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Cover: Henry Thompson, *Painting With Grey Light*, 1984, 92 x 102 cm, acrylic on canvas. Photo credit: Paul Caponhead


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On December 22nd 1997 Henry Thompson, one of Zimbabwe's finest painters, died. Words cannot describe our great loss but we pay homage to Henry with three contributions: the first written by his son, Paul, the second an interview with art historian and critic, Marion Arnold, and the third by Barbara Murray.
If you have ever been passionate about anything in your life then you may begin to understand my Dad.

Throughout his life he was an incredibly perceptive and sympathetic person. This was evident in his understanding of most things, but first and foremost in his amazing visual awareness.

It was this awareness that encouraged him, from a very early age, to pursue the visual arts. Working in a fairly mundane job for years, he would grab every opportunity he could to get into the studio and paint or to sit engrossed in one of the art books from his ever increasing collection.

The ‘studio’ I mention consisted of, to begin with, any space available from an unused room in the house, an area of a room or for a while the dining room table. He progressed from this to a wooden shed in which he painted for years. Although this shed was relatively small, Dad managed to instil it with a certain happy magic and it was always one of my brother’s and my favourite places.

In about 1989-90 my Mum finally persuaded him that they should build a fantastic studio at the top of the plot and it was in this that, I believe, he produced some of his finest works. A strange thing is that I have unusually clear memories of all the houses that we have lived in, from the age of one, and without exception my strongest or only memory is of the area where Dad painted.
The larger body of my father's work focuses on the subject of the African landscape. Although his method of depicting this changed throughout his painting career, his use of space and colour consistently remain quite masterful. It still amazes me that no matter what the subject matter is a 'Henry Thompson' one is always made fully aware of the existence of space beyond the subject matter, at the same time as its existence within the composition.

I have read a number of critics on my Dad’s work over the years, many of them commenting on his landscape work. Words such as ‘light’, ‘colour’ and ‘space’ are often used in various contexts, but almost without fail they presume that the paintings are a subjective interpretation of a physical landscape. This, of course, is true to a certain extent, but I think it would be far more appropriate to describe them as a brief moment of insight recognised, understood and remembered within a landscape.

It is this which allows his paintings to escape ever being static.

The above will also explain the reason why, unlike many artists, Dad would very seldom use reference material like photographs or even sketches and would never paint on location. It became a standing joke between my Mum and Dad that when packing to go on holiday he would insist on taking his sketch book and she would want to know what the point was. I possibly malign Dad here as there were occasions when we went away and he would sketch. However these sketches would seldom be used as references for larger paintings but rather stand as works on their own.

I have discussed Henry’s landscape work so far but, of course, the human form plays a large part in many of his works. It may be noted that of the paintings with a human content the majority of them portray the female form. There is a very simple reason for this, Dad regarded women as being aesthetically far more appealing than men. One can clearly see the two subject matters most appreciated by my Dad in the painting Metamorphosis which depicts a woman changing into a stunning landscape or vice versa.

When painting men, my Dad would only paint specific personalities. Examples of this would be self portraits or more specifically Max Beckman, in Café Bandol. I use the word ‘personalities’ because even though some of the male characters in paintings such as the Café Afrique series are not specifically recognisable, they represent such icons as ‘The unknown traveller’ or ‘The observant writer’; they do not have a place in the paintings purely through the merits of beauty and form.

Above I make mention of the Café series, I think it is fitting that I do so, as this was a subject very close to my Dad’s heart. I have heard him laughingly described as ‘The café guru of Harare’ and I think this is a very apt description of someone who derived so much pleasure through observing and interacting with people at various cafés. Such things as the service or the quality of the coffee were not of paramount importance, but if the atmosphere was wrong my Dad would often make a comment such as “Never bloody make it as a café in Paris”. It is only fitting, therefore that cafés should be the subject matter of many a ‘Henry Thompson’.

An interesting thing to note is that the people featured in the Café series, whilst interacting to a certain extent with each other, are very often solitary characters. It is this that creates so much interest within each painting as each of them gives the impression of telling a different story and of having a different history.

When my Dad painted people he was lucky enough to be able to draw upon an amazing visual memory for individuals. I only truly realised this when I was back in Zimbabwe in November. My Dad showed me a painting of a girl that he had pointed out to me at the airport about eight years previously— I found that I recognised her immediately.

I could waffle on about my Dad for ever but I will sum up by saying this: In every ‘Henry Thompson’ there is a unique quality of optimism. One always has the feeling that just around the next corner, or over the next hill there is something wonderfully exciting or amazingly beautiful. It is with this quality and many others in mind that I conclude: We have lost the company of a good man but will always share the company of a great painter.

(above) Henry Thompson, Café Bandol, 1991, 120 x 120cm, acrylic on canvas

(opposite) Henry Thompson, Winter Grasslands, 1977, 92 x 101.5cm, oil on canvas
Despite being entirely self taught, Henry Thompson was considered a central figure in local art as far back as 1978. Reproduced below is the transcript of a conversation between Henry and the art historian and critic, Marion Arnold. Although this dates from 26 November 1978 it reveals many aspects of the approach to painting which Henry continued to follow until his death in 1997.

Marion Arnold: To what extent has your environment affected your work?

MA: What particular things are you conscious of?

MA: How would you define the African light?

Henry Thompson: Your environment is visual. A painter paints what he sees and what he stores up in his memory and the things he draws from are the everyday things he sees around him.

HT: Light I think probably comes first.

HT: This is something that has fascinated me because I feel that most painters use an atmosphere that I think is foreign to this country. The African light gives every object and colour an immediacy that you don’t get in softer climates. The light is harsh. It’s a peculiar light and to me it gives objects an immediacy, and it affects colours differently too. What I’ve tried to do in my paintings is to build in the light rather than paint the light as a lot of painters do by having shadows etc. When I start painting, the light must be there, it must be in the painting. At first I wondered why my painting was so different to a lot of paintings I was seeing. It seemed almost too direct, there was almost a sort of crudeness in the directness. Other paintings were more finished and there was more atmosphere. Then I realised what was happening. It was the African light that was affecting the way I was seeing things. I believe that a lot of painters in this country are not aware of it for some reason or another.

Coming back to your question — when I talk about environment, it is the physical one that affects me. It affects my shapes. I think I am an organic painter. I draw from nature. I’m rooted in nature because I’d be completely lost if I wasn’t. I haven’t got a mathematical mind. I could never paint like Malevich and Piet Mondrian. I love their work but I haven’t got that type of mind. It would be ridiculous, it would never work for me. It seems to me that a lot of painters who have tried the abstract thing swing back again and root themselves in nature. To me it seems the role of the painter is to see things around him although I’m not decriing pure abstract art.

HT: No. A thing that has been fascinating me for the last three or four years was to go to nature and look at the things that I think won’t change such as the landscape. Let me put it this way. Things are changing rapidly today — ideas — and I think it has something to do with the political setup in this country. What I want is something that I feel is permanent. I used to paint with a lot of detail and then I started looking for the image that will be strong enough in itself and won’t change. That’s why my painting has developed into a sort of minimal structure, although there again, I think that the true minimal painters are painters that approach painting in a completely different way to the painter who wants to take away detail.

My painting is a reduction process rather than a minimal one. I think the end result can be very, very similar so that if you don’t know what the person is doing, you can misread it. I must admit that I am attracted to the
MA: Do you think that there has been any particular artist who has been a strong influence on you?

HT: Yes, the first person I must mention is Cézanne. He has been a tremendous influence on all painters. Picasso has been too but probably more than Picasso, Matisse, because I’m terribly interested in colour. I have got problems there because my approach to colour has got to be different in a peculiar way because I’ve got to let in that light that I’m talking about and this is where you come back to the environment again. The painter that draws from his environment is tied to that environment because, although he abstracts everything, he has still got his colour and his light which affects those things he abstracts. He can’t abstract light or colour. You can use them in an abstract way but you can’t abstract them, whereas you can abstract form.

MA: Do you think you use colour spatially?

MA: Do you think the isolation of the last few years has been beneficial or detrimental?

HT: I think detrimental to me. I hate any form of isolationism although my painting might seem that it wouldn’t make any difference because it’s not busy painting. I’m not gregarious but artistically and mentally I am. I hate isolation. I think of all things isolation is probably the worst thing you can impose on people. Isolation must not be imposed on people but people can choose it if they want — this is different. I think it is a bad thing.

When you are isolated as we have been, artists outside the country almost become giants when they are not. When you have a free flow (of exhibitions) you realise their failings. I’ve found I started reading a damn sight more the moment we got isolated to try and make up for it, but there is something missing. You’ve got to have the contact.

MA: Do you begin a painting with preparatory sketches or do you go straight into a painting?

HT: Both. Some paintings I’ve done I made so many sketches. The painting I’m going to do afterwards is going to differ — I know that when I start making the sketches — so it doesn’t really matter what the size of the sketch is. But I often go into a painting straight away because I feel there is no need for the sketches — I know what I’m going to do. This is another thing — I feel that painters go on thinking all the time pictorially instead of using words. I was taught that you can’t think without words but painters can bloody well think without words and I feel that I paint all the time because I think about painting. I think more about painting than anything else and I feel even if I don’t pick up a brush for months I paint all the time, although the moment you start painting it’s something different again because then you come up with plastic problems that present themselves sometimes unexpectedly.

I think I’d like to mention here too the thing that’s become a vogue now — the chance, that you pick up the accidental in painting. I use that too, but I hate to use it. The creativeness comes in that you have to make a choice. You can reject it or accept it. All the same it seems to me to be a negative thing. So many people that I have spoken to have been under the impression that this is how modern painting works which is extremely wrong. No matter what anyone says, it surely must be one of the most difficult of all arts.

MA: How would you define your painting in terms of style?

HT: At this moment, I think one would say looking at my paintings that I’m a minimal artist but as I’ve said before, my approach I think is different. I’d like to call myself a colourist one day, but I’m not yet.

MA: Do you think your work would be different in a different environment?

HT: I’ve often wondered if the individual has a built-in pattern of thinking. It’s a question of awareness. I think living in a different environment must affect your visual vocabulary. You probably use it in a pattern that is true to you but it would probably change you, because if I was living in a different environment and had contact with a lot of artists who had a lot of equipment like photographic equipment, it is something I’d like to use. I’ve never been able to because the facilities are not easily available. Your light and colour, but not so much your form, might differ in a different environment and the stimuli would make you react differently to shapes — it might make a difference to my visual vocabulary.

MA: What formal problems have you been investigating?

HT: Right now the one that is uppermost is colour. I’m crazy about colour and that’s why I’m crazy about Matisse. I want to use it and it’s a problem I’ve got a feel about. Once I get my brush around it, I’ll know if it’s working for me or not. Painting breeds painting. The more you paint, the
Henry Thompson, *Refuge*, 1972, 39 x 55cm, gouache and ink on paper

MA: You say you hope to paint what you think, not what you feel. So are you using colour as an intellectual concept rather than as an emotional catharsis?

HT: I'm very suspicious of emotional painters. That's why I can't possibly rush into painting war scenes in Rhodesia. I get outraged like everyone does at certain things. But to my mind the whole thing is so stupid and I can't whip up emotionalism. I believe that if a painter today is going to say anything that is worthwhile, he's got to have an intelligence that hoggles my mind. It is so complicated. But the strange thing is that while you're painting, the whole thing comes in — the intellect, the emotions. All it needs to do is to go wrong and you realise how much emotionalism was in the whole thing. But I like the intellectual approach.

MA: Do you think that being a European living in Africa one is trying to reconcile two different worlds?

HT: Yes, I think one is, not only spiritually but physically. We grow up with a set idea of the visual arts that is European that's how we paint but spiritually — this is where your problem is. I cannot be an African spiritually. I've never been convinced of the way people like Klee use Africa. They use their colour differently because they have seen in a different light but they don't paint Africa. It is difficult to live in Africa but as a painter it's something that hasn't worried me. I could never carve something like the African masks but there is something that I see in African art that is typically African and that I try to bring into my own work and that is a peculiar sort of immediacy of expression, of force.

MA: Does art make a contribution to society?

HT: The visual arts don't affect most people. If you are a painter there are a lot of things you have to clarify to be whole in yourself and you can heighten your awareness. This is what art is about. It's not to hang on the wall but to sharpen your awareness to such an extent that you can draw from life so much more. If that's not the case, I don't know why one paints. I like painting and that is the reason I paint.
Invariably he was there before me, sitting relaxed at the café table, wary and eanicut, nattily dressed in light colours, his lean brown face lined and alert, his cloth cap or panama at an angle, coffee before him, sometimes breakfasting on a croissant with jam, watching the passing scene, exchanging greetings and chat with waiters and friends. Conversation would jump and flick, settle into intense discussion, be nipped by humorous-asides, round out to a satisfactory conclusion. The topic: some event in the local art scene, the antics of an artist, the pros and cons of an exhibition, the problems of his painting, the book he was currently engrossed in, perhaps a new volume on De Kooning, Bonnard, Modigliani, an article recently read in Modern Painters or Art Monthly but as often as not a novel or biography. Canus, Kafka, Maugham or Mailhouz. Henry loved books, discovering new authors, new ideas, delighting in tales of human foible. He had a vast repertoire of stories about artists, from Rembrandt to Degas, Picasso, Warhol or Arthur Boyd — as far as I could tell he had read about almost everyone. He knew their personalities, lives, affairs, idiosyncracies, their views on art, as well as the ways they handled light, colour, composition, subject. From a mass of information he could always pick out the telling incident, the revealing remark, the quintessential detail. Just as he could always set me straight when I was caught up in some local art politicking. 

Amidst the conflicting opinions, trends and rival groups, he stood clear, quiet, calm and contained.

Henry was a master of the essential. But it was neither the trap of generalisation nor insensitivity to ambiguity, rather he could select the salient aspects of a particular situation and, never one to bow to political correctness or commercial pressure, he had no compunction in cutting away the crap. A great fan of cowboy books and western movies, I think Henry found in them a clarity and directness lacking in modern life with its swamp of demands, distractions and pollutions. Several cups of coffee and cigarettes later we would part, me always buoyed up and renewed in my belief in the value of art and artists: Henry having had, for the time being, a sufficiency of words about art and ready to return to his studio and the waiting canvas.

Now there will be no more conversations and no more canvases by Henry Thompson. With his death on 22nd December 1997 I lost a very dear friend, a sort of still point in the showe and wether, a trusted and trustworthy guide. His knowledge, his skill, his passion for art had a depth and stability it will be hard to match. Zimbabwe has lost one of the anchors of its art scene, a dependable link to quality and integrity.

I first met Henry, having fallen instantly in love with one of his paintings, at a group show at Delta in 1975. The painting was a wide clear abstracted landscape singing with colour and light — a grassy plain stretching back from a bold rock formation in the foreground, reaching further and further into the light of the sky with a wonderful simple beauty. At the time his studio was a dark wooden shed at the top of a rise behind his house and he was employed in an 8-5 job with the municipality which he said was so boring it emptied his mind and allowed him to paint mentally. The evenings and weekends were his time to put colour on canvas. I used to climb the rocky path between the aloes he and Sarah cultivated, to see what he was working on and to marvel at the magic he created in that cramped shed. He usually worked on one painting at a time — patiently studying each application of colour, each brush stroke and its effect on the composition. Many a time, a painting I thought wonderful and complete would be totally reworked by the next visit. I count myself immeasurably lucky to have been his friend, to have watched his paintings grow and alter, to have shared the beauty that he created.

Henry never produced great numbers of paintings but each one was a joy to see. At first his work was considered too abstract by many Harare patrons but he soon developed a devoted following and when people began to call round to his studio and paintings would disappear before I had seen them finished, I felt robbed!

Henry had a light touch, in life and in art — clear, direct, seldom bogged down by emotion. Anger, yes at times, at the stupidities in society, particularly in politics. He always said the only thing to do with politicians was to line them up against a wall and shoot them. His quiet friendliness, sense of humour and delight in stories made friends everywhere. He seemed so easy-going but there was an inner resilience, at times a hard
stubborness, that enabled him to stick to his own way and which earned him respect.

Growing up on the edge of the Kalahari desert in a family honed by hardship, in the sort of environment where only the resilient survives, there was a stoicism to his nature. It was perhaps here that his early encounters with life, light and landscape gave him practice in reducing experience to its essentials.

Henry’s family played an important part in his development as a painter. His wife, Sarah, always gave him space and time to work undisturbed despite their two precociously bright and talented sons, Howard and Paul. The family ethos served to keep everyone’s feet firmly on the ground, the wit and banter a salutary check on egotism. In 1983, thanks to Sarah’s flourishing career, Henry was able to take early retirement and concentrate on his painting (between cafés, of course). A new open studio was built at the top of another hill — light now flooding into ample space for the first time. There have been many paintings since then culminating in a solo show at Gallery Delta in 1995 (see Gallery nos 5 and 6). At the time I wrote a review of the exhibition which was not published.

Reading the Landscape — Nyanga

For the first time in Zimbabwe, as far as I can ascertain, an exhibition sold out on its opening night. What is it about Henry Thompson’s work that draws such response, a desire not just to see once but to take a painting home and keep it for looking at again and again? Thompson’s work compels the viewer beyond the mundane drudgeries to the vitality and beauty of the landscape. It is a recognition of a choice we can make.

Central to the works on show is a self portrait, In My Mind’s Eye, which places the artist in the foreground, one eye covered, the other screwed up in intense gaze reading the elements and effects of landscape. The other paintings flow from this gaze, taking in a range of experiences of landscape. In each work, the artist concentrates on a limited portion of the Nyanga environment. Having spent many years looking, he now condenses his successive visual experiences, reconstituting the many fleeting impressions through an assured understanding of the mechanics of picture making. These are no ‘spontaneous’ flashes or ‘stab and hope it works’ paintings, but rather the product of considered thought and long hours of work in order to honestly express what has been seen and felt.

Hill presents a slice of landscape, three horizontal planes catching the vision between the edges of the canvas. The foreground and slp of sky echoing the same pale tones hold the middle ground up to our attention. A broken shadow line defers to the middle plane of grassy space whose diagonal brushstrokes lend vitality and lead the eye up to the richer ones at the horizon culminating in the brighter yellow at top left. Areas of stronger red, orange, ochre, greens and blues in large free brushwork suggest vegetation and shadows. The space is successfully contained and energised by the distribution of dark shapings, but held still by the horizontal planes and subtle verticals and anchored in a blue tree mass. The considered application of paint evokes a range of textures, an awareness of mass and space, a balance of dark and light and of open and closed areas, a sense of movement. The eye recognises all these effects with delight.

In October, the colourings, heat shimmer and dryness of our hot season are evoked. The strong verticals — impressions of road, grass, tree, shadows and open spaces — rise into the centre of the canvas where they meet the rounded forms of leaf mass and the swell of hill. The deep shadows contrast with the glare of African light that bleaches colour out of some areas, intensifying it in others; that msasa red. The eye is pulled constantly back and forth between the dominant foreground and the intrigue of the horizon where clever use of colour and shape create immense distance; the successful rendering of that place where sky meets land and water. The edges of the colour masses are of extreme importance in creating effect. Again the brushwork is used to imply both movement and stillness. The balance of light and dark give vitality to the canvas and the heat of the scene is neatly offset by the minimal use of cool tones. Strong masses contrast with delicate markings offering continuous visual change.

Using similar devices Henry Thompson recreates his experiences of Nyanga: crossing a Foothbridge, faced with colour planes and masses, a flattened
perspective yet evoking distance, employing the tension of 2D and 3D to vibrant effect; the moment of contemplation looking down with *The Walker* into light and shadow playing in the reflections and ripples of water; the *Village*, absorbed into the colours and planes of its surroundings.

Line, plane and colour are used to achieve an experienced sense of space, often with ambiguous transfer from foreground to background, the distance claiming as much attention as closer elements. The juxtapositioning of colours with their effective boundaries, edges and transitions, move the eye from one element to the next, absorbing detail within a simplified whole. Many of the paintings achieve a successful combination of form and colour giving pleasure to the eye but also engaging the intellect. They create a consciousness of the forms and energies of nature and their ability to envelope the viewer.

Henry Thompson extemporises freely with the facts of an actual Nyanga scene, compressing or opening out space, repositioning ingredients, focusing on mood,
light and colour, patterning shapes, softening or sharpening linear emphases. Structural analysis however cannot capture the magic of his work which is only to be appreciated in seeing it. As Henry himself has said on many occasions, words can do little to express a painting — they are another language. His paintings seek out and isolate for us moments of great natural beauty.

Many people nowadays demand that art be disturbing or critical or political, as if there was something wrong in feeling pleasure. Others say that landscape is comfortable or easy. Well, if it is, there is not much evidence around of good landscape painting. Just because the many amateur painters try landscape is no reason to ignore it. We may bury ourselves in urban situations to our detriment. Nature is our base. Without it there is nothing. And those woods, plains and hills answer a great need in the human psyche. The work on this show is a reminder of the great pleasure to be experienced in looking at Nature.

And if such painting needs justification perhaps we can consider what Seamus Heaney wrote (substituting ‘Art’ and ‘viewers’ for ‘Poetry’ and ‘readers’):

“(Art) justifies its (viewers’) trust and vindicates itself by setting its ‘fine excess’ in the balance against all of life’s inadequacies, desolations and atrocities — irrespective of politically correct considerations that might damage its chances.”

Henry Thompson paints as he feels and sees — these works are a “celebration of a landscape”. A line written by art historian, Frances Spalding, encapsulates for me the work of Henry Thompson: “... above all, what these paintings offer is the slow surfacing of a profound delight.”

Henry liked the review and kept a copy of it and I think he was glad of the pleasure he gave to people through his paintings. Like Matisse he believed in the value of the comfortable armchair.

Landscape is a major genre in Zimbabwean art and Henry Thompson’s name is high on the list of its most accomplished exponents. A great admirer of Robert Paul’s evocation of our land, Henry went his own way, searching for his own means to capture the effects of nature in paint. He sought and distilled for us instances of Africa’s beauty — the effects of space, the multiple varieties of light, the expanse of grasslands, the volume of hill, the defining profile of mountain, the edge of horizon, the punctuation of rock and tree, the heat, the shade and the water. In these elements he recognised the basis of both material and spiritual/intellectual harmony and through his paintings he gives us what he considered the purpose of art — a sharper awareness and an ability to draw more from our existence.

Henry’s work and life confirm for us the importance of the artist’s integrity in expressing his own vision and individuality; they provide an example of the determination and relentlessly patient application necessary to achieve that expression.

For the readers of Gallery there is a further unknown loss as Henry was always ready to cast his keen eye over my ramblings and effusions and reduce them to clarity. Were he here to read this, Henry would firmly put a line through much of it, too modestly preferring to consider his work as “painting a number of moderately sized canvases to celebrate a landscape that has given me so much pleasure.”

These words cannot give us any measure of our loss. But we can appreciate our gain. We can continue to celebrate life and light — love, memory and landscape — through the paintings Henry has left for us. They speak of the enduring power of beauty and of the possibility we have to choose harmony and delight.
The recently inaugurated Prince Claus Fund which is based in the Netherlands annually presents awards to outstanding contributors in the field of culture and development. Among those honoured in 1997 was the Mozambican artist, Malangatana Valente Ngwenya, who has played an important role in raising the profile of the visual arts of southern Africa.

Reprinted here with permission is the Prince Claus Fund tribute to Malangatana written by a fellow Mozambican, the novelist and poet, Mia Couto.

Malangatana, the man who painted water

Malangatana paints, sculpts, writes, narrates, sings and dances. He is a total artist, able to cross the artificial borders which have been erected between the different forms of artistic expression.

He is undoubtedly an heir of traditional story-tellers of this part of Africa. Story-tellers do more than narrate old legends, though: They recreate them, exploiting the entire expressive potential of their bodies, their voices. They are actors, singers, dancers. A story requires the narrator to assume all these roles. Only in this way can a deeply religious kinship be generated between the narrator and his listeners. I have heard Malangatana telling stories, and I was enthralled by all their magic. More than that, I actually heard Malangatana living his own history. And I succumb to the same enchantment. The man lives as if he were constantly creating, as if time were a huge canvas to be coloured over and over again. As if life were a sculpture, shaped in time by his hands. But the way in which his work develops suggests that he realises that his hands alone are not enough. As if it were necessary to unite everyone’s hands in the same gesture of creating more life. He once told me:

“What we are doing is not just communicating inside and outside a nation. We are building a nation, we are creating the fundamental feeling and thoughts of our future nation.”
I have known this voluminous friend for years. The first impression he makes is that the weight he bears is tenderness above all, a largesse which he distributes freely. It is with tenderness that he fought for his country’s independence. It was that same tenderness that made him light to preserve Mozambique’s dignity. When war wrought havoc on our country, his travelling hand showed the world that the capacity to dream was still alive. That our value lay not in the dimension of our tragedy but in our ability to produce art and culture. Malangatana’s work and voice travelled throughout the world, showing that there was still hope, that there was an African nation which needed not only to receive but had something to give — its contribution to culture.

In this way, Malangatana became a fighter against the isolation to which geography had condemned our country. A fighter against the silence imposed by this move away from the centre to the periphery. A fighter against the feeling generated by the solidarity campaigns which merely inspire compassion.

I once visited him in the new cultural centre he had founded in Matalane, forty kilometres away from Maputo, Mozambique. We had been collecting old legends and myths from the oldest members of the community. While we were resting after our work, I had the idea of planting the area with indigenous trees. I am a biologist as well as a writer, but at that moment I was not thinking in ecological terms. There is more to native trees than just environment. Some of them are regarded as churches where spirits dwell, connecting the ancestors of a place to those who are still alive. I went home with the feeling that all this was no more than an idea. A month later, though, Malangatana rang me up and said: “I have the trees, we are going to plant them, come and join us.” I was surprised at this practical side to his nature. We belong to the universe of talkers. We are not doers. We toil away at other people’s initiatives. But here was proof of something different, coming from a man who had little or nothing to do with trees. Where had Malangatana got the young trees? How had he transported them to the place, ready for planting? I still don’t know. On the day we decided to plant the saplings, I realised that none of this mattered any more, because the collective operation turned into a party. We sang, we danced, we listened to histories. We were not just making something. We were celebrating life, celebrating the feeling of eternity that is transmitted to us by the trees. Women brought water to give the trees their first watering. “Where does that water come from?” I asked Malangatana. “I painted it,” he said. But I insisted on being told. He answered: “You poets invent so much water in your verses that the ability to invent it in the real earth has been lost.”

This wonderful man has become the ambassador of Mozambique culture. International recognition of his work today might furnish a good excuse for resting on those laurels. But there is no rest for this warrior. Inspired by a deep love of this soil and its people, Malangatana builds schools for children, founds cultural associations for the conservation of artistic traditions in his native region, promotes Mozambique on an international level.

All these activities might have been expected to distract the artist and make him forget his obligations as a creator of colours and shapes. Happily, this has not happened. Malangatana pursues the path he embarked on without being borne along on the current he set in motion. Malangatana is not following Malangatana. He continues to devote himself to the cause of exploring his own heritage. He faces the next picture as if it were new now.

I regard it as a pleasing obligation to acknowledge the artistic and human stature of this great artist. Malangatana is like a tree that feeds on the tender shade in which it basks. And we writers take advantage of that shade. We sit under the tree and look up at the sky through its branches. As if it were that last canvas, the last picture in which the master’s hand is exploring other universes. Guided by his wise hand, our future dreams fly.

Note: M. Couto, born in 1955 in Beira, Mozambique, studied medicine until 1974, the eve of national independence. On joining the Liberation Front of Mozambique he abandoned his studies in favour of journalism. He was editor-in-chief of various informative publications until 1985, when he returned to university to study biology. M. Couto now works as an environmentalist on the sustainable use of indigenous species in the coastal zones of Mozambique. He has published five books of short stories, three novels and a collection of poetry. Twice he was awarded the National Literature Prize of the Association of Mozambique Writers. His books are published in Portugal, Brazil, Spain, Italy, France, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Belgium, and the Netherlands. He works with the professional drama group, Maputo Mutumbela Gogo.
1997 was a particularly difficult year for Zimbabweans. On 9 December the nation demonstrated against government mismanagement of the economy, the streets were in turmoil, the people angry and despairing. That same evening the annual Summer Exhibition 1997-98 opened at Gallery Delta. Gillian Wright finds cause for celebration in the work on show.

In praise of artists

The Summer Exhibition — does the exhibition title suggest to you a summer of soft muzak, sunlit lawns and ‘the beautiful people’ at leisure? This article, however, celebrates a generally sombre collection of fine, mainly Zimbabwean, work. A General Strike, the annual Christmas buying frenzy and then devastating food riots all took place during this show, whose work tells of resolute and honest commitment to the land, the conditions of its people, the creation of art and response to the ideas it generates.

I take up Keston Beaton’s Jingler’s Harp. From the detritus of consumerism and an earlier age of craftsmanship the artist has made an instrument which sings only in visual and tactile mode. It is silent. an ornament on a wall. It is like a lyre — its horns though, are cow’s horns (made of pieces of old bentwood furniture) which suggest the old measure of wealth in pastoral times. It is strung with found cords of varying thicknesses and fibres which bear the dirt of use. One would believe that they had been played many times. An old plastic coffee container (as resonator?), bits of plastic machinery and electronic gadgetry are assembled within the harp. There is pathos in the battered plastic animal shape from a baby’s rattle tacked to the frame. It suggests an infant’s rudimentary instrument and perhaps how far we are removed from contact with the warmth of real animals in the poverty of urban life. The bentwood bits are refined in their skilled craftsmanship — the one used for the frame is further decorated and made personal with the artist’s carved markings. This wood contrasts with the tacky plastic things — but they too are rescued rubbish. The ‘third’ world seems to be viewed by the ‘first’ as a vast mine for its resources in the vicinity of which the masses may be jettisoned — there must be no food subsidies, and cut-backs in health, education and social services follow the IMF’s economic prescriptions. So may we, as representatives of the throw-away people, redeem ourselves with art from our trash. On the left, below the baby’s toy, is a breast image, like a metal cymbal, nailed in. Is he saying that music (art) is our comfort and succour — our mother, in fact? That man does not live by commodities alone? We die for lack of meaning. As Gerry Dixon has it in his poem:

“A mark is made
A line is drawn
Meaning is found”

‘People = consumers.’ Much of our music is made up of commercial jingles, which children grow up singing. Beaton’s harp and cymbal allude to Psalm 150, in which song was an act of worship to the Creator:

“Praise him with the psaltery and harp” and “Praise him upon high sounding cymbals.”

Keston Beaton, Jingler’s Harp, 1997, 147 x 50 x 14cm, found objects
Thakor Patel also uses the breast image in two paintings: the metallic nipple in Pot echoes Beaton's cynical. The other work, White Ant Egg, is of a monolithic limbless figure which floats in a turquoise sky. Its terracotta patina of paint suggests a swelling breast, but where it should be is a circular hole which gives onto vibrant sky - space - freedom. The warmth of the blue beyond contradicts the not-thereness of the breast. Can we interpret this as the mystic's faith in emptiness, silence? Where a womb should be is another perfect circular void. Emerging from a shadow inside the left of it is a vibrant orange disk or ball rolling towards the circle of sky. Is it a newly conceived life or idea moving from shadow to light? The artist has seen the womb as space rather than containment/ confinement. I think he is celebrating the fertility and nourishment of Inner Space with arthritic humour, and rejoices over the fecundity of the artist's imagination.

White Ant Egg recalls Bernard Takawira's sculpture See More - Talk Less (see Gallery no13 p24). Patel is consciously developing Takawira's mystical idea of contained vision (the eye of the sculpture sees the sky beyond).

Patel's companion painting, Pot, suggests another rudimentary female form. Her 'neck' is adorned with an African string of beads, hung with the cowrie shell of fertility and wealth. Another mysterious amulet hangs there; it looks like a coat hanger. The breast, also a single image, is represented by a perfect geometric circle 'incised' into the body. Circle = breast might represent the endless cycle of feeding and nurturing of human beings but its reduction to a geometric cypher communicates a different perception of a breast. Instead of a nipple, a bright metal button is seen to be sown onto the stippled paint. The figure is bespattered with drips of paint. This gives her life but reduces her dignity somehow. She is maculate. The purple intensifying to black background is sad and redolent of a majesty belied by the button, the necklace, the splatter down her front. That modern banger shape — does she exist to display clothes, ornamentation? The dead, dirty white colour of the figure may speak of emotional poverty and corruption of the devalued personalities of women who are regarded as fertility containers, and decorative objects only. At the same time Patel may be speaking of the sterility and dehumanisation of art which is expected to be purely decorative, the reduction of the artist (bearer of new life) in the modern economy. Where a nipple should be is a drawing of a pretty button, and skin is made of splatters of paint, female = art is the next step. These themes are transmuted into a creation of beauty and elegance. In this I am reminded of what Berry Bickle does.

The necklace motif reappears as an actual found object, marooned, belonging to no-one anymore and gummed onto the background picture in Berry Bickle’s installation, Font. Again that elegant exotic Portuguese writing is repeated — used as a texture. The imperialist 'Word' still frames and backgrounds us, in the sense of Fiat and Indoctrination.

A straight wrought iron stand bears a block of plaster or something covered in glued varnished paper, with the waters of the Mozambique sea (waters of redemption, renewal? or ravage?) rendered in gorgeous transparent washes over it. All this paper/surface/information. An inverted basin shape in the block of the font holds a segment only of a beautiful deep blue glazed plate. It can’t hold water. The melding of meanings — baptismal font and printer’s font — speaks of our birth into a world of imposed information. The baptismal font is broken but still washed with water. The plate image is insistent in Bickle's work. Plate = food security; that issue discussed endlessly in the vast tide of books, pamphlets, e-mails from infinite conferences, lunches and dinners on the subject. More words. There are a crowned plate and a half face in relief with a horrifying dead eye affixed onto the picture like icons or hunter’s trophies. The expression ‘dish’ for ‘face’ is evoked. (Faces look for food and do eating.) This half face is pasted over with the paper of the written catechism of power. There are other
decorations — her beloved sherds the sea washes up. My reaction to this stunning elegance, constructed from fragments of old art, modern junk, lovely objects made by the artist herself and images of imperial rape, is of rage. How dare she? But I am bewitched by its beauty. It’s a Catch 22.

I take refuge in Gerard Manley Hopkins, one of the first modern English poets. One of his lines is: "Give beauty back." In *To What Serves Mortal Beauty* he says:

“To man, that needs would worship black or barren stone. 
Our law says: Love what are love’s worthiest, were all known; 
World’s lovelyest — men’s selves. Self flashes off frame and face. 
What do then? how meet beauty? Merely meet it; own. 
Home at heart, heaven’s sweet gift.”

Men’s selves are investigated especially in the work of Luis Meaque. Fasoni Sibanda, Cosmos Shiridzimoniwa, Justin Gope, Richard Witiwani and Shepherd Mahufe, and in Ishmael Wilfred’s interior warscapes. The landscapes of this generation of black artists are almost all inhabited. The Romantic individualist buzz over sublime Nature empty of people has not a place here. Justin Gope’s dark and intimate painting of *Dancers* impresses. The two embracing figures form one image in paint which has been handled so as to have strong physicality. Their environment is so dark, warm and light belong only on their bodies — but only enough to define them. This image sears itself on the memory.

Shepherd Mahufe’s *Rural Home* is perfect, poetic. The viewer can somehow see this home with the love of the person who lives there, in that hut with the soft rotting thatch. The deep blues and greens of the lush foliage which still surrounds the homestead suggest sorrow and nostalgia. A newer building on the left is represented by a wall facing the hut which is the focus of the picture. This wall is worked in a deep uniform blue much darker than the intense blue shadows of Zimbabwe’s rural places. Deep depression in the viewer is evoked by this blue wall. Strung in front of the homestead is a fence. Its grey poles used to be young trees which still dance sinuously. Russet light behind tells of the end of day and suggests to me the end of a way of life.

George Churu’s *Rock View* is an uninhabited landscape. It would seem to follow an imposed convention: blue hills beyond a thicket of trees at sunset with a grassy open foreground. There is excitement, a thrill of fear in the chaos of wild colours. The sky is green, yellow, brown and dirty white, and the trees are in colours real trees never have. So why do I recognise this scene, knowing I’ve been there? This feeling has been felt by Churu and expressed in the landscape. So we are, in a sense, together there in the bush, artist and viewer.

Hilary Kashiri works with the abstraction of landscape forms. His *Wind Object — Yacht* is all movement, but composed of images from the landscape here. The scribbled light lines replicate the shine of sun on dry grass, there are sections of fields of wind-blown pasture, a dam wall perhaps. The sails imitate large industrial structures. Deep transparent blue green shapes repeat the violence of moving bodies of water. You watch land transposing itself into water. The painting gives form to the excitement of shifting perceptions of reality.

The attention is riveted by the brightness of Fasoni Sibanda’s *Soke II Scene*. It seems at first to be joyous, artless, naïve. The women seem to dance at their work. His treatment of the dustscape they inhabit, in broad strokes of gourache, magically evokes the soft beauty of exhausted soil. The women’s vigour is represented in deceptively simple forms, with the negative spaces used to separate them and foreground them. They now seem lonely. Where are the men? The woman disappearing towards the horizon (dust meeting those calligraphic white clouds which bring no rain in a brilliant turquoise sky) moves isolated into nothingness. The lightness of his irony impresses.
Luis Meque’s monumental figures this time are larger and even more loosely painted. They dominate the room. The deftness of their execution amazes and speaks of dedicated practice. The respect for people, which is the bedrock of African culture, resonates in these paintings. These are the heroes who populate the poor urban places.

Richard Witikani’s Girl in a Red Bolero has that intense presence one expects in the figures he paints. She is fully alive, conscious in her body and in her clothes. That foot kicked up onto the pavement belies the seatedness of the girl. Most of her clothes echo the sand and tusas — she belongs where she is, does not suffer alienation. The cheerfulness of youth flares in her white hair ornament, her bright bolero, and the delicious white turning mauve strokes of her blouse. Witikani’s fast putting on of paint and use of the paper beneath to create space throughout mocks the massive weight that one thinks one sees. His Road at Bromley is a turbulent painting. This red road cut into the land — where is it leading under that stormy red sky? One imagines from the style that he had to get it done fast before the storm broke — it has that immediacy.

James Jali’s Church III lunches hypnotically on the paper. Leaning dangerously towards it is an electricity pole with its staywires. (The Power?) Cars are parked drunkenly next to the church. The broken picture of the surface, laid in with gouache in sentimental colours, admits a darkness which leaks through the cracks, spaces between the gestures. Is this a comment on the Prosperity Gospel churches which proliferate?

Three Pregnant Women bitterly converse in the clinic queue in Cosmos Shiridzinomwa’s painting. This is evident in the vigorous distortion in their drawing. The floor, worked in warring flesh-toned designs speaks of suffering and aggression, and intense life. It tells of the grim aspects of motherhood.

A shift away from people to In Between Not by Gareth Fletcher. It hangs next to Danner’s elegant graphics. Is it because Fletcher’s is sculptural and textural that these appear so thin, sterile? Fletcher revels in the textures of wood, graphite, paint. His personality is evident in the uneven harmonious lines that draw a diagram of an impossible 3D geometric figure into the deeply worked graphite rectangle which is formed by and backed by slightly battered lovely smooth plywood. The rough graphite surface invites you into the night — into a depth which obviously isn’t there because the graphite is clearly on the surface of the plywood. It is dusty and plainly itself. There are indescribable blots on the graphite. I see them as rainbows, clouds in the heart of the carbon itself — ‘the element contains the whole’ idea develops. Do Fletcher and Patel have different takes on the luxuriance of hidden life, and how making art requires craftsmanship and craftsmanship in dedication to the best fun there is?

Fletcher also exhibits a big rounded metal meat-grinder with a slot in the top and one in the front. It resembles a protruding muzzle now with a dark paper-mâché cigar wedged into the side of the front orifice (now a mouth) and gobs of tar smeared along the edges of the top slot. This piece, Fat Cat, sticks out from the front verandah wall. It is a neat cohesive image: satisfying sculptural single form enfleshing in metal a grim satire.

One is enmeshed again in the human. Craig Wylie’s Urchin amazes. This very young street child is painted life-sized and almost photographically. The attention to the details of her clothes, her face, fingers and feet is almost worshipful, but distanced by the anonymity of his technique — the artist himself would seem absent. She is dressed in ornate cast-off black tunic adorned with flowers, some of which Wylie has made into holly leaves. It is as if she is a precious gift for no-one. She also wears grubby brown pyjama pants, from which a dainty dancer’s foot points with toes tensed. The eyes are lustrous, lovely. A tangle of her fingers presses against her lips. Is she pressing back hunger or stifling a cry? You feel that
she never cries any more. The diagonal lines of the cement-tiled pavement which form background and foreground contain her like diamond mesh. So this beautiful anxious infant is suspended in a fence which refers us to the barrier between the viewer and the child — she is a painted image. She is not real — the picture is. One feels tricked. *Trompe l'oeil* using this subject — is this acceptable? Rage again. To us, who have learned to pass by the street children on the pavement with hardly a flicker of emotional disturbance, turning our attention to other business, the artist says ‘How real is real?’

The attention turns from the ultra-realist to the abstract expressionist Rashid Jogee who also offers an unflinching investigation of personal suffering in *Drought*. This drought is experienced not in statistics for food-for-work programmes. It investigates and sings in sonorous tones of the suffering it causes. It may speak also of emotional drought and loss. The central image, a blackish oblong, reaches forward a darkness which dominates and draws the viewer back through the washes of mauves, purples and golds (for me layers of dust, loss, time and dry golden Bulawayo trees) into the depths of the bereaved heart. That oblong could be read as a grave or as the comfort oblivion offers. I see Rashid Jogee as a mystical, lyric painter. He listens for hours to chants in the mosque, he said. The paintings themselves tell of surrender to, and objectivity towards, the interior life to which he gives a physical body in the layers of paint. He respects the paint, letting it have its own life without imposing his personality upon it. The gestures of his medium do not say ‘Marvellous me!’ but ‘Marvellous paint!’

From this intense focus on individual suffering one moves to the epochal Africa and continent-wide vision of Helen Lieros’s *Africa Apocalypse I*. This picture celebrates the physicality of paint with the worked rough background which is her signature. It is like rock and darkness but the uppermost layer of the surface is in a hot dry blue pigment. That blue excites an intense tactile sensation in the viewer, and being so dry refutes the blue = water = renewal/salvation equation. The central collaged motif suggests a typical local rock formation — or perhaps a couple of chunks of flesh — but the dominant image therein, which appears as if by magic from a print of swirled pigment, resembles the embryo of a horse. Will it grow to be a mount for one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse to herald the end of the world? Do I see the horse embryo because the picture’s title suggested it to me? Horse embryo or no embryo at all, the warm flesh tones of the delicate immediacy in the torn-out collaged print intimates precious pre-conscious life. (The horse in African mythology also symbolises dominion and nobility.) Above the central motif is a heraldic band of three oblongs interrupted by a small earth-white rectangle intersected by a dark line on the side. The middle ‘flag’ has been invaded by the blue sky/dark rock stuff which composes most of the painting, like the land asserting itself over imposed boundaries. Red, blue, white, black/brown. Red of soil, red of bloodshed? Over the ‘flags’ a gold line runs across the picture, gold of motifs’ wings, of ancient art and wealth. Above this is a ‘transparent’ shift which reveals more sky/earth which appears to be diminishing as a broad guillotine blade of black and reddish blood/soil pigment descends from the top. It occupies the space given to the sky in a child’s painting — these conventions stay within us. Blue is often regarded as the colour of spirituality. Here the spiritual seems to reside in the rock below the sky, as rainbow clouds reside within Fletcher’s elemental carbon-graphite. The encounter with this landscape/contemptscape leaves the viewer with inversions, uncertainty, mystery. There is palpable reality in the pigment and paper and its sure handling, but it seems to say that in spite of tangible signs present in our environment, the millennium’s meaning, for us, is inscrutable.

Gerry Dixon’s work perfects this mastery of material and idea in wood. *Keep Looking* is a sculpture made from a section of young tree trunk. It keeps the organic form the circumference of the trunk dictated. The cracks are filled with a green acrylic medium. It is...
Sap. Does creativity erupt through the breaking points in how we are organised and organise ourselves and others? Is this what we must keep looking for?

Dixon and Andreas Makromallis the potter alike are artist/craftsmen who home in on three-dimensional form which they make speak in new ways of feelings and ideas. Makromallis’s *Aegean Memories: Turquoise Blue Lilac Purple Pot* gives one the quiet full satisfaction that a classical pot would: it has a self-possessed beauty, but also surprising and disturbing details. Its shape recalls the amphora but instead of the tall neck there is a dried spout of overlaid partial leaves like those which curl round the shoot of a plant bulb. A hole into the hollow shape inside replaces the imaginary shoot. From the back this edge of ‘dead stem’ or ‘leaf’ reminds me of a soft collar, and brave, sad ‘shoulders’ slope down into the pot’s rotundity. Now it’s a man. These edges look as if they would yield or bend if touched. The plasticity of the unfired clay is also present in the large soft dents the potter has made in the back bottom half of the pot. The front is left intact. This work speaks in its shape and colours of a unity of perfection and vulnerability/impairment. The Aegean turquoise predominates in the thick delicious glaze which has permutations of the colours of the title. The blue drips into bright pinky streaks towards and over the edge of the cave of the dark glaze of the base. This pot is three things in one: a potent cultural symbol, a plant bulb with its suggestion of new growth, and a person.

Frowke Viewing’s exquisite large creamy *Bowl* was set below Makromallis’s collection. One gazed down from the silent carnival into Viewing’s shining pale yellow heaven with its galaxy of efflorescences of exploded melted crystals. This looking down not up into heaven was exciting but to see the underneath one had to go down on all fours. It was worth it. In the glaze of the outside seemed to grow myriad blades of golden grass or reeds from dark soil with deep shadows between the leaves, or the striations of rock. The outer form, whose complex glazing recalls the denseness and complexity of vegetative or mineral existence, contains the inner form of liquid light. Thakor Patel’s eyes must have gleamed with especial brightness when he visited this pot.

Returning to Gerry Dixon, his *Flame Bird* flies up in a single flickering form from its base. It ‘is’ — truly flame and truly bird. The front surface is finely polished, hard like stone, and within it are little scars, excoriations, gouge marks. The artist made some and borer beetles others, I think. They bleed with black ink. The back is unpolished but has soft matt colour soaked into the wood. It looks so vulnerable. The mystery here is — how does he do it? Wood into pure spirit? The exultant upward thrust successfully represents the human spirit, triumphant though scared. I take this to be the sum and symbol of the Summer Exhibition.

It was a feast of works in which the artists demonstrated a commitment to new explorations of the social, spiritual, emotional and physical worlds of our people. Little evidence of stagnation and none of sentimentality were seen. Work of this calibre is an act of faith vital in this cynical, culturally devastated age. It is an act which acquires meaning in the investigative reception given to it by those who will offer the act of truly looking.

(above) Gerry Dixon, *Flame Bird*, 1997, 75 x 23 x 18cm, wood and aluminium

(right) Gerry Dixon, *Keep Looking*, 1997, 17 x 20 x 11cm, wood and acrylic

Photographs by Barbara Murray
Pat Pearce is a character who appears ubiquitously in the tales of the early days of the art scene in Zimbabwe when the National Gallery was an energetic and surprising institution of international renown. Recently Pat has written her memoirs and Gallery is privileged to print an edited extract in advance of publication.

Early days of the National Gallery of Zimbabwe

An event of great excitement for our family occurred during the extravagant years of the Federation: the building of the National Art Gallery in Salisbury. A beautiful, gracious building, situated in a prime area of the city, then called Kingsway (now Julius Nyerere Way), was to be opened in 1957 by the Queen Mother.

Frank McEwen, chosen to be its first Director, had previously worked with the British Arts Council in Paris. He had a worldwide reputation, a unique knowledge of art and a large number of influential and important contacts. In Paris he had become a friend of the famous: Brancusi, Braque, Matisse, Picasso, Leger, Sutherland, all of whom had been influenced by African art. I imagine he felt it was time that African art was given proper recognition. When the gallery was to be built, aided financially by Sir Stephen and Lady Courtauld, who had come to live near Umtali, this was a chance to try and establish something worthwhile. The combined forces of Lady Courtauld and Sir Ronald Prain, a great enthusiast, went into action.

Frank had been invited to visit Rhodesia in the fifties to help with the planning of the National Gallery building. He arrived at Lorenzo Marques, Mozambique, on the shores of Africa, in his private yacht, having sailed down the Seine and across the ocean to Mozambique via Brazil.

To us he was a breath of fresh air. His opening exhibition was a glorious mixture of Old Masters and the European art of the thirties. There were 420 original works by artists such as Constable, Nicholson, Turner, Magritte, Rembrandt, Van Gogh, Bonnard, Braque, Cézanne, Monet, Picasso, Veronese, Kandinsky and many others, lent by such institutions as the Tate Gallery, the Rijksmuseum, and the Louvre. To see these masterpieces in Salisbury was a thrilling experience. Our eldest daughter, Rowena, who had studied in London, was Frank’s first exhibition assistant.

I first met Frank with Alistair Goldworthy, standing outside the gallery. He had just arrived in Salisbury and Alistair told me he was finding it a lonely place. I invited him to come and stay with us for Christmas at Inyanga. This was to be the start of a long friendship.

During that visit at Brackenhills, he was fascinated by my collection of guzdo weaving (the warp and weft both made from a local tree bark), traditional pottery, ceremonial beadwork and metal axes. I was tremendously interested in African art and Mike and I had collected a great deal — particularly during Mike’s flying years. Now, it is mostly scattered, the family and friends have taken it. At one stage, I had offered my entire collection to the first Zimbabwe High Commission in London, shortly after Independence in 1980. Sadly, they were not interested in their own history of art. How stupid I was to think they would be — all they wanted was cars and all our Western rubbish that had been denied them for so long.

One day, while at home in Inyanga, in 1961, I was called to the telephone and a voice said, “This is Jordan Marigo, I’m an agricultural demonstrator. I have been told you are interested in African art. I have some articles that I have left at the...
butchery in the village for you to look at.”
The voice was hesitant and shy. He told me
years later that he had heard through a friend
that there was a white woman interested in
African art but that it took him nearly a year
to decide to ring me.

When I unwrapped the little parcel I found
three objects: a jug, a bowl with a lid fitting
perfectly, and a mug. These were sensibly
carved in green soapstone. I was very
impressed and showed them to Frank at the
gallery. He was equally enchanted and
wanted to meet Mariga. A meeting was
arranged through a complicated series of
contacts through a store a couple of miles
from where Joram lived. He took some
leave and I picked him up from an African
township and drove him to Salisbury. On
the journey, I noticed he was carrying a
parcel. He announced, “I have a much
better article which I want to show you.” He
opened the parcel and there was a replica of
a Chinese jade bowl with claw and ball feet.
I was taken aback. He told me that one of
my friends, Hugh Boswell Brown, had given

John Takawira working in Nyanga, circa 1965

him some old copies of Illustrated London
News where he had found pictures of the
bowl presented to George V.

Frank showed complete disinterest in the
carving, saying, “Not Chinese art in Africa!”
and asked Joram if he could carve a head.
They talked and we discovered that the only
tool he possessed was his penknife. Frank
praised the previous work and said he had
sold the bowl to Mr Paver (editor of the
African Daily News) for £10. Mariga was
very encouraged and immediately used the
money to buy some tools. So began the
Rhodesian sculpture.

Around Mariga’s house at Nyatate, a small
group of carvers including Joram’s nephew,
Numiya Mariga, Frank Vangi, Eric
Chigwanda and Bernard Manyandure joined
Mariga and started to carve. All tried
carving heads or animals. Bernard had been
the cook for the Adams family at the
University Principal’s home in Mount
Pleasant but had been dismissed for
smoking dagga (mbutu). He brought with
him another talent for which he became
much in demand — Tanya Adams had
taught him to make three-tier sandwiches.
This came in handy later when we mounted
exhibitions on hillsides beside some ancient
pits and forts. I would bring our paying
guests from Brackenhills there for picnics
and they could admire the sculptures. They
nearly always bought some.

I first met Bernard Manyandure by
arrangement, at Manganda’s Butchery.
He arrived on a bicycle: tied to the carrier
was a beautiful wooden carving of a woman
and child, about 18 inches high. There was
also a little narrow jar with a lid and handle,
were people and animals and sometimes a
combination of the two. Folklore must have
played a part in their choice of subject as so
often the figures of people were carved with
animals on their heads or clinging to parts of
the body. Once, I watched Mariga carve a
 likeness of a child who had passed by and
who was suffering from cerebral palsy. I
watched this child re-appear as he carved —
it was as though Mariga himself had
produced a spastic child. The head was
similar to his other heads, but it was
definitely a spastic. This carving also is still
in my possession.

There were many carvers who produced just
one or two beautiful things and then no
more, and many others who gave up. I
believe that Frank was entranced and
fascinated with this new art, and I doubt
without Frank, it would ever have become
famous in many parts of the world. I
dedicated myself to making frequent visits to
Joram’s house to collect their work and take
it to the gallery.

There was a lot of interest in the new art and
Frank McEwen planned an International
Congress of African Culture (ICAC) at the
gallery for August 1962. It was the first of
its kind ever to be held anywhere in the
world. Frank knew the art world intimately,
or rather I should say the important people
in the art world in Europe and America.
The congress became his dream. At the time
the Board of the Gallery were not sympathetic,
nor did they share his enthusiasm. Sir Athol
Evans, Chairman of the Board, became
particularly difficult. However, Frank was a
very determined man. He would arrange
dances at the gallery, with African music to
work off his frustration. I have learned to do
this too and have found it a great source of
relaxation throughout my life.

I hesitate to write about it — the function of
ICAC was to show and discuss how African
art, music and culture had influenced the
modern world. Frank McEwen had planned with this in mind, even before he took the job as Director of the gallery. But now, the Federation was breaking up and, suddenly, the country was becoming poor again. Frank was put off at every turn. African nationalism was gaining momentum and none of the authorities wanted to have a congress of this nature in Salisbury.

In spite of setbacks, ICAC finally got under way. Delegates were invited from all over the world: they included Sir William Fagg from the British Museum, Alfred Barr from the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Sir Roland Penrose and his wife Lee (Miller), Tristan Tzara from Paris and others from America, Africa and Europe, of every shade, every race and colour. Each was an expert in his or her own line. There were musicians, architects, sculptors, dancers, actors, anthropologists, writers; every one of whom had something to contribute to this rare occasion.

But first, there was much to be done. Rowena, working in the gallery, was married and pregnant with her second child by this time and had to travel to England for the birth of the baby. Frank asked for my help, borrowing my car, and Rowena and her husband lent theirs: two Mercedes. Mike was busy building a cottage at Inyanga, but he let me have our car for the first fortnight of the congress. My job was to meet the delegates and take them to their respective hotels and attend to their needs. The Ambassador and the Jameson were the only two hotels in the city that would accommodate blacks. I had invited Joram to get leave and attend the congress, so he came with me. The downstairs gallery was turned into a lecture hall with a cinema and slide projector. One man operated the projectors while the female staff and Frank’s wife, Cecilia, ran around doing the rest of the work with Frank acting like the conductor of an orchestra.

I was in a state of some anxiety: I hadn’t had the car serviced for some time and I had been away from Salisbury for many years and found the place greatly changed. My role was to help with transport and public relations. My first job was to transport Dr S Biobak, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ife in Nigeria who was to open the congress, and show him around Salisbury. Frank said, “Take him up Livingstone House and then out to Mazoe Dam.” Livingstone House was the tallest building in the city, at the time and it had a new, frightfully modern lift; you only had to wave your hand across the indicator and you shot to the top of the 17 floors. There was a viewing platform where you could see the entire countryside around Salisbury. Our visitor was most impressed. I was so anxious that I kept up a constant chatter.

Then came the journey to Mazoe Dam, some forty kilometres from Salisbury. We were going along beautifully when suddenly the clutch started giving trouble. My heart sank, but by fiddling a bit I kept the car going and we arrived at the dam. There was a huge volume of water going over the spillway, most impressive. Then there was the anxious return journey, but we made it and the opening of the congress was assured.

One of the most interesting events of the congress was, for me, the appearance of Pancho Guedes, an architect from Lorenzo Marques (now Maputo) who showed slides of his work in Mozambique. In fact, in John Russell’s words, “He brought the Congress to its feet with a dazzling and poetic account of how fantasy must be brought back into Africa’s architecture.” I felt I had caught the same essence in African culture that Picasso had done before him, only much more so; that endearing simplicity, humour, and make believe that is such a part of African art and life. Another of my jobs was to change Tristan Tzara’s return ticket so that he could visit Lorenzo Marques and see Pancho Guedes’ work which was not only architecture. Guedes also designed and made toy boats and produced embroidery of remarkable skill, all in a world of fantasy.

The Chope Xylophone Orchestra from Maputo and the Trinidad Steel Band were amongst the musical entertainments. Hugh Tracy, my old friend, came to lecture. McEwen had organised Pancho Guedes to get the Chope to the congress and this had caused a problem for Hugh and he came to me for help. I was working with Frank and there was no time to sort out petty grievances. Hugh sailed through most of the congress. I felt sorry for him. He had done so much for African music, but everyone can’t get gongs for what they do. I tried to avoid him as Frank was quite adamant that the show should go his way. It was his show, after all. Hugh’s son, Andrew, put on a play at the local theatre at the end of the congress — it was a hilarious skit on Frank and Hugh with all the cast wearing ICAC badges on their caps. Frank’s greatest friends, Roland and Lee Penrose and John Russell were great fun; just the spirit needed with all those great dignitaries around. Each lecture and discussion was a new experience — yet the whites in Salisbury were hardly aware of the existence of the congress. The Rhodesia Herald, the country’s major daily paper, hardly reported it, but the African Daily News had a full page almost every day devoted to the proceedings. I remember very clearly that during the summing up of the congress, Selby Mushi, an African painter, remarked, “The world has moved in Africa and Africa can never look back.” Not only was this a great cultural experience but for me it was a new experience in complete integration and national equality; inside the walls of the National Gallery. It was an oasis.

I hardly saw Mariga during the course of the congress as I rushed about my duties, but on one occasion he found me and said, “There is a policeman outside who is interested in art and he wants to know if he can come in?” I proudly informed him that of course the gallery was always open to everyone, even when there wasn’t a congress in session. The man who entered became a well-known sculptor in the work-shop school founded later in the gallery. His name was Nicholas Mukumberanwa, one of Zimbabwe’s foremost sculptors today.

Outside, across the street, a little cafe owner refused to serve Vincent Kofi, a sculptor from Ghana, with a cup of coffee. Next day, the headline in the African Daily News proclaimed, “No coffee for Kofi.” Kofi was a big man, with a big laugh. With the rising temperature of nationalist feeling in the country, at the time, it was surprising that there were so few unpleasant incidents, but it was sad that so few people had taken advantage of this unique cross-cultural opportunity right on their doorstep.

Alfred Barr, in his enthusiastic report on the interest and success of the congress itemised the things of special interest that he would take back to tell his Board. He added, “At last, I shall also have to say that at least during the first week of the congress, the extraordinary riches offered in music, dance, film, lectures and exhibitions were inadequately reported in the press. This is a serious matter for Africa is in a state of crisis, and the crisis is not only political, social and economic; it is also cultural.”

Prophetic words from a man who was not to know that all Africa would have broken the
bonds of white domination in just over thirty more years, when in South Africa, the last bastion of racial discrimination and political oppression would be made free.

John Russell wrote in the Sunday Times, 12 August 1962:

“The congress was many things in one, an exhibition of African art which was by far the finest ever assembled in Africa, a small scale African Salisbury with an orchestra from Mozambique, a theatre group from the Ivory Coast, instrumental soloists from many parts of Africa, and a steel band from Trinidad — a university open to all in which every hour, on the hour, authorities from all over the world could be heard on their African subjects.”

But in his description of Salisbury he wrote:

“A bygone India returns to life when every is served by cut-footed black servants in the new season’s Rajah coats, and in the Municipal Gardens a seven foot high hedge of sweet peas suggests an apostles of the English cottage.”

John Russell was one of those bygone gentlemen who said “thank you” with flowers. When he left, he sent me a bunch of sweet peas, which brought me down to earth, with a bump.

Now perhaps is the time when, many years after independence, Africa is beginning to realise her own potential. It is not surprising that Africa should have had this hunger for money and to be like us, and that all this — education, cars, political power, the lot — has been achieved in my lifetime. I venture to predict that you will have to wait and you will see just how much Zimbabweans have yet to achieve.

But first of all there must be an end to begging. Africans are a proud people with a great culture that we can learn from in so many ways — the system of justice for a start, and the use of skillful hands, the production of art and music. Harare and all of Zimbabwe’s towns should be filled with art — in the streets, the parks and the buildings — so that indigenous Zimbabweans can learn to be truly proud of themselves. Show yourselves to the world, I say, and the world will learn what art is really all about.

Frank McEwen used to say, “Africa has the art, The West has the science.” It was extremely lucky for Zimbabwe that the gallery was built in Harare and that McEwen was chosen to be its Director. It could have been anywhere in Africa, but because of its wonderful climate, and those prosperous years of the Federation, Harare was chosen. Without Frank and his great knowledge and the good fortune of having the beautiful gallery, I will always doubt whether the present art burgeoning in Zimbabwe would have materialised. My love for primitive art which began when I started out at the Royal College in London was certainly fulfilled by watching an exciting new development in art emerge, enthused and encouraged by Frank McEwen.

I have one of the few extent copies of the ICAC programme, printed in 1962, entitled Festival of African and Neo-African Art and Music and Influences on the Western World, and subtitled First Biennial International Congress of African Culture. I can do no better than to quote Frank McEwen’s foreword, In Praise of African Art, in full.

“Ideas for our Congress were born in Paris. They were conceived for a number of reasons: observance of the influence of African art on the School of Paris; activities of the Musée de l’Homme with its collections; sessions of African film and recorded tribal music and those waves of subtle jazz rhythms emanating from music centres, New Orleans, Brazil, the West Indies, and spreading around the world.

Why should a first cultural Congress of this kind in Africa be held in Salisbury, Rhodesia? There are no particular reasons but those of circumstances. The idea was brought here and it developed. There is also a magnificent new Art Gallery situated in one of the best climates in the world, near the geographical centre of the sub-Saharan continent.

Art claims to exist in a separate world of its own. If this is true our idea is non-political, non-national, non-racial but profoundly African. Its concern is with permanent artistic values and with African influences on modern times.

Sympathy with the arts of other nations promotes understanding, yet countless people ignore the culture of Africa. Unaware of satisfactions it can procure, their fixed ideas date from before our century began. This Congress may inspire more understanding.

By dwelling fully in the spirit of the XXth Centuries one becomes acquainted with influences of African Arts. It is of importance, therefore, in a world not exempt from misunderstanding, to recognise the fusion of Neo-African rhythms with our pattern of bureaucratic and mechanised civilisation in which the thrall of the machine meets the best of the drum.

These rhythms are balancing factors in a new enlightenment. They provide sensory compensation for the fabulous powers which modern technology will increasingly produce.

Strangely enough, although African arts vibrate everywhere amongst us, they were, until recently, a closed world. Very few modern Africans or inhabitants of other continents were aware of the potency and infinite variety of African expression. Discovery of these values for the western world began through artists and collectors, mainly in Europe, at the turn of the century. Later through their gradual recognition promotion came through such historic innovations as Einstein’s “Negerplastik,” 1915, and from exhibitions: ‘African Negro Art,’ Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1935; ‘Traditional Sculpture,’ London, 1951; ‘Masterpieces of African Art,’ Brooklyn Muscum, 1954; ‘Tokens not Tobacco,’ Houston, 1959; by medieval bronzes collected in Nigeria, other exhibitions and studies such as those most prominent works of the Museum of Primitive Art, New York, and of course, from universal distribution of music of Neo-African composition.

Every art movement possesses good, or indifferent phases. Differences between the marvels of magic expressionism in traditional African carvings for ritual use and the piles of lambentite lathe-made figures we call “Airport Art” are paralled by the difference between creative jazz and the appalling, insipid, commercial variety fed world wide to the indiscriminating. But vulgar elements of taste for widespread better will not pede a rise to recognition of one of the world’s great additions to the Arts. These contributions flow from Nok culture of 2,000 years ago, to medieval African bronzes, to carvings of the last centuries and on to renewed vigour in present times. Today in Africa, new sources of plastic arts appear to be extensive but they are as yet untapped.

In Nigeria, Ghana, all Africa, Brazil, the West Indies and North America are inexhaustible sources of rhythm music. Musical inspiration will rally and reflect from one centre to another around the world.

A new era begins in African art. In its dynamic emergence it may draw equally from its great past and from those modern influences which it helped nurture. There is no doubt about its virility and reserves of inspiration; they are unlimited.

With the creation of a Congress of African Culture examining new themes and held in a different part of the vast continent every two years, knowledge of African art and life will be promoted universally for the sake of wider understanding. As powers of expression expand they will contribute to living cultures of the world. They will increase knowledge of ancient wisdom that many newcomers to this continent have often, through lack of sensitive approach, failed to appreciate or understand.”

Photographs courtesy of the National Gallery of Zimbabwe.
It is with great sadness that we witness the loss of one of the father figures of Zimbabwean art. Barbara Murray pays tribute

Henry Munyaradzi

Already John and Bernard Takawira have died leaving great gaps for the wind to blow through into our vulnerable circle. On Friday 27 February Henry Munyaradzi Mudzengerere died after a long illness. Stone sculpture has suffered the proliferation of mediocrity but Henry was one of the pioneers, one of the individuals whose sculpture has always stood out from the mass of commercially orientated production, and which gave Zimbabwean sculpture genuine stature and quality.

As a young man Henry herded cattle, was a carpenter's assistant, a hunter and a tobacco labour gang supervisor. He had never been to school and had no conception of art until he heard that men at Tengenenge farm were carving stones. He had never seen such work and thought he would like to try.

I met Henry at Tengenenge in 1975 when he was already recognised as one of the most talented sculptors with a strongly individual style, easily distinguishable in the great 'graveyard' of stone pieces atop bases made of trunks of trees set among the long grass and miasmas stretching up the hill behind the artists' huts. Henry's work had a quiet peace about it, a simplicity that was appealing. Later when I worked briefly at the Tengenenge Gallery in Park Street, Henry would sit out in the front yard all day, chiselling away at great slabs of grey serpentine, patiently working, a small chip at a time, to create his gentle works.

In an interview at the time, he told me:

"When I work I begin to trim a stone. I have no plan. If nothing comes I stop. But as I work I think I will cut here and here, like this and this. That is it. Sometimes I have a dream which I remember when I wake, then I do that dream. Rhinoceros Licking His Back is like that.

Art is a representation of something, an animal, a man, any object. But it is not that object. It is like a person but not a person. When you are near it, you feel you are with somebody. But you know at the same time that it is a stone. When people look they see a life, they feel a living thing there.

Before I began to sculpt I was close to nature. I am part of it. I become, I am what it is to be a tree, a leaf, a bird. I had no way to say what I felt. Now I put the feeling into stone. All my being is in nature. All my thoughts are from nature. If I am walking along and
I see an ant in a pool of water in a rock. I am the ant. I feel he is drowning. I will save him. I am the ant. If I am walking along and I see a guineafowl. I go into the bird. I feel how it is to be the guineafowl. I become part of him. This feeling comes to me as I work stone and I can put this feeling into the stone. Then there is a guineafowl in the stone, the feeling of being a guineafowl.

When I grow old and my children grow up I will teach them (to sculpt). Sculpture has made me very happy. When I work there is nothing that troubles me. I am happy.”

Henry’s rapport with Nature can be clearly seen in his work. There is a wholeness which expresses an ideal that many of us have lost or forgotten. In Mumvumira Tree, which Henry considered one of his best works, the human being, birds and tree, each in their uniqueness are yet closely interrelated — they become one in the sculpture: trunk into body, fingers into leaves, branches into arms and wings, leaves into beaks. The work is solidly grounded but the shapes fly upwards in a softly undulating rhythm that evokes a sense of harmony in the viewer.

As all young artists must they look to their predecessors and there are many who have been influenced by Henry’s work. Both locally and overseas, he will continue to be recognised as one of the best of Zimbabwe’s sculptors.

For Henry Munyaradzi and his generation there were no predecessors. He was among the first to shape his vision in Zimbabwean stone and he leaves us with a unique body of work, indeed a fine heritage for the generations to come.

The Graphics exhibition at Gallery Delta during April features works by 30 artists including both established graphic artists as well as students and young artists using a variety of techniques. Following it will be a solo exhibition by Richard Witikani whose work has been selected for a two-man exhibition in the Netherlands later this year. Gallery Delta will be hosting the performance of a play, The History of Fear, by Kos Kostmayer of the USA, directed by Wolfgang Pfeiffer of Germany and performed by the Kokoko Actors Group of Harare from Thursday 30 April to 2 May.

Chapungu Sculpture Park is holding a retrospective exhibition of work by Bernard Takawira during April and May. Their next Chapungu Newsletter will be dedicated to the memory of Henry Munyaradzi.

The National Gallery in Harare will show works from France from 21 April - 24 May. Students of the Harare Polytechnic will exhibit from 23 April to 3 May and also 28 April to 24 May will be a show of Slovak graphic arts by the Bratislava City Gallery. The Pritt Annual Schools Exhibition opens on 6 June.

The National Gallery in Bulawayo will be opening two exhibitions in June, one a show of figurative paintings by Beverley Gibbs and the other, entitled Give a Dam, will be a group exhibition of works by members of VAAB to raise funds for building dams in Matabeleland.

Mutupo Gallery will hold two group shows: Earth Elements in May and Land Escapes in June followed by a solo show of work by Itai Njagu in June.

Pierre Gallery will be showing sculptures by Henry Munyaradzi, Zephania Tshuma, Nicholas Mukomberanwa and Colleen Madamombe as well as paintings by Chico Chazunguza in May and June.

During May and June the Brazilian Embassy will be using Sandro’s Gallery to mount an exhibition of paintings by Brazilian artist, Dolino.

The Zimbabwe Association of Art Critics meets every last Monday of the month at the Bookcafé as well as holding other ‘critical’ events. Anyone interested in joining the discussion and developments is most welcome. Phone Harare 861 195 for information.