

ARCHETYPICALY

MAWANDE KA ZENZILE
STEVENSON GALLERY,
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A minimalist use of images or characters runs throughout Mawande Ka Zenzile's exhibition *Archetypocalypse*, on view last year at Stevenson Gallery in Cape Town, South Africa. Using cow dung and oil paint to execute his works, Ka Zenzile's paintings have a corporeal appeal, yet there is nothing literal about his choice of representation. Rather, the palpable quality of his work is infused with connotations that examine the ambiguous ways popular images affect contemporary discourse and operate as cultural imperatives. The line between these two perspectives is both figuratively and literally obscured and delineated through minimalistic renderings that preclude the imposition of a specific narrative and efface historic context.

Cash Cow (2016–17), for example, depicts a cow elevated on a pedestal wearing what appears to be a crown. Mythological and spiritual cultural connotations associated with the cow are both pronounced and inverted in this piece. Not only is the quotidian image of the animal imbued with an ethereal quality, but the economic implications suggested by the title are confused through the indeterminate context in which the cow is placed. The upturned triangle that suggests a crown further inverts the everyday perception of the cow into an object of reverence and mystery.

Ityala Lamawele (The Court Case of the Twins), 2017, takes its title from a popular Xhosa novel by Samuel Edward Krune Mqhayi, published in 1914, which validates Xhosa law in a colonial administration. The title and placement of this piece in the context of the exhibition operate as both a mechanism for comparing contemporary and precolonial contexts. The painting is rendered in a minimalist style, with a shadowed figure emerging from an



Mawande Ka Zenzile, *Ityala lamawele (The Court Case of the Twins)*, 2017. Cow dung and oil on canvas, 75 x 74.5 cm. Courtesy Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg, South Africa. © Mawande Ka Zenzile

agitated background. It is unclear whether one figure is emanating from the other or whether one is superimposed upon the other. The lower third of the painting is treated abstractly in bright orange and turquoise, separated from the top section of the canvas by a distinct line and standing in stark contrast to it. Both the medium of painting and the referenced novel inform the artist's forms of expression and his contemporary modality: art becomes a facility to awaken consciousness of contemporary and postcolonial cultural production.

The same approach to subject matter is reflected in *The Man on the Trojan Horse* (2015), which depicts a figure resembling Osama bin Laden on horseback. The horse that the bin Laden figure rides has no facial features—more like a constructed horse than a real one. The title of the piece reinforces the perception that the horse and rider are not what they seem and are perhaps on a duplicitous mission. Although Ka Zenzile interweaves allusions to Greek literature and contemporary politics,

his minimalist images operate outside the limitations of history. In stripping images of their context—including their association with history and violence—the artist captures the essence of the moment only to emphasize how the intimacy or immediacy of that moment cannot be adequately captured by history or popular media. This is not to say that Ka Zenzile's works are barren of moral implications. On the contrary, his abstract and minimal execution emphasizes the didactic potential of images and the power with which they can inform both the personal and collective experience.

The historic and philosophical connotations of the title *Logos* (2017) further develop the discourse of the individual versus the collective. Here, Ka Zenzile recognizes how words operate within a singularity of perspective and perception that differs from both the collective experience and individual existential experience. The earth brown cow dung and oil paint mixture and thick gray-green line at the bottom of the canvas allude to the idea of



The Man on the Trojan Horse, 2015. Cow dung and oil on canvas, 120 x 185 cm. Courtesy Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg, South Africa. © Mawande Ka Zenzile

inception and the repetition of ideas. That the Greek "logos" translates to the contemporary English "word" reiterates the mechanisms of narrative. The light, cloudlike image on the left appears to disperse into several smaller and more shapeless forms that are floating toward the top right of the canvas, suggestive perhaps of how verbal "truth" becomes distorted and indistinct with each iteration of an idea. The canvas is devoid of any concrete images, creating in effect a perception of inception that references the immediacy of the experience of creativity. Nevertheless, the inchoate nature of creativity also holds the potential to germinate the cultural production of narratives.

The works in this exhibition also depict the extent to which existential experience is influenced by hegemonic strategies. The title *And Then I Went to School, a Colonial School and This Harmony Was Broken. The Language of My Education Was No Longer the Language of My Culture* (2017) is excerpted from Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's book, *Decolonising the Mind*:

The Politics of Language in African Literature, in which Wa Thiong'o describes his experiences in colonial schools where spoken and written African languages were suppressed by the ordained English language curriculum.¹ For Ka Zenzile, Western influences have space or location where they cease their "othering" operation. By referencing Wa Thiong'o, he alludes to the experience of relinquishing African traditions and appropriating Western traditions that informs him as an artist and highlights the location where local African experiences and interactions with knowledge establish a relationship with what is historic and global.

Ka Zenzile reproduces Wa Thiong'o's statement on a black canvas in fuzzy lettering that looks like it was written on a classroom chalkboard. Imposed on the words is a "broken," blue triangular structure that promises but does not fulfill completion. The insidious effect of hegemony can be further discerned in *Umondllalo (Pause)*, 2017. The domestic images in this piece—a pair of shoes, shoe polish, and a uniform

placed near or on a simple mat bed—reiterate the space between personal control and didactic authority. Privacy, here, becomes a point of realization about the conflicting influences on the individual in the postcolonial capitalistic context. In the privacy of a bedroom the unseen occupant has prepared a facade of conformity. A more external discourse is portrayed in *The Conundrum* (2016–17), a rectangular piece in orange and sandy-brown colors. The shape of the canvas and the exaggerated imbalance in the size of the blocks of color destabilize the viewer. The two abstract characters, seemingly facing each other in dialogue, suggest the confrontation of two points of view.

The ambiguously fused title of the exhibition, *Archetypocalypse*, proposes a hodgepodge in which history and apocalyptic revision impact one another. Ka Zenzile's use of text in some of the works creates disequilibrium as history and the present collide in the force of words. In *White (after Amy Edgington)*, 2017, the sense of the personal in the



The Gulag Archipelago, 2017. Cow dung, earth, oil wood, and hessian on canvas, 181.5 x 180.5 cm. Courtesy Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg, South Africa. © Mawande Ka Zenzile



Sibhala sicima (We Write and Erase), 2016-17. Cow dung, earth, gesso, and oil on canvas, 133 x 184 cm. Courtesy Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg, South Africa. © Mawande Ka Zenzile

historic is pronounced. The canvas is asymmetrically divided between two earthy tones upon which four stanzas of a poem can be read. The words inscribed on the canvas originate from a poem by a white Arkansas collage artist, poet, and antiracism activist named Amy Edgington.² Despite the narrator's overt sentiments of resentment ("Who rode with the KKK? / Who received as a gift / the slaves her father fathered? / Who betrayed the black woman / she once loved as a child? / Ask these questions / and the defenders of white honor / turn into avenging sperm") and guilt ("treason underneath my skin") about white political domination and black exploitation, the precise historic marker remains abstract, while the text facilitates a discourse between colonialist and postcolonialist experiences. Incorporating text within the piece gives voice to a specific source of knowledge and demonstrates how Ka Zenzile, as an artist and an African, relates to that knowledge: he is cognizant of the dichotomous nature of relating to knowledge within a Western context, in contrast to his African modality, through which meaning for him can be more intuitively understood.³

Ka Zenzile's use of line in this collection of work operates on multiple levels. It provides an aesthetic sense of continuity and form and also functions as allegorical borders or demarcations. *The Gulag Archipelago* (2017), for example, is comprised of cow dung, earth, and oil wood, featuring an image of an upside-down spade enclosed within a square box. The spade carries associations with a derogatory slang term for black people, but in reverse it also resembles a heart. A small wood square painted with oil is pasted in a dominant position on top of the spade, as if magnifying the content within. The title's allusion to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's 1973 book about Soviet labor camps strikes a parallel with the injustices of colonial imposed slavery. Referencing the gulag, for the artist, is about transcending the confines of oppression and representation that is traditionally associated with both postcolonial discourse and the popular dissemination of images worldwide.⁴ The horizontal black line that traverses the bottom of the canvas divides a uniformly colored reddish-brown background, suggesting that the violence

and injury of the colonial past resonate continuously and cathartically with the postcolonial experience.

Ka Zenzile identifies himself as a consciousness artist, seeking emancipation from the effect and impact of colonialism in his artistic and personal life. He is conscious of the universal ontological space he occupies and attempts to dismantle the characteristics that supposedly define his modality by transcending strategies of representation and imbuing his work with his own sense of what is epistemic.⁵

By engaging text and images that have political and historical implications abstractly through the vehicle of minimalism, Ka Zenzile illuminates their impact on the present. His repeated use of two visual modalities reinforces the existence of this dichotomy. In *Sibhala Sicima (We Write and Erase)*, 2016-17, he articulates the erasure that historic and anthropological texts impose on colonial subjects. An abstract piece without an image, it is maroon at the top and tan at the bottom, characterized by the aesthetic component of a thin, verdant green, horizontal line. The "empty" canvas references the psychosocial implication of encountering knowledge in the postcolonial context that subjects the psyche to existential, cultural, and historic erasure. At the same time, this erasure imbues the community with a historic anonymity that instigates social and communal borders, characterizing a cultural dispensation that is in constant encounter with knowledge, and also with itself.

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Note

1 Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, "The Language of African Literature," in *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1981).

2 See Amy Edgington, "Moving Beyond White Guilt," *Transformation* 13, no 3 (1998). "White" is among Edgington's poems reprinted in this article.

3 Mawande Ka Zenzile, interview by author, Cape Town, South Africa, April 20, 2018.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.