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BILLIE ZANGEWA

SUNDAY TIMES, 8 July 2018

Billie Zangewa is proving critics who say feminine art doesn't sell wrong

Billie Zangewa was told that her intricate silk works were too decorative when she first tried to break onto the SA art scene. Now she's headlining the JoburgArtFair

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BY ANDREA NAGEL



'Ma Vie en Rose' by Billie Zangewa.

Image: Billie Zangewa/Blank Projects

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Women in art. Traditionally they have been passive objects, the receiver of the male gaze - objectified as a reflection, and then a continuation of the objectification of women in society. Art masters have been predominantly male, and so have the owners of the wallets, and while there are many esteemed female artists, many of them have steered away from addressing the charged subject of femininity in artworks, especially in South Africa where the art scene is steeped in the trauma of our politics.

So when the FNB JoburgArtFair selected Johannesburg local artist Billie Zangewa to be the featured artist for 2018, an obvious question was, what is the political message of her works?

Zangewa, whose father is Malawian and mother South African, uses silk to create intricate tapestries that reflect and channel light so that her works always look different. Seeing them on a screen or on a printed page doesn't do them justice.

Reading about her, or even speaking to her on the phone, has the same effect. You miss the nuances of her presence. In this way she is just like the art she creates - she has an aura, a gentle, quiet strength and a beauty that must be experienced first-hand.

“ [At art school we were advised that] femininity in our art would not appeal to prospective buyers unless it was tied up with trauma and angst

- Artist Billie Zangewa

was to desexualise ourselves visually as female artists because femininity in our art would not appeal to prospective buyers unless it was tied up with trauma and angst."

Zangewa was born in Malawi and grew up in Gaborone, Botswana, before moving to South Africa to study fine art at Rhodes University.

"After growing up with the freedom to express myself in any way that I chose, I found it difficult and upsetting to be told not to express my femininity in my work. So the first chance I got, I said, 'I'm going to sew... and then, I'm going to make pictures about my baby.'"

"It took me a long time to be taken seriously by the South African art world," she told me over breakfast near her home in Parkhurst, her graceful artist's hands emphasising every word. "When I first tried to break in to the scene I was told that my works were too decorative."

At art school Zangewa was told to remove references to femininity in her work. "We were advised to disguise our gender, never show aspects of womanhood in the work. The idea

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Zangewa admits to finding the ability to use the tools she had empowering, "and a rebellion too".

"Growing up in Gaborone there were no artists' studios and no printing presses. To make art I had to use what was available. My friend had a trunk full of fabrics left by her grandmother. In it I found beautiful black satin from the 1920s to use as a canvas onto which I embroidered plants and animals."

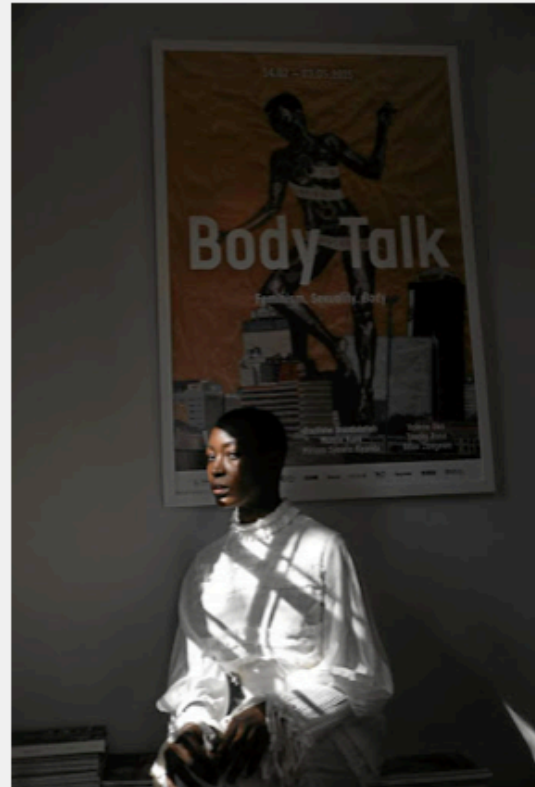
The artist ascribes her creativity to finding ways to make beautiful works without access to the usual materials. "My creativity comes from lack - I had to work from scratch - I would never have discovered the technique if I'd been able to buy huge swathes of fabric," she says. "A little lack is great for creativity."

Later, she was inspired on her daily commute from Kensington to Rosebank, by the pixelated glass of inner-city buildings, shining in the highveld sun. She noticed that silk reflected light in a similar way and started collecting silk swatches from fabric shops because "they were free".

"I assembled the seductive, sumptuous bits of fabric to create my first cityscapes. And at a certain point I started interrogating experiences I'd had in this urban setting, using the work to help me through some personal difficulties."

Zangewa discovered that she was drawn to celebrating the domestic environment. "I found that telling the story of my intimate life was a kind of personal empowerment; taking charge of my own story and using my voice."

This has been difficult for women, and black women in particular, with many social obstacles to overcome. "I began to explore the female gaze - how a woman sees herself as beautiful through her own eyes, a development away from needing the male gaze for affirmation to discovering the power to find approval from within."



Billie Zangewa.

Image: Alon Skuy

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'Vision of Love' by Billie Zangewa.

Image: Billie Zangewa/Blank Projects

So the politics in Zangewa's work are not overt. They are concerned with identity and the sociopolitics of gender and race, exploring the different roles women play, including motherhood, and elevating the subject - no longer objectified - to "a heroine whose daily life is revealed through the scenes she illustrates, focusing on mundane domestic preoccupations, exploring universal themes that connect women to each other."

"When I first started producing these domestic scenes I was told here in South Africa that my work was too sentimental, too narcissistic. In France, where I lived for a few years, the subject of my artworks (me) was exoticised. But in the US they really got it - the audience there loved the intimacy, and appreciated the fact that I was celebrating myself and my life in minute domestic detail."

Behind Zangewa's soft-spoken, serene exterior is a strong-willed, rebellious soul, gradually revealed as we talk. "My interest is female strength and how to build it to defend myself. I'm scared of patriarchy - scared of men because of the confines of patriarchy that insist on controlling and diminishing women."

JoburgArtFair director Mandla Sibeko says: "We wanted to focus on an artist who lives and works in Johannesburg and expresses lives lived here."

In choosing Zangewa as their featured artist, the JoburgArtFair has done two commendable things: chosen an artist who intimately explores the South African experience, and resisted the all too South African temptation to choose one whose work foregrounds the political history of our country.

"My politics are personal - they are not South African apartheid politics. That was never my perspective," says Zangewa, adding, "It's great that many female artists are starting to express their femininity in their work and that they are being appreciated for it. A lot of curators don't like beautiful art - they want to exploit the artist's traumatic experience. Many are not interested in the healing or the development."

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WHAT TO EXPECT FROM ZANGEWA AT THE JOBURGARTFAIR

For the JoburgArtFair, Zangewa will produce three large-scale, mise-en-scène works and one large installation that viewers will be able to enter. Her theme is The Garden (my garden).

"I share my personal experience of the garden space with people, and with the installation I'm taking them right into my space," says Zangewa. "There are many narratives about the garden that have inspired the project: The Garden of Eden; *The Constant Gardener* and, in art, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch and *The Dream* by Henri Rousseau.

“ [Nature] is also a space for excess and indulgence, so my work will also speak to the sexual potency of the garden

- Billie Zangewa on the work she'll be showing at the JoburgArtFair

"The garden is a kind of Utopia, but nature has a double personality – a beautiful side as well as a dark side. There is danger in the beauty; think of snakes, rapists. It is also a space for excess and indulgence, so my work will also speak to the sexual potency of the garden."

Zangewa has exhibited extensively at institutions both locally and internationally, including at Art Paris Art Fair this year, Frieze London last year, MASS MoCA and Stedelijk Museum (2017), Studio Museum

Harlem, Iziko South African National Gallery and Johannesburg Art Gallery (2016), Guggenheim Bilbao and WIELS (2015), La Maison Rouge (2013) and the Menil Collection (2012). Her work is represented in several notable private and public collections, including the Tate Modern, Stedelijk Museum and the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art collections.

• *The JoburgArtFair is on from September 6-9. Zangewa's work will be shown at Miami Beach Basel later this year from December 6-9.*