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Uprooted: A conversation with Zimbabwean artist Michele Mathison

On the occasion his first solo exhibition, *Uproot* at London's Tyburn Gallery, artist Michele Mathison speaks with Houghton Kinsman on *migratory experience* and what it means *to be uprooted*.



© Michele Mathison, *Plot*, 2015. Image courtesy of © Plastiques Photography and Tyburn Gallery, London.

Someone once told me, that you should never meet your heroes. Perhaps it was so said, because there is always the off chance, that they may never really quite live up to expectations. However, I have always preferred the old adage of *nothing ventured, nothing gained...*

It was a bright, sunny, Cape Tonian morning – sometime in October 2014 – when I first met Michele Mathison. I remember briskly making my way to Woodstock's Superette, somewhat expectant yet not quite knowing just how it would all turn out. Suffice to say expectations loomed large. Afterall, I had become deeply intrigued by Mathison's work. Amidst a bustling crowd, we met up, exchanged pleasantries, though I managed to muck up the pronunciation of his name. We then proceeded to get down to the bare bones of his practice, one that is fast becoming recognised on both the local and international art circuit. Looking back now, it's safe to say that Mathison *didn't* disappoint.

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–Michele Mathison –

Born in South Africa, raised in Zimbabwe, Michele Mathison has a deeply complex personal story. It is one that is characterised by an ongoing process of (re)locating. That is to say, he is somewhat of a journeyman. Amidst the backdrop of this current exhibition, *Uproot*, at London's Tyburn Gallery, I can't help but draw parallels between Mathison's practice and his own personal journey. Assuming many guises, this path has taken him to places far and wide, and helped develop in him a keen sense of who he is, and where he comes from. However, he will be the first to say: to read this deeply into his personal story, would be to miss the boat a little. Specifically, because while his work may be informed by his personal journey, on the whole it tends to deal with issues that speak much more to collective rather than individual experience.



© Michele Mathison, *Breaking Ground*, 2014. Courtesy of the artist and Whatiftheworld Gallery, Cape Town.

For instance, Mathison repeatedly deals with broad themes, such as migrancy, labour, land, history and materiality. All of which are issues that a great number of people deal with, in varying contexts, across different locations and on a daily basis. Additionally, his works – primarily sculptural – often consciously blur the line between readymade and fabrication. Here, they exist as reworkings of utilitarian, functional objects, that somehow through the creative process lose, and then come to imply their functionality. To give you an example: for *Breaking Ground*, think a pick axe, suspended in time/space. It can *no longer* dig. Yet, through sculptural repetition and the implied movement, it still gives you the *sense* that it is digging.

My entry point to Mathison's practice came in 2014, through Another Africa's *Next Chapter* series. Here, by profiling emerging artistic practice in Zimbabwe, I came across Mathison's *Harvest* series for the Zimbabwe pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013. These sculptures, which would eventually be added to the collection of the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary African Art in Cape Town, seemed to speak directly to the struggle of human existence. By elucidating the emotional and spiritual connections to land, to what was and what has become home, to the journey of moving away and working in order to make a better life, Mathison attempted to make sense of these universal issues. Because, essentially, at some stage in our lives we all have to deal with them. Broadly speaking, it was a reflection on the personal, *through* the collective; a sort of working out of the uBuntu philosophy of *I am because we are*. There was a real maturity in those works – an ability to speak across cultural lines for it presented a way to relate. By simply looking only at those images, I just knew I *understood*.



© Michele Mathison, *Lost Ground*, 2015. Image courtesy of © Plastiques Photography and Tyburn Gallery, London.

Now two years on, and two exhibitions and two in-depth conversations later, with *Uproot* – Mathison's first solo exhibition at London's Tyburn Gallery – it all finally comes full circle. Consisting of three works, *Plot*, *Lost Ground* and the *Chapungu, Shiri Yedenga* series, the exhibition forms a "visual narrative of Sub-Saharan Africa's collective concern." What follows below, is a conversation which delves into the core of Mathison's practice: it highlights his interest in Zimbabwean history and craft, his own migratory experience and what it means to be *uprooted*.

Houghton Kinsman | Thinking about this exhibition, your first solo at Tyburn Gallery, I am really intrigued by the title *Uproot*. Indexically, it follows on in the same vein as *Manual* (2014) and *Harvest* (2015), both of which are titles that pointedly articulate your major thematic interests within those respective exhibitions. Do you generally start with a title, or do you create the work and then the title follows?

Michele Mathison | I certainly don't start with the title. Thinking back, I'm not even sure what the initial spark was that put the work together. I do remember I was looking at the connection between Zimbabwe, South Africa and London. It was quite an interesting personal journey, as I come from Zimbabwe, live in South Africa and am now having a show in London. And, then of course, there were the ways in which these three countries are closely connected – *politically* and *socially*. There was the colonial migration of the English to southern Africa, and now many Zimbabweans and South Africans have moved to the UK. So, there was a nice symbiosis in my work – it translated well into something that was quite specific to Zimbabweans, both in the UK and South Africa. When I started investigating the history of the birds, there was this fantastic story about Rhodes and his fascination with the Zimbabwe Bird. This just tied it all together, because he also had this relationship with the same countries.

I suppose this idea of moving around is deeply connected to your own personal story. Am I correct in saying you were born in South Africa?

I was born in South Africa and grew up in Zimbabwe, then came back to South Africa to study. I then moved back to Zim for a while. After which I actually came to the UK for a little while to do some construction work. Finally, I then went back to South Africa, where and I have spent most of my time for the last 10 years or so.

The way you have moved around, seems somehow connected to the way the exhibitions themselves have unfolded. For example *Harvest* (2013) for the Zim Pavilion, then onto South Africa for *Manual* (2014) and *Harvest* (2015) and now *Uproot* in the UK. Do you see the exhibitions as an extension of your own uprooting?

Yes certainly, but then again I have always felt that my experience is similar to many others within my generation or peer group. I like to think that in some way I am representative of it, as the idea of being uprooted is quite prevalent amongst my generation of Zimbabweans. Specifically, because we were all so well educated. The one thing that Mugabe did really well for the country, was to educate the entire population almost. Therefore, it was very easy for us to be able to move around. If I look at my group of high school friends, I would say 80 to 90% of them now live in the UK or in the US. This creates a tension, especially because in Zimbabwe there is such a strong spiritual connection to the land. For example, *Shona* culture is very deeply connected to ancestors, and where they are buried. So, I think it was quite difficult for Shona people to be in foreign countries, and then have to adjust their belief systems, outside of having family back at home. It needs to be said: it's difficult to stay connected to both places.

In connection to what you mention above, and cognizant of the colonial history between the UK and Zimbabwe, being that *Uproot* is being shown in London, has it taken on a different dimension?

I'm hoping it does. I'm hoping that people will recognise the influence of Zimbabweans abroad; that's why I wanted to plant my field of maize. It was almost a purposeful taking over of ground – a kind of land invasion, and I like how the idea of the maize patch comes to symbolise that so strongly. As you know I work opposite an informal settlement, where people live in shanty houses and yet you still find small plots of maize in this urban environment. There is this one particular guy who has terraced his land outside his house and planted maize. Therefore, for me there is this idea that when you move somewhere and plant food, you take ownership in a way of that land. You are colonising it I suppose. And, I like the irony of that journey: the English colonising Zimbabwe and Southern Africa, and now Zimbabweans are sort of colonising England. London has become such a multi-racial, multicultural city, it is so intriguing. You hardly hear people speaking English. Rather, it is Arabic, French, Italian or Shona; so, it's an interesting place to be.

That brings me to your interest in migrancy. In a globalised world where travel is easier than ever before and we have more opportunity for cross-cultural collaboration/dialogue, it feels as though migrancy within this context is a pertinent topic.

Yes of course, and also don't forget that there are the different layers of migrancy. Many Zimbabweans were lucky enough at some point to be offered free passage into the UK seeking asylum. Obviously, they soon put a handbrake on that and it became slightly more difficult. But, there is something to be said for the many levels to migrancy: from the poorest of the poor to the wealthiest of people. Everyone is moving around, in different ways, to different places and are trying find *their* place.



© Michele Mathison, *Plot(detail)*, 2015. Image courtesy of © Plastiques Photography and Tyburn Gallery, London.

Where does your interest in migrancy and labour stem from?

It really stems from the exodus that happened in Zimbabwe. It came as such a shock to us. I think that's why so many Zimbabweans have an attachment to the country – especially my generation – because we grew up over the course of those 10 or 15 years [since full democracy was achieved in 1980] in Zimbabwe when it was an incredibly peaceful place. It was full of hope, full of care, full of understanding. There was such a strong sense of community. Therefore, over the course of the next 5 years, for that to be transformed and for people to suddenly be leaving the country – *none of us expected that*. Especially, while we were growing up under such different circumstances. You ask any Zimbabwean and they will tell you that they have some cousin, aunt or uncle scattered somewhere around the world. Yet, they still have family in Zim. And, so this situation really ignited my interest in migrancy.

And, in terms of labour? I remember chatting with you about *Manual* and in particular about how labour intensive some of the artworks were. Could you speak to the act of labour in the actual making of the work?

There is an interesting story here that relates to Zimbabweans and their affinity for craft making. One of the most popular craft products that Zimbabweans manufacture in South Africa are these metal birds often sold on the side of the road. They are very lightweight, and hand forged. A little kitschy and touristy but also beautifully made. Initially, for *Uproot*, I wanted to try and get some of these guys to make the maize sculptures for me. Even though I didn't get them to make it for me, I was inspired by them. The idea of their craft and the labour of making sculpture is so closely linked to the history of craft-making and art making in Zimbabwe whether it be stone or metal work. Also, there is a complex tension between those who make art and those who make crafts. So, the idea to make the maize out of steel is closely connected to the way in which Zimbabweans are able to go to the UK or come to South Africa and make or sell their crafts, essentially earning a living in this way. Therefore, for *Uproot* there is a follow-on from *Manual* in terms of ideas around labour.

Do you see the three exhibitions as following on from each other?

Definitely. Especially, as I have looked at the work more closely. I see Zimbabwe as being a starting point. *Harvest* was really kind of rural, and then with *Manual* there was the influence of labour in urban South Africa. Now, the influence of the UK can be felt with *Uproot*. There definitely has been a journey I think between these three exhibitions.

This idea of the journey seems to not only connect to your personal story, but also to your practice and how other people have become aware of your work. It feels as though there has been a progressive, gradual growth in how you make your work, and how people view it.

Exactly. Every time there is an exhibition, there is another step. For me, it is a very natural way for that journey to inform my work. I'm in South Africa, looking at my journey and then I notice other Zimbabweans in South Africa, and think about their stories. Then coming to the UK, I found myself then thinking about Zimbabweans coming here, and what that meant. This sort of process, is a very easy way to come up with ideas for these exhibitions.

On your point about other Zimbabweans in South Africa there are a few artists doing very interesting things. Gerald Machona and Portia Zvavahera are two. What sort of relationship do you have with them?

Yeah, there is also Richard Mudariki. Then there is also Dan Halter, Ralph Borland as well. I know them all. I see some of the guys from time to time. I have spend a little time with Richard, Dan and Ralph in Cape Town. But a lot of the other guys still live and work in Zimbabwe. Portia, Moffat Takadiwa, they all still live in Zimbabwe. I don't get to see them as much. But when I visit I see them then. I also have good discussions with Raphael Chikukwa when I see him in Harare or at Art fairs in South Africa, he is the curator of the National Gallery of Zimbabwe. He came up to South Africa for the opening of *Harvest* at Zeitz and facilitated an artist talk.

Getting back to the work. One of the things I have always enjoyed about your sculptures is how they implied movement and energy visually, yet they are static objects. In this vein, I return often to the work *Breaking Ground*, where the boundaries between functioning and nonfunctioning are blurred.

Yeah, it is almost as if they were frozen in time and like their potential is frozen. Ralph Borland wrote a wonderful piece about that for *Manual* where he described how this energy is stored in the sculpted objects, that are almost frozen. Almost as if they are waiting for someone to press play, or give them some life.



© Michele Mathison, *Breaking Ground(detail)*, 2014. Image courtesy of the artist and Whatiftheworld Gallery, Cape Town.

And these objects, although they look like readymades, aren't they actually fabricated?

That is correct. I like to play with the materiality of the object. I haven't used many readymades for *Uproot*. However, in a sense I have because my interpretation of the Zimbabwe Birds is linked to the original birds. There has been a lot of replication of the birds – they have almost become a curio. Something, which once again goes back to curio art-making in Zimbabwe, where you can buy these little birds on the side of the road. Consequently, they have become iconic sculpted images across the country. Therefore, I wanted to go back to what the birds originally looked like. Specifically, because of the way they have been reinterpreted so many times and in so many ways. At one point I was trying to access the original moulds, but then decided to reinterpret them myself from historical photography.

This is a good point to talk about the influence of history on your practice. Aside from this work, in general It feels as though it occupies an important position in relation to your work.

I have always been interested in the idea of history and its repetition – you look at the walls that were built for Great Zimbabwe, and they were said to be completely non-functional, almost only decorative. They were there to represent the power, wealth and social behaviour of the Zimbabwean kingdom. Fast forward, 600~700 years later and people are still building mansions to show off their wealth, sometimes replicating the very same stone walls. Also, Great Zimbabwe has such a strong spiritual and patriotic history with Zimbabweans. So for *Uproot* I really went far back in time. All the way to the 13th century in fact. And, that journey of the birds was so captivating. In particular, how they were stolen from the site and then taken to South Africa. Some were scattered around Europe, and then repatriated back to Zimbabwe. All of them have been returned, except for that one that is still stuck in Rhodes' house in Cape Town.



© Michele Mathison, *Chapungu, Shiri Yedenga series*, 2015. Image courtesy of © Plastiques Photography and Tyburn Gallery, London.

This discussion has somehow continued to return to the theme of the journey, specifically in how people and objects are uprooted and then repatriated...

Exactly! With the birds everything just clicked. Because, the journey of the birds both *figuratively* and *literally*, also represented that idea of migration; they have become a metaphor for what is happening now.

And, even though they are art objects, they still also migrate. There is a connection to the way birds move, the way that art objects move in the art world and how people move.

I know and the language is all the same. You use the term resident when you describe a bird species. Then there is the process of migration and then repatriation. The language is all tied together. I thought it was very appropriate.

Lastly, seeing as you seemed to have settled comfortably in Johannesburg, how do you find the process of working so closely with Zimbabwean history and culture from such a distance? How do you navigate this challenge?

I think it goes back to one of these things that you asked about the Zimbabweans of my generation. And, it is almost a mystery, why us Zimbabweans have such a strong attachment to the country. It's very compelling and I still haven't quite figured it out yet. Because, for any other person you would say it hasn't worked out, so we are going to start again somewhere else. But for Zimbabweans there is such a deep connection to the country and the land, despite all the politics and other issues. Even though I live in South Africa or maybe somewhere else in the future, I think I'll always have that because of that moment in time when we all grew up. There was so much optimism for the future of the country, and it is deeply ingrained in my generation.

About

Born in South Africa, **Michele Mathison** lived in Italy and Mozambique before spending most of his childhood in Zimbabwe. He studied at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town, South Africa (1997-2000) and spent the following years living between Cape Town, Harare and Bulawayo, before moving to Johannesburg where he now lives and works. Recent solo shows include: *Harvest*, Zeitz MOCAA Pavilion, Cape Town (2015); *Manual*, Whatiftheworld, Cape Town (2014); and *Exit/Exile*, Nirox Projects, Johannesburg (2011). Mathison has produced commissions for Carvela, *Running in Circles* (2012) and *Slow Lounge, Carto/Graphic 1* (2011). Group exhibitions include: *Broken English*, Tyburn Gallery, London (2015); *You Love Me, You Love Me Not*, Municipal Gallery, Almeida Garrett, Porto (2015); *African Odysseys*, Brass, Brussels (2015); *Nirox Sculpture*, Nirox Sculpture Park, Johannesburg, (2014) and *Dudziro*, Zimbabwe Pavilion, 55th Venice Biennale, Venice (2013). His work is included in the collection of Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (Zeitz MOCAA).

michelemathison.com