

Dress Code: the politics of dress, oppression and self-determination in the works of Zemba Luzamba

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by Kirsty Cockerill

Zemba Luzamba sits on a black swivel desk chair in his Cape Town home studio, surrounded by methodically organised paintings in progress, his white t-shirt freshly ironed is neatly tucked into misty blue jeans. The T-shirt is branded with the black logo of Picha, the art biennale held in his home town of Lubumbashi (Democratic Republic of Congo). Fire engine red socks assert themselves before disappearing into his brilliantly polished shoes. I relax into a chestnut coloured leather couch warm from the sun, my feet comfortable on a Prussian blue and burgundy Persian carpet. Drinking tea out of crockery decorated with the cobalt blue willow pattern, we begin our conversation on the morning Africa hears that Robert Mugabe has died.

Through our conversation I seek to investigate three distinct yet interwoven aspects of Luzamba's practise. The first is the inclusion of historically significant articles of clothing and the body posture of his subjects. The second relates to his use of paint, the colour, texture and compositional structure. The third is to understand the reasons that have lead Luzamba to produce his work in this way.

The conversation begins in his studio and continues for the next three weeks, first as a trickle of restrained emails, and later as a bouquet of voice notes. Luzamba is straightforward, charismatic, an easy and generous conversationalist when you get him on a subject he has feeling for. His manner of speaking, the pronunciation and affectation pumps gravitas into words and concepts he has passion for. The repetitive patterns of his speech builds the timing, a story teller of much grandeur, the voice notes are an auditory delight, English spoken with the reverberation of a French- African accent.

Kirsty Cockerill: How has fashion or style played a role in how you read the world around you?

Zemba Luzamba: The habit does not make a monk but we recognise a monk by his habit. Yes for me, we are what we wear, either we are pretending through it, or not. Fashion is something I strive to understand. We are surrounded by it, it can be a way to make a statement, identify oneself or locate a movement in a period of time. Truly speaking, beauty always attracts, and in fashion that is important. I find it necessary to combine beauty and style in my paintings to attract while my true motive is to express the deeper subject matter.

Zemba Luzamba was born 1973 in Lubumbashi, the same year President Mobutu banned the wearing of blazers, shirts, ties and bow ties. Mobutuism, with its attendant policy of Authenticity was in full rhumba. Mobutu had returned from a visit to Beijing and a meeting with the Chinese Communist leader Mao Zedong, his suitcase neatly packed with fresh inspiration. He renamed the Mao- style tunic the abacost, a word derived from binding the French 'à bas le costume' literally translated as 'down with the suit'. The abacost became the enforced uniform of Zairian men working in any business or civil capacity. Sometimes worn with a cravat, and if you were Mobutu, with a leopard-skin toque.

Thus continued Mobutu's implementation of his totalitarian policy of *Authenticité* (sometimes referred to as 'Zairianisation' in English). In 1971 it took the form of a nation-wide renaming campaign. Mobutu renamed the Republic of Congo the Republic of Zaire. In 1972 he changed his own name from Joseph-Désiré Mobutu to Mobutu Sese Seko Koko Ngbendu Wa Za Banga translated as 'all-powerful warrior who, because of his endurance and inflexible will to win, will go from conquest to conquest, leaving fire in his wake'.

The policy of *Authenticité* was sold to his subjects as a force to rid the country of the vestiges of Belgian colonisation and as a design to birth a centralised and singular national identity. Projecting his own image, Mobutuism became the all-encompassing ideology, a cult of personality.

The men packed away their suits and stepped into the abacost, the women packed away their fashionable pre independence miniskirts and wrapped themselves from waist to ankle with African wax print cloth, ironically made in Holland. Freedom of choice had been banished. The citizens of the country were not treated as subjects capable of their own transformation, but rather as objects to be transformed into his own image.

KC: Tell me about the abacost, what does it mean to you, have you ever included it in a painting?

ZL: An abacost was made to eliminate the use of blazers, bow ties and ties of all kind. I have not portrayed it in many of my works, because somewhere, somehow it does not give you a very good memory. It was worn by the military, you don't cherish that kind of thing in your memory. None in the country could wear a blazer, you would be arrested and sentenced. The abacost was imposed to show patriotism, because the country had only one political party back then, so everyone had an obligation to wear an abacost to show their support for the Mobutu ideal. It was a sign for Mobutu to see who follows his instruction and who does not. It was easy for him to see who was trying to oppose the situation. It was also playing with people minds, he achieved this by convincing each and every one that by putting on the abacost we are all supporting every movement our dictator president brings to the country. It was a kind of supporting movement that he had. He achieved control, total control. In 1990 when Mobutu stopped his dictatorship and let democracy come into the Congo, our fathers and grandfathers went straight to their suitcases and brought out the clothes they used to dress in before independence. It was so sudden, Mobutu had a speech in the evening, and it was proclaimed that he would let the people free to choose. The first thing that changed the follow day was dressing,

especially in men, they started wearing ties the following morning, most of our parents and elders, you know most of them kept their ties somewhere hidden, the dress code changed, changed completely. In 1990 people went back to their old styles, you know, putting on a normal blazer, people became a little bit freer to express themselves when it comes to clothing. We were being controlled by one party Popular Movement of the Revolution MPR that was established in 1967. There was still fear, here and there, but people were free to choose their own dress. Women of the 1960s wore many miniskirts, mini dress, mini this, mini, that. Most of the clothing was minis with a long big head scarf. But in Mobutu's era they were not allowed to wear minis, they had to adopt the African wax cloth, wax Hollandais, made in Holland, and wrap that fabric around the waist to cover their legs. That's what they wore from the 1970's to early 1980s. In the 1990s we started to see short dresses and miniskirts, women went back to what was popular in the 1960s. All though, still now, they have become accustomed to the wax print, it has become traditional, a so called respectable married women would not dare to wear a mini anymore. It's just become a belief that you are a mature or respectable women if you wear the long wax cloth now. There were men who had kept their suits, ties, blazers for so long. When it changed in the 1990s, it was like, it was like they found something they lost for so many years, since the late 1960s! Imagine how happy some people were. We saw 1950s and 1960s styled suits, people heading to work, to business, wearing ties, a totally changed scenery in the street. It happened over night, it's one of the memories I have kept. It's still very fresh in me.

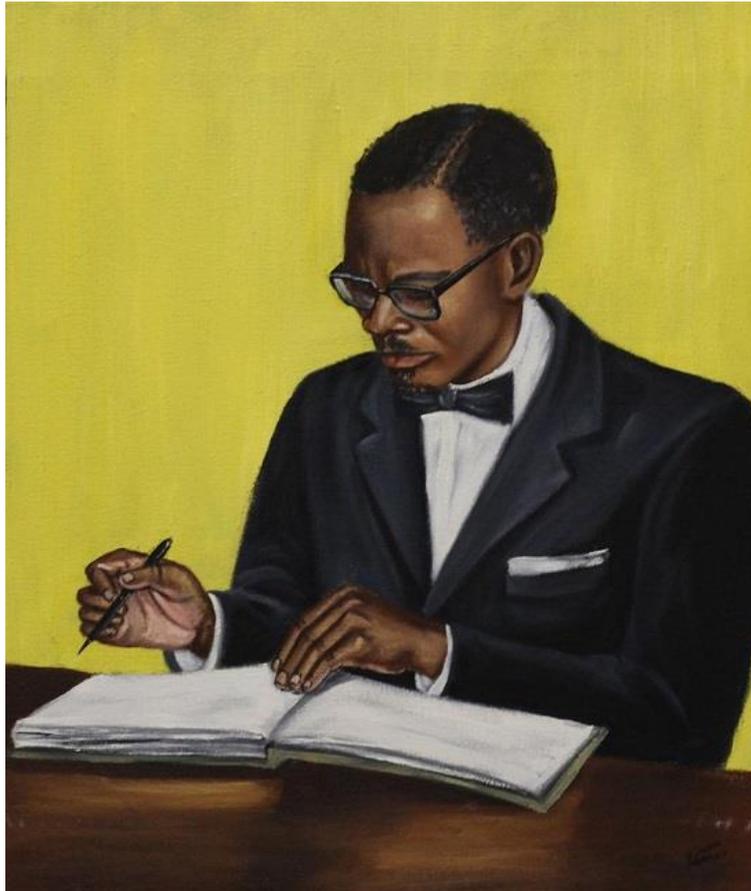
Mobutu's announcement of the transition to the Third Republic in 1990, which included most notably a three party system, came with the freedom to return to more universal forms of dress, men could wear a suit and tie without fear of arrest. Notably some aspects of the Mobutu's enforced dress code have been harder to shake. The notion that reputable women wear long skirts is one. Culture can never be measured in historical time, it is neither linear in evolution nor restricted to geographical terrain. It's a compression of past historical impressions, present and future imaginations and potentials.

KC: How do you find style and fashion in South Africa different to the DRC?

ZL: As for South Africa, there is "multifashionstylism" I mean a cocktail of fashion where you find diverse ranges with many influence in style, from traditional African to modern, Eastern to Western, it's got a rainbow trademark.

KC: In the work titled *Lumumbist*, the subject is wearing a bow tie and black thick rimmed glasses, why is that?

ZL: The bow tie was a Patrice Lumumba trademark, most of the time even before he came into politics and was a salesman, back in the day, he was known to be a bow tie man. Even when he became the first prime minister at independence you see him wearing a bow tie. The bow tie and the spectacles those are the symbols of a Lumumbist.



Lumumbist, 2012. Oil on canvas, 54 x 45 cm. Courtesy: Zemba Luzamba

Patrice Lumumba was a Congolese independence leader and the first democratically elected leader of the Congo in 1960 at independence from the Belgian colonial empire. Twelve weeks after independence Lumumba's government was deposed in a coup. Lumumba was subsequently imprisoned by state authorities under Mobutu, and executed by firing squad.

KC: Can you explain why the subjects in the work titled *Conversation* are wearing long dress suit blazers and leopard skin hats?

ZL: This work depicts a conversation between two early leaders in the Congo, because back then that leopard skin hat was worn by a group of leaders after independence, they adopted that system of bringing that hat with them, like an entourage of leopards. Before Mobutu banishes blazers and the tie, they would wear the blazers, looking smart, with leopard skin hat. In the painting I'm depicting that a kind of terror was coming, coming but slowly. Leopard skin was a symbol of terror coming into the freedom of independence. Then it was the leopard skin hat with the Abacost.



Conversation, 2014. Oil on Canvas. Courtesy: Zemba Luzamba

KC: Can you recall your earliest memories of style?

ZL: My early memories in style, I can remember in the early 1980s when some of the musicians like Papa Wemba and others, started travelling to France. From France Paris, they would come back with the latest in fashions. They would play in concerts, and us kids we would see what there wore and copy them. Checked shirts, white socks and nice black shoes. I was 10 years old in 1983, and fashion was part of our daily lives, though we did not put on ties or blazers.

Papa Wemba a famous Congolese musician, the father of Afropop and *La Sape*. *La Sape* is the blending of French, *Societe des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Elegantes* that translates as the Society of Ambiance-makers and Elegant People. *Sapologie* is not all about the outfits, it's not just for show. Envisioned as a

mechanism were individual could express themselves in a way that was associated with dignity. A *Sapeur* must learn how to stand and walk with dignity and swagger. A *Sapeur* must be clean and clean cut with impeccable gentlemanly manners. In the 1970s and 1980s *Sapeurs* would meet in secret, decked out in chic suits, dramatically put together often with no more than three colours. It was an expression of freedom of resistance to Mobutu's stifling policies and to restrictive class structures. Papa Wemba sentiment was you get education from your parents, but dignity and class you give to yourself. Wemba made intentional choices concerning his dress and often vocalized that white people may have invented the clothes, but Africans make an art of it.

KC: In 2013 you held an exhibition titled *La Sape*, the painting style and aspects of the theme first seen in this show has remained part of your formal strategy to this day. What does *La Sape* mean to you?

ZL: *La Sape* is a movement of being clean and very chic, very well combined, you need to bring something to the outfit to WOW about. *La Sape* is a kind off movement that brings people who are well dressed together. People who are worshipping clothing, it's like clothing worshippers! Now days you even find religious movements born out of *La Sape*. What matters is the combination of colours and reputable quality labels. You have to match what you are wearing. Dress luxurious, look expensive, match your colours and walk. You need to learn how to walk, you don't just walk anyhow.

KC: Are you a *Sapeur*?

ZL: As a Congolese I say yes, it's a movement that most of us that grew up in 1980s and 1990s, were familiar with, and as a youngster you do it here and there. It's a lifestyle. Being a *Sapeur* is a lifestyle. Yes I'm Congolese, *la Sape* movement is everywhere in the Congo. Yes it's an influence on me.

KC: Do you get inspiration from newspapers, magazines, and social media?

ZL: I refrain from being interested in newspapers, because newspapers most of the time you open it and there is so much negativity, you know. I try to focus on a positive side of things, a magazine is way better, you read about different things. They don't poison you with negativity, they don't poison you with fear. Newspapers you open them and its death here, bomb there, arrest there, so much negativity. You will end up living in fear, the bring fear to the forefront, on the front page. With magazines you relax, they make you dream, they make you start wishing, its relaxes you, and I get some of ideas from magazines, I can't lie to you, I enjoy magazines, they are trying to show you something different. Social media is another problem, a very troubling one, because everyone is a journalist, everyone can publish anything. You know we have lunatics, we have this, we have that, and they can publish whatever. Social media no, maybe I'm old school, but no, it's not my thing.

KC: You have painted a couple of works titled *Paparazzi*, the paintings draw our attention as much to the people taking the photographs, and to ourselves who become the photographer's subjects. Can you describe your interest in this aspect?

ZL: In *Paparazzi* I wanted to put the viewer, or the admirer in the spotlight and make them feel like the early stars felt when surrounded by cameras. It was something that I asked myself, what if I'm this celebrity, what would be my reaction, how do I behave, how do I act, these people are busy taking photos of you but you have to have your life, you need to take it easy sometimes. It's a question I ask myself what if I was one of the early stars, and these cameras are busy running around after me, what can be my reaction. So I wanted to put it there in the painting to try have a conversation between ourselves as viewers, looking at the photographs of celebrities, and seeing them as real people, what can be our reaction, how do we feel, how do we see them.



Paparazzi, 2012. Oil on Canvas, 88 x 120 cm. Courtesy: Zemba Luzamba

KC: Colour conveys a mood, it also has psychological, personal and historical associations. Is the selection of colour part of your formal strategy?

ZL: Yes it is, 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. The use of a single background colour in my works, came when I wanted to focus on the subject matter. I wanted the viewer to put themselves, if they can, locate themselves where ever they want to. I did not want to specify anything in the background. I wanted to put the viewer in a space when they might choose to imagine where it was. Which makes the viewer become part of the making of the artwork. It creates a conversation where the viewer decides what can be the background, can be South Africa, can be the bush, can be where ever. I decided to use the flat background because I needed to involve the viewer in the discussion process, so the viewer can develop their own imaginary background.

KC: Your paintings present power dynamics to the viewer. Is personal and public power and its manifestations your overarching subject matter?

ZL: I strongly use the science of forces in my work to empower the subject. Referring to the way I paint, I believe it can hold potential to show, teach, and speak about my mind and the way I see things.

KC: Shoes and chairs often hold focus in your paintings, why is that?

ZL: Shoes and chairs in my work symbolise power, what kind of power the person occupies. Sometimes the colour changes, sometimes you see a red chair showing there is fire, black chair showing trouble, a white chair symbolises peace. A chair not only for me, but for everyone, conveys a certain rank that the person has in society. When you look at the shoes, shoes give you status, also the person's posture and the position of the shoes, they show you the character of the person. The shoes symbolise status, status and character.

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Zemba Luzamba uses the coding inherent in clothing, style and body posture to reference and illustrate power dynamics. Sometimes the clothing references are specific to the pageantry of power and politics found in Congolese history and sometimes they relate to status and class exhibitionism found in global life more generally. The people painted are more often than not mere coat hangers, placeholders onto which symbols of clothing are hung, utilised to represent general archetypes in the dance of power.

The painting titled *Scapegoating*, depicts a man on all fours, slumped off a chair. His tie spills limply onto the floor. Cut down to size by a faceless man whose polished shoes are within licking distance of the bent man's face. Painted in tonal gradients of grey, a bureaucratic power dynamic found in systems the world over is illustrated simply. The reductive, stark simplicity of the painting, adds rather than detracts from the scene of humiliation.



Scapegoating, 2016. Oil on Canvas, 100 x 140 cm. Courtesy: Zemba Luzamba

Luzamba's formal painting style as outworked through his choice of colour and composition, embodies the attitude and style ethos of La Sape. Clean line and colour combinations bring punch, smooth magazine finish and flat pictorial planes a stage onto which the viewer can imagine their own back ground, their own place in the hierarchy of status and aspiration. The freedom of imagination enacted by Luzamba and offered to the viewer are at times a rallying cry for the power of self-determination, at other times a tribute to those who have succeed or as an illustration to the outworking of power both positive and negative. They are an act of defiance in the face of oppression and often calculated to disrupt the notion that you are defined as an individual by the class structure into which you are born.

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KC: In your painting titled *Cohiba*, you have painted yourself wearing a suit and tie, reclining in a leather arm chair, confident, detached, smoking a Cuban made cigar unaware of the viewer. Can you describe the nuances and your intent with this painting?

ZL: Yes, in the work titled *Cohiba* there is a sense of power in the dressing, the suit and posture, and in many parts of the world it shows class. In *Cohiba*, I paint myself, all though you see luxury, a cigar, a suit, a very nice armchair, I wanted to speak about the reality that happens. I have never been to Cuba but I have read about it. Although a cigar is consumed by the elite and the high classes, at the end of the day that cigar is not made by the high classes or the middles classes. That's why I had to show the scratches on the sole of the shoe, to show the oppressed people who make the cigar. The people under foot. Sometimes we tend to forget and we just consume a cigar as a luxury, it's expensive, and we forget who made it. That is why the foot is up and the sole scratched. I wanted to speak about the people from Cuba who actually made that cigar, the struggle the cigar maker, tobacco farmer goes through. You must not forget the sole that holds you up.



Cohiba, 2012. Oil on Canvas, 120 x 90 cm. Courtesy: Zemba Luzamba

KC: You have painted a two works titled *Connoisseur*, in them the viewer is presented with the backs of people dressed elegantly, looking at artworks, in such a way as they become the artwork. In the two paintings of this title you reflect on two different variations of the theme. Can you describe your choices and intentions with these variations?

ZL: In *Connoisseur*, I wanted to make a point about the art world. For somebody who comes from other parts of Africa, visiting a gallery is a luxury, it's something different. Telling somebody you are going to a gallery, they will say you are becoming a white man now! When people go to a gallery they have knowledge, they appreciate art, they are a connoisseur. I'm speaking about the few black folks that visit galleries, back in the day it was only white and other races. If you see black folk in a gallery then they are either an artist, somebody who works for the gallery, or they are a connoisseur! Somebody who knows about art who leads a different life as an African person. It was a kind of a tribute to those black folks who have the courage to visit museums and galleries. Because it's not in our culture, I can be an artist, my people may come to support my show but they are not used to it.



Connoisseur, 2012. Oil on Canvas, 100 x 90 cm. Courtesy: Zemba Luzamba

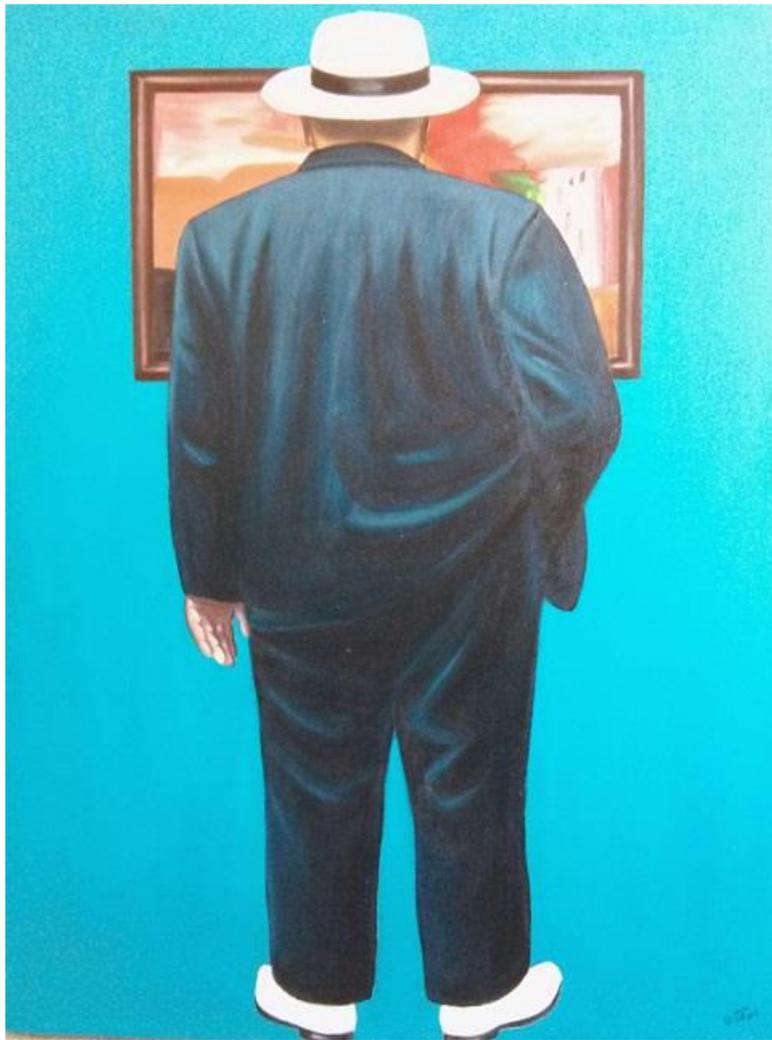
KC: In the one painting the viewers are looking at a William Kentridge work, why did you select his work to be the focus?

ZL: William Kentridge, an artist of that calibre is not a person you see every day. I'm paying tribute to that. I have much respect for the man. I see not only a great artist, I see a clever guy, he works very hard but also very smart. A person who knows when to jump, who is not afraid to do something. Give it 20 or 30 years from now you will see how powerful this person is. You will see how hard this artist can hit If he was a sportsman! He is an artist who does not stop. That's why I respect him, because he keeps going.

KC: In the second work titled *Connoisseur 2*, you paint a Hendrik Pierneef being looked at by a white viewer, why is this?

ZL: Yes I use the example of Pierneef because I wanted to represent old masters in *Connoisseur 2*. I was being ironic, so I used the white guy because the old master collection are in white people's hands. Up and till now the biggest collections are in white people's hands, we as black folk still do not collect old masters works. So the painting was a way to say come on! Come on black folks, let's join the movement, let's buy old masters. Black people are very vocal when it comes to the selection of black artists work, empower this black artist, policy this, and empowerment there, we talk and have politics in the arts but black folk don't support the arts, they don't buy art especially not old masters. The reason is white people don't just talk, but they also act. We have black people in the arts but they don't buy old masters, why. How

many black folks buy Irma Stern, Cecil Skotnes, Maggie Laubscher, It's the sad truth but we have too many excuses.



Connoisseur 2, 2012. Oil on Canvas. Courtesy: Zemba Luzamba

KC: Are you influenced by Cheri Samba, you both use fresh clean colour and dynamic colour combinations in graphic ways?

ZL: Most of us use bright colour combinations and are influenced by our elders, Cheri Samba is one of the leading Congolese artists we all look at and admire, but me, my influences, my inspirations are limitless.

Kirsty Cockerill is an independent arts facilitator, exhibition maker, curator, writer and consultant, interested in cultural systems and the visual arts.