



Tamu Nkiwane interviewed by curator Paul Luckraft, 19 October 2018



**Paul Luckraft:** Your work centres on the material property of objects, their history and what traces they carry with them. This particular show is your response to things you encountered during time spent visiting extended family in Zimbabwe, mixed with elements from London and childhood memories. I wanted to ask you about your motivation for the trip and your connection to that country.

**Tamu Nkiwane:** The reason I went to Zimbabwe is because it's something I had kind of buried in the back of my mind. I hadn't really asked myself some questions about my family, and then when they became apparent I realised I didn't actually know the answers. The answers I did know were always from secondary sources, like friends of my mum. So I thought it would be a good idea to try and find out more, and went on a four-month trip to southern Africa.

**PL:** And before the trip, as part of your RCA degree show, you contacted your grandad via a Skype phone chat, which was your first direct contact with him, is that right?

**TN:** Yeah, it all just opened up when I did that phone call with my grandad. He sort of invited me to go and visit Zimbabwe for his ninetieth birthday. I had some questions for him, because in Zimbabwean culture there are heads of families, so I was confused about why he had been so absent in my life. But then he does have a good excuse in that there's a lot happening in that country.

**PL:** Yes, it's a very complex situation politically. You were born in the UK, but you have a lot of family in Zimbabwe. In terms of what appears in this exhibition, there's no direct record of your time spent with your family, such as interviews with them or images of them. Why is that?

**TN:** When I was in Zimbabwe I was invited to do a show at the National Gallery in Bulawayo. I found it very

difficult. How do you represent all these layers of emotions and information in a different environment with different behaviours and customs? How would I even represent that as a portrait? There wouldn't be enough layers. I don't even know how to deal with a lot of the information I'm getting. I was meeting people and then thinking, how am I supposed to work all of this out? In the end I did include some drawings I made of my mum, alongside some abstract pieces.

**PL:** For this Invites show the main element is a sculpture evoking a market stall. What is it about the market stall form that interests you?

**TN:** I like the idea that it's a temporary object, and it comes with its own sort of law, of barter and negotiation. There is talking and intimacy around when someone owns a market stall and you see them every day. Near the National Gallery [in Bulawayo], there's loads of stalls littered all the way down the street. It's supposed to be illegal, but then it's also the only way these families can survive when they have no money or income. The reason they come to the streets every day is because they have to – there are no jobs for them and they have to sell something. It might be selling very small fruit from their garden – anything they have to hand. They're doing it to make the best of a bad situation.

**PL:** The state of the Zimbabwean economy is dire, with ATMs completely empty because of hyper-inflation. I read today in the papers about increasing petrol and energy shortages. Were you surprised by the extent of the economic troubles?

**TN:** Yeah, I was. But I got to see two worlds as well, as some people in Zimbabwe are comfortably off, like my auntie and uncle, who are professors. Everything there seems to do with title. If you're a professor then everyone loves you. I found that very conservative, and that's the bit that shocked

me: the sense of rigid hierarchy. After the liberation of 1980, a lot of the black people in Zimbabwe moved to where the white people used to live. They re-enacted the same rigid social hierarchy. For example, my uncle often told me to stop playing with the street kids who lived near the National Gallery. I was wondering why the Mugabe dictatorship happened, and I think one reason is because the Zimbabwean people respect that hierarchy – if you are power, you are essentially like a king.

**PL:** The hierarchy is quite patriarchal and based around a male family line, isn't it?

**TN:** Male family lines, yes. But it's been like that from the very beginning – status and hierarchy. There's a site called Great Zimbabwe, which is now a ruin. When the colonial Germans came, they didn't believe the Africans could have built it. But it's very old, and marks wealth generated by ancient trade routes with people from Egypt, China and India. Gold mines in Zimbabwe led to massive levels of trade.

**PL:** In your show with us you've made these dried fruit objects and fresh tomatoes, stacked into pyramids like you saw on market stalls, and there is also a video of you visiting a cousin's illegal backyard goldmine. There seems to be a reference to very basic materials made into some form of currency, but also the desire – or need – to extract wealth from the land.

**TN:** Well, when you go to Zimbabwe most of the artists there are working with some type of DIY or recycling method. A lot of well-established artists were making things out of bits of cars. And in general, instead of buying something, people fix it or make it themselves. No one throws away food. There's this whole community of people who find all the best things out of skips and then they sort it out and sell it on. When the good stuff does come, they're ready. I loved hanging out in Bulawayo Province, because even though

everything is kind of heavy everyone is really chilled. Going down these streets seeing all these pyramids of tomatoes – there's a lot of colour there, and you hear music in the street. You get a sense of the resilience of the Zimbabwean people. I wanted to take some of that energy and elaborate on their pride.

**PL:** I wanted to ask about the videos. You shot a lot of footage on your trip, but in this show there are only a couple of clips. Why those clips, and was it a tough decision to leave lots of material out?

**TN:** Yeah, there is just so much. It was actually heart-breaking to watch footage. I have got all this stuff that I don't really want to watch again because it's almost a bit too heavy. I interviewed quite a few people on camera, such as my cousin, who was writing a book, but in the end the interviews didn't feel right.

**PL:** Because your art isn't a documentary practice, right? It's not a travelogue; you're presenting an installation about complexity rather than presenting a clear report.

**TN:** I was trying to get the rhythm of my experiences. That's why the market stall made sense, because I think you can see an aspect of Zimbabwe in it, but actually it's even more a reflection of me in that state of mind, of putting something up and taking it down. I put up a mental image when I was in Zimbabwe and then I took it down. And now I'm putting it back up in London with the information I gained from my time there. That's how it feels.

**PL:** In the show you've also included language in the form of your own handwritten texts, printed in a newsprint booklet people can take away with them. And there are also some snippets of music you have made playing on speakers. Do writing and music often feature in your installations?

**TN:** It seems that way. My degree show at the RCA, the exhibition I did in Zimbabwe, and then this one – they are all linked. The first one included the audio of the phone call, which was like 'Oh, who is this?'... 'It's me, your grandson', and that one had a very London aesthetic. The one in Zimbabwe was like a symbol, a snapshot, me trying to figure out what was happening. I couldn't really get a proper viewpoint because I was in it. Then this *Blue Plastic* show is the after-effect of the previous two, with me trying to figure out what the hell just happened.

Reverse: Tamu Nkiwane, untitled photograph, 2018. Courtesy the artist.

**Artist's presentation** Sunday 16 Dec, 3pm. Free

As a closing to his exhibition, Nkiwane presents a new performance with his brother. The duo play new lyrics and music, developed collaboratively, which resonate with the work presented in the Invites space. Please note this event will take place offsite at White Crypt, St Mark's Church, 337 Kennington Park Road, SE11 4PW.

**Tamu Nkiwane** (b.1990, London) lives and works in London. He completed an MA in Painting at the Royal College of Art, London in 2017, and a BA Hons in Fine Art (Sound Art module) at Middlesex University in 2013. Recent solo exhibitions include *EITHA UNGUSWI ZIM//CITY*, National Gallery of Zimbabwe, Bulawayo, March 2018. Group exhibitions include *Artagon III*, Petites Serres, Paris; *Café OTO*, London; *Medal, Meddle, Metal, Mettle*, RCA Arts Bar, London; *Inventory London*, London; *House Dimplex*, Norlington Road Studios.

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