

MASIMBA HWATI

b. 1982, Harare, Zimbabwe
Lives and works in Harare, Zimbabwe

art35th
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Booth D18



Antenna I
2017
Mixed Media
240 x 23 x 40 cm (Detail)

smac

STELLENBOSCH
1st Floor, De Wet Centre
Church Street
Stellenbosch, 7600
T +27 (0)21 887 3607

CAPE TOWN
1st Floor, The Palms
145 Sir Lowry Road
Woodstock, 7925
T +27 (0)21 461 1029

JOHANNESBURG
1st Floor, The Trumpet
19 Keyes Avenue
Rosebank, 2196
T +27 (0)10 594 5400

www.smacgallery.com
info@smacgallery.com

In an artistic practice that spans over a decade, Masimba Hwati's interest has always been in the use of objects to reveal multiple aspects of histories, cultures, politics and economies that are unique to his background. And ingrained in his works are the visible changes and transformation happening to this culture.

In sync with his first solo exhibition "*Instruments of Memory/Simbi dzeNdangariro*" at Smac Gallery in South Africa, Hwati's new works continue his interrogation of the exchange between African and Western cultures and simultaneously the resilience of African cultures under uncontrolled exposure to Western and now Asian cultures. By juxtaposing culturally significant items with found objects, characters from personal memories of growing up in post-colonial Zimbabwe and contemporary imagery, he examines the state of impermanence in his cultural background and Africa's socio-cultural and political landscape. In the process, he identifies what is easily influenced and what is irrepressible.

The visual allegories of his works point at the convoluted task of decolonization as he shows the overlapped and continued interactions of Western cultures and values with local cultures and belief systems on the continent. Without looking too hard, one can see that remnant (more than one can call insignificant) of colonial pasts are still present in the sociopolitical and economic aspects of African lives. The style of governance, for one, remain a replication or slightly altered versions of colonial rules and law and the socio-cultural space is being controlled through the consumption of Western media. New African leaders have only become different versions of colonial oppressors and agents of foreign control. For the most part, the association of African and Western cultures and the dependency of Africans on the West was tactically implemented. And so, long after the independence of most colonies, it is evident that not so much will become indigenous again and complete freedom from the West may be an illusion.

Born in the 80s and a consumer of Western media, some objects in Hwati's works allude to the impact of the broadcast media on him, particularly, television. For Africans of his age and those born during the rise of commercial TV and cable networks in post-colonial Africa, understanding and navigating their local space was shaped by encounters with multiple cultures. First, they were influenced by what they saw on television, and then, by the remaining presence of Euro-American lives on the continent. Recent windows of influence and exchange have been the by-products of digital media.

The television has encouraged a romanticized need for superhuman through cartoons and popular sports. So from a young age, it seemed

normal to seek for a hero or desire to be one. Which according to Hwati only became a norm in Zimbabwe from the mid-eighties and a Western ideology that subdues the importance of the old traditional belief in community spirits and shared responsibilities. In Hwati's own words, "It is a faulty concept of heroism and individualism. It disempowers the rest of the people and places ridiculous and unrealistic expectations on a few individuals."

Certain sports elements have been the carrier of Hwati's highly symbolic messages. Using both objects of contemporary and traditional sports he shows what they reveal about the different cultures represented. While the traditional sports in Africa was only a form of amusement in colonial times, Hwati shows it was how Africans proved their strength and resilience. Some elements of these sports - spears, horns, re-imagined headdress - are symbols of this resilience in his works. The spear has multiple usages. It represents the resilience of the indigenous cultures, and the unchanging aspects of its knowledge system. The spear is also traditionally a symbol of both attack and defense and used ceremonially by hunters and warriors along with shields and headdresses. A close look at the cricket headgear show drawings of African deers with interlocked horns forming resistance against attacks. The horns are also standalone symbols on his other installations. The use of leather on the gear as well as other works is Hwati's representation of the toughness of his people and their survival of oppressive policies. Beyond the physical aspect, Hwati is also aware of the political nature of sport. How it is used "as a tool for mass diversion, a pacifier and false 'unifier' by neo-colonial governments". He believes sports, as well as other entertainment inventions, are tools of control on the African continent. For a very long time, sports have been promoted as a tool for development and in one of Nelson Mandela's speeches he declared "sport has the power to change the world." But how much unity and development has this brought to Africa post-independence?

An oriental memorabilia on one of the new ensembles call attention to the strong economic and cultural ties of Zimbabwe with China and its perceived political influence. China's presence in Zimbabwe dates back to supporting the Robert Mugabe led ZANU party during the Rhodesian Bush war and the fight for Zimbabwe's independence, and has since extended to China supporting the country with development finance and investments post-independence. Despite Zimbabwe's government claim of looking to the East in general for foreign relations, China remains the most engaged for infrastructure development and Zim's biggest service provider. As China's presence and influence in the country (and Africa in general) continue to grow and there are more claims of land for investment, Hwati wonders what the future holds for Zimbabweans (and other sub-Saharan regions) in the hand of China.

Masimba Hwati was born in 1982 in Highfield, Zimbabwe. He graduated from the Harare Polytechnic in 2003, and has continued to live and work in the capital city.

In 2015 Masimba Hwati was one of three artists selected for *Pixels Of Ubuntu/Unhu* curated by Raphael Chikukwa for the Zimbabwean Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale. Masimba Hwati was the recent winner of the Cape Town Art Fair's Special Projects Section: *Tomorrows/Today*, with his solo presentation: *Don't Worry Be Happy* (2016). The presentation formed part of *Consuming Us*, an exhibition curated by Azu Nwagbogu and Ruth Simbao.

Solo exhibitions include: *Instruments of Memory / Simbi dzeNdangariro* at SMAC Gallery in Stellenbosch in 2016, *Don't Worry Be Happy*, part of *Tomorrows/Today* co-curated by Azu Nwagbogu and Ruth Simbao for the Special Project Section at the Cape Town Art Fair in 2016; *Quantumlogik* at Gallery Delta in Zimbabwe in 2014 and *Facsimiles of Energy* in 2011 also at Gallery Delta in Harare, Zimbabwe.

Group exhibitions include Hwati's South African debut: *Trek – Following Journeys* at SMAC Gallery, Cape Town in 2015; *Between the Sheets: 2012 Artists' Books Exhibition* at Gallery East in North Freemantle, Australia; *Colour Africa: Zeitgenössische Kunst Aus Simbabwe*, Kulturallmende in Munich, Germany in 2011; and *Food for Thought*, National Gallery of Zimbabwe, Harare in 2011. In 2012, Hwati received an award for *Multi Media – Tradition, Family and Religion* – sponsored by the European Union. In 2015 Masimba Hwati participated in the Zimbabwean Cultural Centre of Detroit (ZCCD) Artist Exchange programme in Detroit, USA.

Hwati has recently been awarded a scholarship to complete his MFA at the Penny W. Stamps School of Art & Design, University of Michigan in the USA and will commence his studies from September 2017 - April 2019.