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BILLIE ZANGEWA

ALARM, 20 mars 2007

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Marketing gurus over the years have done everything they can to convince consumers that mass-produced fashion is all about personal expression. "Shop here to say you're really a woman on the go!" But what does an industry focused on moving hundreds of thousands of units really have to do with individual creativity? For [Belinda "Billie" Zangewa](#), the answer was clear: Not much.

Born in Malawi in 1973, [Zangewa](#) had an intense interest in fashion as far back as she could remember. She spent hours upon hours in her mother's wardrobe as a child, day dreaming of recasting the beautiful fabrics into her own unique designs. However, her schooling, divided among family stints in Malawi, Zimbabwe, and Botswana, focused more on future workplace skills than creative expression.

Fortuitously for [Zangewa](#), needlecraft was one of the skills taught to young African girls. This sewing ability gave life to the glamorous couture she had been fantasizing about. Instead of playing with clothes, she was making them.

Given her passion for designing elegant outfits, it seemed logical that [Zangewa](#) would choose a school of fashion design to continue her post-high-school education. But she chose a different path, ending up at Rhodes University in Johannesburg, South Africa, to study fine art. There, [Zangewa](#) reasoned, her sketches of luxurious garments would blossom into beautiful paintings.

Upon arriving, however, she immediately felt the onerous constraints of a conservative art school. Not only was she told to focus only on landscapes, still lifes, and portraits, she was also ordered to make the content of her work either asexual or masculine.

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"At university, if I did work that was Feminist or feminine in any way," Zangewa says in her lilting but firm voice, 'they used to say, 'Oh, No! That's terrible. You must never show your femininity in your work! That used to really make me angry.' For a young woman whose motive for going to college was to learn to best depict gorgeous women in gorgeous clothes, this was not only infuriating, but also disillusioning.



While trying to reconcile her place in a sexist academic environment, Zangewa was also exploring her new home of Johannesburg, by a wide margin the largest city in which she had ever lived.

"For me, the city was really a mystery," Zangewa says. "Everything was new. It was exciting. Places like Botswana, Zimbabwe, and Malawi are all very nature orientated, very close to the earth, very African. Johannesburg is this metropolis with these high rise buildings and this shiny reflective glass. That was really awesome. I remember driving down the street in the center of Jo'burg and I thought, 'Wow, this is so beautiful, this man-made thing.'"

For Zangewa, Johannesburg was a place where beauty took new forms. The glimmer of a skyscraper now shone with a brilliance equal to that of a sequined dress. A new inspiration had risen from the streets of the city. More than just a visual wonderland, Johannesburg was a place of convergence. It was to become a place of joining for one woman, one passion, and two means.

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After college, [Zangewa](#) worked a variety of jobs in the fashion industry – salesperson, store manager, advertising art buyer, marketing manager, model, and assistant to a stylist. What would have seemed as a girl like an ideal career path wasn't cutting it for [Zangewa](#).

"I always knew that I was more of an artist than a fashion designer or an accessory designer," she says. "I always go back to the art being the most important thing, not necessarily, 'Can it be marketed? Can you mass-produce it?'"

Not surprisingly, [Zangewa's](#) art from this period reflected her personal anxieties. She was still painting her long-held ideal – women in the height of sartorial luxury – but the women in her work always seemed to be wallowing in glamour instead of reveling in it. Things weren't turning out as they were supposed to.

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It was while surveying these paintings that a friend of [Zangewa](#) offered a new approach to combining art and fashion. "She said, 'You've got such a strong influence of fashion in your work. My grandmother left me this trunk of fabric. Why don't you come over to my house and have a look at these fabrics and see what you want to do with them.' I found the most beautiful old black satin and I started to do embroideries on it, which then became handbags."

It was in those handbags that the two means – fashion design and art – finally came together in a way that fulfilled [Zangewa's](#) love for each. She was painting with fabric, and cutting various small, hued shapes to drape her purse canvases in vibrant Johannesburg cityscape tapestries.

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The art world took notice. In 2004, she won the Gerard Sekoto Award for the most promising local artist. It is no small measure of poetic justice that the objets d'art for which Zangewa first gained notoriety were so undeniably feminine. After being told for years that her art had to be gender neutral or phallogentric to be accepted, Zangewa was being celebrated for work that was defiantly womanly.

"I said to myself, I am a woman," Zangewa says. "I am going to express my femininity and I'm not going to be what somebody else wants me to be anymore."

When asked why she chose to portray building facades on the handbags, Zangewa speaks not just of her awe for the architectural splendor of Johannesburg, but also of pop culture.

"Think of a television show," she says. "At the beginning of the program, the exterior of a building is shown to set the scene. Once the setting is established, the next cut goes inside the building to find the unfolding story."

This, Zangewa points out, is the way the narrative in her work ran as well. You have to know where you are before you can get to what's going on inside. With the scene set by the architectural facades on the purses, Zangewa could move on to revealing what was going on inside those Johannesburg buildings and inside her life.

Just as there is beauty and ugliness in any city, the vagaries of relationships carry plenty of both nectar and bile. Emboldened by her handbag breakthrough, Zangewa soon found herself exploring those personal extremes in her work.

"I did a piece called *Through the Lens*. It was the first piece I did about love or romance. I met a guy and he seemed really nice but in the end he turned out to be something that I never expected I would attract. I was really upset about it because I was doing so much work on myself spiritually and emotionally. Asking the question 'Why?' really got me into a confusion. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't eat. I couldn't come up with the answer. I just picked up a piece of silk and started writing about what had happened. The first one was really just trying to come to terms with the fact that maybe there was no answer."

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Using embroidery cotton as a pen, [Zangewa](#) regularly transcribes actual passages from her journal – crossed-out lines and all – onto flat swatches of cloth. When combined with silken autobiographical scenes, the words hang like portentous clouds. Ringing with the biting sexual commentary of the painter [Wangechi Mutu](#) and the bracingly personal revelations of artist [Tracy Emin](#), the tapestries are born out of a therapeutic process.

"I find it cathartic," [Zangewa](#) says. "We're always ashamed to talk about the disappointments in our lives. If somebody that we love betrays us, we don't want to talk about it to people. We always want to make it seem like our lives are going really well. I like to think that I'm breaking that taboo. Somehow it makes me feel better. Then I don't so feel ashamed, I don't feel so hurt. I don't feel so alone if I can just share it with people and say, 'Here it is. I'm not ashamed of it. I have been disappointed and betrayed!'"

Garnering international attention and accolades for her work, [Zangewa](#) has traveled far from her Johannesburg home to make and display her art. All the while, she collects both new experiences and new materials – a trip to Paris's Cirque d'hiver, a piece of turquoise silk, a ski trip, white sequins, etc. These personal moments of discovery are what inform the art.

[Zangewa's](#) work, in its unwavering honesty to her life experiences, says more about the issues women face than most work that is explicitly politically driven. Now that she is internationally recognized and considered a vital emerging artist, her art school professors may want to reconsider their stance on feminine art.

– Buck Austin