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Cover:  Luis Meque, Journey’s End (diptych), 1998, 186 x 230cm, mixed media/collage. Photo credit: Tom Haartsen

Left:  Richard Jack, Guardian, 1998, 82 x 15 x 15cm, ebony and serpentine

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Notes and writings on the life and death of Luis Meque (1966 - 1998)
by Derek Huggins

‘Free at Last’
"I am black. I think black. I paint black."  
Luis Meque's now famous words which more than anything else are the summation of himself and his work in his short life. They speak of a new generation, a new consciousness, a growing self awareness, a new spirit and pride and purpose for being. Luis Meque was a major black African painter of Zimbabwe. He was both catalyst and cataclysmic. He had enormous impact on his contemporaries and on the development of painting in the country during the last 10 years. It will take a long time to find another painter of his stature and dynamic. He was the right artist at the right time in the right place. Given time his recognition and acceptance will grow out to black Africa. And he was prophetic too: "I'm trouble. I got a bad spirit on me. I'm not gonna live long." These were true words. He died suddenly and tragically on the 21st March 1998, aged 31.

Luis was out of Mozambique. He was born on 10th April 1966 at Tete, a town in the interior on the banks of the Zambezi, and he was named Luis Jose Meque Gugumise. His parents moved to Beira on the coast about a year later where in due time he attended school until he was 14 or 15. His sister Veronica has related that after leaving school and when about 16, he made application to go for overseas studies — an offer of the Frelimo government — but having signed the papers found himself carried to Maputo where he was put into army uniform to fight the MNR in the guerrilla conflict that had developed after Mozambican Independence in 1974 and turned into a civil war. Luis was posted to Nampula in the north where he saw service for about five years.

Having known Luis well it is impossible to imagine that he would have been a dedicated and zealous soldier but he would have had presence of mind in a difficult and dangerous situation and he survived the ordeal. It was, no doubt, during this period that his aversion for authority and his abilities to defeat the system were born. In 1986 Luis deserted the army, sold his uniform and other possessions and bought himself an air ticket and flew to Beira. After two or three weeks he left Mozambique, entering Zimbabwe illegally, albeit as a refugee, by circumventing the border post. He found refuge with clan members at Kadoma where he stayed for some six months and then settled in Harare.

He gained admission to the BAT Workshop in 1988 where he studied for about a year. Amongst his very early paintings, executed while a student, was the Catholic Cathedral at the corner of Fourth Street in exactitude — in its grey brown sandstone blocks and the twin towers tall and prominent. It is said that he did this in situ and it took him about five days. It was a painting he favoured and one of the very few paintings that hung in his studio at the time of his death. It proved to me from the outset that he could draw. He lived at that time at Mufakose, a high density suburb on the edge of the city: box houses of pre-moulded cement walls and asbestos roofs, a place of vendors and vegetable stalls and beer halls and humanity in the street, queuing for transport, of pirate taxis and backyards. His income then was the poverty datum line and below. He was to draw on this environment for many of his paintings.

He first showed his work at Gallery Delta in the Students' and Young Artists' Exhibition in 1989 and afterwards regularly. He grew steadily in his work, exhibited often and enjoyed increasing success. Simply; he was offered every opportunity possible to show because he was seen to be a leader from the outset and the first of a new breed of painters. He was a major participant in all the New Directions and other exhibitions for the new group, culminating in two one-man exhibitions — Life on the Line (1996) and The City (1997). Luis' work took contemporary black African painting in the country out of the doldrums — the exotic idyllic African scene — that it had been in for decades.

But it is of his life rather than his works that I would rather speak presently. Many have asked what happened to him? Luis was passionate in his ways and there were several problem areas — drink, women, the constant question of his immigration status and his health.

His origins drew him, in about 1992, to Tete. I think he wanted to see and feel his birthplace and on his return he commented that it had been a dangerous journey with several days walking and dodging the MNR guerrillas. The works that he painted there were dark and sombre — some landscapes in dark greens and blues and a big canvas with three figures silhouetted against the
horizon and clothed, as it were, in red. Clearly he was painting a country at war. He said the people were wild and dangerous. It was probably on the return journey of this visit that he was mugged. He phoned from Mutare and said, "This is Luis. I'm at the railway station. I've been robbed. I am without clothes. I have only my underpants. I am cold and hungry. I am without money. Please send some." We dispatched dear old Jethro Maromo, the gallery assistant, with money to refit Luis and to get him back to Harare.

He was to go back to Mozambique again in 1994. I remember we sat in the amphitheatre and talked. Perhaps he was painting there at the time. Luis was troubled and as he was wont to do so he blamed the bad spirits. He said he was cursed, that the bad spirit was upon him and that he was being affected by the memory of a girl in Nampula. She was his first real love and when he had deserted the army he had abandoned her too. Luis thought the only remedy was to return to Nampula, find the girl, appease the spirits and resolve his dilemma. But, he said, it would be dangerous and he might be assaulted and even murdered. Nonetheless, he went off to Mozambique and returning in due course said he had found his past love but she was married and with about four children. Any wonderings and feelings about lost love and ambitions for Mozambique appeared to dissipate with that visit and there were no more specifically Mozambique paintings that I recall.

Also that year, one morning at the gallery, there appeared a young lady looking no more than about 17 with a newborn baby. She introduced herself as Sandra and said Luis was the father of her child. Luis was there, framing a work and looking very sheepish. He said he was not convinced the child was his. There was a discussion. The mother put the baby, wrapped in white woollen and a shawl, on the floor of the verandah and walked off. It seemed we were left to hold the baby. I had a talk with Luis and told him to accept the responsibility if the child was his. The mother returned in the late afternoon and they went away together with the baby. Luis took her and the child — subsequently named Luis — into his home. They were to part ways later but he continued to accept responsibility and to pay for the child's well being. Luis was always kind and generous and this was one of the reasons why he never had money for very long. And in due time, Angie was to appear on the steps of the gallery with a baby, Tsiuti, in her arms, looking for Luis and he accepted her as well. Finally, he settled down with Patience known as Gwen and of this union there is a son, Jose.

There were travels to Germany in 1994 and again in September 1995 in company with Tapfuma Gutsa and Keston Beaton for the Genesis Exhibition curated by Ingrid Raschke-Stuwe at Galerie Munsterland in Emsdetten for which Luis had painted some large works in the amphitheatre at the gallery — oils on canvas and mixed media on paper. The following anecdote is from my notes dated 15 September 1995:

'I waited on the steps of Emsdetten Station for Ingrid but she didn't come. Instead Luis came. I cheered immediately. I hadn't wanted to be alone for the evening. He told me there had been a problem of some kind. We walked to the town centre. Luis was without any money whatsoever having expended all his allowance. He wanted to drink. We went to the Extrablatt. It is a beer house in the old building, other than the church, that remains in the centre and it is warm and with much character. It is in the rhythm of the older Germany and the one that Emsdetten has largely lost. We went upstairs and sat at a round table and drank draft beer from long schooners. Luis was the only black man in the establishment and got some curious looks. He was wearing the beginnings of dreadlocks.

Luis was talkative and amusing. "There has been a problem," he said. He took his time and drank. I waited for him to continue. Luis is seldom direct. Tapfuma and company wanted to change their accommodation, he said. There had been an altercation of some kind the night before. The lights had gone out mysteriously and when the host asked, "Did you do something?" Tapfuma objected crossly and made a scene. It did not seem very serious to me but Ingrid was having a meeting with everybody to try to sort out the differences. Luis did not want to be involved which was typical and wise. We sat and drank the long strong beers. Luis, in his gentle, sensitive manner, wanted to tell me something else. He was shy and mysterious and embarrassed to be direct. I expected it to be about money. He never has money for long. He has been sitting in the pub all day every day drinking. He is not eating properly and has broken out into a rash. He drifted into conversation and began speaking about home ... and about a child of a liaison about which we were uncertain.

"You know the baby," he said.
"Of course.
"You thought she was mine."
"I wondered. The mother is quite becoming when she dress up. And she likes you."
Luis laughed. "No. She is not mine. But whose is she?"
"I don't know. Her ex-husband's? Perhaps he knocked on her door and pressed his attentions on her."
"No. I don't think so. There is somebody else."
"Then you tell me. I don't know what goes on. Nobody tells me."
"There is somebody else."
"But who?"
"Don't you know? No idea?"
"No."
Luis speaks a name.
"No. I don't believe it."
"Yes. I think so. But don't say anything."
"The crafty bugger. Tell me more. He's too old."
"No, he's not," said Luis emphatically.
"How do you know?"
"I am an artist. I can see it. I have sketched him. And I have sketched the child. I look hard. I can see by the shape of the head. I can see by the shape of the eyes. You look hard when you are an artist. You look hard when you get back."
"I shall. But I still can't believe it."
"And there's another thing," said Luis. "You know in Shona they say ranwokata. He writes the word on the beer mat."
"What does that mean?"
"When a man goes to bed with another woman there is a snake in the bed which bites him."
"Bad omen. Bad luck."
"Yes. We say so. Now look at him."
Runyoka! said. I think it might have been him. Luis said convincingly. “Let me tell you,” he continued, “there was a man who called me to talk. He said he was feeling like he could explode inside. He said: ‘I look at my children. I know the first one is mine and I think the third one also, but for the other four, I don’t think they are mine.’ “Well, I am still not convinced,” I said. “When? How come the opportunity?” “Often. When you are not there. There is plenty of opportunity.” “All right. What else?” “There was a day when he was sitting on the stool on the verandah and he was cuddling the baby. The mother came and pulled the child away from him. He turned to me and said, ‘How is it that that which you love gets taken away from you?’ You see. I know. He is the one. I am an artist and I can see. Watch and you will find out. But don’t say anything.” “There is nothing to say,” I said. “Even if he is the one, there is nothing to do.” Luis was amused. He was in a genial mood. He wanted to stay and drink. I gave him DM50 for a drawing which I wanted to give to the German doctor who had tried to fix my back. Luis said he would walk to his bed. Late night I left him sitting there drinking.

I have never found out who was the father of this child. Luis always maintained he was right. The person about whom he had talked died at late middle age at the end of that year after a long and dissapating illness. Perhaps Luis was right. Perhaps it was runyoka after all? It was these incidents in the life of the people and their relationships that Luis was apt to paint. There was a painting in his City Life exhibition depicting a man with a huge red penis entitled Loose Morals and I wondered about the snake in the bed. It was during the time at Emsdetten, on the steps outside Galerie Munsterland, that Luis first showed me the small black spots that were appearing on the skin of his chest. I urged him not to drink so much, thinking it might be alcoholic poisoning that was causing him the irritation.

Back in Zimbabwe, however, life fell back into its regular pattern. Luis worked towards a show which we called Life on the Line, in February 1996, in which his work reflected the tenuousness of life in Africa which he knew so well. Luis did not appear at the opening. While he was shy it was unlike him not to make an appearance. Obert Muringani said that Luis had been arrested the night before and had been detained in the cells at the Central station. There had been a fracas at Sandro’s. I was indignant with Obert for not letting us know Luis’ whereabouts earlier in the day. It was the middle of an exhibition evening and too late to do much for Luis at this time.

I went to the Central police station the next
money. So he smashed all her windows. And he ended in the cells. There was another deposit fine to be paid and again we were very concerned that the authorities would get wind of it. Luis was still running the gauntlet with Immigration while trying to sort out his status and maintaining his stay with a series of monthly visa renewals.

Later, in August 1996, Luis went to Mozambique involuntarily. He had returned early and unexpectedly from El Loko’s Afrikansche-Europaische Inspiration Workshop and Exhibition at Aldorf, Germany. At Harare Airport he was refused a re-entry visa, promptly declared a prohibited immigrant and arrested pending deportation. He was allowed to call me from the airport and I went there immediately. He was being pushed and pulled around by a particularly obnoxious official. Luis was angry and wanted to resist under this provocation but restrained himself. My efforts to intervene met with rebuff. It is impossible to plead the case of the artist, no matter his artistic import, to the unknowing and uncaring.

Luis was locked up in the cells at Hatfield police station where I visited him the next day. He was sitting in the pen outside the cells, waiting to be deported. A kindly police sergeant permitted me to speak to him through the diamond mesh and to give him cigarettes but not money. We had a smoke together across the wire. He said he had been ill at the workshop in Germany but had painted hard and well. He had seen a doctor who had been concerned about him. All his work he had left behind in the care of the workshop. He was at the time in dreadlocks which was always sure to receive the attention of the authorities. He was by now calm and semi amused by the treatment that he had received and was suffering the inconvenience without rancour.

He was deported at the end of the week to Beira from where he made his way to Chimoto to his sister. I had told him at the cell block that Helen was going to Maputo to paint murals in the Greek Orthodox Cathedral and that I would send money with her and he should get himself to Maputo to collect it. He arrived one day at the church where she was painting ‘The Apocalypse’ and they spent time together there and at the priest’s house. Helen says that even there he attracted trouble. Leaving the priest’s house late at night he was accosted by the Frelimo police who were intent to arrest him for wearing dreadlocks and it was only with the remonstration of George Tshilakis, the Honorary Greek Consul of Maputo, that they released him. In Maputo he was robbed of his passport and other papers including the list of his works that he had left behind in Germany. Luis, always living by chance, soon came back to Zimbabwe by crossing illegally at the Forbes Border post — there is a path that circumvents the immigration post that many use. Luis said the police and immigration know of it but so many use it they have given up chasing people.

Luis was tall and good looking. He liked to dress well and did so with a flair, with a fancy shirt and bolero or waistcoat. He was the young successful painter about town. And he liked motor cars. He acquired one as soon as he could — afford it or not — and his first was an orange Renault 12. He bought it at a secondhand car yard and drove it to the gallery where we all looked it over. He was the first of his contemporaries around the gallery to possess a car and he was very proud of it. And he was the cause of envy and inspiration for the others. I asked him about insurance and driving licence, well knowing his aversion to formality. He did insure but he never did get a driver’s licence. I was concerned that he would have accidents and, of course, he did.

It was the Renault he was driving one Saturday afternoon on the Beatrice Road near the flyover and abreast of Hilary Kashiri in his recently acquired fawn VW. They were racing and somehow, inexplicably, they collided and damaged each other’s car and were rendered immobile. The police attended and they talked themselves out of it.

The old Renault became more and more dilapidated. The exhaust pipe lay on the back seat for months. Finally it was abandoned or sold for scrap after yet another accident when late one night he turned it over onto its roof in Julius Nyerere Avenue on the right-hand bend near the National Gallery. Luis had been drinking at Sandro’s and taking off for home crashed beneath the palms. Again he talked his way out of it with the police. I suppose it was the roll of notes into a ready palm. Then there was an old and good looking, almost sporty, white Rover which was a bad buy because it was not long before the gears sheared and there
was no spare to be found. It lay abandoned at his home.

Luis made a good exhibition with The City in June 1997 but all was not well. His health was troubling him. He complained increasingly of pains in his legs and sore and swollen feet. He had difficulty in walking. He was to say of this discomfort later that it was like a snake crawling under his skin. The following is an extract from my notes dated 14th November 1997:

Luis came past yesterday afternoon and needed to talk. He had been to see a specialist at Parirenyatwa Hospital and was clearly worried. It is a long story. He has not been properly well since he last returned from Germany. His feet swelled and the discoloured patches on his legs became more evident and spread to other parts of his body. Some prostate and encrust. Have urged him very often to visit a "proper" doctor and even made appointments for him but he did not bother to attend. He reneged on an appointment I made for him with Dr Freeman. Have pleaded with him to let me make an appointment with my doctor Steve Williams but he refused. He's so stubborn. He said he was seeing a doctor but no improvement was apparent and no diagnosis that Luis could put a name to was ever pronounced. Finally, his doctor, or the second or third one, sent him to a specialist at Parirenyatwa. In a sense he is relieved to learn that the disease he has is not his alone. There are many others suffering from the same. But he is very disconcerted that most of these are HIV positive.

"I don't know ..." said Luis in his characteristic manner of opening a speech, with that slightly sing-song lift in his voice that I got to know so well. "I don't know ... I have had a good time. But now the bad time. I don't really want to know if I am HIV positive because I don't know what it will do to my head and the way I am thinking. But I guess I got to know now. Maybe I shall be lucky. But I don't know what I shall do if I got it. Maybe I shall live only another five years. But I shall fight it in my head. I'm not gonna die. The specialist says she will use me to test and try to fight the disease. They have cut one of the sores from my arm. They have taken blood. I go back in a week. They will tell me if I want to know. I am going to church now. I don't drink anymore. I don't smoke anymore."

Crispen Matekenya who is looking plump and shiny but needs a loan looks askance at Luis. Luis tells him, "I can't lend money anymore ... I am sick."

"They all think they can do it without God, but they can't."

"Luis doesn't look well — he looks ashen in the face — and I guess he is suffering from the shock of the doctor's words. I end up lending Crispin money as usual and they leave together in Luis' recently acquired secondhand Renault 5. I watch them go. The chances are that Luis has HIV — it will be a miracle if he hasn't because he has led the modern permissive lifestyle."

The fact was that Luis' condition improved remarkably in the ensuing three months. His face filled, his colour returned, the patches on his skin dissipated and the growth on his eyelid disappeared. He got his shine back. He became smart and well groomed again and he was walking very much better. Whatever the doctor, a foreign dermatologist at the hospital, was doing, it did him good. He was much happier and was working hard for a show scheduled for April 1998. During January he brought in a pile of paintings which we had looked through in the amphitheatre with pleasure and excitement. They are large works, painted with zest and energy and full colour.

But my notes of the evening of Sunday, 22nd March 1998, reflect a drastically different picture:

'Luis is dead. I cry for him. I mourn for him ... Amal Courage telephoned me at home from the gallery a little after two o'clock yesterday and made the report. She had received a phone call from Gwen, Luis' partner, who cried that Luis had just died at the Parirenyatwa Hospital. I told Helen and she let out a scream of shock and in despair put her fist in her mouth. I went to the hospital casualty and found Gwen. She was in tears and I tried to console her. Hilary and Matilda came soon afterwards. Gwen gave us the story. Luis was better on the Friday. But this day he refused to eat and to take his pills. Later in the morning he developed breathing difficulties and his landlord drove them to Parirenyatwa Hospital. There they spent two hours waiting for attention and all the time Luis labouring for breath. Ultimately, in desperation, Gwen pleaded for help.

Oxygen was administered but it was too late. Luis had died at about half past one when, after a busy morning at the gallery, I was showing his most recent paintings to Helen before her imminent departure to Europe the next day. The duty sister said simply, "We lost him." Indeed we lost him. We lost a friend. We lost a great painter."

The death certificate reads Kaposi Sarcoma — cancer — and surely he had this affliction but Luis was, I think, victim also of the scourge sweeping this land and tearing and shredding the innards of the nation's young people — Aids — and which hastened his death. We are, it would appear, in danger of losing a generation of young people.

I had seen Luis in the week before he died. He had come to the gallery on the Monday morning and was in need of money. He said he was feeling bad. He said he had pains and indicated his abdomen. He said he rubbed some Sloan's Liniment on his skin but he had come up in a rash. I asked to look. He lifted his shirt and he had a string of blisters around the midriff. I thought it
might be a reaction to the Sloan’s and said so. He sat a while and we talked about retrieving his works which were still in Germany following the African European Workshop of 1996 and I urged him to frame two works destined for the Dak’Art Biennale in Senegal. He didn’t feel like doing it but he scouted for frames in the store and asked Hilary to fix them for him: The Woman in the Bar and The Composer. He left for the bank.

He came again on the Thursday morning. He was looking wretched — tired and drawn — and he had lost his shine and panache. He said he had felt very ill on the Tuesday but had felt better on the Wednesday. He had come from the doctor whom he said was worried about him. She had prescribed him a course of drugs for which he needed money if he could find them. I asked him if he had ever ascertained if he was HIV positive. He said he hadn’t asked but that his blood had been taken and tested. I told him that I thought he should know but he said he didn’t want to know. We sat and talked in the office and he remarked, “There is no way out for me.” He read over the letter to the German Workshop and instigated a change or two and which, after printing, he counter-signed. He looked very fatigued. I saw him off and watched him walk along the garden path. He turned and looked back at me with that amused, mischievous smile of his that I had got to know so well. I waved him a farewell. Then he was into the car and gone. I was not to see him alive again. I told Helen that evening that I was concerned about Luis and wondered how long he might have. When I described the symptoms she said, “That’s shingles.” But he was under the care of a good doctor and had not been admitted to hospital. I had no thought that he would die so soon, so suddenly.

From my note of Tuesday, 24th March 1998:

‘We buried Luis today. We assembled at Dove Morgan’s funeral parlour in Harare Street at one o’clock. It was a throng even a crowd. Despite the short notice the word had carried and the artists had come to the gallery in the morning. Gwen, looking smart and attractive in a long black dress, was wet eyed. Little Bebito, Luis’ nephew, was grief stricken. In the chapel the women broke into a hymn. It was very moving. And then we bid a last farewell to Luis in the open coffin. I formed the sign of the cross with my finger on the wooden side near his head. Outside, Barry Lungu was howling. We all looked wretched.

And then we joined the cortège to the new Granville cemetery off the Beatrice Road. Acres of open grassland surrounded by the bush which is filling rapidly with mounds of earth covered with broken pots and dead flowers and without a headstone in sight. So many are dying presently that the dead are buried quickly. Hilary had been shocked when he recovered Luis’ corpse from the bottom of a pile of unrefrigerated bodies at the morgue the day before — the residue of death over a weekend at the hospital. Luis’ face had been misshapen from the weight of the bodies above him.

We laid Luis to rest. It was very hot, even under the canopy. There was no preacher or members from the church Luis had joined. The principals of spiritual truth are wonderful. Man’s imperfections unending. A number of mourners spoke — Joachim, a member of his clan, Cosmos Shiridzimomwa and Crispin Matekenya. A tall, elegant woman said a long prayer. I had got up in the middle of the night and written, as best as I was able, some words in the form of a praise poem which I read:

Good people who knew and loved Luis Meque,

I cry for Luis Meque,

I mourn for Luis Meque,

My heart is heavy, my soul is in distress

And my spirit is downcast

Yet we are here to honour him and to praise him.

Here are the mortal remains of

A true Son of Africa

And the time will come when

You will know it.

Listen to my words.

I say Son of Africa

Not Son of Mozambique alone

Nor Son of Zimbabwe only

But Son of Africa

Remark my words.

He was born and raised in Mozambique

But fled the war to Zimbabwe

Where he made his home

Where he did his work and

Lived to the fall his short life.

In tune Mozambique will claim him

And honour him as its own

And in tune Zimbabwe will acclaim him

And honour him as its own

And in tune Africa will embrace him and call him her own.

Luis Meque is a Son of Africa

For his paintings know no borders, know no boundaries,

They extend beyond the mountains,

Beyond the Limpopo and the Zambezi

And across the deserts to the oceans.

Luis Meque said

I am black, I think black, I paint black

And identified himself wholly with Mother Africa

And the People

He was a Son of Africa.

He painted black people

But anonymous people

People types in different situations

That are unmistakably African

And whom we all recognise daily.

He painted the people

The fatigue Workers Going Home

The Strikers, The City Boys and The Drunkards

The Midnight Lady

The Rastas and The Street Kids.

People standing, sitting, waiting tolerantly

All the activities of the life of people

In the street and in the city —

The life he knew and

The life he led.

Luis Meque tested himself,

He tested his art and the limits of his gift —

His perceptionness and his observation

And his courage,

And he tested authority.

He broke rules in his art and in his life

Because he was an individual and non-

conformist

And in his turn he was tried and tested

But never subjugated and he bore his trials patiently

and without rancour.

He did what he did

What he had to do, honestly

And in the manner that only he could do

And in this he has left a legacy — his life

history and his work

And in this is his victory for his spirit lives on.

Tafumia Gutsa said to me last night

“Your Sons are dying”

But for Luis Meque, this Son of Africa,

His message and the spirit of his work

Will remain and carry.

At the end to him is the Victory

To him we pay homage

And we pay honour and tribute

And we praise his name

And we praise his work.

He was Luis Meque — Son of Africa

Painter of life until death

Let us pray to your God and to my God

And to our God

Rest his Soul.

We, the mourners, shovelled the grave full.

Cosmos took great and loving care

smoothing out the mound. The flowers were

put on the top. We shall erect a tombstone in a year when the soil has settled. Hilary

implanted the wooden cross he had made

and on which he had painted:

Luis Jose Meque 10.4.66. — 21.3.98.’
Luis was a fatalist and he even seemed at times to have a death wish. Perhaps it was that he had assessed his chance of survival very thoroughly and was facing it daily and noting it condition and reconciling himself to death. But there were times during the last few months when he said he was fighting and was not going to die. As much as I tried to counsel over the years he largely ignored it. But near the end he admitted he would have been better off if he had followed advice in some things — the drink and the women. Luis wandered through this life doing his will most of the time, and leaving loose ends and disruption in his wake. He was hopeless at managing his money. Generous natured, he would distribute it to needy artists, buy the drinks, and pay for the children that he had sired here and there. At times I thought of him as prone to indolence but these were gaps between working spells or when he was feeling unwell. In fact he was a very serious and assiduous painter who liked and needed challenges to get into the working mode.

My notes of 23rd March go further:

‘Luis exited this life as he lived it: unpredictably. Helen commented that Luis had very good luck and very bad luck. Extremes. Certainly, with his art, he had remarkably good fortune. In his personal life he had much misfortune. He suffered authority but never conformed. He was an individual. He did his own thing in his own way. He seemed to take delight in courting trouble and then he would patiently endure the repercussions. I never saw him angry and I never heard him say a harsh word. He was of sensitive and gentle disposition but somehow trouble found him.’

Luis knew he could always manage me. To that degree he used me as his bank, his banker, his loans manager, his mother, his father, his brother, his sister, his uncle and his aunt. I would sometimes say to him, “Luigi, why can’t you manage your affairs better? You have had thousands of dollars recently. You are the most successful artist, not only of you young artists but under this umbrella. You earn far more than I in a week, in a month, in a year and yet you still cannot manage and are back so soon for more.” He would smile and say, “You always get it back.” And that was true. But in this way he kept pressure on me to move his work to recover the debt and to keep him in money. And he knew that, even if I complained, I would never refuse him. I had opened an account for him at the bank from the beginning but he never used it. Luis moved easily and well where he wanted and he did what he wanted. If he felt like sleeping all day he slept all day. Regulation and strict discipline were not his way. He would drift into the gallery two or three times a week. He would never come early. About eleven o’clock or midday was time to
Luis never said very much but he was a thinker and took criticism seriously. In response to criticism that his figures were always back views and that he couldn't paint faces, he came through with some frontal views for his exhibition, The City, in 1997. But then Pip Curling wrote of him in The Standard that his work was an "iconography of bondage". Luis' response was to paint a nude white female figure in high heels who is painting a placard with the words 'War very Art' and 'Learn how to Write'. This was to me an obvious reference to Pip and while Luis laughed he never did admit that this was the case. He was gentle in his manner and speech and preferred to talk through his paintings.

In his inimitable way, he was painting types and that makes his work important because it was about the life of the people — a microcosm that embraces all. He had other directions and roads to traverse and he was beginning to strike out into a wider and more universal concept. He gives us just a glimpse of where he was going ... And as Helen said, had he lived longer he would surely have created masterpieces. Perhaps it will be seen in time that he had, in his short life, already done this.

In respect of painting in Zimbabwe, he forged a new way for black painters with his expressionist renderings. His more modernist works that move steadily towards abstraction challenge the best painters the country has known. Luis was reckless but it was clear at his death that he was loved and worshipped by many of the younger artists who saw him as an example and hero.

We have lost Luis the person and Luis the artist. It is a double tragedy, a double sense of loss. I mourn the loss of Luis in both of the senses because I was very fond of him. He had great affinity for him, indeed more so, loved him. And the artistic loss is enormous. Luis was the leader of the group. He possessed the creative spirit. And his work has power. And he was coming into maturity when he was cut down.

Amongst his last paintings of February 1998, there was Journey's End, a diptych — each large with 84 painted drawings on pages torn from a book stuck on hessian over stretchers — one work being in colour and one in black and white. Helen saw them as a tremendous breakthrough and said that he had again completely outclassed his contemporaries and complimented him. Luis was clearly pleased with this reaction and said he was going to pursue this direction. Subsequently, he brought in another roll for scrutiny and for selection for his April exhibition. These works are as windows, compartmentalised, and include symbols in the squares. It was these paintings that Helen and I were looking at the moment he was dying at the hospital.

The real clues as to the manner of Luis' thinking and feelings in the last months of his life are within The Last Paintings. Amongst the works he showed us in January there are several which relate to death. One, predominantly in greens, incorporates the form of what appears to be a body lying in front of a building with arched windows which may be a church. This is set off and balanced beautifully by a thin red line through the sky and a white stroke near the head of the lifeless almost indistinct form. Another, with two figures with a bent chair in what may be a continuation of his Cafe/Restaurant series has the word 'Exit' emblazoned in the background. On yet another, Luis formed the letters 'L.M.' and
Chiedza Musengezi reviews an exhibition of works by Luis Meque

An exhibition of The Last Paintings of Luis Meque opened at Gallery Delta on 25 August 1998. It commemorated Luis Meque’s life and underlined his contribution to the visual arts in Zimbabwe. He had a style distinctly his own, one which matched his defiant and robust voice when he proclaimed his blackness: “I am black. I think black.”

Winner of several awards including the National Gallery’s 1993 Award for Distinction in Painting, Luis took part in no less than 32 exhibitions in the 10 years during which he painted (1988-98). Some of the exhibitions were held in Europe and America to favourable critical acclaim.

Luis Meque’s last works, produced during a brief period of remission between January and March this year, suggest a confidence and an easy pleasure in painting. His brush strokes are swift, broad and spontaneous. The outlines of his figures and forms are fluid. Seemingly effortless, they make drawing and painting look simple. He had mastered the skills. His late palette is founded on dark colours: deep maroons, greens, blues, purples, browns and blacks. They mirror the dark times we are living through. HIV is taking its toll in human lives, unemployment is high and our currency is continually falling in value. However, nearly each painting has red in it. Perhaps there is hope if, like Luis Meque, we are imaginative enough to explore new means of survival. The dark colours reveal too, the personal psychological tones of an unhappy background and were partially influenced by working indoors at night as the artist often did.

Luis Meque was committed to experimentation without which there would be no new art. At times his characteristic playfulness and inattention to detail earned him negative criticism but his style reflects his own reckless attitude to life. Sometimes he layered his colours (and the layers seldom fit snugly on top of each other) then scratched them away to reveal what was underneath. He delighted in textual surprises made possible through collage or by superimposing water-based and oil-based colours as in the painting Exit. In 1997 he produced a collage for an exhibition of wind objects, using an old pair of tattered red overalls flapping on a line stuck onto cardboard and looking like a body both gaily and hopelessly tossed around by the wind. In his last works he was still experimenting. The five large collages on hessian or brown paper and the smaller Windows series present new techniques and materials — he was moving in yet another direction.

His immediate environment, the city, as well as his own condition and feelings provided his inspiration. He frequented cafés, bars, night clubs and sometimes walked the streets in order to watch and sketch. He observed himself dispassionately, without flattery. From the urban spaces, Luis extracted personality types such as Guy and Doll, Car Watcher, Midnight Woman, House Workers. A remarkable quality about Luis Meque as a painter was his ability to capture the archetypes and the moods that match their situations. He did so in such a way that the viewer can recognise them at once.
The Last Paintings

One of my favourite paintings even though it does not form part of this exhibition is City Boys which depicts two young men of handsome physique wearing trendy clothes. They walk casually amongst buildings presumably night clubs and bars, the dark colours which form the background suggesting that it is night. The mood of the painting is unmistakable — they are happy and carefree night revellers.

Cell which is part of the last paintings depicts some city boys in a reverse situation. Here two fashionably dressed young men are locked up behind bars. They are completely under the pressure of their emotions. Luis did not hesitate to distort their facial features to render them expressive. They have extraordinarily long faces. enlarged noses and eyes. Their gloomy situation is reinforced by their grotesque facial features. I found this painting quite evocative — it opened up my imagination and connects well with City Boys. Perhaps the night revellers were picked up by the police for rowdy behavior.

But defining the elements of the painting too precisely can only limit the meaning. Cell may have broader implications. It may be representative of the nature of prisons that we live in, be they political turmoil, unemployment or unhappy relationships. Perhaps the concept of imprisonment was important to Luis. He knew about life behind bars. The jacket of one of the prisoners in Cell is patterned with bars which make the jacket stylish but also probably indicate something more. Imprisoned body? Imprisoned heart? Does the way we dress confine us? The bars also appear in the painting Seated Woman where they form a background to a woman consumed with worry. The miserable-looking woman, stripped down to her petticoat, is seated in a dark interior against a white window or opening. Closing off the window are five spaced bars, a result of five broad and bold brush strokes. In other paintings, bars take the form of thin lines on a figure as in Building with Figure. For the viewer, the feelings triggered are those of being caged, trapped in a situation, a general failure to break through.
Luis gives us another archetype in Woman which could easily be re-titled 'City Woman' for she looks very much a young woman about the city. She's young and saucy in her blue body-hugging mini skirt which barely covers her thighs and her yellow top which just sits on her waist. Her straight hair is scooped up and held in place with a white hair comb. Her posture and dress suggest that she is comfortable with the way she is. She stands alone with her back to the viewer. She is not part of the mainstream. Her style of dress signals that she has broken away from conformity perhaps as a way of asserting her own individual freedom. The female figure is not detailed, it only reveals what can be gleaned at a glance. We cannot be sure about the story behind the woman we can only guess and our own imaginations add to the narrative. For viewers who read the daily newspaper the painting has a resonance with a report in The Herald of 4 September of a young woman wearing a mini skirt at Mbare Musika who had to run for her life after a mob had threatened to strip her naked. Representations of non-conformity appealed to Luis. The elements of his work Friends — Free At Last reinforce this point.

If a viewer were to look for common elements, windows or openings could not be missed. They feature in many of the last works. However, his windows are frustrating to look through. Nothing clear or definite is revealed. The windows of the painting Church and Figure are dark in colour, no sunbeams are admitted to shed light on shadowy places. What is it Luis was searching for which he never found? Do the viewers strain to see something even where there is vagueness or nothing? The painter seems to mock our falsehood for certainties. We crave them yet when closely examined these certainties often turn out to be half truths or plain untruths.

The three paintings: Friends — Free At Last, Crossroads I and Crossroads II are all about windows and uncertainties. The organiser of the exhibition has grouped them in the same room to emphasise their unity. They comprise of pages ripped out of old novels, pasted onto large brown cardboard surfaces to form a series of 9 x 9, 5 x 5 and 4 x 4 squares. On the pages Luis drew figures and symbols. They are arranging pieces in which he employed text to engage the viewer's closer attention. Some of the pages have chapter headings or running titles such as 'Reminiscences of my Life', 'A Diagnosis', 'Farewell to Danger' and so on. Bearing in mind that Luis was quite aware that he was not to live long, the printed headings add further insights for us. The pages are like panes of glass through which we can catch glimpses of his life. The figures in Friends — Free At Last look like a couple in different postures or perhaps many different couples: standing separately, seated closely, hugging, entwined and so forth. The printed word on which they are drawn is formal, final and controlled. It provides a rigid background to the fluid figures. The contrasting elements communicate that a formal and controlled outlook on life diminishes love and tenderness. It threatens intimacy. The figures emphasise the centrality of love and relationships in our lives, further highlighted by the deep red spiral. Much of Luis’ work was concerned with the tenuousness of relationships. In Lovers, she gives him an intimate caress. In Guy and Doll, the woman is huddled on a chair, left in the cold by the man who turns his back, perhaps not wanting a permanent relationship.

In Friends — Free At Last, the figures to the bottom left are hardly legible. They shed light on Luis Meque’s creative energy and limited time. The brush tip is too broad to give a distinct line, the hairs have separated and Luis seems too much in a hurry to stop and rearrange them. The last figures are reduced to abstract smudges of paint.

These paintings also reveal that Luis Meque’s final days were characterized by the struggle with death. Woman Seated shows an unhappy figure nursing depressing thoughts. Drips of red in the background suggest that her life is in danger. The darkly painted man in Figure in Room looks agonised. His ribs are showing, his eye sockets are hollow. Blood drips out of one nostril and there is more blood on his underpants. Exit has two figures seated closely. With their backs to the viewer they look into red space, a danger zone. They are exiting this world. Journey’s End, which resembles Friends — Free At Last in its composition, is a recognition by Luis that he could go no further. He had travelled the journey. The viewer can share scenes from his travels by looking closely at the paintings on the pages torn from the book of his life.

Although Luis Meque might have talked of bad spirits as the possible cause of his illness he did not reveal this in his last paintings. What he communicates is triumph over death. His painting Victori suggests there is nothing to fear in death. Transforming gloom into works of art is an admirable quality in a world where fear of death is a major cause of evil. Luis has passed away but his life and paintings validate art as a tool for survival. Farewell Luis.
Empires and nations

Anthony Chennells looks at Zimbabwe's culture debates in context

Last year the Zimbabwean media showed President Mugabe in Belgium at an exhibition of Zimbabwean art gazing pensively at one of the soapstone birds from Great Zimbabwe. The head of this one, at some stage in its history, had been broken from the body and the body and plinth had gone to Berlin, the head remaining in Zimbabwe, the two pieces temporarily united for the exhibition. Mugabe took the opportunity to speak angrily about Africa's looted artifacts which he argued should be returned to the continent. A month after Mugabe's Belgium trip, a British Labour member of parliament, Gwyneth Dunwoody, learned that locked in a glass case in the New York Public Library were the stuffed toy animals once belonging to Christopher Robin Milne. His father, A A Milne, made up stories about Christopher Robin and his animals which became some of the most famous children's books ever written. Dunwoody ensured a well-attended press conference by affecting outrage; the toys, she argued, should be returned to England immediately. The American press took delight in involving in the debate the British Prime Minister, who happened to be visiting President Clinton. "The government position," said Blair, "is that we admire the president and people of the United States, and we believe they will look after and care for these animals sufficient for them to rest here." 1

Behind Mugabe's anger and Dunwoody's and Blair's mock seriousness, which satirises the posturing of cultural nationalism, lie two centuries of debate about the institutionalisation of culture and the nation which has some bearing on contemporary discussions in Africa about culture as a lived experience and cultural objects as commodities. By the end of the eighteenth century, the development of European nation states meant that Europe no longer looked for humanity's greatest cultural achievements to the classical world of Greece and Rome to which all Europeans were heirs. Instead nationalism emphasised cultural differences: each nation possessed unique features which contributed to its national identity. The emergence of the nation state coincided with European Romanticism, that many-faceted movement which is so often over-simplified into some sort of nature worship. In fact Romanticism encompasses many contradictory positions and Romanticism inspired people as diverse as the architects of the nation state, early socialists and reactionary feudalists to look to country people as the repository of authentic national and indeed human values. Because these people were untouched by industrialism, the argument went, they had remained close to blood and soil, those Romantic metonymies of nationalism. Folk art, music and stories were analysed and imitated so that urban art could discover in the creativity of the people a distinctive national character. Their simple forms were used not to accommodate the intellectual searchings of sophisticated minds but rather to address instinct and emotion in the idiom of ordinary life. 2

Although the nation state may have had its origins in Europe, the last two hundred years throughout the world have been characterised by the development (some would say invention) of nations, almost invariably in response to the collapse or expansion of various empires. We are so accustomed to thinking of imperialism as an African or Asian phenomenon that we forget the extent and ubiquity until very recently of colonised people in America or Europe itself. By the end of the nineteenth century new nations in south and central America had declared themselves independent of Spain and Portugal, and the right to rule of several ancient empires was challenged in Europe and the Middle East. The Ottoman empire was confronted by demands for regional autonomy from the Persian gulf to Romania. Even as colonial wars on Russia's frontiers were extending the power of the Tsar into southern Asia, the Tsar's European subjects from Finland to Ukraine were discovering multiple nationalities and intellectuals were turning to rural people to reveal the discrete characteristics these
might have. In his great history of the end of Tsarism, Orlando Figes writes of nineteenth-century artists within Tsarist Europe appropriating peasant crafts in order to create "a set of ethnic symbols as the basis of their own national ethos and identity". Figes is sceptical of the validity of these symbols:

"The folk culture of the countryside, which (the urban middle classes) believed was the ancient origin of their own nation, was in fact little more than the product of their own fertile imagination ... (It was this class) rather than the peasants, who dressed up in folk costumes when they went to church, who filled their homes with furniture and tableware in the 'peasant style' and flocked to ethnographic and folk museums."

Bordering both the Russian and the Ottoman empires, Austro-Hungary was similarly faced by the development of secessionist movements in provinces which were to become independent nations after the First World War. I was recently in Moravia which was ruled by Vienna from the early sixteenth century and is now the eastern province of the Czech Republic. Moravia's principle city Brno, the second largest Czech city, still shows in its street map traces of a colonial organisation of urban space. Under the Austro-Hungarian empire the industrial and commercial centre had once been German speaking, ringed by Czech-speaking suburbs whose inhabitants went into the centre only to work. Language here separated centre and periphery, as race so familiarly did in the white-dominated cities of southern Africa.

North of Brno, in the foothills of the Moravian highlands, is a thirteenth-century convent, Porta Coeli, where Cistercian nuns have returned once again since the collapse of Czechoslovakian communism. Part of the convent buildings are a museum whose original exhibits were collected for an Ethnographic Czech-Slavonic Exhibition in Prague in 1895 and included "ethnographic collections, folk furniture, ceramics and craft tools." The guide book to convent and museum refers to the 1895 exhibition as "national" which it could have been only as a gesture of Czech solidarity and a statement of resistance to Austrian hegemony. It is symptomatic of the Romantic nationalism of the nineteenth century that a seven-hundred year old institution, founded by Czech royalty and which Moravia's often violent history has marked in every smashed and restored statue, should be seen less as a manifestation of the nation than the artifacts of Moravian peasants. The convent was founded from France and the magnificent portal of the convent church, its nave and the convent cloisters are superb examples of Western European gothic architecture. The gold-leaf and marble sanctuary is baroque and only its exceptional beauty sets it apart

(top) Gothic arches and baroque altar and apse of the Porta Coeli church. The arches are over seven hundred years old; the apse is more recent and was finished in the early eighteenth century. Are they still evidence of alien influences in the Czech republic?

(left) St Joseph and the Christ Child in the Chishawasha church surrounded by a border decorated with fleurs-de-lis, part of the royal arms of France. Several of the first Jesuits at Chishawasha were French. The drums have been adopted from Shona worship to play an important part in Roman Catholic Shona liturgy.

(right) The magnificent tympanum above the main door at Porta Coeli which shows the French influence of the founding nuns. Although the bodies of the statues are thirteenth century, marauding Swiss iconoclasts knocked the heads off in the seventeenth century. They were replaced in the nineteenth century.
from a hundred similar sanctuaries in Austria and southern Germany.

The gothic and baroque of Porta Coeli should remind us that very few nations will not show in their art international influences and that the cultural products of all nations are likely to be syncretic. The Porta Coeli guide book, however, seems to insist that the nation can reveal itself only in art and crafts which are specifically local. Although these gothic buildings have been part of the Moravian landscape for three-quarters of the millennium and south German baroque has added other aesthetic dimensions to the church’s interior and indeed to Brno city centre, they are not seen as examples of a national idiom. Pan-European architecture and sculpture are implicitly antithetical to the nation. The colonial city is always suspect to nationalists as the site where the coloniser’s culture is affirmed and where the authentic character of the nation is compromised.\(^5\)

National culture as it is being constituted here is more than an indication of national difference. In this account culture’s principle value is that it provides the vocabulary of resistance to an authoritarian metropolitan culture. Culture as resistance has been invoked in Africa as it was in anti-colonial movements in the Russian or the Austro-Hungarian empires. The classic formulations of African culture as anti-colonialism were made by the Guinean resistance leader, Amilcar Cabral:

“(T)he people are only able to create and develop the liberation movement because they kept their culture alive ... and because they continue to resist culturally even when their politico-military resistance is destroyed.”

For Cabral this culture of resistance remained alive with “the masses in the rural areas ... (who were) untouched or almost untouched by the culture of the colonial power.” \(^6\)

The most uncompromising statement of national art as the expression of ordinary people was made by the Ugandan cultural theorist and poet, Okot p’Bitek. He argued that Europe had taught Africa to see culture as something which could be commodified, “something separate and distinguishable from the way of life of a people, something which can be put in books and museums and art galleries”. \(^7\) African governments, Okot claims, have accepted this idea of a dead, commodified culture and in “Uganda the Ministry of Culture runs the National Theatre and Cultural Centre, an art gallery, a dance troupe called The Heartbeat of Africa, a curio shop which sells dead drums (drums which cannot be used for dancing any Ugandan dances, and are sometimes used as tables).” \(^8\)

Such things are for the tourist trade but Okot wittily attacks the new “clan of tourists ... political leaders who visit one another’s countries ... (to be) entertained at airports by traditional dances for a few minutes.” Such people cannot begin to grasp the wealth of significance within the dancing from its movements to the colours which are worn by the dancers — he explicitly excludes political party colours which presumably have meanings with which the leaders can immediately identify. \(^9\)

African culture, Okot p’Bitek explains, “is the living and celebrating of ... fundamental ideas (about Man, Nature and Spirits).” Independent Africa has learned from the European colonisers to transform culture into “a commodity, a ‘thing’ which could be bought and sold, imported and exported, imprisoned in museums and cathedrals and art galleries — buildings, that is, where people do not normally live but visit when there is a show.” And Okot p’Bitek imagines the spirits of funeral drums dying “because of the everlasting silence. Drums are for drumming not merely for gazng at ... A silent drum, an unplaved flute, the string of nanga which is not plucked etc ... what are they for? ... These ‘items’ do not operate in solo, alone, away from home, in the absence of the people ... steeped in the world-view of that society.” \(^10\)

By imagining ceremonial objects wrenches

from a living community, commodified and appropriated for metropolitan scrutiny, displayed for the shallow admiration of people who come to them sceptical of the beliefs which made them live, Okot p’Bitek forces us to think of other ways in which nations can define themselves. One way of reading the collections in the National ‘Gallery in London or the Pergamon Museum in Berlin would go something like this: both institutions use their collections of cultural artifacts to affirm nation as imperialist power, whose national characteristics derive in large measure from its people’s abilities to control the rest of the world, shape it to its will, describe its cultural productions and remove them to the metropole so that they can be objectified within the gaze of a nation which knows itself through conquest. When British and American politicians joke about Christopher Robin’s animals, they are able to do so because both have known or know what it is like to be world powers. The ironies in Dunwoody’s and Bhair’s remarks lack bitterness because both Britain and the United States can joke without anxiety at the American colony now metropole and Britain as new colony, its cultural objects accumulated in a new configuration of political and economic power. Imperial
powers do not turn to their own rural people for a sense of national identity.

To regard the collections in Europe's and America's great galleries as the production of a predatory colonialism does, however, simplify the way in which these collections were accumulated. There can be little doubt that the marble statues wrenched from the Parthenon and displayed in the British Museum as the Elgin Marbles should be returned. They were part of the integrity of a building which, though ruined, exhilarates hundreds of thousands of people each year. What, however, of the Babylonian Processional Way in the Pergamon which is one of the greatest archaeological reconstructions in the world? German archaeologists recovered the ceramic tiles which faced the walls on either side of the Way from under the sand where they had lain for nearly two millennia. The wonderful Assyrian bas-reliefs had suffered a similar fate until British-initiated digs at Ninevah, uncovered and reassembled them in the British Museum. Okot p'Bitek talks of silence surrounding ritual objects when they become objects merely of contemplation but what silence could be more profound than that surrounding great human monuments, buried beneath desert sands and whose very existence was no longer a part of any national memory? The tiles of the Babylonian Way now line the progression of tourists; whatever else moves between them it is certainly not silence.

But my disagreement with Okot p'Bitek's conception of art and culture lies deeper than a disagreement over whether ceremonial objects should be seen simply as aesthetic objects or not. Clearly in one context they will be ceremonial and in another they will be aesthetic since the ceremonies which gave them their principle meaning are not enacted. The danger of Okot's cultural exclusivism only becomes fully apparent when he speaks of African artifacts which he imagines decorating a wall in Los Angeles: "These so called 'things' do not speak in foreign tongues. They have nothing to communicate to strangers, outsiders who are therefore, not dano (Human)." 11

To deny humanity to Europeans or Americans or Asians or indeed other Africans not familiar with the particular ceremonies in which these objects had a ritual function is intended to be both shocking and amusing I assume.

(left to right) The convent and front of the Porta Coeli church. The stone would once have been exposed and the stucco is relatively recent.

National decorative and architectural idioms influence the thatched roof, circular wall and Father Anthony Berridge's wall paintings of the Redemptorists' chapel at St Alfonsus House, Tafara.

The Chishawasha church is nearly one hundred years old and is a familiar feature of the Chishawasha valley. Jesuit brothers built it using bricks, moulded and baked in the valley, and local wood and stone.

One of the soapstone side-altars in the Chishawasha church carved by Brother John Baptist Krechel - an interesting alternative use of our infamous stone.

The altar at St Alfonsus House chapel is formed from a Tonga drum. Clay pots which Roman Catholics have adopted from traditional rituals for use in the mass stand beneath a fifteenth-century icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. The original from Crete is in the Redemptorist church in Rome and copies hang in Redemptorist churches throughout the world.
Throughout the world languages which have developed without much contact with outsiders tend to refer to the speakers of the language as representing a human norm and to describe other people in terms which sees them as less than human. 

"Dano" is the Acholi word which performs this function and in drawing attention to its connotations, Okot is saying little more than that the Acholi language developed without much contact with other people. He is also echoing imperialism's assumption that the colonisers represent some human norm. Much more dangerous than this is the barely concealed cultural authoritarianism in everything which Okot p'Bitek writes. "Man cannot, and must not be free," he says, and he lists the terms which identify our relationships with members of our families and our social positions. "Permanent bondage," he goes on, "seems to be man's fate. Because he cannot escape, he cannot be liberated or freed." 12 The primary function of culture for Okot is to contain deviance and impose conformity. Not surprisingly then we have the following definition of "the true African artist". It is of course a 'he' whose eyes are fixed "on the philosophy of life of his society. His voice, the thunder of his drums, the vibrating of her buttocks and the slashing of the sky with his horn, the wood and stone carved into a figureless figure of a — is it a ghost? — are his contributions to the celebration of real life here and now." 

When people start using words like 'true African artist' they have closed their minds to any possibility of innovation and one should not be particularly surprised that women function in the 'real life' of male African artists only as sexy dancers. Culture, as Okot p'Bitek uses it, is not a term descriptive of a way of living; it is a prescriptive term and culture is conceived as a mode of control.

African scholars have increasingly begun to contest a cultural nationalism which admits neither the possibility of development and change nor the inevitable syncretism which follows any culture's encounters with foreign cultures. Chidi Amuta has complained that in order "to project the so-called African world view as a coherent philosophical proposition... the ethnic heterogeneity of the continent has to be submerged... and practices... typically and uniformly African" have to be inverted. 13 Amuta accuses cultural nationalists of using the cultural beliefs and practices "of a particular phase in the development of a society to generalize on and post an immutable philosophical paradigm for the world view of that culture — dead, living and unborn." 14 Against this sort of ahistoric essentialism, Amuta speaks of:

"the reality of the contemporary African experience (being) the active co-existence of

a pre-scientific mode of perceiving reality with a modernizing tendency...

(Herbalists, shrines, hoes... (co-exist) with computers, Mercedes cars and skyscrapers."

One African reality is:

"the African urban masses... who, in their rural poverty and urban squalour and dispossession, are progressively losing confidence in gods, shrines and amulets that have no answer to rising costs of imported foods, drugs, electricity."

The important black English cultural theorist, Stuart Hall, remarks that identities cannot be "grounded in mere recovery of the past... (if) identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned in and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past." 

Culture can be nothing else than the expression of a people living in history and therefore living with change. Part of the value of the work of the late Luis Meque is surely because he paints alienation as a part of contemporary Zimbabwean life. As someone who came from Mozambique, he never felt entirely accepted by either the Shona or white communities in Zimbabwe. His art is produced from a space just beyond the coherency of communities where people exist within the security of shared understandings. Characteristically a Meque painting does not show interactions within a community: rather we see the backs of women, their faces hidden from us or else people on their own or in twos within an unpeopled space. Since diaspora, migration are the great characteristics of our time, these have to be a part of any nation's identity.

What then of the securities of rural life? As we have seen people have turned to these in places as removed from one another as Uganda, Finland and the Czech Republic. But as Figes remarked of nationalisms in the Tsarist empire, this is probably in part the illusion of an alienated middle-class searching for and imagining roots.

Gathering Firewood, a painting by Peter Kwangware on display in Mutupo Gallery shows a familiar enough scene in any communal land in Zimbabwe and probably throughout Africa. What is striking about the painting is its efficiency and its limitations. The verticals of the woman's bodies and the horizontals of the wood bundles form a pleasing arrangement which suggests that this scene is part of the eternal nature of things. The painting does not allow itself to register any curiosity about the people for whom collecting wood and carrying these burdens is part of a daily grind or indeed the larger ecological implications of fuel gathering.

The painting becomes all the more striking because it appears on the same exhibition as a remarkable piece of work by Chiko Chazunguza called Bejini Blues. Chazunguza has taken four mistsawire, the rural handbrush made by cutting the tough stalks of the old-season's grass to a uniform length and binding them at one end with a belt of reeds. Inserted into the first three are other ordinary household articles: a home-made whisk with semi-circles of wire driven into a whittled stick, and two sadza-stirring sticks. The basic materials with which Chazunguza is working are the ordinary utensils of any rural home. The bristles of the first brush are curved into a perfect globe, a shape which suggests the firmness of a young woman's body. The stalks of the brush are held together by a strip of bark cloth and the whole covered with doga, which has the appearance of termite adits. The termite nest is always ambiguous in Shona culture, suggesting both womb and grave. Once the female shape is recognised, the whisk becomes ornamental, an elaborate hairstyle, something which is removed from hard work. The second brush registers significant changes; some of the bristles have been pulled out and re-curved against the body of the brush, suggesting pregnancy. The whisk has been replaced by a sadza stick, slightly charred on one side and instead of the bark cloth there is a strip of metal, partly tarnished but still with some brightness showing within the metal. This
metal strip is repeated where the top of the brush meets the handle of the stick, only here it is held in place with nails and sinisterly suggests a collar designed to constrain. The third brush is held by an even wider belt, but now it is rusted and the shine has disappeared; the collar has gone and the ends of the brush have become unravelled. The sadza stick protrudes but a thin leaf of metal covers it, held in place by nails whose points protrude. It becomes a club. The last of the four brushes is unravelled at its top and its centre is charred. Only an old rusted tin holds the bristles in place.

This striking sculpture shows how art can do so much more than simply insist on conformity to the cultural norms of rural life. The very title signals the dissidence in its conception. The adjective refers to the great Beijing women's conference of 1995 which in Harare speech has become 'Bei'jini', used by men to indicate an uncontrollable woman and by women to indicate their right to independence. The centre may at first sight appear to be the rural area since the entire sculpture employs the products of rural craftsmanship, but 'Bei'jini' invites us to consider these things from an international perspective and the word 'blues' suggests little comfort when we do. Whatever rhetoric of liberation may be heard, the reality is routine domestic chores which constrain and in the end destroy. Witty though this piece is, it is a bitter wit which does not find the nation when it looks at rural culture but rather the destruction of so many female lives. The sticks and the brushes become emblematic of male and female sexuality and in the progression what was once whisk has become club. There is no male presence in the last brush — the unravelled ends and charred interior suggest that she is no longer an object of male desire.

If I am excited by Chazunganuz's sculpture, my excitement is partly because it is national in the sense that it is explicitly using Zimbabwean idioms in its construction. But it is turning them back against themselves. Marriage, sex and domesticity are not allowed safe and conventional meanings. These meanings are subverted and are rendered unstable with wonderful economy of material.

Nations like individuals exist with change and if a museum — or art gallery — is to be truly national, it must always accommodate both the relative stasis of past societies, which may have been stable, as well as the contemporary nation caught up in often violent and contradictory changes. This involves showing an appropriate respect for art which is reproduced from the sites of instability within the nation. It also must allow the nation to be looked at from perspectives which are not national.

Notes
2. Significantly Marx would have nothing to do with this. He and Engels regarded the proletariat, the new under-class of industrialisation, as the class of the future. The peasantry were outside history, locked into "the ideas of the rural life". The Manifesto of the Communist Party (1848; Moscow, Progress, 1977), p. 40.
5. Until the seventeenth century, Protestantism was regarded by some as an expression of Czech resistance against the aggressive Catholicism of imperial Austria. Although the Czech Catholic Church was persecuted under communism, elements in the Church are widely regarded as having collaborated with the regime. These historical details and the secularism of nineteenth-century Czech nationalism may partly account for the unwillingness of Czech nationalists to regard the Church as a national institution.
8. Ibid p. 16.
10. Ibid. p. 22-23.
11. Ibid. p. 22.
12. Obanza in the Ngami languages and Hunha in Shona perform similar functions. A local discussion of the phenomenon is S T Sankange, 

References
Peter Garlake writes a personal appreciation of some works by Berry Bickle

'Memory, Mischief and Magic in the Country of My Heart'

I am not an art critic. My appreciation is too limited and personal. I do not have the wide sympathies, stamina or curiosity to visit every gallery or studio, or the confidence to judge, expound and pronounce on their contents. It takes me too long to arrive at some confused conclusion. Although we have been fortunate enough to acquire a few of the pictures we have loved, Margaret and I are not collectors. We believe only the artist can ever own his or her works. The rest of us can only hold them in trust for a short time. A work of art has an autonomous life which outlasts a human life. One does however enter into a life-long and very personal dialogue with every painting on one’s walls. Each will subtly change one’s perceptions and insights and thus very slightly change one’s individuality: one of the many miraculous effects of art.

Six paintings by Berry Bickle illustrate something of this. *New York*, 1990, is a large, thick, still folded, commercial brown paper bag, an item I associate with the small corner shops or delicatessens that survive in parts of Manhattan (the only district of New York I know) and are as surprising as grass growing through cracks in a concrete freeway. Berry has covered the face of the bag in muted, sombre colours, seemingly too unconsidered and deliberately inarticulate to rank as art, though perhaps bearing echoes of the art for which New York is renowned. It is beautifully framed, in what looks like a museum showcase rather than a frame. The bag is transformed without damaging its inherent integrity. Here in its simplest form is one of Berry’s great gifts: the ability to redeem the simplest object, the ‘small thing forgotten’ and through it make a statement about an entire experience: in this case moving from Zimbabwe to the very different environment of one of the world’s greatest and most vibrant cities.

Ibo, an island close to the northern Mozambique coast, has one small, old, forgotten village and a classic 18th century fort. Through a series of misadventures I waded ashore there from a grounded yacht in early 1974. The fort was now a torture centre and death camp of the Portuguese secret police, PIDE/DGS. I was arrested and taken before the camp commandant who was enraged and probably frightened by our intrusion: obsequiousness alternated with a demented stammering and frothing at the mouth, made more
nightmarish by his gaudy 'beach-wear'. This was the only contact I have ever had with the 'banality' and obscenity of total evil. Through nights on the yacht, one heard the muffled cries of human agony and despair in the face of imminent death, against the constant distant background of mainland artillery. After the Portuguese Revolution, the detailed bureaucratic records of the Ibo horrors, Nazi in their thoroughness, were seized and published in full. Here in 1975, Samora Machel began his great symbolic journey, part triumphal progress, part pilgrimage, south to assume the presidency. In his first speech in Mozambique, he rechristened Ibo 'Estrella de Morte', the 'Star of Death', a metaphor derived from the plan of the fort.

With all this in the past, Berry made a home in Ibo village and produced a series of paintings about her life there. Conscious of its past, she transcended it. *Ibo*, 1993, is a set of five pages from a sketch book, stapled to a plain white canvas in an uncomfortable, long, narrow, vertical format. Each page has a few rubbings or outlines of very ordinary and common sea shells, the outlines tentative, broken, and suggestive not descriptive. A few shells and sherds of equally ordinary household china, collected along the beach, are collaged onto the pages. Some of them are covered in uneven strips of a light coarse muslin, as if still veiled in a film of sand and water. One sherd is more carefully and tightly wrapped, hidden and withdrawn, to become a talisman suspended on a wisp of string. The only colour is the slightest and most delicate pink shading, colour of a fresh shell or the most delicate and intimate areas of a human body. Everything is understated, reticent, obscured or hidden, and the effect is lyrical. This is a representation of a very specific place, once the location of the worst of human suffering and evil, now redeemed, exorcised and laid to rest through very feminine powers of love and art. Once again, 'small things forgotten' achieve the ultimate triumph of the fragile and desped.

*Pro Amore*, 1992, is a very different work: a triptych of three huge canvases addressing the landscape of Berry's homeland, Zimbabwe. (See *Gallery* no 7 for reproduction.) Many white artists, with sensibilities attuned to the subtleties of Europe, are overawed by the distances, the harshness of the light, the alien forms and the sense that the human is reduced to insignificance in Africa. Berry seldom if ever attempts to delineate, describe or represent directly some specific part of her country. Perhaps in agreement with her, I also find that almost every attempt to do this only results in a diminution of reality and differing degrees of failure. In the triptych one only realises one is facing a landscape through the contour where land meets sky. The land is filled with strong yellows, oranges and reds, scarred by violent slashes of a paler buff, swept across the canvases...
with a broad twisting brush: undisciplined, formless, almost repellent (and it does repel many people). The sky is an equally overpowering deep blue, scarred by clouds.

Inset on the left panel is a heavy, outdated, gilded oval picture frame containing a battered tin cigar-box lid depicting in miniature a heavy and heavily bearded gentleman in a formal black suit and tie against the background of a factory and harbour reminiscent of any 19th century tropical settlement. The figure reminds one irresistibly of Thomas Baines, Zimbabwe’s first white artist. The whole becomes a memorial tablet complete with epitaph. The right panel has a clearly more modern framed photograph of the Victoria Falls, head-on, full-frontal, giving a full factual description of their height and width and volume and conveying nothing of the wonder they engender. It is so similar that perhaps it is an illustration from my first Junior School history book of nearly 60 years ago, which was indeed the first attempt to provide children here with some knowledge of their own country. With almost surreal incongruity, a gilded fan is stuck to the central canvas and a pair of high-heeled shoes painted below the Falls. The only objects that seem at home are a wooden snake and a broken necklace of old trade beads. Every panel bears a square of scrawled unintelligible writing, failed attempts to describe the landscape in another medium. The whole is a collage of all the inadequate and doomed attempts by outsiders, male and female, to inhabit, come to terms with, respond to and interpret the Zimbabwe landscape. The land remains undaunted, indomitable and master; the intruder is inconsequential but allowed a history, a struggle and a grudging space.

A subsequent Bickle exhibition was dominated by large panels using the metaphor of actual simple canvas dresses: part wedding dress,
A Belief shared. | 22x172

It was transposed into another medium, the destinies forecast for farmers' daughters and wives who are less masterful than Martha Quest. A long series of paintings and prints refined the calligraphy of Pro Amore into photographs of 17th- and 18th-century Portuguese explorers diaries and maps. I am less happy with these enticing, beautiful but bland bureaucratic documents. For me they mask the reality of the rows and layers of corpses of young Portuguese men buried beneath their 17th-century church in Mazowe, toothless from scurvy and dead in their early twenties.

The theme set by Pro Amore reaches a climax in Memories, Mischief and Magic in the Country of My Heart, 1998. Could any title be more evocative? Only subdued colour now suggests the landscape. Another conventional picture frame once more imprisons four little black Instamatic family snap-shots of the Falls, lively but artless memories of holidays. Under them are old hand-written recipes compiled by a housewife before the popularity of cook books — and no doubt of the hot, heavy, meaty dishes of the time; there is also a farmer's faded letter, probably to a product buyer. This is all the intimate history of a family in a time now gone. A boxed and titled relief map of Zimbabwe is stuck to the canvas, the map itself still folded away, though there is a line of small torn fragments of it at the top of the canvas; a country reduced to conventional abstract denotations which evoke only unreality. Copies of a 17th-century map at the bottom at least offer depth, romance and an aesthetic improvement on their modern counterpart. With the wit that so often adds delight to a good picture, one of these is stuck to the canvas so carelessly or artfully that it is ridged and becomes a map in real relief.

Around and over all of this there are, once more, tiny, tightly wrapped, suspended packages containing what are now intriguing secrets. The care taken with them has turned them into potent talismans, amulets, potions and magic. Another Africa surrounds us, a great unknown pressing in on the bounded, diminished white life. The orderly lines of the talismans are surrounded by scribbled numbers and notations: some abandoned attempt to catalogue, describe and come to terms with magic in rational Western scientific terms — and a violation of their reality. Tragedy is present in the cheap, bent, buttered and now useless little enamel dish, so often the only marker of a nameless grave in the bush, in this case perhaps of a child: the dispossessed and forgotten masses of the past. Throughout this painting, landscape is given meaning by history or rather two, even three, histories: one precise and formulated, one vast and almost entirely hidden. The artist has yet again turned 'small things forgotten' into her treasures and then shared them with us and given them to us.

It does not matter if the interpretations I have given are nonsense to many. They carry no authority. I am sure Berry would be astonished at many of them. Good paintings carry many resonances, allusions and have many meanings. A good painting is not a subject for decoding but celebration. Responses to it should be less attempts to analyse and more 'to bode forth' richness. Pro Amore and Memories mark the beginning and perhaps the end of a particular trajectory (though Berry will continue to astonish us). The last is much more settled, resolved and mature than the first. Traditional African art is said to be essentially 'an art of accumulation': in this, as in other ways, Berry unconsciously demonstrates that she is an African artist. I believe paintings of the quality of Pro Amore and Memories, confronting the key artistic problems of landscape and celebrating our country, peoples and history, deserve a place in the national collection. This view is not shared. Pro Amore hung crooked, badly lit and in a space far too tight and confined and, perhaps as a consequence, remained unsold throughout an entire Heritage exhibition: 'large things ignored'.

Recent paintings by Hilary Kashiri will be on show at Gallery Delta during October followed by Magic Works by Thakor Patel. In November Helen Larios will hold a solo exhibition of paintings followed in December by The Summer Exhibition - a group show of paintings, sculpture, textiles and ceramics.


Life drawing lessons are being offered by Gareth Fletcher. Phone 882972 for information.

National Gallery in Bulawayo is hosting A Changed World, an excellent exhibition of recent British sculptures including work by Richard Long, Rachel Whiteread, Anthony Caro, David Mach and Anish Kapoor who are among the best international contemporary sculptors. The show moves to the Harare National Gallery in January and is not to be missed. The British Council who have brought in the show will also host a workshop/seminar around the exhibition. This is a chance for Zimbabwean sculptors to get to grips with other concepts of sculpture. Phone the NGZ in January for information. In November the National Gallery in Bulawayi will mount the 1998 Schools Exhibition and in December they will open the 12th Annual VAAB exhibition and photographs by Luis Basto and David Brazier.

The National Gallery in Harare will be closed during October for the mounting of the Heritage Exhibition which opens in November and runs until January.

Art, Iron & Linen at 6 Harrow Road has a permanent exhibition of paintings by the Tengenenge sculptors: Barankinya, Paulo, Violet, Jeneti Manzi, Elina Costa and others.

The Zimbabwe Association of Art Critics meets the last Monday of every month to discuss art and related issues. Everyone is welcome. Phone 861195 for information.

Mutuppo Gallery will be showing recent large paintings by Charles Kamangwana and sculptures by Nesbert Mukomberanwa during October, African Decor Accessories and recent work by Rayi Njagu in November, and a group show of ceramics, paintings and sculptures in an exhibition entitled Earth Elements for Art II in December.