

Zemba Luzamba: Postcolonial identities in motion

This text was originally published online by ASAI in 2021 [\[LINK\]](#)

by *Khanyisile Mawhayi*

It was the formal qualities in the painting of Zemba Luzamba – notably his crisply delineated forms, vivid use of colour, and economical application of paint – that first attracted me to his work. Subsequently, I became intrigued by his complex layered themes and the question regarding the extent to which his identity as a Congolese artist resident in South Africa infuses his work. His paintings carry with them the personal, social, and political histories of the artist. Despite this specificity, they also speak to a broader sense of the artist as a global citizen.

In *Forefront* (2020), the artist depicts three black, male figures in formal attire. The central figure links arms with his associates, with his right fist raised. The character on the right holds a phone. The figures wear cloth masks, which locates the subject within the period of the Covid-19 global pandemic. The entire scene is set against a red background.



Forefront, 2020. Oil on Canvas, 140 x 160 cm (Images courtesy EBONY/CURATED)

The title of the work introduces associations with frontline workers during the lockdown, although their attire is more formal than functional, not unlike the *sapeurs* that feature strongly in Zemba's art.[1] It also possibly alludes to the

Black Lives Matter protests, some of which have taken place during the period of the pandemic, whilst generic signifiers of struggle such as the fist and red background could be seen to allude to a much wider range of black or African protests. The inclusion of the cell phone, perhaps, alludes to the important role that camera-phones have played in social mobilisation and recording popular struggles. Notwithstanding the ambiguous context, the isolation of the figures brings to the fore issues of courage and risk that go with taking a public stand and leading from the front.

When asked about the work, specifically about who was being represented at the forefront, the artist affirms that the ambiguity in relation to who and what is depicted is intentional. As in many of his works, there are many layers and narratives to be extracted from this scene, especially about who the leaders are and who is being led.

Forefront brings into focus the artist's tendency to use simple but effective symbolism and titling. These are devices that the artist seems to always turn to in the making of his work, along with the use of vivid colour. In an interview with Kirsty Cockerill, Luzamba stated that "I carefully analyse every aspect of the work, the meaning of the content has to match the colour selection, bearing in mind that the aesthetic is important too." [2]



The New Caretaker, 2020. Oil on Canvas, 108 x 110 cm (Image courtesy the artist)

In an earlier work, *The New Caretakers* (2018), the artist depicts two male figures in formal suits. Each holds a piece of paper in their left hand and has their right hand raised. We can assume that they are politicians being sworn into office because Luzamba has previously stated that spectacles and a bow-tie are the symbols of a follower of Patrice Lumumba,[3] Furthermore, there were general elections in the DRC in 2018, when this work was painted. leading many to think about the people voted into power, take an oath of office and what that means.

Unlike *Forefront*, the background of *The New Caretakers* suggests human activity. However, in contrast to the main figures, those in the background appear as ghostly spectres. While they lack definition, signs indicate that they include photographers, which suggests the presence of the press.

As a title, *The New Caretakers* goes beyond referring to newly incumbent politicians, evokes not only a change in parliament but also introduces questions of neo-colonialism, of whose interests are served under the ostensible guise of 'development'. [4] The work brings up important questions about the agency that African politicians and public servants have when assuming office. What exactly are they taking care of, and whose interests do they represent?



Homage Whooping, 2020. Oil on Canvas, 140 x 160 cm (Images courtesy EBONY/CURATED)

As with the works discussed above, *Homage Whooping* (2020) depicts African men smartly dressed in Western suits. In this instance, they are shown applauding and gazing at and applauding something or someone that is outside of the picture plane.

From the title and the work, one could deduce that this is an occasion that revolves around the idea of homage or paying respect. The blurred background suggests

balloons, adding to the sense of festivity. The background gives us no idea of the location or specific context, but does create movement and a mood within the painting that complements the clapping men. What or who is being honoured and why? Is the artist perhaps being ironic and trivialising 'homage' because he sees through the hypocrisy of these kinds of events?



Homecoming, 2014. Oil on Canvas, 120 x 120 cm (Photo courtesy the artist)

In the earlier painting *Homecoming* (2014), we again see the artist's interest in portraying groups of well-dressed male figures, along with his technique of suggesting the presence of others who do not appear in the image. Here there is a distinction between the two figures in the foreground, who gesture towards those who have come to welcome them, and the four figures at the back who seem to be earnestly observing the surroundings. The background here is a flat, powder blue even though the body language of the two figures in the front suggests that there is something happening around them.

Homecoming, like the later *Forefront*, uses the background to eliminate any detail that may provide context. However, in this instance, the artist acknowledges the theme as being inspired by the theme of returning political exiles, particular political event, "In this artwork, I spoke about two events that happen (especially with African politicians); Firstly, we have the homecoming of those who left the country to fight for freedom out of their countries. Not only in South Africa but you will find that even in Congo we have Laurent-Desire Kabila. who went out of the country because he was not in agreement with the Mobutu regime. After some time he came back and fought Mobutu forcing to Mobutu to leave and most of Kabila's colleagues who were in exile

came back. Same as what happened here in South Africa, those who were in exile came back; that is the first idea behind the work. The second event is about the irony of the same politicians that we do have, our leaders.... You get elected by a certain group of people in your province where you were known, you influenced people to go and vote for your party, to go vote for the ideology that you and your party or your group stand for, and for you to do that you have to go to your community. But once in power, you just leave, without looking back to the community. And the only time that you will be seen back in the very community that voted for you, that very same community that elected you, for you to be seen there it is when election time comes, then there is the homecoming of the leader. So, this work has actually two ideas that I tried to combine and put together. One concerns those who were in exile and came back, the second looks at politicians who only come to win your vote in the community, once done they leave. They leave for as long as they can be in power there wherever they will be, and once their mandate is expired, they are coming back home.”

The examples discussed above make it clear that Zemba has drawn on the postcolonial experiences of the DRC, whilst simultaneously finding common ground with his experiences as a South African resident and as a global citizen. He acknowledges politics as central to his art, “... mostly in my work you find some political elements... politics are found in anything that we do. In art, there are politics, even in food there are politics of food, so politics is everywhere, you cannot run away from politics. I do have friends who say, ‘No, I don’t like to put politics into my work,’ but politics are with you, we live with politics day and night.” Despite this conviction, Zemba has opted to develop a non-didactic aesthetic. In this he departs from leading Congolese painters, with whom one may be tempted to compare him – he sidesteps the narrative techniques of Tshibumba, Cheri Samba and Moke, which, in Samba’s case are also satirical. Instead, he embraces understatement and ambiguity, along with a deceptively simple process of synthesising ideas. Through these means, he ensures that his work resonates outside of the specific historical contexts that he draws on.

Khanyisile Mawhayi is an artist, curator and writer from Kagiso. She recently graduated with a BAFA from the University of the Witwatersrand and is interested in ways of complicating the representation of Blackness.

Notes.

[1] Kirsty Cockerill, “Dress Code: The politics of dress, oppression and self-determination in the works of Zemba Luzamba”, Africa South Art Initiative, October 10, 2019. <https://asai.co.za/dress-code-zemba-luzamba/>

[2] K. Cockerill, “Dress Code”.

[3] A supporter of Patrice Lumumba (1925-1961), the first prime minister of Congo after its independence in 1960 from Belgium.

[4] Mark Langan, "Let's talk about neo-colonialism in Africa", *Africa at LSE*, November 15, 2017, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2017/11/15/lets-talk-about-neo-colonialism-in-africa/>