

Mail & Guardian

Breaking free from migrant status

By Mary Corrigan, October 21, 2016.



Following a pattern: Ronald Muchatuta's works, Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech.

The psychic journey Zimbabwean people undergo when they leave their homeland has, unexpectedly, not come to shape the cultural production of artists from that country.

In NoViolet Bulawayo's celebrated novel, *We Need New Names*, she lays bare this struggle, untangling her old self from the new one that emerges in the United States, and is shaped by her "foreigner" status. She adopted a new name — the Bulawayo pseudonym — after settling in the US, marking the shift in her identity, while maintaining a link to her homeland, as the surname Bulawayo suggests.

Artist Ronald Muchatuta didn't change his name when he arrived in South Africa in 2004. Instead, he began a search for a visual lexicon to describe the trauma of separation from his native Zimbabwe and the baggage his migrant status entailed.

It was after the xenophobic attacks in 2008 that he felt compelled to rely on a familiar symbol for this condition — the blue, red and white checked print that is associated with Chinese carry-all bags.

The pattern of this bag has appealed to artists and fashion designers wishing to unpack other patterns of behaviour tied to the design: Zimbabwean artist Dan Halter, Nobukho Nqaba in her *Unomgcana* photo series and Dennis Chuene, of the Vernac fashion and accessory label.

In Muchatuta's expression, the print found its way on to the bodies of his female subjects, operating like a skin and demonstrating the way in which the migrant status had become inseparable from the person and the Zimbabwean identity.

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Muchatuta was living in Kloof Street, Cape Town, at the time of the xenophobic attacks and wasn't under direct threat but the events triggered a crisis within him. "I was asking myself about my position and everything else. I could have been a victim," he recalls while sitting in his studio on Greatmore Street, in Woodstock, Cape Town, ahead of his exhibition at the Agog Gallery in Johannesburg.

The title of it and the content of his paintings reflects the trauma of separation from his homeland. Kusina Amai Hakuendwe is a Shona saying that can be loosely translated to mean "do not stray too far from your Mother's umbilical chord."

Muchatuta explains the phrase further: "When someone leaves their homeland, they don't know where they are going. You don't know the obstacles on the other side and when you reach there, whatever you face — there is no comfort for you."

The absence of maternal comfort offers an analogy for separation from Zimbabwe but the condition of exile is embodied in his paintings via the recurring form of a headless female body covered in the familiar blue and red patterns of cheap Chinese carry-all bags. He was naturally drawn towards depicting a female rather than a male body, he says.

In the new collection of 15 paintings for this exhibition, he has attempted to navigate the motif and theme into new directions. "I want to talk about migrancy on a global scale and make the work universal," he says.

Significantly, he plays with the inescapability of the migrant condition and the desire for an escape. The push and pull between these two states is communicated via a patterned body that either disintegrates or transforms into a fish, which is not limited by national borders.

Muchatuta's paintings are dominated by this interplay and the depiction of fences. In this way the crossing lines that define the Chinese bag prints are echoed in the environment too. The only reprieve from this controlled space comes in the form of a pleasing abstract work in which the motif of the fish disappears into swirls of water. It is as if through his art Muchatuta can break free.

"When you are Zimbabwean migration is part of your story," he says.

He seems desperate to arrive at a place where his identity and existence is not limited by his nationality, yet ironically this remains a subject of his art.

It is in a collection of drawings that he teases out other ways bodies are controlled and defined by their race or gender. He is interested in and concerned about the way black women's bodies are objectified through popular culture and forms of sex work and human trafficking.

This is most successfully rendered in works labelled Black Body and Stripped, which depict women whose bodies are inseparable from patterns, either the Chinese bag pattern or a leopard one in the latter work. Their identity is written into their skin and traps them.

He loathes labels and how they impose stereotypes. "Black artist, African artist. What do those labels mean?" he asks.

"Zimbabwean artist" is a label that haunts him, this exhibition and his art but it gives context and meaning. And at a time when the market for African art is ripe, it gives his work currency too.