

The aesthetics of feelings: a conversation with Zamani Makhanya

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by Rachel Matteau Matsha

Zamani Makhanya's studio tells the story of a man and artist whose humble presence shines through the space. Bright oil pastel off-cuts cover the floor, a small transistor radio broadcasts a soccer match, smoke nonchalantly rises from an ashtray, and a discarded whiskey bottle is reinvented as a candleholder. The white walls are much more than walls. They are permanent easels, where colourful artworks are simultaneously in progress, as if engaged in a complex yet joyful symphony under the guidance of a masterful conductor. If these walls could talk, they would tell the story of a hard-working artist creating art to beautify the world around him.



Zamani Makhanya in his studio

It all started in 1959, when Zamani was born in Lamontville, south of Durban. As a young man, he moved out of the family nest to study at Amanzimtoti Training College (now known as Adams College). He recalls his first encounter with art:

Towards the end of each year, the teacher who taught art at teacher diploma level used to call the young talented ones to his classroom. We used to create sculpture with wood, with everything that was there. It was exciting for us to be in the art studio, knowing that you are talented, that you love art but are not exposed.

The 1976 student uprising marked a new era in Zamani's life as he moved from one high school to another. He recalls the heightened consciousness and learners' desire to participate in the protests that spread like wild fire around the country. As the situation grew more and more tense at Amanzimtoti College, with security police regularly raiding the campus and dormitories, he changed schools and spent a year at Ohlange High, before obtaining his matric certificate at Dlangezwa High School in Empangeni.

Fast forward to the University of Fort Hare, which had a major influence on Zamani's career in visual arts. While studying Fine Arts and also doing a University Education Diploma at the university, Zamani entered and won a national art competition, prompting him to think that perhaps he had what it takes to make it as an artist. However, after completing his degree, he returned to Durban and joined Ntuzuma College of Education as a teacher. While working at the college, Zamani co-founded the Natal Visual Arts Organisation (Navao) with fellow artists Thami Jali, Sfiso Ka-Mkame, Paul Sibisi, Siphso Mdanda and Tiki Phungula. Navao was born out of financial necessity but also political commitment, at the height of the struggle against apartheid in the 1980s: 'We had to survive and pay our rent, so we did some work for the ANC and the unions, creating political banners for rallies, and all those things'. Although short-lived, the history of Navao is a fascinating one that warrants more research than fits the scope of this essay.

Early influences

Looking back to the moment when he knew he would become a full time artist, Zamani cites childhood friend, painter and photographer Zwelethu Mthethwa as a major influence:

I was observing his progress as an artist in the newspaper. I remembered that once Zwelethu told me that I inspired him to do fine art. So it kept on ringing, I told myself I have to do this. So I quit teaching in 1999 to go [into art] full time.

Shortly after this, he met artist and curator Gabi Ngcobo, who offered him studio space in her rented Glenwood house. He recalls this period as an exciting one, a burgeoning time for Durban-based black visual artists that led to the formation of the Third Eye Vision art collective:

So when we were there [in the Glenwood house], Sfiso [Ka-Mkame] came. He visited from time to time and we gave him a space, and then guys from the [Natal] Technikon kept on coming. Something was brewing; we started talking about our future. That is where Third Eye Vision came. We used to talk about a

lot of things, about the lack of exhibition space for black artists. No galleries in Durban for us. So one of our objectives was to have our own space. We wanted to do away with the notion of 'township artist', 'traditional art' and claim our place in the mainstream art scene.

Before democracy, as a young artist, I used to take Peter Magubane's and Alf Khumalo's images, for example, and make a collage, juxtapose images. Then came post-1994. There was no more war. That created a vacuum, so we had a lot to talk about. A strong theme that emerged was identity. Most of us, as artists, were caught in that space where you don't know what role you are going to play. That era was very difficult. Yes, freedom is here, but you've been telling the whole world about your plight through your work, now what are you going to do? So we started looking to Africa for inspiration. That is where the symbolism comes in.

Mindful and beautiful



Zamani in his studio with work in progress in the background

Looking to the African continent from a South African vantage point, Zamani is particularly fascinated by Ethiopian and Congolese artistic compositions. An encounter with Congolese artist Roger Botembe was a major reason for him venturing into the abstract:

Botembe came here [in Durban] while we were in Hymes Studios, in Morningside. He is a master of symbolism. He taught us a few tricks. We just threw them all over our paintings, unlike him [laughs].

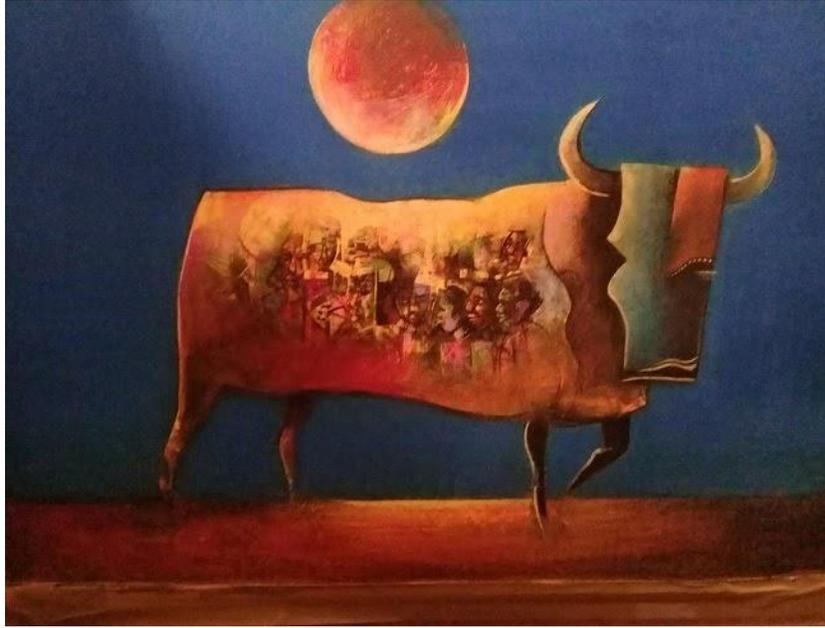
Zamani rapidly mastered abstract art, through practice but also the guidance of artists such as Thami Jali. While fluid symbolism and spirituality became distinctive features in his creative aesthetics, his foremost artistic intention is creating beautiful artwork. As he puts it: 'I want my work to be a landscape. Not a physical landscape, but something that will show you feelings'.

The sun appears in many of Zamani's pieces, as a constant reminder that it is a source of energy, love and life. It is perhaps no coincidence that he always starts a new work by applying yellow, building up from light to dark as he creates his own colours, with a distinct predilection for yellow, red and blue. He builds colours as a painter would, gradually and carefully. He attributes this fascination with colours to Sfiso Ka-Mkame's influence.

On his creative process, Zamani is quick to point out that when he starts a new work, he doesn't know where it is going to end:

I just enjoy it. Put these things, erase them. You can see how much pastel I am wasting [pointing to the pastel offcuts on the floor of his studio]. I scratch with a blade, that's what I do. If it doesn't work I scratch it out. I can see it developing in a beautiful way, but I need time to do it.

Not shy to erase and start again, Zamani remembers useful advice from his art teacher at Fort Hare: "Makhanya, don't be precious. Erase it if it doesn't work!" Layering colours and images is part of his creative process. Looking carefully at some of his work, one can indeed see the surface of juxtaposed layers and the complex reinterpretation of fading images as renewed symbols take shape, with each scratch of the razor matched by three strokes of colour.



Untitled from The Cow series

Some of Zamani's most striking works are from *The Cow* series. Although relatively recent in terms of making (early 2000s) the idea was long brewing:

I was in Mozambique [in the 1990s], and I saw this guy. He got in the lift with a goat. We asked him, "What are you going to do with it?" He said he is going to slaughter it up there. At that time, I was staying in Point Road [in Durban]. It crossed my mind that I did not think of doing rituals for the ancestors and that sort of thing. But at that time, I just thought about me taking a cow in the lift, going up to the 9th floor to have a ritual [laughs]. It started there. Then I saw Botembe's cow, nicely abstract. So I started to do my own.

[...]

There is no need for me to do these things, the slaughtering. So I spent a lot of time wondering about life, wondering why people do what they do. Do traditional rituals really help? What I realised is that all of us have power in ourselves. So I don't have to call the spirits, the spirits are here already. You know why I did this [with reference to a current pastel works on the wall]; these cows go in different directions. It is a metaphor for confusion. Our ancestors are also confused.

A free spirit

Anchored in a profound, personal understanding of spirituality blended with aesthetics, *The Cows* are among Zamani's most commercially successful works over the past few years. While the aspiration to sell is by far surpassed by the desire to produce beautiful and eloquent artwork, Zamani's body of work has been acclaimed and exhibited in various galleries, art fairs and festivals and has found its way to numerous private collections in South Africa and abroad.

Returning to work as a teacher in 2007 has given Zamani a new sense of creative freedom. Asked whether he feels that his work reflects who he is, he responds:

I am still trying to get to that level. Right now I am beginning to find myself. Now that I am working as a teacher, I get a salary, so there is no pressure anymore. I don't work to sell now.

Teaching gives Zamani the financial freedom to create, but he also finds inspiration in the freedom with which children approach art making: 'Working with children gives you that freedom. You know, there are no inhibitions with children. It gives you that confidence, because they can do their own things'. A teacher at heart, of the countless things Zamani could be proud of, his involvement as a visual art teacher at the Ningizimu Special School in Montclair, a public intellectual disability school, stands out:

When the recession started, that's when I decided to take my teaching certificate and present a proposal at that Special School. This Special School is for disabled children, who have learning problems. I came there with a simple thing: recycling paper, because I have plenty of used newspapers around. I used a room, starting to create papier-mâché sculptures with the children. These children are from a poor background, they don't do grades, and they cannot do matric and get a certificate to work somewhere. Once you are 18 years old, you are out onto the streets. So I try my level best to make sure that I give one or two of them some skills.

This was my own initiative. I decided that I can do something for these children. I was also feeling useless, I was bored. I can't do art from morning to night; you have to go do something else. I developed a proposal and they loved it. And we started to win competitions. It's serious. It's not that crap art thing, I teach them Art.

When not teaching, Zamani spends most of his time in his beloved studio in Hillary, a space that represents freedom to be and to create.

I spend a lot of time here. I really enjoy being here. I am beginning to see the fruits of that. The more you respect yourself, the more you do your art, the more people take you seriously. This space offers a lot for me.

Musician Madala Kunene is a regular visitor to the studio, playing his guitar as Zamani works. Mutually inspiring, music and visual art are entangled in a flow of creativity, tuned in the rhythms of the guitar and strokes of pastel.

A masterful artist with an impressive network of friends and acquaintances, Zamani collaborates with artists using different media, including music, photography, literature and poetry:

Spending time at Bafo's [Madala Kunene] place I've met a lot of people. It's no coincidence that from time to time I'll do something with musicians. I've done

covers for [record label] MELT 2000, the Rainbow Restaurant [in Pinetown] project with Rafs Mayet. I collaborated with a poet from South Africa, who used to be Mandela's isiBongi [praise poet], Zolani Mkiva. I produced images and he made a poem for South Africa.



Zamani on the doorstep of his studio in Hillary

Currently mainly using pastel, Zamani plans to expand the studio to create a dedicated painting space:

I am going to clean the other room, where I do painting. I am a painter, I love painting. But the pastels that you see are dictated by the market. Whenever I send my painting now, people are asking where the pastel work is. There is this thing about the paper behind the glass.

Constantly nurturing new ideas, Zamani's dream project would be public art:

Taking art to the people is my dream. I think we are leaving our people behind. It would be nice to have public art with the communities. See the presence of the artist in the community. Coming to Durban, going to Umlazi and elsewhere, talking to people, and asking them about their history. And create a sculpture,

using everything that is there. I would really love to do public art. Taking art to the people, reaching out. I would really like to do that. I am still dreaming of that. Go to a space and create something beautiful, with the people, for the people. The problem is that nobody wants to fund. Too much politics going around, too much greed. I really don't know what the future has for us.

Disillusioned with contemporary politics and the state of the arts, especially visual arts in South Africa, he nevertheless believes in his mission as an artist to educate and inform, to connect with people:

Now that I am growing older, I would really love to be just a good citizen of the world. I love people. I want to be comfortable everywhere I go, and I want to make sure that people around me are comfortable. I don't want to be put in a box. I am a free spirit...



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