



REVIEW / FAY JACKSON

PORTIA ZVAVAHERA, WALTER BATTISS, ZAMA PHAKATHI & 21 ICONS

JOBURG ROUND UP

STEVENSON, AOP, STOP SIGN ART GALLERY & MOAD

FACING PAGE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Portia Zvavahera, *Ndakavhumbani*, 2014. Oil-based printing ink and oil bar on paper, 157.4 x 110 cm. Portia Zvavahera, *Ndoyya Kwamuri Ishe*, 2014. Oil-based printing ink and oil bar on paper, 156 x 99.5 cm; Portia Zvavahera, *Ndireregere*, 2014. Oil-based printing ink and oil bar on paper, 153 x 98 cm; Portia Zvavahera, *I Feel Single*, 2014. Oil-based printing ink and oil bar on paper, 155 x 97 cm. All images courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.

BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT: Walter Battiss, Wood block, 22.6 x 30.5 mm. Photograph by Fay Jackson; Zama Phakathi outside The Stop Sign Art Gallery. Photograph by Fay Jackson; Jonny Clegg from the '21 Icons Portrait Of A Nation' exhibition by Adrian Steirn, held at Museum of African Design (MOAD). Courtesy of MOAD; Desmond Tutu, from the '21 Icons Portrait Of A Nation' exhibition by Adrian Steirn, held at Museum of African Design (MOAD). Courtesy of MOAD.



Vast, cosmopolitan Johannesburg has long held its reputation as the Big Bad City. A patchwork of contrasting districts, sprawling townships, compact gated communities and extensive shopping mall complexes, South Africa's twenty years of democracy have yet to overcome numerous socio-economic inequities that still prevail across the city, and much remains to be done before a cohesive voice is heard.

Still, the city continues to shed its ugly veneer. Previously perceived of as both threatening and a little too straight-laced (like a hyena in a suit and tie), Joburg is emerging as one of the hippest hotspots on the map of a burgeoning African contemporary art, music, and fashion landscape.

Platforms such as the FNB Joburg Art Fair (22-25 August), the first international art fair of its kind on the continent, have played a leading role in supporting contemporary pan-African art, and showcase the city as a place for the continent's artists, curators, collectors, writers, and art-lovers to congregate.

Areas that were recently conceived of as "no-go" have experienced vast revitalisation. Braamfontein, the gateway to the city, is home

to a myriad of popular businesses and cafés, including numerous gallery spaces such as the newly opened Wits Art Museum (WAM) and Co-Op, an innovative collaboration between whatiftheworld and design duo, Dokter and Misses. Stevenson JHB also opens its doors every morning onto trendy Juta Street and, from 3 July until 1 August, showcased the work of the 2014 FNB Art Prize winner, Portia Zvavahera.

'Wayfinding' was the young artist from Zimbabwe's first solo exhibition in Johannesburg, having had her debut solo in Cape Town in January of this year. Her vividly coloured paintings are made using layer upon layer of oil-based inks, resulting in a combination of painterly mark-making and printmaking aesthetic, which is augmented by her use of graphic floral patterns resembling textiles.

Mostly feminine figures float in jewel-toned negative space, their faces abstracted as if the artist were trying to recall them from a dream. Printed textures in vast patterned edifices proliferate, some images even resembling Klimt in their composition, with faces and limbs emerging from blocks loaded with symbols.

Zvavahera's work is autobiographical, reflecting her own female experiences of spirituality, marriage, and childbirth, and addresses issues such as human isolation and the social injustice occurring as a result of the socio-political crisis in her home country.

Just down the road from Stevenson, in the centre of the area of Milpark's sophisticated ambit, lies the 44 Stanley complex. In a converted former factory building, now bustling with restaurants, shops and galleries, there is a bright, well-lit white cube where the Art on Paper (AOP) Gallery makes its address. AOP recently (24 May - 14 June) showcased an unusual retrospective of works by one of South Africa's most illustrious artists, Walter Battiss.

Presenting a unique collection of wood and lino blocks, as well as drawings and prints, the exhibition aimed to illustrate the process of Battiss' work from sketch to matrix, from matrix to print. Curated by AOP's own Wilhelm van Rensburg (art critic and expert regarding Battiss' oeuvre), this body of work constituted the high/relief printing practice of Battiss, hence the exhibition's title, 'High Printing'. A book specially written by van Rensburg about

the collection, was launched at the opening. But the real bright sparks flying from the creative flint are to be found right at the city's true urban core, in the gentrified neighbourhood near Doornfontein now known as the Maboneng Precinct. The area's rebranding has been internationally regarded as an exceptional example of urban regeneration, converting a mess of grimy post-industrial warehouses into trendy NYC-style loft apartments, an upmarket hotel, countless cafés and shops, indoor markets, and, of course, art galleries.

Transformations like this seem to have cultivated a much younger, hipper art audience in recent years, as well as encouraging a new breed of gallery owners, curators, and critics to emerge from within an upcoming multiracial "creative class". Take, for example, Zama Phakathi, a flamboyant "walking artwork", in her own words, who owns and runs a gallery from a shipping container a mere stones throw away from the notorious neighbourhood of Hillbrow.

Stop Sign Art Gallery can be found in a glass-fronted space on Fox Street in the city centre. Located just outside the perimeter of the

Maboneng Precinct, the bazaar is surrounded by hair salons with hand-painted signage, iconic Coca-Cola supermarket/café/take-aways and a small privately owned panel beater – a battered taxi with its bumpers removed, gleaming crimson, in its lot. As such, the Main St Bizarre really does represent a "cross section of the new Joburg" (as it proclaims in gold lettering, emblazoned across its storefront).

Similarly, the Museum of African Design (MOAD), the first museum dedicated to design on the African continent, is on Commissioner Street, slap-bang in the centre of the city. Owned, run, and staffed by a team of energetic young enterprisers, MOAD (opened 2013) aims to create a space where cultural engineers from across the continent can share ideas and work through exhibitions, outreach, and partnerships with creative spaces across Africa and around the world. '21 Icons: Portrait of a Nation', presented by Mercedes-Benz South Africa, was an exhibition at MOAD for the first time, from 16 June until 17 August.

The 21 Icons project includes beautiful black and white portraits, short films, behind the scenes photography, and written narrative, combined

and showcased at MOAD in order to celebrate "the lives of men and women who have shaped the world around them for the better, inspired by the life of Nelson Mandela." Visitors to the exhibition experience an audio-visual, interactive walk-through of the multimedia content through the 21 Icons smartphone Augmented Reality (AR) app that acted as a personal exhibition guide.

Featuring well-known legends, like Madiba himself and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, alongside lesser-sung heroes such as Gary Player, Johnny Clegg, and Evelina Tshabalala, '21 Icons: Portrait of a Nation' opened on Youth Day in MOAD's cavernous subterranean exhibition space in celebration of 20 years of South African democracy.

Maboneng, meaning 'place of light' in Sotho, is an example of inner city Joburg rolling with the times. Like our fledgling democracy, the city is young and raw, and bursting with potential.