My Third Eye
Excerpts from a conversation with Lizette Chirrime
Danielle Becker

The following conversations with Lizette Chirrime took place in 2014 and 2016. Chirrime’s career has made bold strides in the past year, with an increasing number of performances, and she has become a very visible figure on the South African art scene. Exhibitions from 2017 included a performance at the Goodman Gallery Cape Town (accompanying Ângela Ferreira’s installation as part of the South-South show); exhibitions at the Cape Town Art Fair and the Art Africa Fair (where she was a finalist for the ‘Bright Young Thing’ award); a performance at Gallery MoMo in Cape Town as part of (Don’t) Look Back (a collaborative exhibition with Ledelle Moe); participation in Dress Code, a group exhibition at Gallery MoMo; inclusion in City Lights and Shadows, a group exhibition at Stephan Welz, Johannesburg; representation in 35 Years: Trailblazers, a group exhibition hosted by Lizamore and Associates, Johannesburg; and a performance at the Essence Festival in Durban.

Observatory, Cape Town
12 November 2014

Danielle Becker: At what point in your life did you start making art? What occurred around that time that allowed you to begin being creative?

Lizette Chirrime: I started to make art in 2003, 13 June, Friday, full moon. But before that I was working at a company called Generic Engineering, an aluminum company. I used to draw a lot until my boss said to me that I was lost; he said that I wasn’t meant to be there but to do art. So when my contract came to an end, I decided not to look for another job but to listen to my soul. The result was magic, magic and magic until today.

DB: Part of your family is Islamic, while the other part is Catholic. Did your family’s differing religious beliefs affect your work and your attitude to making art?

LC: I was born into a Muslim family but grew up with the Catholic side of my family. I grew up with my father and went to visit my mother from time to time. My father left my mother and he was living with another woman. She was a child of a Chinese man and an African woman. She didn’t like me, and she batted me almost every day; she made me a slave. I did all the dirty work […] I grew up crying and missing my mother or someone to love me. Everything I did was wrong for them and they all attacked me for no reason, but I didn’t stop [making art].

I visited my mother’s Muslim family in 2010/2011, coming from a long stay in Cape Town, as I was looking to root my soul and spirit. I brought and made my art there. They all reacted badly [to my work] because it had figures, and for them it was Haram.
Fabric collage on mannequin, 385cm (h).
(courtesy WorldArt)
**DB**: How do you see your art making in relation to the two different places and spaces of Cape Town, South Africa and Mozambique? Do you continue to move between these two places?

**LC**: I came to Cape Town in 2005. Making art in Mozambique is nice, as I’m exposed to many different kinds of material. But it also means struggling, as I don’t manage to sell enough to afford a good place to live and good food to eat in order to keep creating and thinking better. And my self-esteem is low in Mozambique. In Cape Town, things are far different as the market for art is big and there is a lot of opportunity. Here I have recognition; I sell a lot, I can have a better place, better food and my self-esteem is higher.

In Mozambique my art is more ‘roots and raw,’ and when I come to Cape Town I transform to ‘contemporary roots.’

My art is my prayer to keep the love flowing as water. My studio is my sanctuary, where I pray, I love, I cry and create according to my mood.

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**DB**: When I look through your work, there are things that seem to recur. A lot of eyes, forms that look like eyes, as well as hands.

*Zawady Chirrime, Lizette’s son, sits next to us on the floor playing and suddenly interjects, seemingly wanting nothing to be left out.*

**ZC**: And feet!

**DB**: And feet.

*I say, smiling at his obvious pride in his mother’s work.*

**DB**: Does that have a particular meaning? This one, for example, you titled ‘My Third Eye’?

**LC**: Yes, my third eye. I believe I see more than the two eyes. I feel things and I see things that maybe other people don’t. So this I can explain as being like a third eye.

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Lizette Chirrime is an artist whose intense spirituality and emotional connection to her work may not sit easily in a global art market drawn to conceptualism and an ironic, postmodern aesthetic. Spiritual themes, affected displays of emotion or for that matter symbolism are not what one typically associates with the internationally recognised, Euro-American gallery space. It is such spaces and structures which still have the power to define how creativity is seen – even in South Africa.
Yet, it seems appropriate, as a viewer of artwork in the hybrid space that is contemporary South Africa, to attempt to move beyond an expectation of art that reflects such a bias: to look and to see with a mind open to possibility and an awareness of our African context without reverting to damaging stereotypes and ideologies of ‘authenticity.’

Chirrime makes use of layered symbolism in her work and shows a profound appreciation of the possibilities of engagement with materiality. She works with an understanding of both the inherent and accrued meanings of her materials. Superficially, her themes, such as vision or unity, appear to reside in the realm of the universal and may therefore appear banal to the jaded visual critic. Closer observation will reveal, however, that to see her work as a collection of singular products denies the possibility that the process of making is both a performance and a ritual rather than a means to an end. The process is also primarily a personal journey through material expression as opposed to an overtly representational act.

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**DB:** The other thing that I noticed is that there are often figures that are in some way interacting with each other or intertwined with each other. These two figures, [The Couple (2006)], for example.

**LC:** Connections, and togetherness, uniting.

**DB:** So human connections.

**LC:** Yes. Because right now I think we humans are not so connected. We disconnect so much from each other. We don’t recognise each other; we don’t allow each other to be in the same space. We always fight with each other. Chaos is what becomes. It’s a sadness. It’s too much stress, too much fear, too much anger. Technology – people are hiding, they are running away from their path – where they are supposed to be.

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The use of material in *The Couple* that connects the two halves is both a literal, physical connection and one that mirrors the conceptual theme of unity despite separation.

Chirrime’s work with material offcuts extends to all facets of her creativity. Wall hangings in hessian like *The Couple* (2006) are formed of re-purposed material while other works, such as *Compassion* (2010) or *Finding Myself* (2005), combine paint and collaged material. Chirrime also designs clothing, which can be seen as extensions of her work on two-dimensional surfaces both in concept and material aesthetic. For instance, a skirt she creates and a Hessian wall hanging both contain a similar image of a house, which, as indicated below, relates to a dream Chirrime has about building a house. To represent the house becomes a productive act that may eventually lead to the actualisation of the thing itself. The act of making here is differentiated from mere representation as it becomes intertwined with physical and spiritual existence.

The act of collecting material is, for Chirrime, part of the process of making. For example, the use of recycled material therefore becomes an embodiment of her environmental concerns.

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**DB:** Here again is the eye form.

**LC:** Like a soul, like water coming, feet from the sea. That thing of feeling guided or watched by energy.

**LC:** I dreamed to build my own house

**DB:** So this was part of a dream, this figure is you with energy

**LC:** Yes.

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LC: It’s always I’m calling to my house. I’m planting the house.

DB: Making it again and again until it is there.

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DB: You mentioned elsewhere that you felt quite strongly about the environment. There was this quote: ‘The planet is a beautiful garden.’

LC: This was for my exhibition in Mozambique. Yes, for me, I have always felt we are so blessed to be alive in nature, to be part of mother earth – it’s so beautiful. For me, I believe it’s a garden but we are not using the garden nicely. We mess and we put rubbish and we put negative energy; we fight with each other and we destroy things, especially where I come from in Mozambique. Here it’s more organised; people take care of the rubbish. But in Mozambique, we don’t have that cleaning system where it’s flowing, where we know that every Thursday the rubbish is collected everything is clean, it’s organised. No. It’s messy. So I feel – imagine if each of us could take care of our own rubbish – I mess, I clean; he messes, he cleans. Instead of waiting for the government – they’re not doing it. The government does what it can but we could all collaborate, you know?

DB: And does that come through in any of your works – that concern for the environment?

LC: Somehow yes, because I started with recycling. When I started to work I didn’t buy anything, I just picked up. I started by picking up things off the street. I went to the shops and asked for the coffee bags or peanut or cashew nut bags. Then I came home and washed them and gave them colour and incorporated everything that I found like that.

DB: And this – Untitled (2014) – is also recycling?

LC: Yes, offcuts from the shop. I go there.

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DB: How important is the material to you – working with it? Is the process important, the act of working?

LC: I think, it is important, because material it’s… I don’t know. I’m connected with material a lot. Sometimes I think…. I just know that material is with me. I like to make clothes; I like to decorate things with material. I like the effect of different pieces of material together.

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For Chirrime an interest in the layering of material as a performative process extends to her engagement with painting, but almost reluctantly. Below she describes the beginnings of a relationship with paint during her 2005 residency at Greatmore Studios and then at the Castle of Good Hope in Cape Town in 2006. Chirrime describes how she continues to work on images rather than delivering them as finished products. This is seemingly indicative of the way she sees her creative production as a whole – as an embodied process that is connected to her personal journey and one that resists traditional, art-historical classification.

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LC: At the Castle [in Cape Town] when I was doing my hessian…people didn’t understand it, saying, ‘This is not art. Art is painting.’ I felt uncomfortable working on my things because they wouldn’t understand. So I started to paint. But I felt I lost something.

DB: Because this is your expression. Do you find the terminology – this is fashion, this is art, this is painting, do you find it difficult because other people have the perception that these things are separate?

LC: Yes, they say it’s so. For me, I just create. Sometimes I think if art is painting then I’m not an artist; I’m a creative person. I’m not an artist. Because I don’t want to put myself in one place where I will be forced to do something called art. So then, I am not an artist.

DB: The perception that only painting is art is quite a historical, European perception. It’s quite narrow – art must be painting or sculpture and that’s it.

LC: But then, I’m not a European. I’m an African.

I paint with fabric.

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LC: You will see this same picture here, Embraced by the Moon (2007), transformed – Embraced by the Moon (2009).

DB: A different one or the same thing re-painted on top?

LC: The same thing but re-painted. Because here she is different. She is wearing green and she has a cross like a light.

DB: So you took the same painting and just changed it? Is that something you do often?
LC: I have that problem. The painting is only done when it’s gone. If it stays around here [the studio], I will keep working on it. I have problems, yes [laughs].

DB: That’s interesting. So you don’t see it as finished?

LC: No, it’s finished only if it’s gone. These ones I haven’t touched them because I’m not in the painting mood. But if I was in the painting mood […]

DB: They might get additions?

LC: Yes [laughs].

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LC: So in this painting, *Embraced by the Moon* (2009), do you see what I’m saying when I say that the painting is never finished? This is that. So I started with the fabric. My idea of me, moon. I don’t know, something like that. It was a self-portrait somehow. But then Cape Town influences and it stayed with me.

I was pregnant when I did that.

DB: This is a fetus?

LC: Ja, it is moon, someone in the moon. I always have an idea of the moon; it carries a mother. For me, it’s a female with a child. And then it became that. I started to change. I wanted to paint. I want to say: she’s blue. It’s still me in a way. It’s me, my energy. So now you understand the painting is only done when it’s gone.

LC: And it’s funny enough – did you see this painting, *Untitled* (2005)? This is the opposite of the other one. It’s two in one. So on the back is that one.
DB: Are they painted in the same year?

LC: Yes, same timing. I painted this on the front and this on the back.

DB: Was that intentional?

LC: I needed space. There was space on the back. I used it.

DB: There is a similarity in the work. There are these faces and these circular forms.

LC: It’s moon, eyes, breast. I don’t know.

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As Suzi Gablik would have it, late Modernism and Postmodernism have made a mockery of the artist as spiritual being: ‘sacred symbols are doomed to make-believe and artifice in a society where their inner purpose has been suppressed and their forms deprived of any root meaning.’ To complicate the matter, an inability to account for spirituality in art has been connected, historically, to a separation between the disciplines of art and anthropology and to a relegation of many African practitioners to the sphere of the anthropological. In reaction to this history, contemporary critics, particularly in South Africa, are weary of assigning terms that denote a connection to spirituality to artists for fear of pushing them into the problematic category of the ‘authentic African artist.’ Chirrime is an artist whose work is intimately connected to her life and spiritual journey and whose work risks both the stereotype of authenticity or a dismissal for a sense of intimacy not in line with much of artwork sanctioned by commercial galleries. Yet, such a preoccupation misses the insights one can gain from the layered symbolism evident in her work. Chirrime’s story is one of an artist who creates as a result of emotional and intellectual necessity and whose products provide a narrative of affect and personal development that the contemporary art world is often reluctant to acknowledge.

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DB: We last spoke two years ago and a lot has changed for you since then. Are there any exhibitions that you feel have been pivotal?

LC: I think when we met I was still feeling like I needed to open my wings and fly. I wasn’t in touch with the galleries. I was busy with Nandos and Spier – Yellowwoods. I didn’t have that exposure that I felt I needed for my career to take off.

Charl from Worldart came across and we started to work together. I don’t believe in coincidence. Nandos and Yellowwoods were also cooking something on the other side. Everything was very quick; everything came at the same time.

I had this exhibition at Worldart on 1st September until 29th of September and then from the next month, October, I was invited to go and be a part of an Art Fair in London, 1:54, which is a very big fair. I felt, wow, I am beginning to fly.

I’m reaching the platforms that I was looking for and to have other people look and appreciate my work was very overwhelming. You start to realise that you are special because people appreciate what you do. They really like and they buy. It makes you feel confident and like you are on the right path.

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In the last two years Chirrime’s work has been recognised by an increasing number of galleries and her inclusion at 1:54 | London potentially marks the beginning of international recognition and her entrance into the network of global artists whose work forms the category of ‘contemporary art.’ The exhibition in which Chirrime participated at the London art fair was a group show commissioned by the restaurant chain, Nandos in collaboration with Yellowwoods Art (an amalgamation of the Spier Arts Trust and Jeanetta Blignaut Art Consultancy). The inclusion of Chirrime’s work in the art fair, as well as the fair’s existence as a popular exhibition of contemporary African Art in the UK, can also be seen as part of a growing market interest in African art and African artists from the perspective of established creative economies in the global North. Auction houses, such as Bonhams and Sotheby’s, have noted substantial increases in contemporary African art sales and in 2016 various news outlets reported an ‘African art market boom.’

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**DB:** In terms of the content and style of your work, do you think they have changed in relation to these experiences?

**LC:** Not really. I’m still the same. I’m not an easily influenced person. I believe everyone has her own way of working. It’s not because I saw someone walking this way, flying this way, that I want to go in this direction. I still take my direction but with more information. I absorb different things. I saw different people working. I saw different ways of expression, people’s expressions. But I still express myself. Maybe it will be more mature now, but it’s still me.

**DB:** Maybe the question in the other direction: do you think, in the past two years, that the South African art scene has itself changed, in terms of the kind of work we are seeing in galleries?

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The water in blood, 2016. Fabric collage and stitched leather rope on canvas, 140 x 106cm. (courtesy WorldArt)

My African mood, 2016. Fabric collage and stitched leather rope on canvas, 164 x 144 cm. (courtesy WorldArt)
**LC:** Yes, yes. It is more… people are getting loose, loose, free. It’s like they are not moving in the same way. People are getting free and there is a different kind of expression you see — like people working with fabric, people working with rubbers, people working with computer parts — not necessarily just painting and sculpture. I think the market is allowing that.

**DB:** That’s interesting in terms of the discussion that’s happening at the moment. When we met before you mentioned something about painting having this association with Europe and European history. The opening up of mediums is possibly more appropriate to this place.

**LC:** Yes. People. We have different backgrounds, different views, different upbringings. So it makes sense for you to play with what you know. That represents you because it’s your comfort zone, in a way. It’s nice to stretch away from your comfort zone, but if you use your sources to create something beautiful I think you will be stronger. Because if I go out and want to use European tools I might need them to teach me, but if I use my own tools, I don’t need anyone to teach me. I can just walk and fly. [Laughs].

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The ‘opening up’ of the art market that Chirrime mentions can be felt in South Africa with a slow but steady change in a sphere that has long been criticised for being dominated by a small, predominantly white, university-trained group of artists. The transformation of the art sphere in South Africa is, however, not merely about demographics but also about the nature of the work that is institutionally sanctioned. Chirrime refers to the acceptance of a variety of different mediums that artists are working with such as rubber; a medium used by South African artist Nicholas Hlobo, and computer parts; a medium used by Maurice Mbikayi who was born in the DRC and is now based in Cape Town. The use of a diversity of mediums is, in the most obvious sense, connected to the rejection of the European tradition of painting and sculpture as the historically sanctioned modes for art production. The rejection of traditional mediums has been happening in Western cultural spaces since the early twentieth century and as such, may be decried as conventional and commonplace. Yet, in acknowledging that the rejection of traditional mediums in the West was largely due to influence from other, non-Western traditions for art making one also has to acknowledge that contemporary artists working in such a way are working as African artists whose production forms part of the larger project of decolonisation and is not simply part of an homogenous, global whole.

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**DB:** Are you still involved with the other aspects of your work. The making of clothing, etc?

**LC:** Yes, I am in a way. Slow, but I am. Actually the exhibition I have with Ledelle Moe is about clothes. We still talk about it because she came with the cement and then I come with my colours. Then it’s about me singing because she likes my voice. She saw me performing and she said let’s do this. You, wearing your performance.
DB: So part of the exhibition will be a performance?

LC: Ja.

DB: So it is also still very important, that your work is multifaceted. Some of your work is on the body

LC: The works on the body and the voice coming from the body.

Also, because the singing is part of me. A few people saw me performing. The ones who saw me performing, they enjoyed. I feel I have a singer in me, maybe I don’t feed her for whatever reason. So Ledelle wants me to feed her on that day.

DB: Feed the singer.

LC: [laughs] Yes.

I’m happy at the moment. I feel honoured to be an artist at the moment. After the exhibition I had at Worldart, I had this invitation from the National Gallery for the 1st of December, next week Thursday. Then Mario Pissarra just had a group exhibition and I was one of the artists in Durban. Then there is another big thing for me. It will be the first time I will be part of Cape Town Art Fair so it’s confirmed that I am there in February next year. I feel happy and grateful for all of the things that are happening. They feed me to work. It’s a big motivation for me to create and then dig deep.

LC: But I think I need to create, I will start to create something that includes performance. Me singing, because it is something that I should do, I believe. Because I feel very happy when I do that.

DB: And it connects very much to the work?

LC: So it’s like you see the work and then you hear the voice of the work.

DB: Could you talk to me a little about this particular one – *The Sea Jaguar* (2016)? Particularly the material, is it real human hair?

LC: Ja, my son’s. I have this thing in mind that human hairs, human parts, are not to be thrown away because it’s your part. You cut your hair you throw away, you throw away a bit of your energy, a bit of your thing. So I look after them. My nails, I plant them. I put them in the ground, like my plants. So for me it’s safe. So the hair, I work, I play with it, I give it another life. It’s there, it’s protected. It’s not somewhere.

DB: So does this work in some way embody your son?
LC: Could be.

DB: But that wasn’t the intention?

LC: It wasn’t the intention. But now that you ask, it could be. That one – *The Boy Snaking* (2014) – is my son.

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Chirrime uses human hair in a manner that likens her work to a spiritual practice that sees material as more than simply physical. While the products may be viewed as aesthetically pleasing it is starkly evident that Chirrime works with what she calls her own ‘tools,’ her own vision and her own voice. Her art is a multidimensional practice, not easily forced into narrow categories and one that, instead of being changed by the external force of the global art market has the real potential to change it from within rather than be subsumed within its powerful ideological system.