

Portia Zvavahera

I'm with You



Ekphrasis
for a Veiled Dream

Nomaduma Rosa Masilela

I.

A ghostly figure strides across the picture plane. Her form is simultaneously diaphanous and opaque. Her head emerges like a cumulus cloud from the collar of her lacy white dress. The garment, while porous, reveals no trace of a body underneath, solely a formless field of lavender below the billowing chiffon. Her oversized feet barely graze the ground as she ambles forward, intensely preoccupied with the form she cradles in her arms. Is she falling over her bulbous feet, her body nearly lifting off the ground, or is it the ground itself that refuses its support? It is not a firm ground. It is a gestural field of burnt umber, sienna and plum that reveals the white paper underneath. Is it painterly haste that permits the material ground to show? Or does its exposure serve to highlight the harmonious strata of lavender, blood ochre and blue below? The scalloped pattern of the dress appears to hover gently on the picture plane, an illusion. The lace print smudges indentations into the layers below. Or is it the paper underneath that pushes back? A set of diminutive limbs clasp the lavender form in a tight embrace, disrupting the orderly pattern with their sickly mustard hue. She wraps a pale, striated arm around the clinger's grimacing grey face; she cradles it against her chest as it strains into an endless scream. An overwhelming foam of white consumes the honey-yellow body as she hastens to the edge: *Ndakadeedzera (I Shouted)*, 2016 (p104).

2.

Portia Zvavahera paints her dreams. She keeps sketchbooks tucked under pillows and records her dreams within them upon waking, later taking them to the studio as source material for her oil-based paintings and works on paper. Using printing ink and oil bar, Zvavahera fills her large paintings with expressive figures that drip and float across ornate fields of printed patterns as they contort in the throes of emotional entanglement. In recent years, Zvavahera's work has explored a combination of dream records and reflections on her personal relationships and lived memories. She explains:

Before, I used to paint my dreams. I sleep and when I wake I don't forget my dreams. I make a sketch in my sketchbook. Later I just translate the dream onto the canvas. But now, I kind of join together the dream and my experiences with my husband and everyone else around me, to make a painting.¹

Zvavahera's dreamscapes are filled with thoughts of members of her family, as well as important occasions in her life, and many are visual missives showing the simultaneous simplicity and complications of love. While *Ndakadeedzera* shows the focused care of a mother for her child, *I Can Feel It in My Eyes*, 2015 (p51-87), is a series of large-scale paintings of lovers embracing among the flowers of Harare's central park. Inspired by the textile patterns popular in Harare fashion magazines, Zvavahera prints intricate patterns onto the canvases in order to create vibrant floral grounds for her tenderly contorted lovers.² Bursting brushstrokes herald the emotional fervour of springtime romance, as oversized hands clasp and large feet tenderly intertwine.

¹ Portia Zvavahera. Interviewed by Netsayi. 'Portia Zvavahera'. *BOMB Magazine*, Vol 134, Winter 2015-16, pp36-45.

² Lucinda Jolly. 'Unique Afro-expressionist Style'. *Cape Times*, 6 August 2016, p12.

3.

Zvavahera works in layers. She covers her canvases with bold strokes, drips and sinuous lines, while simultaneously using a collagraph blockprint to incorporate intricate patterns across and within her painted forms. This printing technique produced the lace design of the dress in *Ndakadeedzera* and the bold floral patterns in the series *I Can Feel It in My Eyes*. Zvavahera developed her painting and printing techniques at the Harare Polytechnic College, where she earned a first-class Diploma in Visual Art. At the college, she was exposed to an artistic pedagogical practice that emphasized technical and formal concerns. Referring to her teacher, Zvavahera explains:

*A print has to be smart. It has to be very clean. If you drop something on the print, then it's a reject. So, even when he was teaching us the technique, if you didn't do it the way he wanted it, then you failed. He was good.*³

This sort of precision is visible throughout Zvavahera's oeuvre: the prints that spread across the paintings are decisively and very neatly plotted in place. While practising these techniques under the guidance of her instructors, Zvavahera and her schoolmates were taught the histories and works of the European impressionist and expressionist movements. Zvavahera's expressive manipulation of paint reveals the influence of works by Gustav Klimt, Francis Bacon, Egon Schiele and Edvard Munch.⁴ She supplemented her studies with frequent visits to Gallery Delta in Harare, where painting by local contemporary artists, such as Helen Lieros, Luis Meque, Chikonzero Chazunguza and Charles Kamangwana, was often exhibited, and was influential to her work. The precision of printed pattern lives in compelling contrast to the gestural application of paint, and reflects the confident hand of an artist who has mastered her two mediums of choice.

We Are Covered, 2016 (p79), is a painting on canvas of two hugging figures in which the printed and painted coexist in tension and the modernist interrogation of line is expanded. The two figures are composed of borderless fields of colour and pattern that suggest human forms but verge on the bulbous and cloudlike. The body of the central figure is an amorphous triangle of purple floral patterns, while the second figure that embraces it lacks interior form and is articulated with a tenuous line of red. These lines do not serve to delineate, but merely

³ Zvavahera interview. *BOMB Magazine*, p45.

⁴ Doreen Sibanda and Raphael Chikukwa. *Dudziro: Interrogating the Visions of Religious Beliefs*. Zimbabwe Pavilion, 55th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia. Milano: Edizioni Charta, 2013.

rest atop the picture plane. Through repeatedly layering translucent paint to achieve varying levels of opacity, she alternately reveals and conceals that which lies underneath, all the while obscuring the means by which it is exposed. The interplay of shape and line reveals a formal slippage that Zvavahera plays with throughout her works.

Both *We Are Covered* and *Ndakadedzera* represent a woman and child, and much of her painting focuses on women's work and activities, whether caring for children, giving birth, walking in wedding processions, or kneeling for prayer. Zvavahera's representation of women's roles and their bodies in her opaque painterly style touches on women's issues not solely in her own locale, but also worldwide: in looking at Zvavahera's work, the artist Nontsikelelo Mutiti raises the question of women's safety, stating that "we [women] are doing the work in our communities of being nurturers but we aren't safe in those spaces".⁵ While revelatory of these concerns, the printed patterns perform the task of obstructing easy visual access to the women represented. The figures in *Ndakadedzera* are enveloped in voluminous clouds of dresses, overlaid with white patterns akin to the veiling qualities of lace in wedding gowns. The gown conceals the action in the field of the painting: a traditional garment thus enables the bodies to be illegible. This active veiling is a moment of resistance and self-empowerment; Zvavahera dresses her figures in the soft materials of traditional femininity, but through her play with line and pattern is able to resist the viewer's prying gaze, allowing her figures' autonomy through an opacity of form.

5 Kwanele Sosibo. 'Zim artists see with spiritual eyes'. *Mail & Guardian*, 30 November 2016.

4.

Zvavahera cites religion often in interviews and represents it in her paintings. Doreen Sibanda, director of the National Gallery of Zimbabwe, observes that “Zvavahera’s work explores how versions of Pentecostal, charismatic Christian and Afro–Apostolic sects of Zimbabwe increasingly engage artifacts, scepters and symbolic paraphernalia as conduits for the dissemination of their religious ideologies.”⁶ Zvavahera’s paintings take cues from a related constellation of the religious and the supernatural. She explains:

*The dream is like the prophet, telling you about the future, about what’s going to happen or what is causing something to happen in the future. We all sleep; we all have dreams. [...] For me, the dreams are like future–telling, letting me know what to do next or what’s happening in the spirit world that I should be aware of. And then I should take action in prayer.*⁷

Zvavahera is part of a long lineage of artists who produce work that strains towards the universal through its investigation of the spiritual. Her first art school, the BAT Visual Arts Studios, managed by the National Gallery of Zimbabwe, had previously been the Workshop School. The Workshop School was established by Frank McEwen, then–director of the National Gallery of Rhodesia; it operated in the years before independence, from the 1950s to 1973. McEwen projected onto his students a primitivist desire for authenticity and demanded they produce work that reflected an unadulterated universal unconscious stemming from an imagined African source. As a result, modern Zimbabwean artists working in the Workshop School, such as the expressionist painter Thomas Mukarobgwa, were induced to produce work within the rubric of a fabricated spirituality imposed by their instructor and primary patron.⁸

However, artists such as Mukarobgwa resisted such creative and conceptual limitations, which were taught in workshop schools across the continent. The expressionist painter Iba N’Diaye refused impositions of authenticity in Senegal, arguing that:

*For me, painting is an internal necessity, a need to express myself while trying to be clear about my intentions concerning subjects that have affected me – to commit myself concerning vital problems, the problems of our existence.*⁹

6 Sibanda. *Dudziro*, p33.

7 Zvavahera interview. *BOMB Magazine*, p40-44.

8 Elizabeth Morton. ‘Frank McEwen and Joram Mariga: Patron and Artist in the Rhodesian Workshop School Setting, Zimbabwe.’ *African Art and Agency in the Workshop*. Ed. Sidney Littlefield Kasfir and Till Förster. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013, p284.

9 Iba N’Diaye. *Iba N’Diaye and Iba N’Diaye: Un peintre, un humaniste*. Quoted in VY Mudimbe. ‘Reprendre: Enunciations and Strategies in Contemporary African Arts’ in *Reading the Contemporary: African art from theory to the marketplace*. Eds. Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor. London: Institute of International Visual Arts; Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999, p39.

The Russian abstract painter Wassily Kandinsky was similarly concerned with the prophetic role of the artist in his well-known tome *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1910). He strove to develop a universal visual language of abstract forms and colours that transcended cultural and physical boundaries, and articulated a concern regarding the spiritual in art, examining the 'internal necessity' that impels artists to create as a spiritual impulse. Zvavahera's expressionist dreamscapes are also in close conversation with the work of Surrealists, who produced work by mining their subconscious, through automatic drawings and paintings of dreams. The Spanish surrealist painter Joan Miró prized the deeply intimate, personal and painful as the source of the universal. Miró explains his belief in the anonymity of an individual gesture, which in "being anonymous, [...] allows the universal to be attained ... The more local anything is, the more universal."¹⁰ Zvavahera's deeply personal work complicates notions of universality that are often limited to the realm of the white and the male. The energy of her expressive marks reflects the widespread anxiety regarding political and economic instability in Zimbabwe, which in turn has also increased religious devotion and 'hyperspirituality'.¹¹

10 Joan Miró. *Miró: I Work Like a Gardener*. Paris: XXe siècle, 1964.

11 Kwanele Sosibo. 'Zim artists see with spiritual eyes'. *Mail & Guardian*, 30 November 2016.

5.

Zvavahera's layered forms engender a feeling of the uncanny, which the Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud described as "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar".¹² *Ndakadeedzera* is a painting of a woman caring for a small child, yet – through an uncertainty of form, a complication of how bodies exist in space and in relation to one another – a greater sense of ambiguity is engendered in the viewer. Both *Ndakadeedzera* and *We Are Covered* oscillate between the tender and the strange. The pink mouth of the grey Munchian face that protrudes out of the billowing white dress of *Ndakadeedzera* is inscrutable. It may be the face of a squalling child who is tenderly held and stroked by the striding figure. It may be the silent scream of someone ensnared. It is this ambivalent and inscrutable element that produces the punctum of her work:

*When you have a dream it's like when you look at a painting: there's a focal point.
In the dream there's this thing that strikes you, that's where I create my painting.*¹³

¹² Sigmund Freud. *The Uncanny*. Trans. David McClintock. London: Penguin Books, 2003.

¹³ *Portia Zvavahera: What I See Beyond Feeling* (3 November 2016 – 27 January 2017).
Press release. Johannesburg: Stevenson, 2016.

6.

Break.

I recently awoke from a dream, in which I was sure and certain that a woman who did not resemble my mother in the slightest was, in fact, her. Despite long seaweed hair and a face that did not belong to my mother, this apparition was my only source of life and complicated sense of self. She slowly walked away from me, looking over her shoulder as her strange blue hair whipped across her face. I walked towards her, as though drawn, experiencing a strange and yet familiar feeling of closeness and abandon. She frightened me and yet I knew not whether it was due to her unfamiliar appearance or the feelings of uncertainty engendered by her withdrawal. I was drawn to her, both for the security the idea of a mother induces, but also because of the strange volatile beauty she now embodied. Like a frightened moth I was drawn to her flame. I abruptly awoke, uncertain if I had ceased dreaming.

7.

This break, which emulates the writing of the feminist performance studies scholar Rebecca Schneider, serves as a moment of interregnum within an analysis of Zvavahera's work as universal.¹⁴ It is a moment of self-reflexivity that acknowledges the palimpsest that is Zvavahera's oeuvre. Zvavahera's paintings are not only reflections of her subconscious, but also of her experience as a mother and an artist whose work is in conversation with her contemporaries and predecessors in Zimbabwe, across the continent and beyond. Zvavahera's paintings weave mercurial relations between print and paint, line and form, and in their opacity expose the close relation between the intimate and the universal. Maybe it was all a dream. Or a beautifully articulated scream.

Nomaduma Rosa Masilela is a writer based in New York City. She is currently completing her doctorate in art history at Columbia University while also working on independent curatorial projects.

14 Rebecca Schneider. *The Explicit Body in Performance*. London/New York: Routledge, 1997. Edward Said correctly warns: "On the contrary, no experience that is interpreted or reflected on can be characterized as immediate, just as no critic or interpreter can be entirely believed if he or she claims to have achieved an Archimedean perspective that is subject neither to history nor to a social setting." (Said. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994, p33.)

