

ART CRITICISM AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE. THE SOUTHERN AFRICAN EXPERIENCE

Doreen Sibanda

Major historical, ideological and philosophical movements such as the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, Romanticism, the Industrial Revolution and, more recently, the revolution in Information and Communications Technology, have influenced the ways in which art in the Western world has developed. Formal training, economic patronage and curatorial support have also influenced the development of the arts by national and international pacesetters. In these circumstances, western modern and contemporary art has tended to mirror the major social developments, although at times it has tended to be opposed to the mainstream ideological thrust, reflecting the individual artists' preoccupations, perception and interpretation of the geo-political environment.

In Third World countries, art has tended, in contrast, to be largely functional, reflecting the major aspects of people's lives and activities of people (i.e. their religious, social and economic activities). The various forms of interaction between the Western World and Third World countries, first through trade, then colonialism and later as interdependent "partners", have tended to be reflected in artistic developments, and Western art has tended, in consequence, to shed some of its purely formalist attributes. In the end, this has resulted in a closing of the gap between function and contemplation, leading to an art practice today which reflects both modernist and contemporary trends, with an African flavour.

Taking Southern Africa as a case study, I will show how art criticism and curatorial practice have undergone a transformation, largely determined by the various historical epochs experienced in the last 100 years. Although the paradigms have differed greatly from those pertaining in the West, there is, indeed, a strange meeting ground and this ground is increasing its territory, as works from both Europe and Africa appear to converge in similar form and content, in the arena of contemporary art. The main historical periods that may be said to have had a bearing on modern and contemporary art in Southern Africa have been the Pre-Colonial era, the Colonial period, the period covered by the Struggles for Decolonisation, the period of Reconciliation and Reconstruction, the Post-Colonial period and the Age of Globalisation.

The Pre-Colonial Era

Throughout this time, the local population was engaged in art practice, and the earliest known examples were in the area of Rock Art. The early hunter gatherers criss-crossed the country and left behind numerous examples of rock art, wherever they went. These drawings, which are usually to be found on the underside of protected granite outcrops, provide vast galleries of images, mostly of human and animal forms engaged in a variety of activities reflecting the desires and aspirations of the artist, who created this imagery on behalf of the community. Extensive research has been conducted on these images, in order to decipher what they represented and also to understand the state of mind of the artists and what they were seeking to achieve. The work done by Leo Frobenius ¹

¹ *Rock Paintings from Zimbabwe*, ex. cat., Munich, Goethe-Institut, 1983. [??]

and Peter Garlake² is the closest yet to stating that these early artists were able to put themselves into a trance-like state, and that the images they created in this semi-conscious condition embodied the possibility of some kind of thought or action that would enable them to make sense of the challenges they faced in their daily environment.

The stone architecture and the accompanying carved stone images found at the court of the Great Zimbabwe and other similar sites in Southern Africa provide us with further examples of pre-colonial art. The appeal of these stone edifices, constructed without mortar consists in the fascinating insight they offer into the architectural and engineering skills of these early inhabitants, whilst the existence of carved stone birds at the site has intrigued many scholars and even politicians, since the time of their discovery. Colonialists assertions claimed that other groups of migrant peoples had created these structures and that it would have been beyond the technical capacity of the African occupants to have created stonework of this quality. Nonetheless, the literary references and archeological finds that have come to light have revealed beyond any shadow of doubt that these buildings were, indeed, an indigenous achievement, and that these structures represented the highest pinnacle of social organisation and nationhood that existed anywhere at that time, on the African continent or beyond.

Thus, Pre-Colonial art and aesthetics were largely communal in conception and execution, and there is little doubt that the creators of this work played a privileged role in the community, as they seem to have been given the time and space, fully to exercise and develop their skills. Zimbabwe is thought to have the richest collection of Rock Art anywhere in the world and is richly endowed with stone structures, scattered all over the country. Other aspects of pre-colonial artistic expression largely consist of handcrafted objects that are mainly functional in nature. These include intricate décor, scarification and symbolic patterning on objects such as funerary sticks, dance masks, weaponry, basketry, textiles and objects such as snuff boxes, clothing and adornments, as well as headrests and stools. Extensive research has been conducted on all of these manifestations by a number of local and international scholars including Matenga³ (3), and William Dewey⁴ (4). These scholars have contributed to the posing of critical theories on the creation and meaning of all of the above. The existence of both the Natural Museum and Monuments of Zimbabwe and the National Gallery of Zimbabwe, with their extensive collections amounting to millions of objects, has meant that they are able to create permanent and special exhibitions that offer insights and interrogative interpretations of these works for the public.

Curatorial representation of these pre-colonial items has been mainly ethnographic, although the National Gallery of Zimbabwe staged a number of shows during the 1980s that placed more emphasis on the aesthetic qualities of the work, thus awakening a new interest in their artistic quality and, in the process, stimulating the development of a number of subsequent publications and even enterprises, based on the creation and export of a wide range of hand-crafted objects. Today this type of entrepreneurial production provides the main stimulus for the handicrafts, as the original communal and traditional needs have largely been displaced by modern technology.

The Colonial Era

Some of the settlers built elaborate art galleries and museums, ostensibly for the purpose of maintaining contact with the metropolis and showcasing aspects of their own heritage and culture. Thus, the National Art Gallery was opened in Rhodesia in 1957 and other National Galleries were also opened in Namibia, Botswana and South Africa. The National Gallery of Rhodesia featured several international Western European exhibitions and showings, and acquired works by

² P.S. Garlake, "Archetypes and Attributes: Rock Paintings in Zimbabwe", in *World Archaeology*, vol. 25, no. 3, Reading List. London and New York, Routledge, 1994.

³ Edward Matenga, *The Soapstone Birds of Great Zimbabwe*, Harare, African Publishing Group, 1998.

⁴ *Legacies of Stone - Zimbabwe Past and Present*, vol. 1. *Artifacts*, ed. William J. Dewey, Tervuren, Royal Museum for Central Africa, 1997.

established European Masters. A permanent collection was assembled, at the time of founding the National Gallery and consisted of various collectables hand works created by the settler artists, most of whom lacked professional training, but were able to produce an artistic response to their new environment. Many works acquired during this period depicted the land and the rugged, inaccessible nature of the landscape. Many were also abstract and thus avoided any representation of the human figure – notably, any depiction of the local indigenous population.

The colonised peoples also found expression through the creation of works of art. Much of what they created, as early as the 1940s, was of religious inspiration and reflected the teaching and imagery of the Bible, as it had first been presented and interpreted to them. Gifted students were encouraged to express themselves, and a biblical iconography was developed, and flourished, at a number of mission stations and churches, including the Serima⁵ and Cyrene⁶ missions in Zimbabwe. It was at these centres that indigenous artists began to practise their craft and to express themselves in modern artistic idioms and materials. Some of the missionaries worked hard to encourage and promote these early works, and some of the artists later resurfaced in the next phase of artistic development, when stone sculpture was introduced and gained increasing popularity in the country, from the 1950s onwards.

The story of the development of stone sculpture in Zimbabwe is well known and documented, and the newly founded National Art Gallery played a salient role, in encouraging and supporting would-be artists to work in this newly identified medium. The early stone carvings depicted familiar narrative figures, including simple, rudimentary human and animal form. Shortly, the forms grew more complex the choice of harder stone more challenging, and the tendency to explore ethnographic and ontological ideas more widespread. This was largely as a result of suggestions from settlers, who acted as mentors and were able to convince the emerging artists of the interest such subjects could generate. This was at a time when artists like Picasso were embracing African art, which was depicted as exotic and grotesque and offered an alternative to the bland, conventional images usually associated with European sensibilities.

Contemporary Zimbabwean artists, in this formative period, found a niche in the environment provided by the National Gallery and happily embraced the new trend in stone sculpture – the more especially, as their works came to be admired, and even purchased, by well wishers and those interested in forging connections between Rhodesia and Europe and North America. Additional workshops and artists' colonies emerged during this time in different parts of the country, the most famous of which was the Tengenenge project, situated on a farm several miles from Harare, which became known for its prolific production, strong ethnographic and sometimes grotesque representations, that provided an insight into the nature of the characteristic farmer-artists, who came from different part of the region and were first attracted to the farm by the prospect of finding work there. The development of this art form reached its zenith in the 1970s, when it was able to capture the attention of important museums in Paris and New York.

This work, constituting a revival of the stone-carving tradition, has subsequently been subjected to a good deal of criticism and discussion. Several international scholars entered the field in the 1980s, including Marion Arnold, with the first book on the subject, entitled *Zimbabwean Stone Sculpture*. Many other scholars and writers have subsequently written extensively about the stone sculpture of Zimbabwe, and today the literature on the subject is quite extensive⁷. In the early days, much of the sculpture that was produced was exhibited at the National Gallery of Rhodesia, but it soon captured the imagination of curators and art critics elsewhere, who were convinced that it offered possibilities for the development of a modern African art, in advance of anything that was being produced anywhere else on the Continent at the time.

⁵ *Serima*, ed. Albert Plangger, Gweru, Mambo Press, 1974.

⁶ 'Cyrene Mission', in *Insight*, 1980, vol. 1, Zimbabwe, National Gallery of Zimbabwe, 1980.

⁷ "Published Books and Writing – the Theoretical/Critical Background to the Stone Sculpture", a paper presented by Celia Winter-Irving at The Condition of Sculpture Forum, staged at the National Gallery of Zimbabwe, September 2005.

Curatorial practice in the 1980s and '90s tended to be more commercial in nature, and the over-exploitation of the work, with high volumes of sales leading to considerable economic success led increasingly to expressions of critical doubt about its intrinsic value. The emergence of other art practices coupled with the death of most of the pioneers of the tone carving movement have led to the displacement of stone sculpture from its once dominant position of critical esteem.

The Struggle for De-colonisation

As the liberation struggles began to take root in these territories, new elements began to appear in the works of some artists, who sought to depict aspects of the conflict in their work. The new element of discomfort was clearly evident in the work of the Mozambican artist, Malangatana, as well as that of Helen Sibidi from South Africa, among others. Of greater importance, however, was the conspicuous absence of images of protest and resistance from the wider body of creative output. Most of the work that was produced at the height of the liberation struggles avoided any direct reference to events. For example, for the '70s one could count the number of works that directly referred to the struggle in Zimbabwe on one hand. No memorable images of this were created, even in cartoons or illustrations. Few artists of the period made any reference to the events in their work, and the stone carvers continued to explore traditional myths in their work; only John Takawira, from among their number, managed to create a sculpture of a figure with something in his hand which, he later told me, represented a stone and related to some of the disruptions that had occurred in the high density townships, as part of the protests against colonial rule⁸.

For most artists working in stone, it was business as usual, and one explanation for this could be that the artists were already assured of economic success and simply worked to meet the demands of their patrons and promoters. The painters did not fare any better, in this respect and the only provocative works that were produced during this period were some paintings created by visiting artists and by some artists that began returning to the country around the time of Independence, on completion of some training overseas. Most of the other work was characterised by innocuous landscape imagery, abstractions and mythological scenes and elements. This was seen by a number of commentators to represent a failure of nerve, and became a bone of contention immediately after Independence had been achieved. In spite of this, at the time of Independence the country was the beneficiary of a rich and successful artistic heritage, which was to be nurtured and promoted by the National Gallery, as well as a host of private and commercial galleries, over the next twenty-five years.

Post Independence: Reconciliation and Development

The period following Independence has seen artists demonstrating a remarkable unity of purpose, in order to gain a foothold in the international art world. For instance, in South Africa, the Johannesburg Biennale was born in 1995 and generated interest worldwide, as art enthusiasts and curators converged on the new city, in order to witness the transformations that were taking place and the role that art was called on to play. International art lovers were ecstatic, and by the time the second edition was staged, it had moved on from being a mere sideshow to attracting the foremost international curators, critics and commentators on contemporary art from all over the world. Throughout the nineties, South Africa seemed to be pulling ahead of the rest of Africa and managed to field artists in many international shows, from which Africans are normally absent. The global art world's fascination with South Africa resulted in the presentation of many exhibitions of art from this region at international contemporary art events, such as Documenta and the Venice Biennale.

⁸ Doreen Sibanda, *Zimbabwean Stone Sculpture. A Retrospect 1957 – 2004*, Harare, Weaver Press, 2004.

In Zimbabwe, this period was marked by the staging of a number of shows that also contributed to presenting a more united face to the world. A number of private galleries which came into being sought to profit from the steady stream of tourists and buyers who came in search of new art and to purchase paintings by a particular artist or collect the stone carvings that had begun to make their appearance in new parts of the world, such as the Netherlands, in the case of the Tengenenge sculptors and a number of other countries, including the United States and South Africa.

In addition, the idea for the Harare International Festival of the Arts was mooted in the mid-1990s, as a new inclusive festival, that would go on to become one of the most attractive art events of its kind in the annual Zimbabwean calendar and, by the turn of the new millennium, has come to be identified as one of the best festivals of its kind, anywhere in the world. This unity of purpose has helped to attract donors and corporate support, with the result that the sector has begun to take on a more cohesive quality, characterised by a new professionalism in conception, quality of execution and accountability.

Moreover, this period showed a marked increase in the number of black art professionals involved with all aspects of art practice and curatorship. Most of the art galleries and museums in Southern Africa are now staffed by local professionals, and this is an indication of the increase in local capacity and in the availability of suitable training.

Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism

Well into the postcolonial era, we are once more witnessing a significant shift. This period has begun to be distinguishable, as an outgrowth of the heady days of achieving National Independence. In contrast to the first ten to fifteen years of optimism, the most recent period appears to be marked by some kind of realisation of the fact that Independence often does not mean that all things will be rosy forever afterwards. In fact, the challenges of limited social and economic resources, as well as the increasing flight of human resources in pursuit of new pastures, have resulted in a slowing down of progress and the process of reform. In addition, what at the time of Independence appeared to be a fairly homogenous population fixed on the attainment of the same goal, now turns out to be a cacophony of diverse voices, and this, in turn, impacts on the artist and forces him or her to adopt a certain position, in the face of changes in society and people's aspirations. Societies are growing more complex, with the divisions between the classes and rich and poor growing ever wider. Social pressure on the limited infrastructure and other resources has led to a crisis of expectation and an explosion, in terms of disadvantaged people and the fallout of sectors of the community that find it increasingly difficult to earn a decent, and honest, living. All this has brought undue pressure to bear on the authorities, and increasingly divergent voices have begun to make themselves heard.

The work of artists during this period has likewise begun to reflect growing diversity and some have turned to focus on social issues. Admittedly, the growth of new expressive skills has contributed fundamentally to the work that is now emerging in the region. Firstly, some artists respond in a positive way and several exhibitions have been made of the new sculptures being forged from the recycling of weapons and ammunition in Mozambique⁹. In addition, the growth in painting and the two dimensional media in Zimbabwe has led to many more artists choosing to represent their immediate environments in a manner that is objective and narrative. A major cause for this has been the NGZ Art Training Workshop that opened in 1982 and has been the single most important training ground for the schooling of the young would-be artists, many of whom are the main contributors to local and international showings of Zimbabwean art. Most of these artists continue to make their living through the sales of their work, and many works are sold across borders, by artists plying their trade between South Africa and Botswana, where the market is far more buoyant than at home.

⁹ Barbara Murray, "Memento Mori: Art from Arms", in *Gallery Art Journal*, September 2001.

The growing popularity of installation has lent itself to more outright political engagement, and some works have addressed concrete current challenges such as agriculture, the voting process, the media and food, in sometimes very graphic and explicit ways.

This content is a far cry from the early images of traditional myths that dominated much of the local art expression, at its inception. Much of this kind of artistic social realism has surfaced in a variety of group shows with a social theme and shows based on an open submission, but the biggest single demonstration of this was provided by a recent show staged at the Manchester Art Gallery, in England, under the direction of the independent curator, Raphael Chikukwa. *Zim VISIONS* became one of the most talked about African shows last year, partly for its presentation of contemporary art and, no doubt, partly, because it could be perceived as presenting the Zimbabwe of divergent voices, the sound of which would undoubtedly bring music to the ears of the former colonial power. Within the country, in spite of isolation and other challenges, the artists continue to create art, participate in exhibitions and expand both their aesthetic vocabulary and imaginations. Many more artists are working in the installation format, as well as with photography, and more sculptors are expanding the form and content of stone sculpture, to include a variety of media and a wide range of content. The increase in formal training, the renewed vision of the National Gallery and the proliferation of workshop opportunities has led to diversity in the kind of art that local artists attempt. The rise in media interest and challenges of new curatorial practices have combined to contribute to a much more contemporary outlook to art, and a division between work that is strictly commercial and that which is directed at meeting curatorial challenges and portfolio and residency opportunities, both locally and internationally, is beginning to emerge.

The Era of Globalisation

The era of globalisation has meant that there is a renewed interest in African art, and this has been demonstrated by the staging of several blockbuster exhibitions in America and Europe over the last ten or so years. In 1995, the *Africa '95* festival was staged in England and sought to present the entire spectrum of African art practice, from the early ethnographic works and established masterpieces to the more modern movements, punctuated by the stone sculpture of Zimbabwe, the Makonde of Tanzania and the new art from South Africa. Various curatorial directions were adopted and showcased in a variety of venues, with a central focus on the role of art education. Contemporary art was largely absent, due to the fact that the organisers found it difficult to establish criteria for “quality”, in relation to the new work that was eligible for consideration¹⁰.

The last ten years have seen the advent of a new wave of biennales, in which space has been given to African art and art from the Diaspora, and several successful biennales have been established on the continent itself. The most successful of the latter are Dak'Art, in Senegal and the Bamako Meeting of African Photographers, in Mali, which now have a legitimate place alongside the long-established Havana Biennale, in *Cuba Africa 05*, in the UK, provided a focus for contemporary visual and performing arts from Africa at a selection of venues across the country and the exhibition, *Africa Remix*, itself one of the components of Africa 050, was a high point in the presentation of African art in Europe, since it travelled to Düsseldorf and Paris, in addition to London and was seen by large audiences in each city. A celebration of artists from the entire continent and inclusive of those residing in the Diaspora, *Africa Remix* showcased the cutting edge, the experimental, photography, new media and installation, as well as “junk art”, or the transformation of everyday objects into works of art. This exhibition brought together a wide variety of works in different media, in an elegant setting and managed somehow to combine the traditional with the new and to celebrate both functional and aesthetic forms of narrative, shot through with light-hearted gaiety and humour, under the general headings, “Identity and History”, “Body and Soul”, and “City and Land”.

¹⁰ Margaret Garlake, “Africa -95”, in *Gallery Magazine*, no. 6, December 1995.

In many ways, globalisation has tended to work to the advantage of the contemporary art from Africa and stimulated the appetite for presenting and celebrating the artistic languages that have evolved out of years of cultural conflict and shortage of materials and other resources. African artists are now adept at improvisation and innovation, and at home with exploring new depths of meaning and the symbolism that is a natural aspect of life in Africa and contributes to its constant re-invention and survival.

African contemporary art depicts African realities in a manner that demonstrates that, in spite of the years of polar division between the “haves” and the “haves not” and between the dominators and the dominated, what now passes as international contemporary art has retreated back to the basic, the essential, the essence, into the point of intellectual engagement, where the relationship between hand and brain is anchored in the marriage of tradition, technology and ambiguity, in such a way as to open up an entire range of new possibilities.

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