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Osborne Macharia Kipiriri *4 series*. Photograph

## Back to The Future: 'Still Here Tomorrow to High Five You Yesterday' at Zeitz MOCAA

By **Sue Williamson**

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**Zeitz MOCAA**

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After the teething problems which dogged the fledgling Zeitz MOCAA in its first fifteen months, it is indeed thrilling to see the museum rapidly coming into its own under the skilled directorship of Azu Nwagbogu and his team. A series of new visual engagements greeted visitors in town for the recent Cape Town Art Fair, and most importantly, truly reflected the mission of the museum, which is to focus on the diversity, freshness and complexity of the contemporary art of Africa.

An extraordinarily rich wall hanging showing off Ghanaian born El Anatsui at the top of his form has been installed along one wall of the central atrium, taking over pride of place from Nicholas Hlobo's dragon. Anatsui is seen at his best in these monumental metallic pieces, which have clad the interiors or exteriors of buildings as diverse as a renaissance Venetian palazzo, where several stories were luxuriously draped for the 2007 Venice Biennale, or a museum in Berlin, where a hanging in stark black and white, with gaps rent into the surface, was stretched like a shroud across the facade in 2010. At the MOCAA, the chain mail like surface with its red and gold glints on a silver background is a magnificent foil for the rough cement surfaces of the cathedral-like atrium. It's sheer size makes it difficult to get a

proper view of the whole from the ground floor, but one could have a pleasant morning viewing it while zipping up and down in the glass lifts.

On the third level, twenty eight painters from Zimbabwe – and one from its neighbour, Malawi – are given a fine in-depth survey of the genre in curator Tandazani Dhakama's 'Five Bhoobh – Painting At the End of an Era.' 'Five bob' is the standard taxi fare in Harare, the requirement for any short term journey, and usually a new passenger will find herself instantly immersed into a lively discussion of the matters of the day. That such a strong show with its manifold themes should emerge from a country once again plunged into a dire financial and political crisis, speaks to a culture that keeps going, no matter what obstacles block the road.

On level four, the visitor will find a visionary exhibition entitled 'Still Here Tomorrow to High Five You Yesterday: Chapter I.' Chapters II and III are to follow. The theme here is Afrofuturism, a term coined in 1993, and understood to frame a reclamation of black identity through art, film and culture, building on the rich cultural heritage of the continent and the diaspora.

The talented curators of 'Still Here' are Gcotyelwa Mashika and Precious Mhone, and curatorial text on the wall reads in part: 'The African continent is home to a plurality of myths of creation. African mythologies bear a striking resemblance to speculative science fiction. The interweaving of space, time and cosmology is not new. In folklore, stories describing the origins of the world have been passed down for generations.

'By creating avatars and hybrid characters, whose agency reconfigures our mind and soul, artists are able to navigate to the limits of existence and explore uncharted terrain'.

The tremendous popular success of the film *Black Panther* has brought these ideas to a new level of global acceptance and a vastly enlarged audience. The investment of Hollywood in the myths of Africa is riffed on in a cheeky Michael MacGarry work hung above the title of the show. 'Posuban' (2016) is a wall hanging of 15 flags reproduced from Hollywood films about the continent. No actual country flag is shown, but there is lots of yellow, green and red, and such clichéd symbols as stars, lions and shields.

The cinematic influence continues in Osborne Macharia's four large portraits in the next gallery. It is not a surprise to learn that the Kenyan photographer was tapped by Marvel to promote the movie *Black Panther*, and one imagines that the Hollywood production team probably studied Macharia's work closely at their planning stage, so impressive is the photographer's attention to the detail of his subjects' costumes, lighting and make-up, to say nothing of their measured and commanding gaze. Particularly powerful are his two portraits of matriarchs clad in what might be called bush battlefield couture, with astonishingly ornate towering headdresses, featuring outsize rolls of shining black hair, which apparently serve as covers for weapons or maps. Macharia's practice includes creating backstories for his protagonists, and this series honours female freedom fighters involved in Kenya's Mau Mau movement in the independence struggle of the 60's.



Loyiso Mkhize also utilizes the language of myth, intermingling it with heroes, villains, astronauts, planets, puffs of smoke and futuristic machinery, creating a time spanning universe in an epic graphic novel style drawing, which keeps the eye on the move. At bottom right of Mkhize's drawing, a young boy, oblivious to the frantic action behind his back clutches a remote control and gazes upwards – dreaming, no doubt of the future.

At the other end of the visual scale, size-wise, Atang Tshikare presents a set of immaculately executed small ink drawings of oddly attenuated creatures in unsettling landscapes. In one drawing, two creatures with sea anemone-like tentacles where their heads should be, have pushed their arms through the earth's crust, above which their hands appear as plants. The works speak of discomfort and hybridity or, perhaps, of an ability to adapt to difficult circumstances.

This spirit of make-do infuses Willie Bester's cumbersome three seater vehicle, fashioned, as is the artist's wont, from found materials: the seats are miners' shovels, and the worn enamel bowls and mugs used to serve food to workers are encased in a glass case forming a seat back. The work is painted the bright yellow of the South African Defence Force's Casspirs in the apartheid era, those ugly tank like vehicles which roamed the townships. ('Daar gat die yellow pages', people would mutter as one passed). Seen in this setting, Bester's telling comment on the hardships endured by labourers under apartheid takes on a new reading as a dystopian



vision of the future, a time when fossil fuel has come to an end, and transport must be put together by any means possible.

The far reaching influence of the broadcast word is made manifest in a painting by Willie Bester. In *Radio Waves*, a giant transistor radio is surrounded by circles of passively hunched listeners. The current controversies swirling around the country around the undue influence on the gullible followers of the 'prosperity gospel' churches and its pastors come to mind.

And a media story provides the impetus for Spanish photographer Cristina de Middel's 'The Afronauts' (2012), a series of photographs based on a 1960s story from Zambia about a failed attempt to launch a space programme.

The work consists of reproductions of three documents from that period together with a number of photographs staged by De Middel. The central document is a copy of a newspaper story.

'We're going to Mars!' WITH A SPACEGIRL, TWO CATS AND A MISSIONARY' reads the headline. The writer is one Edward Makuka Nkoloso, whose photograph accompanies the piece.

Nkoloso was a disaffected returnee from World War 2, and a teacher, and one can only regard his project to train his space team by rolling them down hills in oil barrels, and his request for funding of seven million pounds from UNESCO as a brilliant provocation highlighting the abyss between ambitious scientific progress and impoverished reality.

De Middel's work emanates from stories she comes across which she describes as 'unexplained or incomplete.' She blends researched documentary images with her own constructed photographs which re-imagine aspects of the story, adding handsome visual layers which extend the parameters of the original text documents. At the same time, the viewer is led to question exactly where the truth lies.



In one corner of this gallery, the curators have added their own footnote to Nkoloso's story, installing the kind of the desk and typewriter at which he might have sat, complete with a selection of vinyl records of music of the time to add to his listening pleasure.

Twenty artists in all are represented on this first chapter of 'Still Here'. Some are well-known like Gerald Machona, who has planted a flag fashioned from decommissioned Southern African bank notes,

into a pile of sand in his *Flagging the Nation*, or very well known like Yinka Shonibare, whose trademark headless figures in wax print historical costumes play out an Adam and Eve tableau. But all the artists – and what a pleasure it is to discover new practitioners – have earned their place on this beautifully curated and well hung show.

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