

Rhiannon Lowe, *If you keep going south you'll meet yourself*,
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If you keep going south you'll meet yourself

Kudzanai-Violet Hwami's first major solo exhibition has just opened at Tyburn Gallery, London. It is a show of large and medium-sized new paintings, exploring the individual within with community; nature versus nurture; sexuality; and family. Hwami forges narratives that weave between the fictive and factual, dipping in and out of cultural, historical and sociological references. They delve into and echo her past, offering a glimpse of a brighter future for her birthplace, Zimbabwe. Whilst preparing for her show – painting in the wiles of countryside Norfolk – Hwami spoke to **Rhiannon Lowe**.



Rhiannon Lowe: I was reading about the music that you've been listening to – about a shift from punk to Afro punk, Fela Kuti... What've you got on at the moment, what you looking for and hunting out?

Kudzanai-Violet Hwami: I was listening to an old playlist on SoundCloud the other week and after it ended a radio documentary called Zim-Heavy came on. It was talking about the heavy rock scene that took place in black townships in the 1970s – pre-Zimbabwe's independence – particularly looking at Well's Fargo. Since then I've been listening to a lot of ZamRock and ZimHeavy; bands such as Eye Q, Stars of Liberty, The Witch, and Gypsy Caravan amongst many others. It's bloody brilliant! I really like the folkloric, funky afrobeat sound they integrated with punk rock. I'm still jamming to the classics though – some Yaphet Kotto and Bad Brains.

RL: Is music very much part of your research for painting? Does it embody times that you want to pick at, choose from, respect, make part of your work?

KVH: Yes and no. I tend to listen to music for the enjoyment of it. I never look at it as research. It can be influential, that's for sure, but I try to steer away from breaking it all down to simply research for work. It's similar to when I watch films or read books... Most of that stuff is done for its own sake, and sometimes they have nothing to do with what I end up creating. I kind of enjoy surprising myself after a painting is complete, and realising that another piece of art has been referenced. I'm also weary of the word 'research' because I never know what to do with the research after I have done it. It's one of those things I dreaded in university... I never knew where to begin.

RL: What's in the upcoming Tyburn show, are you making new paintings?

KVH: The imagery I've been making changed three or four months ago. I had to narrow my ideas down. The title of the Tyburn show was decided before I came up with the imagery, but I knew I wanted to make work that spoke about Zimbabwe's past, sexuality, and my new-found fascination with Carl Jung and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. I've been reading *The Gulag Archipelago* on-and-off since last Christmas – I'm still on chapter 5. I can't really say why I'm reading it, but someone said

it's a great book if I want to understand how evil begins. Anyway, the imagery I was using was a mash of ideas; in the end I narrowed it down to the focus on family. I have made new paintings, all on canvas, all reflecting on the saying: 'It takes a village to raise a child.' The title of the show *If You Keep Going South You'll Meet Yourself* is a play with words; and really what I am trying to say is, 'I am because you are, that I only exist because they were'. I'm reflecting on the philosophy of *Unhu*, a contrast to my belief in Individualism.

RL: Can you explain a little more about use of imagery? I think you've said that the figures in your work aren't known to you, as you don't want to get others involved.

KVH: I see the figures as individuals and try not to portray a stereotype. Each painting has its own story. In the past I was working with figures that were unknown to me... but for this show I have used photographs from my family archive. I've noticed though, when I use these that I am hesitant to create a fictional narrative. I was outside my comfort zone, forcing myself to confront the past.

RL: But you're not trying merely to add to the endless reams of pop imagery that exists – by that I mean your mix of appropriation and splicing together of contemporary, cultural elements; the colour too; text, symbolism, repeated imagery, immediate daily life. There's power and commentary in your work – doesn't it become, by its nature, very personal?

KVH: At the end of the day the work is personal, and I'm attempting to stretch the meaning behind all my paintings. But I always keep in mind that I'm working in stages. Right now, I am playing around with subject and themes – not forcing anything. If the painting demands seriousness, I'll allow it. If it demands fun and silliness, I welcome that too.

I see colour as a virtue and vice. I wonder, if I had used a different pallet and less bright colours, would the work still be considered as 'pop'? Nevertheless, I understand where you are coming from. I think due to the early influences – from Kaws to Takashi Murakami, and perhaps a bit of Yue Minjun – the previous work did have a 'pop' quality to them. But like Yue Minjun, the work also has an underlying seriousness to it. I mean, if you take a look at a painting I made titled *Sisi Themba's post surgery, Harare General Hospital, 2050*, I've

depicted a transwoman lying on what looks like a couch, proudly posing in her new skin. In that painting I'm commenting on today's cultural phenomenon but also what might be possible for Zimbabwean transgender people in the future.

RL: Is there a wishful futuristic element to the work – a cultural future that you look to? One imbued with societal/political change and edge? A Zimbabwean future in particular?

KVH: Oh yes! It's the dwindling down to: 'What should influence the future? Who should influence? And which cultures should we bring to the table to nip at?' That makes me nervous when I think about it. I believe I'd be barking up the wrong tree if I attempt to even act out the kind of changes I want to see – I'm not built for it. The best way I can tell an idealised, futuristic Zimbabwe is to create imagery. If someone approves, then they'll act it out. I would've done my job.

RL: There's hope in a lot of the images.

KVH: There are things that I wish would become a thing in the near future: LGBT rights for instance; better standard of living; better roads so kids can skate. All simple things, you know? I'd like to paint a Zimbabwe after all those have been granted really. It's a utopian view point that I'm aware isn't going to happen anytime soon, but we can still aim for it.

RL: Is there hope for trans people in Zimbabwe? I don't know enough, sorry. The UK's position always seems a little wary – precarious, even now – and the US, well, who knows... We're lucky I guess, but there are edges of culture and society that trans people particularly will be forever encouraged, if not forced, to tread, it seems.

KVH: There's always hope! There are individuals trying to decriminalise LGBT rights in Zimbabwe. I'm not in Zimbabwe and I can't begin to explain what it currently is like being there, but I think we can agree and say that in the UK it's much easier to live your life. I feel foolish to complain about anything. I think I'm privileged to be here and talking to you now freely about these things.

RL: Can you say a little more about your examination of *Unhu*? And did you mean earlier you're more of an individual-responsible-minded person?



KVH: I have been really into self-actualisation for almost two years now, and in theory it focuses a lot on personal responsibility – to do what you can with the circumstances given to you by life, and to do what's truthfully right for you – aiming for a life purpose that's carefully designed by the individual. That appeals to me. And I believe that everyone's individual life purpose will always be for the betterment of humanity as a whole. But the individual should have the choice and freedom to make life however they want it. I'm sounding a lot like those self-help gurus here, forgive me, but it all makes sense to me; knowing I have some power to craft my life, y'know?

Unhu on the other hand is a philosophy that stands for the community. It's the community that decides what's right for the individual and you should act in accordance to what community values. That's my understanding anyway. I'm torn between the two because one is nurtured philosophy and the other is more nature. I'm figuring out how to navigate both.

RL: Have you still got family in Zimbabwe?

KVH: Yes, but we are all scattered. Borders divide my family; I have family in Zimbabwe, South Africa, Canada, US, Kenya, Estonia, the UK – like most Zimbabweans in the diaspora.

RL: Going back to your practice. D'you work the paintings out direct onto the canvas?

KVH: I have been using collage as a form for preparing the paintings. This is how all paintings have started in the past year and I find it's a really good way to plan a painting. I can play with different variations, colours and composition. Once I'm content with the image, it is then transferred to canvas. Depending on how I feel about the final image, I sometimes deviate from the collage – allowing spontaneous mark making. The paintings are usually large scale but I am attempting to do smaller works. I'm noticing that some paintings need to retain an intimacy, and the right thing to do for them is to go small.

RL: Would you ever show the collages, or is painting where the work is – where it has to be? What is the painting part of the work that makes it fall into place?

KVH: I'll show the collages someday, but only collages that fail to be paintings. I'm terrified of liking the collage pieces more than the final painting. Painting is where it's at though. I wasn't raised on a farm, but I used to visit my grandma around December time in Gutu, [Masvingo Province, southern Zimbabwe] and she grew crops and reared cattle. Because of the labour involved in working on a farm I've grown to believe in blood, sweat and tears. Collage doesn't give me the feeling, that sense of having worked hard.

Scale is another – texture too... A collage, especially digital collage, is flat and will always be flat, even after printing. Paint changes that, and I get to choose what part of the painting should be flat, and what part needs impasto. Painting allows me to hold these awkward qualities together. Most of the time the collages translate well, but other times I have to change some things as I work. I kinda like that... Changing everything because the canvas demands it.

RL: So the scale and painting, they enable you to feel that you're in the work physically? Is that part of trying to understand the process of paint and painting, rather than working out what painting as a subject is?

KVH: Yes, that's exactly it! It's going back to how to paint, how to mix pigments, all those physical moments. The subject happens while I work on the collage. That's where composition and imagery is built. The canvas is where this thing, whatever image it may be,



comes to life in a way. That's what I'm trying to do anyway.

RL: As far as your practice goes is painting the best means to put over what you want to say?

KVH: I'm not sure. I'm still figuring it all out. This great guy I've come to call a friend, Alan Fitzpatrick, said to me that painting is one of the few means to enter another realm, and not understand what it is we are looking at. He was comparing painting to how I feel when I listen to [jazz saxophonist] Pharaoh Sanders – that feeling of not knowing what on earth you're listening to, or where the sound can lead you (I find Sanders terrifying, by the

way.) But yes, I agree with Alan in that respect; painting is the best way to enter that other side of... the unknown. I can't think of any other medium that can allow that to happen as quickly as I work. But... there's a high chance I'll begin to work on stone sculptures (in the near future) – a medium many Shona people value as an art practice in Zimbabwe.

RL: D'you work with the canvas flat or upright? Are they built up over time, and d'you go back to work, or rework older pieces?

KVH: Always upright. That's how I was taught to paint. I don't have that many old works in the studio with me, so I don't really do that. I

don't like to dwell on a painting, so even if I did have that many works, I'd leave them be, I think. I don't know if that's a good thing. It's like leaving your children to rot and die, haha.

RL: The painters and artists you mentioned – Kaws, Takashi Murakami, Yue Minjun – are they early influences? Who've you been looking at more recently?

KVH: It sounds weird to hear you saying 'early influences', because I've just begun. I always shift and change. I'm really trying to grasp what painting is about as I go along. Not the subject, but the actual material. Recently I've grown fond of Fiona Rae's paintings. She







First spread:

Family portrait, 2017, Kudzanai-Violet Hwami
acrylic and oil on canvas
2 panels: 220 x 128 x 3 cm, 220 x 170 x 3 cm.
Total: 220 x 298 x 3 cm
Copyright the artist, courtesy Tyburn Gallery

Second spread:

Left: *Young lady with enamel mug (portrait of Chioniso), 2017, Kudzanai-Violet Hwami*
oil and graphite on canvas
70 x 50 x 3 cm
Copyright the artist, courtesy Tyburn Gallery

Right: *Sekuru Koni, 2017, Kudzanai-Violet Hwami*
acrylic and oil on canvas
60 x 60 x 3 cm
Copyright the artist, courtesy Tyburn Gallery

Third spread:

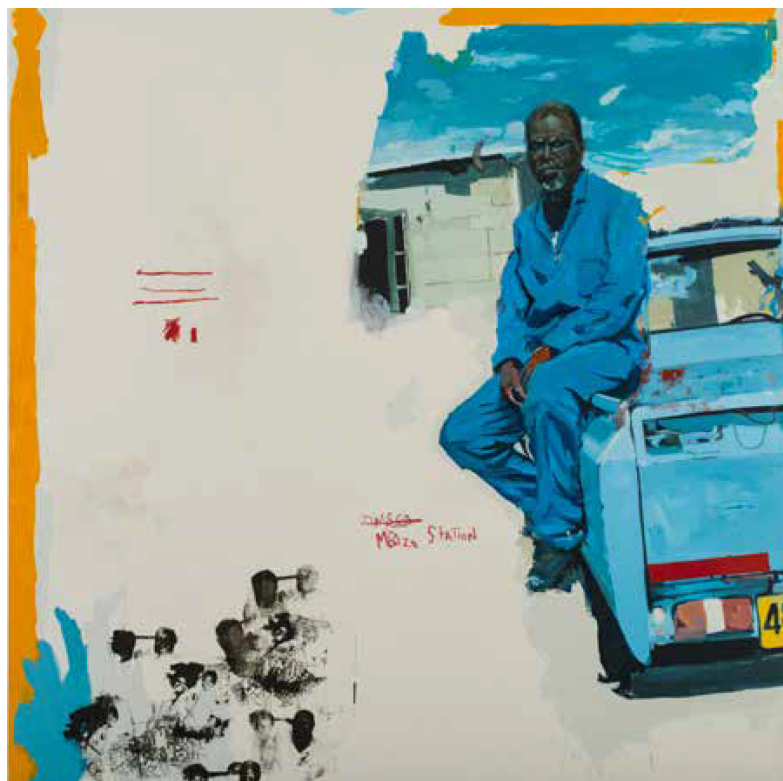
Left: *Sam in mother's factory, 2017, Kudzanai-Violet Hwami*
silkscreen, acrylic and oil on canvas
120 x 180 x 3 cm
Copyright the artist, courtesy Tyburn Gallery

Right: *Sisi neMwana, 2017, Kudzanai-Violet Hwami*
Silkscreen, oil and oil stick on canvas
150 x 150 x 3 cm
Copyright the artist, courtesy Tyburn Gallery

Fourth spread:

Left: *Chafamba Chasvava, 2017, Kudzanai-Violet Hwami*
oil stick, acrylic and oil on canvas
2 panels: 180 x 180 x 3 cm, 90 x 180 x 3 cm.
Total: 270 x 180 x 3 cm
Copyright the artist, courtesy Tyburn Gallery

Right: *Mbizo station, 2017, Kudzanai-Violet Hwami*
Silkscreen, acrylic, oil and oil stick on canvas
180 x 180 x 3 cm
Copyright the artist, courtesy Tyburn Gallery



paints in a language I'm trying to understand. Larry Rivers is another.

When I look at paintings at the moment, I'm looking at process and technical narrative. Robert Rauschenberg is an artist whose work has recently shifted my painting technically. He was at the Tate a few months ago and I went to see his work by chance – that same day I came back to the studio, made a few collages, about 13, that now hang on the studio wall. I plan to paint them someday, but they were springboards to what has now become my solo show.

RL: Is painting a political process for you? Perhaps that's a non-question. Your work seems to skirt in and out, round the personal/private and then makes a dash for the very public... Does that make sense?

KVH: Haha, well, what do you think? I feel once your skin is black, or if you're a woman, painting becomes political whether we like it or not. I'm not particularly a fan of that concept. I don't know if I can escape it; or if I should.

RL: Have you been involved much with LGBT politics, rights, visibility, process – here or elsewhere, if not in Zimbabwe?

KVH: No. I've tried but learnt I'm not built for it. I know close people in my life who are very involved with LGBT politics directly and I have great respect for and appreciate the work that they do. My way of protest is to live an honest life to the best of my ability, and make paintings that I hope will increase visibly of some sort.

RL: How is your work received here in the UK as opposed to in Zimbabwe? Does that matter?

KVH: I think it matters more how it's received in Zimbabwe. I was in a group show in Harare earlier this year, but not being there, it's difficult to tell how the public responded. I'm much more interested in how other painters/artists in Zimbabwe view the work... Engaging more in conversations with them on painting would be good.

RL: There's mention in other interviews about a graphic novel, a post-Mugabe one, is that something you're still planning?

KVH: I haven't thought about that in a long while. I'm surprised you have picked up on it – I had placed that in the back of mind. The idea does however sneak up on me when I'm

contemplating quitting painting – you know when you are just having a bad day in the studio and you start daydreaming about other possibilities if the current project fails.

On a serious note, it is something I'm thinking about doing in the future for sure. Initially I wanted to create a lesbian romance that had a political element to it... I was younger when the idea came to me – so the theme reflected my mind-set at the time. I'd like to think I can come up with a something else... Having said all that, I'll admit, I'm a terrible writer and I think it might be worthwhile to pursue that project with another person. I've never collaborated on a serious level so that'd be an adventure I'd welcome—**CCQ**

Kudzanai-Violet Hwami, If you keep going south you'll meet yourself is on at Tyburn Gallery until 15 November, 2017

tyburngallery.com
hwaamistudio.tumblr.com