

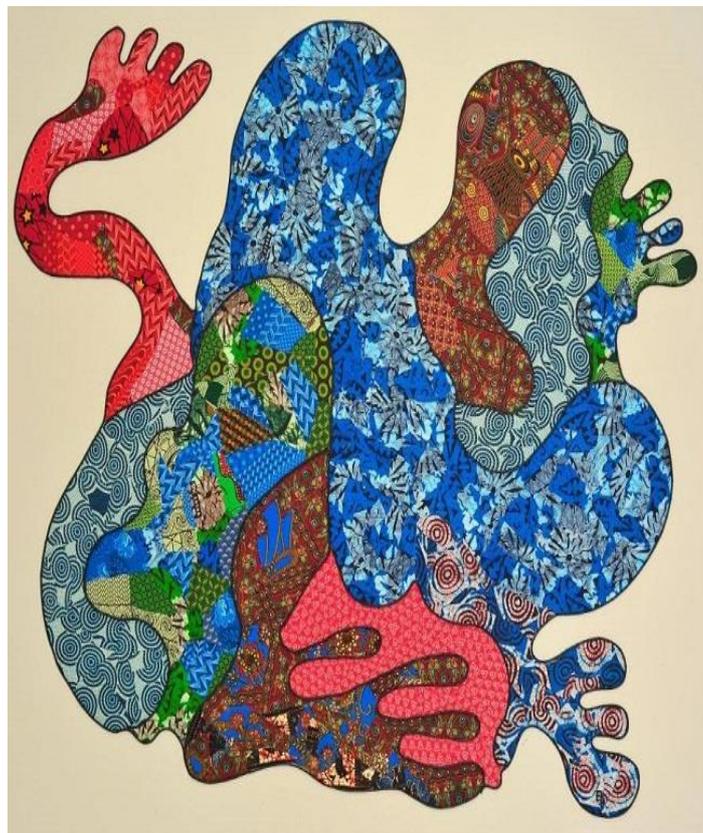
Art harmonious: an interview with Lizette Chirime

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by Keely Shinnars

Lizette Chirime is on a mission to heal us all. Her work, characterised by rich, hand-stitched recycled textiles weave together complex stories about trauma and reconciliation, ancestry and rebirth. Her simultaneously corporeal and abstract figures treat the body – as Chirime specifies, the femme body – not as a site of exploitation, but mutability. But it's not just about the artworks. There's something restorative about Chirime's way of being-in-the-world. Perhaps it's the space she creates for herself, so well-curated with objects holy and homemade. Perhaps it's how she listens to the world around her, sensitive to the violence we continue to enact on the earth and each other, while refusing to tunnel into pessimism. Perhaps it's the way she respects herself, speaking both candidly about her vulnerabilities and confidently about her life's work.

Chirime was kind enough to invite me into her home in Salt River to speak, over strawberries, about personal, political and spiritual healing.



The harmony of the symphony, 2016. Fabric collage and stitched leather rope on canvas, 130 x 154 cm.
Courtesy: Lizette Chirime

Keely Shinnars: Can you tell me about the origins of your art practice? What got you interested in art making?

Lizette Chirime: It all started when I was looking for myself. I was doing something different than art, but there was something in me – my inner voice, my inner spirit – that was not happy with what I was doing. When my contract finished where I was working, I decided to listen to my spirit. Suddenly, my spirit started to reveal itself through art making. It was also a part of my spiritual healing.

KS: Was it always fabric?

LC: Yes. There's something about me and fabrics. I've come to realise that it has to do with my life, my story of life. It's looking for home. You know, fabric is the first thing you encounter when you are born. They cover you with fabric. It's that warm, comfortable place. Maybe that's what I'm looking for. I feel very comfortable working with fabrics.

KS: There's that tactile element, as well.

LC: Touch, yes.

KS: Do you ever work with machines?

LC: I started working with hands. All the time, I did hand stitching. Then I learned to work with machine. Every now and then, I use machine. But the emphasis is still very much on hands.

KS: Does it feel different when you're using a machine?

LC: It is completely different. Machine is machine. Hand is hand. The only advantage of the machine is that it makes things faster.

KS: You mentioned art making began as spiritual healing. Can you speak more about that?

LC: I didn't grow up with my mom. I grew up with my father and step mother. I didn't have a nest. That's what I was healing. There was a hole in me. I never had that protection or love or guidance from my father or mother when I was young. They did abuse me a lot. I was broken. Very much broken. Stitching, it was a kind of stitching myself back together. All the pieces that were broken. That's the healing I'm talking about.

KS: Has personal healing carried on through your career, or would you say it's become more complicated?

LC: I did find a place where I felt I was healed, in a way. But, we live in a society that is also very broken. I am also part of that society. So, besides being broken from my home, I'm also broken from the society. Society makes life very complicated for people. It makes us disconnect from ourselves, from nature. We are running faster than we are supposed to. All because we want to pay the bills. Why would we want

to pay bills on the earth that was given to us for free? The system makes us run after the money instead of looking inside ourselves and living our life in a way we should. I think that's where so much illness comes from. That's where so much anger comes from. We are completely disconnected. The process is only to keep healing.

KS: Healing is an ongoing process.

LC: Keep healing. Keep meditating. Keep moving. It doesn't stop. Every day, there's a different story about darkness. When I do art, it's the safest place I can find. I'm in my own bubble. I try to forget what's going on outside. It's quite hard. If I tune in all the time, I get myself in a depressive place. And it just gets worse. There was a time when I thought it's going to get better. We move towards getting better, and then we go back. It's not moving. We're not healing nature. We're just destroying.



The water in blood, 2016. Fabric collage, stitched leather rope and beads on canvas, 106 x 140 cm. Courtesy: Lizette Chirime

KS: The figures in your work are quite bodily and organic. Does that have to do with healing nature in some way?

LC: They come across because I have a vision. I see. I dream. I feel. Some figures are from things that I've felt. Some from things that I've seen, or something my subconscious transmits. Mostly, it's abstract. Sometimes, I use figures to be more specific. I tend to use female figures a lot. The female is the most broken species on earth. We've been oppressed all over the world. They don't allow us to perform our power. They won't let us free to be who we really are. They acknowledge that we're strong, but they don't allow us to be strong. That's why I use women. I also believe nature is the way it is because women are crying. Women are crying all over the world.

KS: Those problems are all connected.

LC: We are all nature. We are connected. Everything is connected. Let's say, I have this pain. I am from nature. When the weather is clouded, the pain gets stronger. How can you explain? We are connected. Nature influences my movements, my feelings. We tend to forget that we are nature, and then we want to control nature.

KS: It ends up being quite suicidal.

LC: Of course. No one has a remote control. Nature is in control.

KS: You said that you work from visions and dreams. To what extent does you work reflect these external forces, and how much of it is you having something to say?

LC: I do both. I do myself, and then I do communication. The whole idea is to spread the word, to communicate, and to heal. Sometimes, I come across a situation where someone buys my work, and then they have dreams about the work, and it brings up a problem they are going through. Even though it was my story, it relates to their story. They come to me saying, "Wow! There's something about your work. It took me to a place." I say, "That's funny, because when I did the work I was thinking about that place." There is something about communication that I bring out, and it touches people.

KS: Do visions mostly come in dreams?

LC: Sometimes it's dreams. Sometimes it's something in which I feel I should intervene. Talk about it, try to fix it. I will talk about one thing that's going on for this exhibition [upcoming at the Gallery of the University of Stellenbosch]. I'm thinking of these twenty seven dresses, hanging from the ceiling. My vision is about women. As women, we are so wounded. Society wounded us. But then, we tend to put our pain in other women, instead of holding each other., If you put your pain in a woman, remember she's also a woman. She's also in pain. You're not doing anything good. You are just breaking more of that person. Instead of you putting pain in others, why don't you try to heal the pain? We can heal each other. That's my communication.

I also try to make people believe in themselves. People tend not to believe in themselves. They run away from their gift, their call. Obviously, because of the bills, but also because of a lack of self-confidence. I went through the same situation. Then, I found my path.

It's not an easy place to be. As an artist, a black woman in this country. I wouldn't say the same of my country. In my country, we don't have this situation we have in South Africa. In Mozambique, it's more free. We call each other by name. Obviously, we know there is white and black and coloured, but we don't specify. People smile at each other. They look each other in the eye. They compliment each other. Even strangers compliment you. Here, I experienced different things. When I came, I saw people looking at me in a very bad manner. They don't smile. They look angry at me. I used to take it personally, before I learned that the society is like this. I shouldn't just swallow everything, because it will make me sick. Whenever somebody put anger or fear on me, I always thought it was about me. Until I realised it's not about me. It's about that person and what he is going through. He's projecting his problems onto me.

As I was saying, being a single mom, an artist, a foreigner in this country, it's not easy. It's not for sissies. It is quite a challenging path. But it's possible. I'm still walking on the path. It's never certain. You never know what's going to happen tomorrow. If you're going to be able to eat. If you're going to be able to have shelter, to have a studio. But, I keep going. Every month, I still have a house. I still have a studio. I still have work. I just leave it to nature.

KS: Trust.

LC: Trust. Have faith. Believe in my work.



Untitled 3, 2016. Fabric collage and stitched leather rope on canvas, 157 X 120 cm. Courtesy: Lizette Chirime

KS: Do you feel like it's a calling? Something you must do?

LC: It is a calling. It's really strange the way it happened. I was working for an aluminium company. As in, I was working for people. I never felt comfortable working for people. I always compared myself with my boss. Come on, he has everything I have. Hair, hands, feet, brains. We look similar. How come I am selling my time to him? The whole month, I am busy doing his job, but the money he gives me doesn't help me to pay for everything I need? I pay rent, I buy a bit of food, I put in a little petrol, and then I'm broke again. I said, this doesn't seem right. It's like I'm selling my soul to this person. I'm making him rich, while I am struggling every single day. I

have to wake up every single day, and there are times when I don't want to. I do things I don't want to.

There was something inside. Calling. I never had the time, because my time was for my boss. When I get home, after work, obviously I'm tired, and there's more work to do at home. Cooking, cleaning, washing, resting for the next day. So, when my contract finished, even though I was a single mom, I made a promise to myself that I would never look for work. I wanted to let this thing that was inside to come out, because it was really strong.

I've always liked to create my own things. When people come to my home, they always compare my house with a gallery or museum. I make my own carpets, my own cushions. I recycle candles. I was always creative. So, when my contract finished, I had the chance, the time to try. My time. It was hard, though. I didn't have money. I was very broke. But I was happier. I was free to do whatever I wanted to do. It didn't take long until the spirit revealed itself. People will say it's strange, but for me, it was a beautiful day. It was June, Friday the 13th, full moon, 2003. I remember that day. I woke up and felt really strange. I didn't feel like talking to anyone. I gathered old pieces of fabric that I had, and I created a doll.

Ever since, I never stopped working. I didn't have money, but I worked. I would collect, recycle things that other people throw away, and put together a piece. I never thought I was an artist. I'm still not sure I can be called an artist. I think I'm a creative person. What is an artist? What is a creative? What is a crafter? They call me artist, but I'm a creative person. I don't just create on a canvas. I also create at my house. Whatever I am, I create something.

KS: There are multiple levels. It's not just the material, or the final product. As you said, it's not just an image, it's a communication.

LC: It's a lifestyle. Sometimes, I see an artist who only puts his energy on the canvas, and not his environment. For him, beauty is just for the canvas. How he lives, it doesn't have the same feeling. For me, beauty is whatever you are. How you eat, how you work, how you dress, how you move, how you talk to people. It's the full package. It's not just one thing.

KS: Are there artists who you think operate in that way?

LC: I know quite a lot of them who are only artists in the studio. "I live in a mess, but I don't care, it doesn't matter." For me, I don't get it. People are different. But I do know a few artists, when you go to their home, you feel, this is an artist's home. Wherever he is, he makes beauty. I feel I am like that. I like my house to be a place where I feel comfortable. It's my nest. My studio. The food I eat. The music I listen to. The way I treat people. We have to be surrounded by beauty in order to have positive energy and pass beauty to other people.

KS: As you said, it's all connected. If your house doesn't feel like a good place, you're going to end up taking that headspace to the studio.

LC: My house now feels like a mess, because I'm not in a physical state to clean and organise the way I like. Whenever I see mess, I think my head is like that. I like to see things organised so I feel lighter. Then, I make another mess and clean up again. It's a process.

KS: At this point, are the fabrics you use symbolic to you? You use a lot of shweshwe, for example. Or, is it still just using whatever you can find?

LC: Whatever I can find. My idea is to clean up the mess we are busy making. It's not like I have a specific fabric I want to use. No, I'm helping to clear up nature. There's a lady next to my studio who owns a fabric shop. She has a lot of offcuts. For her, it's rubbish. She throws it away. But for me, it's material. I go and collect and I work with what's there. The more I can recycle, the better. But, it's a dangerous place to be. I end up being a rubbish collector. I end up keeping so much rubbish. Even in the house, I collect bottles and things. I never throw away. But then they pile up. That's why I dream to have a big team of people who can help me, so that I can make everything happen. Myself, alone, maybe it's impossible. Or, it's possible, for it will take a long time. By that time, my house will be full of rubbish.



Layers of my soul, 2017. Fabric collage on mannequin, 385 cm (height). Courtesy: Lizette Chirime

KS: Do you feel there's a different process for creating works which will go up on the wall, and works like *Layers of my Soul* (2017), that you might wear and perform in?

LC: I wouldn't say no. The process is the same. The love is the same. Obviously, it has to be a bit different, because they mean different things. It's one thing to be on someone's wall, where people will look and have different feelings. When I do something sculptural, or something that I perform in, it has one intention. Even though I repeat the performance, it's different, the message is one. The coat is for that specific thing, while the wall piece varies. It depends on what the viewer is

going through and what they see in the work. It talks different languages. So, there is different energy. Similar root, but different branches.

KS: Maybe that's true of every piece.

LC: Obviously. I never did one thing in my life. Everything is different. Similar, but not the same.

KS: What are you manifesting, or what are you hoping for?

LC: For a better life. For us to reconnect. For us to readjust. For us to love and stop hating. We have to stop looking at each other in a different way. We are similar. We have to stop putting brands on each other. To live in harmony. We practice respect. I might not like you, but I must respect your choices, your religions, you know. We are all part of nature. We have the same creator. We are in the same bed. What makes us different? That's my aim, actually. For harmony. I just have to evoke that and to see it in people, and it's going to happen.

KS: What do you feel is the role of artmaking in achieving harmony?

LC: I find harmony by making art. That's why I make it. It's a peaceful place. It's warm. It's safe. I'm creating beauty. Something that will make you smile. Something that will make you see colours in a dark place. That's my intention, to brighten life.

Keely Shinnars is a writer currently working on their Master's degree at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. Their work is featured in peer reviewed journals such as "James Baldwin Review" and "Safundi", and the magazines "ArtThrob", "Mask", "Flaunt", and "Autre".