

"A new gallery for contemporary and classical African art in Antwerp's trendy museum quarter."

"Mostaff Muchawaya's first solo exhibition in Europe."

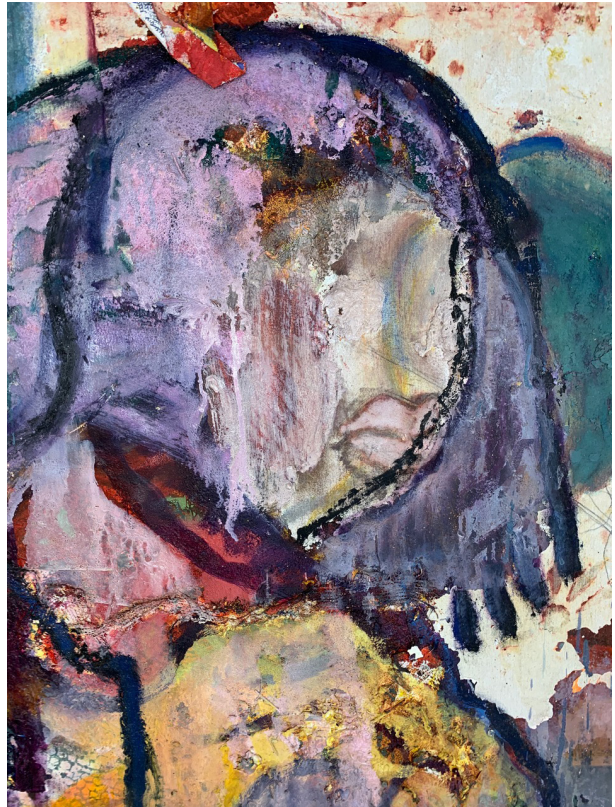
"A leading contemporary artist from Zimbabwe, Muchawaya will be present during the opening weekend."

"Exhibition text by renowned art critic Ashraf Jamal."

"Muchawaya's works had a lot of success at Duende Art Projects' 2022 'Unsettled' group show."

"Beautiful portraits and intense landscapes in an unique style."

"It's the gallery's ambition to give more visibility to art from the African continent."



**"MUTSVAGI WENZIRA
-PATHFINDER" MOSTAFF MUCHAWAYA
B.1981, ZIMBABWE**

Jan 21 - Feb 12, 2023
Thu-Sun, 13-18h

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ABOUT MOSTAFF MUCHAWAYA



Mostaff Muchawaya (b. 1981, Zimbabwe) is one of the most innovative painters of his generation. Through the medium of paint, Muchawaya creates multi-layered landscapes and portraits of people drawn from memories of his upbringing in the mountainous Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe. Muchawaya's portraits are a complex confluence of portraiture and self-portraiture, autobiography, and fiction.

In his work, the artist expresses a deep connection to his memories and experiences, which are inseparable from 'his people' and surroundings. He continuously refers to his rural upbringing; his art serves as a safe space, a home he reverts to.

"My work is centered on portraits of my loved ones. It's all about Nyazura where I come from, and the people and places in that area."

While the paintings are new in their material form, to Muchawaya they are deep-rooted, remembered renderings. His portraits are a combination of memories, a dream-like flash of faces that shape an impression of a half-remembered experience. As with memories, the works encompass all embellishments and subjectivities layered on top of one another. Muchawaya's method of eroding the surface mirrors the natural process of forgetting. His unsettling, faceless portraits make way for recognition.



"I don't put faces, but you can find your face. It's all about perspective."

When I look at the portraits, I see a face because sometimes I create a face and then I conceal it with paint, so I leave room for the viewer to also find their face."

Muchawaya's energetic signature style involves the application and erasure of multiple layers of vividly colored paint.

Once dry, each generous application of paint is then scraped in parts or removed from the canvas. Household cleaning agents and paint chips from derelict walls are also used to give the impression of erosion. Paint chips from prior works are added to the richly textured surface. Each new piece is thus also part of an old one, creating a very personal sense of continuity throughout his work.

"The scrapes in my work symbolize distant memories of my loved ones. I use processing ink and acrylic PVA to create layers on canvas and paper then I apply paint thinner to scrape the surface and reveal components of the layers underneath. The scraping technique produces an aged effect on the work representing passage of time or memory."

This cycle of application and eradication – almost like an exorcism – continues until each portrait reflects the shifting and uncontrollable nature of memory itself, where the processes of remembering and forgetting converge to form abstract impressions of the women in his life. Once finished, the portrait he presents is one that eerily reminds one of a haunting – a haunting by places, by people and by what used to be or could have been.

Born 1981 in Nyazura, Manicaland, Mostaff Muchawaya works in Harare, Zimbabwe. A 2003 graduate of Zimbabwe's National Gallery School of Visual Art and Design, he joined the artist's collective Village Unhu art studio in 2012 when it was run by Misheck Masamvu, Georgina Maxim and Gareth Nyandoro. Muchawaya presented his first solo exhibition in South Africa "Memory/ Ndangariro" at SMAC Gallery in Cape Town in 2017. This exhibition concluded his 2017 residency at Greatmore Studios in Woodstock, South Africa. Earlier solo exhibitions include his debut show, titled "My Entire People and Place"s, in association with Village Unhu and Alliance Française at the Old Mutual Theatre in Harare, Zimbabwe in 2013. In 2018, Muchawaya was included in the exhibition "Five Bhobh – Painting at the End of an Era", curated by Tandazani Dhlakama and featuring twenty-nine artists from Zimbabwe, at the Zeitz MOCAA. The artist had a second solo exhibition at SMAC Gallery in 2018 ("Zviso Zvangu - My Faces") and participated at the 22nd Sydney Biennale in 2020. In 2022, Muchawaya was part of Duende Art Projects' group exhibition "Unsettled", and also had works shown at Osart Art Gallery in Milan and Tiwani Gallery in London.





ABOUT DUENDE ART PROJECTS

Duende Art Projects' ambition is to inspire people and enrich their lives by sharing our profound passion for the art of the African continent.

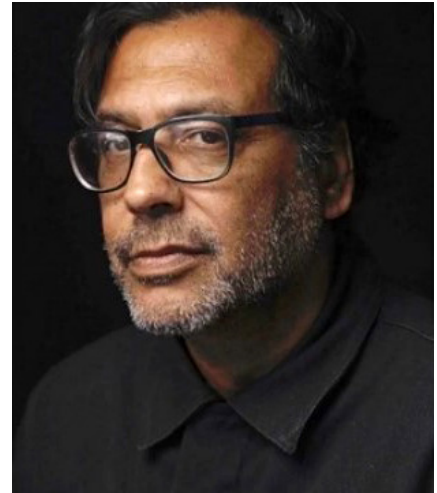
Our purpose is to strengthen Africa's visibility and significance within the global and diverse art world through a strong digital presence, curated exhibitions on unique locations and the participation to art fairs such as PAN.

Our mission is to connect people — the curious and interested, aspiring and seasoned collectors, connoisseurs, emerging and renowned artists, art advisors, curators and writers — with art from the African continent.

We facilitate easy access through compelling exhibitions — offline and online, in Antwerp and on location. Our online platform provides insightful educational content and wishes to be a home for ideas, news and stories. We offer a bespoke and discrete art advisory service that covers all aspects of building and managing a collection.

Duende Art Projects was founded in 2021 by Bruno Claessens, a passionate art expert with 15 years of ample experience in the African art market. Previously, he was the European director of the African art department at Christie's for 5 years.

Bruno has published three books on African art (Ere Ibeji (2013), Baule Monkeys (2016) & UNÛ (2021)) and has ran a popular blog on the subject since 2013. Throughout his career, he gained a profound knowledge of art of the African continent, both classical and contemporary, and has developed a great network of collectors, curators and scholars as well as strong institutional ties. The gallery's first year saw two major group exhibitions, "Threads" and "Unsettled" at Zwartzusters Monastery in Antwerp, as well as a first participation to the renowned art fair Parcours des Mondes in Paris and the PAN art fair in Amsterdam.



INTRODUCTION BY ASHRAF JAMAL

Oil, ink, found objects on canvas – the combination of materials in Mostaff Muchawaya's art remains jarringly familiar. They speak to collage, the ready-made, a century-long resistance to transparency – to German Expressionism in particular, the great detractor which placed the artist's war-torn psyche at the centre of an agonised drama, and drowned art in its lurid artifice.

Muchawaya's art – part painting, part collage, wholly assemblage – bears all the traits of a Modernist tradition that thrust inward, and refused the mimicry of Realism or its more spectral variant, Impressionism. Instead, the frontier which modern art would claim was the fathomless interiority of Being. It was inside this precarity that Modernism, we are told, installed its Godless doubt. However, we forget that many of the early Modernists were theosophists, mystics, dreamers. What the new art of the 20th century issued forth was a wildly eclectic set of belief systems, which were irreducible to any orthodoxy.

That, today, we find a great return of the core drives of Modernism – in the stratospheric return of Abstraction, for example – tells that we are not done with all our exploration. Indeed, as T.S. Eliot reminded us in 'Little Gidding', the last of his Four Quartets, 'We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time'. This view is powerfully echoed in Muchawaya's exhibition, Mutsvagi Wenzira (Pathfinder), in which this sense of an eternal return is acutely felt. As Muchawaya reflects, 'From memories of my upbringing, from where I came from up to now, I find myself'.

Encountering a Muchawaya relief work, it is this eternal return one senses – and age-old truth spliced with the giddy pleasure of novelty. Despite the fact that he is an African artist in a time in which Black Portraiture is the rule, he has refused the iconicity of the black body in the artworld, in favour of presenting a more psychic depiction of black being, or more controversially, a being more generally, more inclusively – universal.

This is the way of the 'pathfinder' – the one resists arbitration, preferring to give us paintings in which the bodies conjured are largely consumed by a painterly aesthetic that overrides, deletes,



or smudges out any realistic depiction. His 'Self-Portrait', for example, is a pairing of black and white figures, inverted echoes, skewed doppelgangers. His 'Untitled Portrait' is a crude rub of circles for head and eyes and an ovoid thrusting red tongue. This is less an iconic representation of black resistance, more challenging resistance – with tongue thrust out – to those who seek to keep the black body a bondage, while casting it in the guise of freedom.

Abstraction is the dominant register in Muchawaya's paintings. In this regard, they are timely. Visit any major contemporary gallery in Europe today, and it is Abstraction which graces or haunts its aching white walls. Why? Because we are not done with it, despite all attempts to thrust it under the carpet.

Because we are traumatised, caught in the stranglehold of grotesque piety and righteousness, bonded to some or other political dogma, wracked by identity politics, sickened by guilt, and fundamentally drained. Thus, it is unsurprising that what we seek, and find most therapeutic, is art that refuses to explain itself, that asks only that we linger longer, embrace a calming colour field, or some vivid hemorrhage.

Matisse was correct when he declared that we want nothing more, after a long day at the office, than to kick off our heels, sink into a comfortable armchair, and enjoy a lovely painting. If Muchawaya fulfils this brief today, it is not because his paintings are pretty, but because they mirror our shredded exhaustion, and appease us in the midst of this recognition. This is because we cannot deny ugliness, or error, because we now find ourselves caught at a radical juncture – between hope and its impossibility. This is our psychic crisis, which Muchawaya presents to us. Through his paintings we too can find ourselves.

All eras have their creative seers, their confessors, or soothsayers. In today's starkly abrasive and haunted world, we require art that is psychically honest – this is Muchawaya's gift. His abstracts are especially restorative. We are drawn to their crudity, discordant choreography, yet tonal gentleness.

One work, titled 'Chimwanda Mountain Near Nyazura', speaks to geography. However, as to the scale of the geography evoked? It is impossible to say. The artist's vision is as microcosmic as it is macrocosmic.

A work, especially appealing to me, is 'Gwinanzira Near Odzi'. Once again, the trigger is geography, but these are works that refuse a landscape format, rather, theirs is a psychic geography. Verticality is especially key in the seeming rockpile in slurries of pink and lilac. The one prevailing trait in all of Muchawaya's works – which read as paintings, despite the accreted foreign substance, sometimes thickly, sometimes slightly, which are lodged into/onto them – is that they resist any definitive mark-making. Instead, what we are looking at are loosened blobs of colour, some psychic and seismic shift.

Whether Muchawaya paints a human figure, or a landscape, one thing is clear – and that is the refusal of clarity. As to why this is the case? Perhaps because he can uncover none in its entirety, despite being a ‘pathfinder’? Because clarity is a ruse in these troubled times? Because his Africa is no curiosity, no fetish, that can be easily reified? Or because, as I’ve stated at the outset, we are compelled to revisit the damage we have caused, because no answers wholly lie before us?

In this confusing regard, Muchawaya’s portraits are refreshingly free of entitlement, or any self-justification. Rather, they haunt our peripheral vision, they will not be contained or mastered. Because they prefer the limits of cognition, the far reaches of taste, because in this world in which we find it difficult to digest the state of play all about, the terrible unease we feel, they are artworks which have deliberately and smartly resisted gluttony, or easy consumption.

ASHRAF JAMAL is a Research Associate in the Visual Art and Design Centre, University of Johannesburg, and Writer-Researcher for ArtBankSA. He is the co-author of *Art in South Africa: The Future Present*, and author of *Predicaments of culture in South Africa*, *Love themes for the wilderness*, *A million years ago in the 90s*, *The Shades*, *In the World: Essays on Contemporary South African art*, and *Strange Cargo: Essays on Art*. *Wide Ladder: Abstraction & The Figure* is forthcoming.



