being hurt or protected.

This duality between torment and safety, joy and danger, the corporeal and the spiritual, affords Zvavahera a lush creative latitude to claw at the sublime. Her Ozymandian pictures leave viewers feeling haunted by a presence that never completely reveals itself.

It's part of a mystique she has nurtured since her star began rising. Zvavahera burst on to the art scene in 2009 as the new, radiant child of a revived interest

in Zimbabwean contemporary art. She was an artist-in-residence at Greatmore Studios, Cape Town, and she has won the Tollman Award for the Visual Arts (2013) and the FNB Art Prize (2014) — well-deserved accolades.

As the market becomes familiar with her power as a painter, the question arises: will she beat the tyranny of a successful style? As Robert Hughes once put it, "the modernist image tends toward standardisation".

Consider the fictional Benny Dalmau in *Basquiat*, who tells the painter Jean-Michel Basquiat in the film: "And you gotta do . . . the same kind of work, the same style — over and over again, so people recognise it and don't get confused. Then, once you're famous, you have to keep doing it the same way, even after it's boring — unless you want people to really get mad at you, which they will anyway." **LS**

● **What I See Beyond Feeling is on at Stevenson Gallery in Braamfontein until January 27**

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