

EveryDAY
LuSAka
GALLERY

A FLOCK OF VOIDS

RABSON PHIRI & DAVID DAUT MAKALA



SEPTEMBER 2024

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CURATORIAL TEXT

"A Flock of Voids" is choreographed as a formation of objects that resemble a flock of migrating and moving figures. The title of the exhibition holds reference to the displacement of people across the Atlantic during the slave trade. Intergenerational voids were created through the annihilation of indigenous culture, and new lands became homes to people from Africa and India in the Americas. Africans and Indians were indentured to colonies as forced cheap labour to replace the void that arose in the post-abolition era of slavery. A new chapter in plantation economies was devised that brought prosperity to Europe. Europe found an industrial enlightenment based on this prosperity drawn from exploitation and it scripted the aesthetics of Modernism. In the post war years reeling from its disgust for the inhumanity it inflicted upon itself and others - the artists of Europe began revolting through practices that questioned its comfort through Conceptual art.

However, timelines of art history have been linear in the occidental context while modernity in Africa has been an ongoing aspiration for society. In societies that have not yet encountered industrialisation concepts such as 'found objects' and 'arte povera' cannot be drawn into definitions of art through a simple philosophical construction of it being conceptual art. Connecting the practices of Rabson Phiri and David Daut Makala is how they excavate an object's past to present a discourse that arrives from both a realm of aesthetics and politics. Using found materials and adapting them into new languages, 'foraging' becomes an active act of production of their artwork. Both artists developed their artmaking vocabularies by reconstructing historical contexts and aesthetic philosophies. They bring our understanding of their work back to an African paradigm. Art needs to be defined and perceived in a non-linear fashion that is not occidental in its philosophical underpinnings. Rather, it needs to hold the spiritual and holistic understanding of its role in society.

In his ongoing series called "Designed Stories", Makala has used aluminium printing plates used in offset printing of newspapers, books and magazines. His figures of humans and animals printed on top of the existing text obscures what these plates had been originally used for printing. Printing on top of a printing plate is akin to the act of layering in painting. As a keen observer of history and materiality, Makala paints a 'Pan-African' consciousness where he connects Bob Marley's poetry of a return to Africa to the political assertions of decolonisation through the quotes of Thomas Sankara. He asks about the image any text holds - how true is that text and how does it become the initiator of our identities? Does text itself constitute an image? For this we must discuss Joseph Kosuth and the chair.



Photograph by Ruth Simbao

Right above on the ceiling you see the photographer's studio stool and a chair painted onto a large canvas of industrial linen. This is a collaborative work between David Daut Makala and Sana Ginwalla. Ginwalla has a keen interest in the studio stool, which began with stools that recurred in images found at Fine Art Studios. The glaring void it holds without a sitter is reminder of the many staged photos that the stool has borne witness to. Holding the personality of the subject and the absence of the subject makes us imagine our own fictional photos that never happened and ones that could still possibly be taken. Joseph Kosuth's seminal work 'One and Three Chairs' 1965, is a conceptual piece where he arranges a chair, a photograph of the chair and the dictionary definition of the word chair. Kosuth saw the fact of inquiring into the nature of the art as an act of producing conceptual art. Do the photograph, definition, and object serve the same purpose in art? How has linguistics influenced our perception of artwork? Should we classify it as conceptual, modern, or artisanal? While dictionaries focus on semantics, Kosuth's combination of three recognizable visuals in different materials creates a post-structuralist conceptual artwork.

Makala's work transcends boundaries by incorporating drawing, printing, bound materials, and sculpting with concrete. In "The Periodic Table", he creates a complex mural using concrete chunks, wires, and plates, moving beyond flat surfaces at the Everyday Lusaka Gallery. This approach pays homage to African masks as animated wall sculptures, engaging in dialogue with Rabson Phiri's sculptures.

Arising into leviathan rejection of gravity, we turn to Rabson Phiri's ethereal sculptures in wood. These are syncretic figurations that reveal in their twirling shapes of what may be people, fauna or flora. They have teeth in spaces that resemble a string instrument, and they stand up like an uprooted human body. Their limbs are markers of resistance - a resistance of a life lived beyond the odds. Starting at a cycle-repair shop, a place where you make do with parts to re-fashion, re-buff, weld, paint or reuse - Zambian sculptor Friday Tembo came to Rabson Phiri to repair his bike in the late 1990's and they got talking. Rabson Phiri visited Tembo's studio and was inspired to pursue sculpture. Thus began his apprenticeship under a master skilled

in transforming found materials – stone, wood, and metal. The master and student were determined to produce an oeuvre that could contain Africa – its beauty, its diverse visuality, music and spirituality.

The sculptures by Phiri in “A Flock of Voids” are titled in Nyanja and Bemba – Kuyopa Zabene (Fear What Belongs to Others), Banachimbusa (Series) and Langana Zuba, Langana Nkoloko (Look at the sun, Look at the clock). He also names one as ‘African African’ inspired by Afro-hairstyles urging his fellow brothers and sisters to keep their hair in its natural state. His sculptures drawn from Zambian proverbs reflect on how some traditions must be preserved for social cohesion, how the riddles and proverbs gather traditional wisdom and in the quest of modernity we must not forget nature. Rabson arises from traditional practices of souvenir making in ebony we see across artisanal markets in Africa and embraces a role within the art world. How do we define his practice?

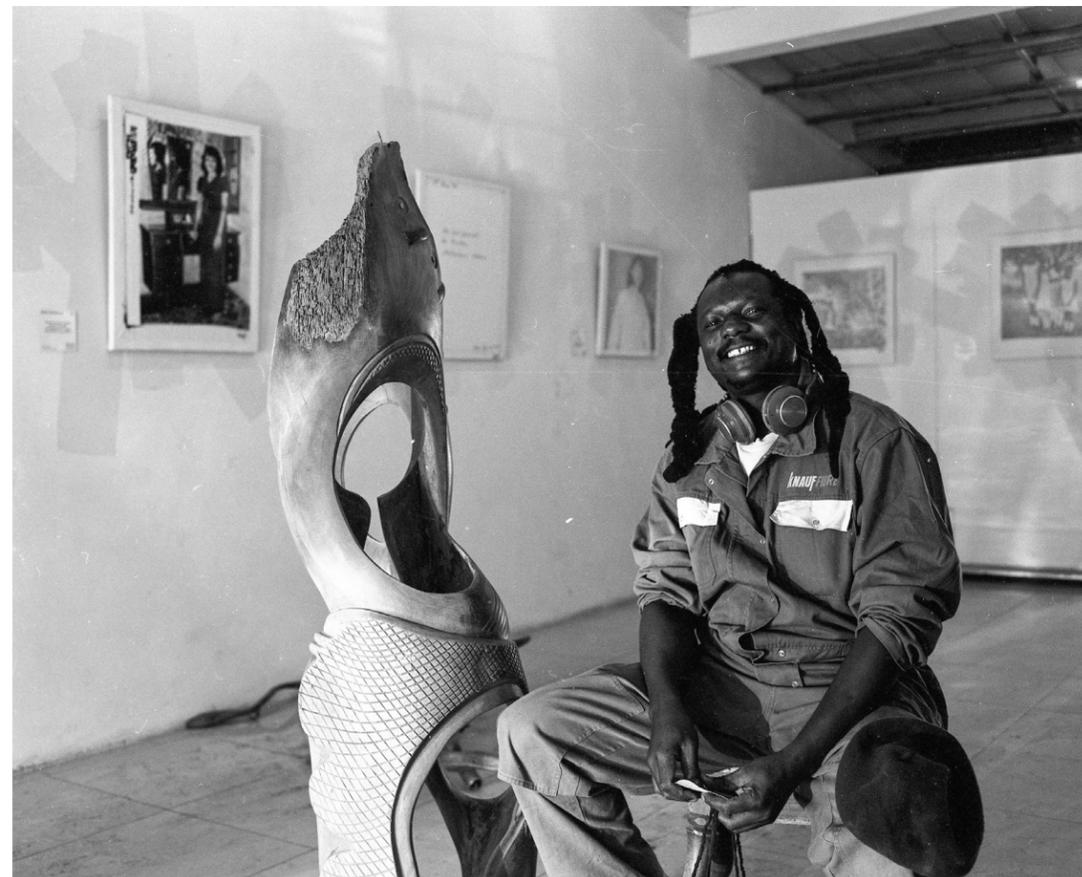
We wonder why the sculptures and figures of Rabson Phiri and David Makala are of bodies of men and women that we do not recognise. Nor are they spirits from another realm. Rather the artists create landscapes using malleable and unyielding materialities such as wood and aluminium to carve and imprint stories of dance, labour, society and traditions through abstract and familiar figurations. The Everyday Lusaka gallery was keen on merging these works together as they hold a history of transition where distinct Zambian modernism in sculpture gives light to contemporaneity. Both Phiri and Makala have not followed a curriculum in an art school which is still structured in a colonial aesthetic gaze. Artists who do not have to unlearn the burden of what they have learnt in art school recently have seen great success in an art world that is deconstructing how we define art and record art history. As autodidact artists who have learnt from other artists, literature or practice, “A Flock of Voids” shows work from Zambia that celebrates syncretic materiality & form that holds true to the traditions of storytelling and folklore in Africa.

–Sumesh Manoj Sharma, Edited by Sana Ginwalla.



Photograph by Maingaila Muvindika

RABSON PHIRI



Photographs by Visule Kabunda

A FLOCK OF VOIDS

Born 1982, in Lusaka, Zambia, Rabson Phiri's work features an ingenious use of scrap metal that comprises mainly car and bicycle parts. The latter features prominently in his work perhaps because he spent his teenage years as a bicycle mechanic, an occupation that led him to his mentor, the late Friday Tembo. As a 16-year-old, Phiri was hired to fix his soon to be mentors' bicycle, but when he visited Tembo's Ulendo Studios – an informal art school right in the heart of Linda compound – in 1998, he was instantly enthralled with the place.

He accepted an offer to join Ulendo and accompanied Tembo alongside others on an expedition to reclaim discarded wood for use at the studio. The learning process had already started. Ever since, he has worked with stone, scrap metal and hardwoods which he still harvests from surrounding areas. He has attended several workshops, including a recycling workshop in Nigeria, and has exhibited in numerous group shows. He was also awarded second prize in sculpture in 2010 for the Art for Wildlife competition.

Rabson Phiri has featured on CNN's Inside Africa. He mentored James Mumba who got first prize in the Art for wildlife competition. He exhibited in China in 2016 and most recently showed work at the Italy–Zambia Building an Art Bridge / BABIZ exhibition in 2022 as well as the Rock, Paper, Scissors, Form exhibition at 37d Gallery in 2023.

Arising into leviathan rejection of gravity, Rabson Phiri's sculptures in wood are syncretic structures that reveal in their swirl shapes of fauna and flora. They have teeth in spaces that resemble a string instrument, and they stand up like a disfigured human body. Their limbs are markers of resistance – a resistance of a life lived beyond the odds. Beginning at a cycle-repair shop, where fixing cycles denuded in journeys in the dust, a place where you make do with parts, re-fashion, re-buff, weld, paint and reuse. Friday Tembo the Zambian sculptor came to repair his cycle to his shop, and they got talking – Rabson visited his studio and claimed he could work on sculpture like him. Here his apprenticeship began under a master who would refashion found material – stone, wood and metal. The sculptor and student were determined to produce an oeuvre that could contain Africa - its beauty, its diverse visuality, music and spirituality.

Rabson made men flying on wheels of bicycles from found metal – these were elementary sculptures one see artists often make out of found metal. As he apprenticed, he began experimenting with material. Found stone and found wood would determine the size and dimensions of the sculpture. Using a grinder and carving tools he would work them into a realm of African

fantasmic surrealism.

Zambia is a nation built on diverse tribes holding many forms of craft to denote their distinctness. But Friday Tembo came from a school of unification following on the Pan-Africanist ideals that anchored Zambia as an early nation under Kenneth Kaunda. The Zambezi River valley unites Angola, Namibia, Botswana, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Mozambique before pouring into the Indian ocean. A people divided by Portuguese, German and British lines of the nation state began questioning their regional molly-coddle. An attempt was made to see them distinct from each other as a colonial tactic towards paternalism and control. But art revolts and asks us why we constrict ourselves to a particular geography? An aesthetic manifesto in the making as design comes into play – creating a vocabulary of the bush – vast unending and drawn from nature.

Friday Tembo passed away in 2004, leaving Rabson in a void – a conflict of reflection led him to create works adorned an aesthetic of contemplation. His stone sculptures were following the line in the stone not resisting its shape and formation. They in turn would then turn into zen minimalist sculpture with distinct African lines much like the work of the American-Japanese sculptor Isamu Noguchi. The absence of Tembo allowed him his own oeuvre in sculpture. Four years later in 2008 this set of bird-like wooden statues came into presence. After a brief showing they were pickled with nature facing the sun and rain in the garden

of the curator William Miko. Weather gave them interesting tonalities and preserved the wood. Rabson treats wood without altering its nature – ebony in raw form is magnificent in our presence because it does not come polished.

We wonder why the sculptures of Rabson Phiri are the bodies of men and women we don't recognise. Nor are they spirits from another realm. Rather he creates a surreal garden placing wood he has given presence to following its form. The Everyday Lusaka Gallery was keen on working on this set of works for they hold a history of transition where distinct Zambian modernism in sculpture gives light to contemporaneity - as the torch passed from Friday Tembo to Rabson Phiri. Sana Ginwalla, its curator, is concerned in re-imagining and re-telling alternate art histories hidden in the vernacular and of those forgotten artists from whom Zambia inherits its aesthetic tradition.

– Sumesh Manoj Sharma, Villa Médici, 2024.

Fashion

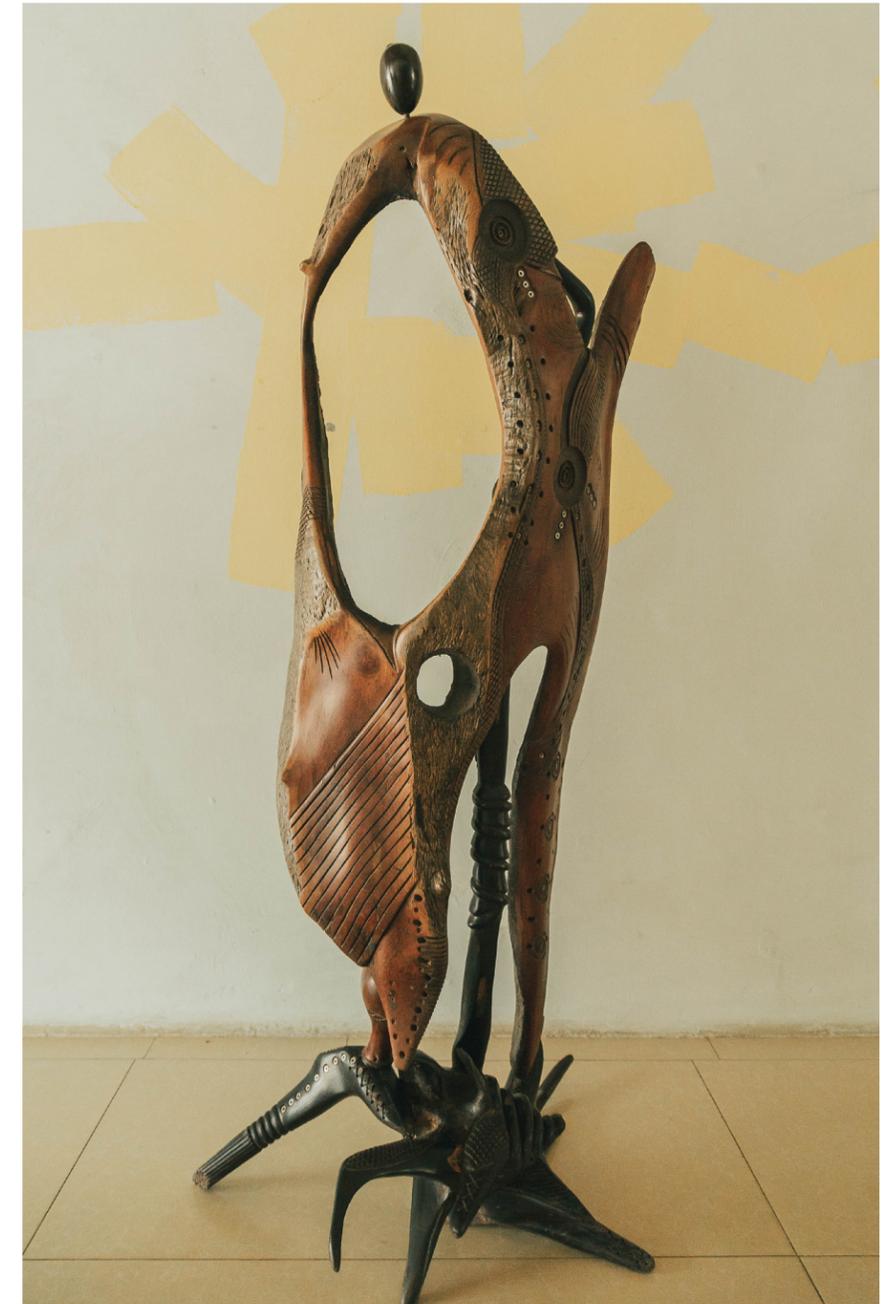
[190 cm x 88 cm x 63 cm]

Musase wood, beads, screws, metal & ebony

\$2000 / K52,900

Photograph by Mutumbi Lungu

"Fashion" makes a commentary on how our contemporary belief system is in conflict with the way of life of our ancestors. Elders today express disdain for revealing clothing, when our ancestors were adorned with less. The sculpture addresses the complaints of elders in the form of stone and metal that sit at the rib of the figure. "Fashion" poses different questions in need of answers: are our traditions bad and if so, who is telling us this? The upturned clay pot at the root represents how Africans found ways store and preserve our knowledge in olden times, but also reflects on what has been left behind and what roots we stand on in the present.



Langana Zuba, Langana Nkoloko (Look at the sun, Look at the clock), 2008

[138 cm x 90 cm x 52 cm]
Ebony, mukwa wood and metal

\$1,500 / K52,900



Photograph by Mutumbi Lungu

This piece depicts a young girl dancing in a ceremony typically found in the Eastern province of Zambia. During this ceremony, young girls are brought to stay in a hut for a month and are given lessons to help them transition into womanhood. At the end of this, these young ladies perform a dance which leads to a grab-and-run activity where girls jump off the stage when they finish dancing, and a boy grabs them to take them to safety to avoid the lashings of the on lookers of the festivities.

Many of these practices are dying out due to the globalisation of society. However, as a response to town dwellers feeling that their children are going down a wayward path due to the influences of today, some will return to their ancestral homes and pay for their children to be initiated into these cultural practices.

Kuyopa Zabene (Fear What Belongs to Others), 2008

[80.5 cm x 102.5 cm x 39.2 cm]
Ebony, rosewood & metal

\$1,500 / K52,900

Photograph by Mutumbi Lungu



"Kuyopa Zabene" warns that sexual promiscuity leaves holes in the lives of the people – not only in the conscience but with life altering situations like the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) such as AIDS. Though not be considered in the moment, these consequences become realities to carry for the rest of their lives.

Banachimbusa (Series), 2008

[183 cm x 67 cm x 55 cm]

Ebony & bone

\$2000 / K52,900

Photograph by Mutumbi Lungu



This sculpture is part of a series about Banachimbusa, or teachers who guide women on how to act when they are married. The burnt wood atop the sculpture speaks to the idea of foraging for material, but also represents traditional practices of modesty using fabrics such as head wraps and chitenges. The heart of the sculpture is a store of intergenerational and ancestral knowledge which is only fully accessible after passing through various teachings from the Banachimbusa.

RABSON PHIRI

14

15

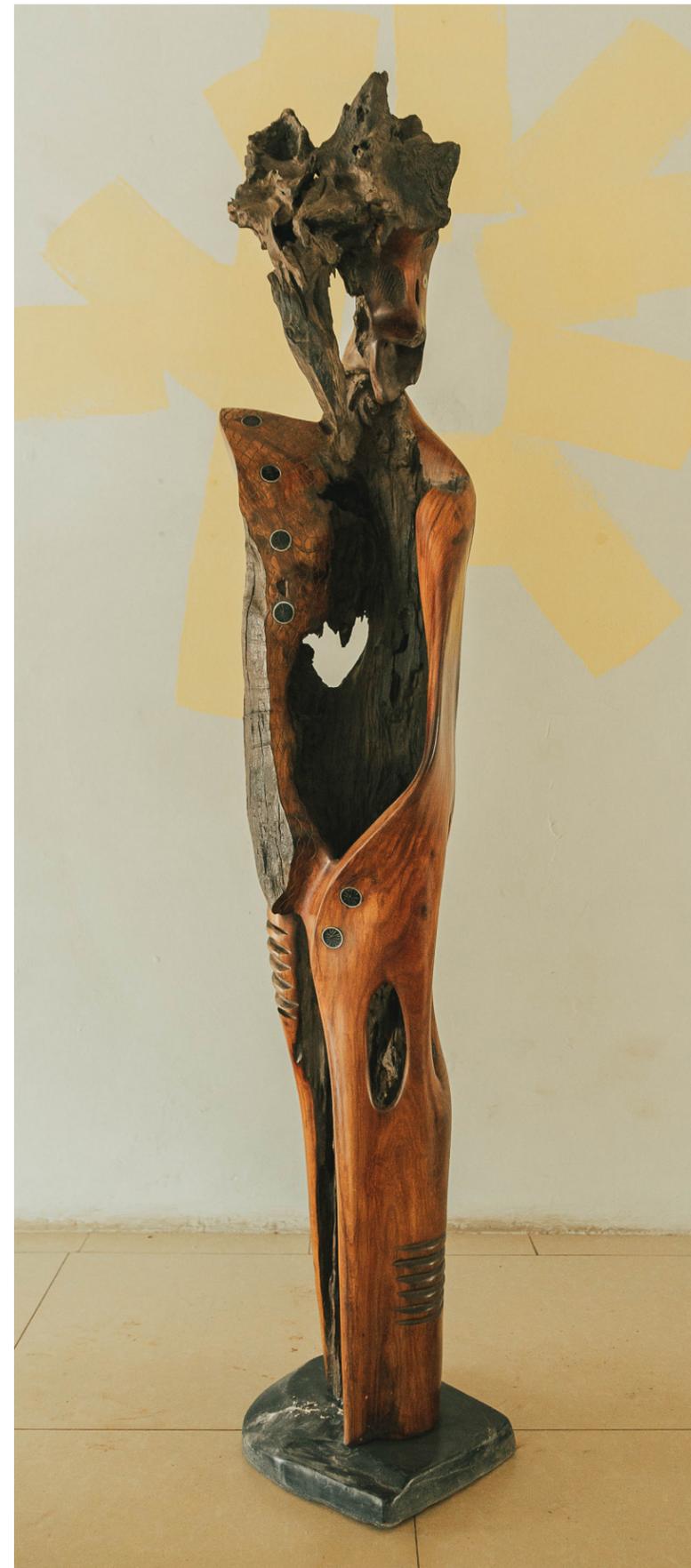
African African, 2008

[182 cm x 35 cm x 44 cm]

Ebony, mukwa wood,
metal, stone base

\$2000 / K52,900

Photograph by Mutumbi Lungu



Forged from a found upturned root, the sculpture is a celebration of Africans that keep their natural hair in a natural state. An integral part of Phiri's process is that he communicates with the with material before he selects it. Observing the sculpture, a heart emerges, emphasising Phiri's deep connection to nature which drives his work.

RABSON PHIRI

DAVID DAUT MAKALA

Born in 1983 in Lusaka, David 'Daut' Makala is a Zambian self-taught artist and founder of Studio225, a collaborative self-funded studio in Chilenje, Lusaka. Makala's artworks reflect his ongoing exploration of the way Zambians relate to their traditional heritage of Zambia, how they build identity with or without it and use it in navigating life. As much as there has been deliberate erasing of this traditional heritage, some of it has also disappeared naturally with time. David looks at the processes of this search of identity and specifically how people relate to memories of a lost past while using them to construct (disappearance) and reconstruct (reappearance) new ones.

David took up art professionally in 2006 and is today considered as a reknown artist in Zambia and beyond. Mentored by Stary Mwaba, David has built his own path in the field of visual art as a multimedia artist. He his work has travelled to Asiko' in Mozambique (2015), FNB Johannesburg Art Fair (2019) Gate44, Milan (2019), Congo Biennale (2022), and most recently worked in El Salvador with Custom Made Stories in a public art intervention.

WHY DO AFRICANS DANCE?

"WhydoAfricansDance?" isa question posed by an artist within the narrative of his conceptual practice. For an artist on the borders of the generational term "millennial" – an identity that is undecided both culturally and within the context of socioeconomic and socio-politics – this question can be answered through myriad ways. We do not have any real rational reason to ascertain why humans decide to dance, but his works that are relatively drawn within the frequently used term for art mediums "mixed media" – are well thought out narratives on a philosophy of visual artistic practice and aesthetics.

David Daut Makala (b. 1983 in Lusaka, Zambia) interrogates his existential role as an artist and a person by weaving a metaphorical discourse through materiality with the use of aluminium plates, pieces of concrete, linocuts, printing and painting. Reflecting on how the Christian faith through the Bible as the guiding word forms the identity of ordinary Zambians including him, he believes that a certain structure of words of how they are used and placed decide on how we form society, behave and remember. This reflection may be true of any human society on

earth but an artist who conceptually begins to inquire how text and words have formed how we see ourselves, understand our pasts and speculate our futures demonstrates the maturity he holds not only at his medium, but also the composition of his image and construction of his context that arrives from a thorough reading of who he is and what makes his environment.

In "A Flock of Voids" David prints images on discarded aluminium plates that had previously been used in offset printing of newspapers, textbooks, bibles, psalms, magazines, official documents and technical readers. We see elements of erasure and words that go faint that are covered by the images he produces on them and arrests our attention as the viewer forcing us to decipher if the written word has a connection to the image. Here he asks the pertinent question: Who decides on the written word produced here and how does the authorship of those words construct our lives? As if his images on these plates are the visual markers - images of the lives of people who were constructed by that newspaper article, magazine cutting and the inspiring psalm. Are these divine acts of destiny or well-constructed manipulations of man in power?

As Africa decolonised, propaganda held supreme in many nascent nations as the departing colonial powers wished to hold influence in countries where their natural resources were essential to the economic hegemony the colonial power had constructed by exploitation. Manipulating humans



through a structure of power mechanisms held by their political puppets installed to lead such countries became a marker of African politics in the 1960s and 70s. David was born in a decade where the exhaustion from the false promises was setting in. Thomas Sankara the liberator of Burkina Faso once said, "We must choose between champagne for a few, or safe drinking water for all."

Sankara was an African leader who saw imperialism in the imported maize and medicines. He worked hard to make Burkina Faso self-dependent with food and ensured all Burkinabes had access to two square meals and clean water. He invested in health, sanitation and social infrastructure. He was assassinated by Blaise Campaore in 1987 who saw him as someone who was deteriorating relations between Burkina Faso and

its erstwhile colonizers and felt it was detrimental to the country. David cites Sankara as an influence.

David draws water in his plates, an element he believes is essential for both printing and making concrete. Without water we cannot have life or create a civilisation. For him the essence of the debate around climate change is its relationship to water. Zambia at present is facing an acute electricity shortage due to a drought. An economy that is dependent on hydroelectricity comes to a sudden stop when a drought evaporates all its water reserves held behind dams. The thirst has a sonic element - the orchestra of printing machines at the printers in Lusaka fall silent, while the sound of generators pollute the city. Galleries cannot turn on the display lights and life ebbs away with patience.

To David - Aluminium AL, Concrete - $3CaO \cdot Al_2O_3$ and Water - H_2O are all present as words on chemistry charts and are interrelated in composition.

His chemistry of an artwork conceptually depicts both humans and animals. An element that arises from the tradition of depicting human-animal hybrids with Africa especially in sculpture and masks. Not only does it arise from proximity but also from a story David as an artist is keen to tell. Humans have formed ideas about themselves before the written word. In Africa these stories were passed through the oral tradition which led to their negation from history where the vanquishing victor wrote history. This victor was the coloniser. A white man from a distance. A great distance of culture, human value and relationships to objects distinguished one race from



the other. This man introduced his religion through the written word and printing became popular through the need to produce bibles. The bible itself did not come from the geography of the white man - Europe. Instead, it came from somewhere much closer - the Levant and Jerusalem.

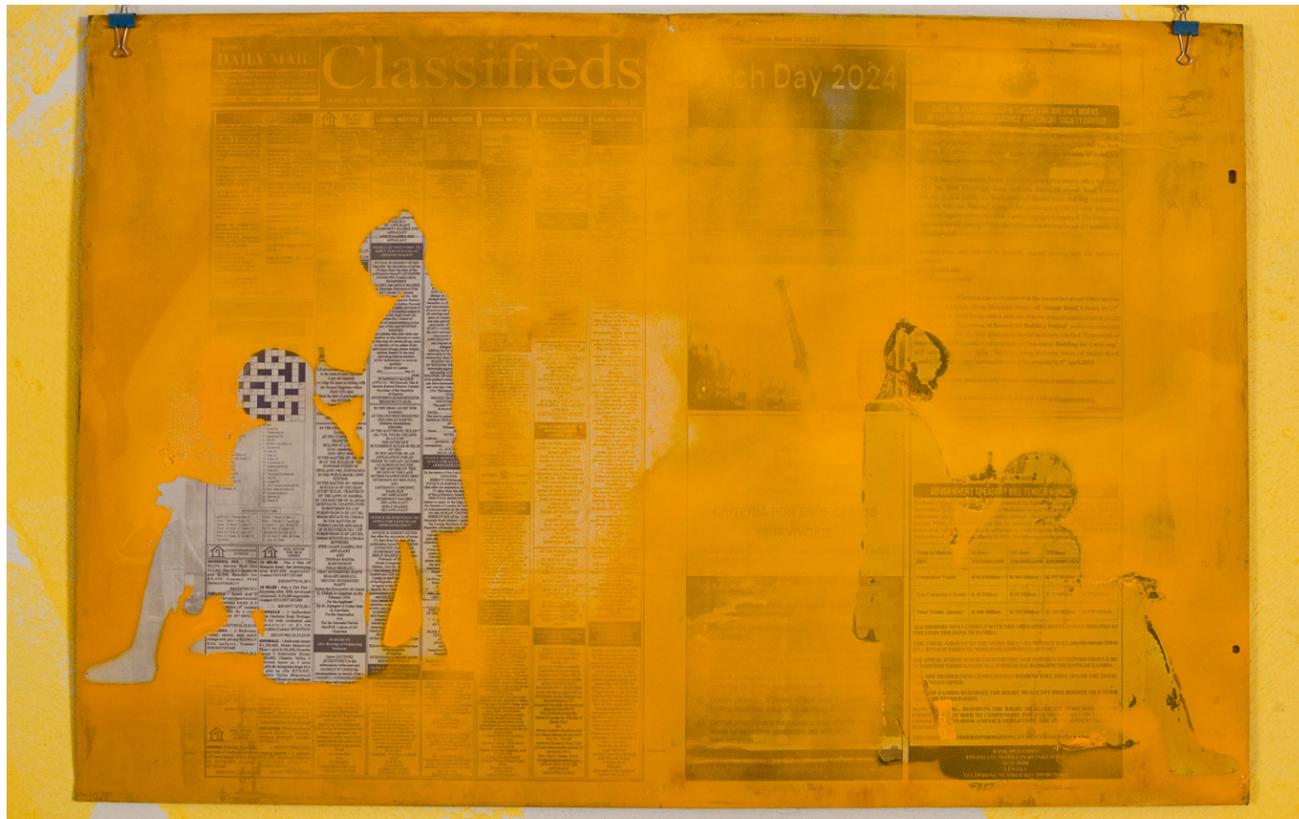
Christianity arrived in Africa to Ethiopia within the lifetime of Christ. Bob Marley across the Atlantic in Jamaica was contemplating on who the Black man was. He arrived at the Buffalo Soldier - a man who was not only dancing out of love for 'Jah' - the almighty and creator but also fighting for himself to survive in the unknowing terrains of the Americas where he was enslaved. Dance was a ritual, and a martial art. Marley's Rastafarian faith was situated in Ethiopia as its holy

land, the land of its civilisation and redemption from the tribulations of slavery and the displacement it had caused from the homeland. David revisits the words of Bob Marley's lyrics from "Them Belly Full (But We Hungry)", that invents an alternate mythology of belief closer home to Africa. As an artist, David reconciles the values and identity the Bible accords him and many of his generation to its association with the oppressors of his ancestors.

Zambia is at a crossroads. Once seen as a place of hope, it sits with the perception of emanating the stereotype of an African state afflicted with poverty. A few artists and curators are challenging this nihilistic perception. David has established an institution that also serves as his studio in Chilenje - a market suburb of Lusaka. Studio 225 is an institution and a school of learning. Here artists interested in learning about the arts are invited to come experiment, fail, succeed and produce. It is one of the most liberal artist-run experimental spaces in Zambia where freedom produces artists. Where once strongmen, politicians and dictators were manipulating the written word to arrest the self-determination and progress of Africa's youth, artists like David are effecting change as a conceptual art project.

David does not attempt the digital, its numeric ease at printing does not excite him as an artist. The risks and toxins the chemicals pose while printing excites David as an artist





and therefore, he experiments with analogue techniques of traditional printing. He sees providence when words get cut out, or images are altered by the restrictions such as the size of the plate or the printing machine. The lack of control is seen as the aesthetics of the experimentation. The movement of the machines is perceived as a dance, though much slower on his manual machines at the studio – the sounds they make is a musical score, systematic and rhythmic like an orchestra. The images are a sonic production.

David installs these words at the Everyday Lusaka Gallery as a tapestry of a narrative that is not linear but woven interspersed with blocks of concrete. You cannot read them as history or a story that can be revealed from the words that were once inscribed on

them as the words are printed in the countersense for printing. You need to use your memory, imagination, ideas of the self and desires to complete the work he beckons you to see. These works ask us to fill in those voids that are intergenerational. The pains our families have faced, the humiliations our identities as colonized people hold and the procrastination we practice when facing our problems – resigning to the fact that only failure is what we embrace. In Africa we do not dance to forget but dance in a flock to fight like Bob Marley's soldier who danced to exist.

– Sumesh Manoj Sharma, Jaipur, 2024.

DESIGNED STORIES (ONGOING STUDY)

Aluminium, steel, offprint ink, oil based spray paint, acrylic paint, stencils, and drawings.

#1
[86 cm x 62.1 cm]
\$750 / K20,000



#2
[102.5 cm x 86.5 cm]
\$940 / K25,000



#3
[84.5 cm x 86 cm]
\$940 / K25,000



#4
[102 cm x 137.5 cm]
\$1,125 / 30,000



#5
26.6 cm x 18.7 cm
\$750 / K20,000



#6
[31.2 cm x 25.9 cm]
\$750 / K20,000



#7
[27 cm x 18.8 cm]
\$750 / K20,000



#8
[57.7 cm x 86 cm]
\$1,125 / K30,000



#9
[87 cm x 106 cm]
\$1,125 / K30,000



#10

[59.4 cm x 86 cm]

\$1,125 / K30,000



#11

[76 cm x 92.7 cm]

\$1,125 / K30,000



#12 *The Periodic Table*

[219 cm x 431 cm]

\$3,950 / K105,000



All "Designed Stories" photographs by Maingaila Muvundika

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Exhibition Concept and Curator: Sana Ginwalla

Exhibition Text: Sana Ginwalla, Sumesh Manoj Sharma & Maingaila Muvundika

Exhibition Installation: Sana Ginwalla, Rabson Phiri, Sam Mwale & Maingaila Muvundika

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