

Artsy
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The Artsy Vanguard 2021: Wallen Mapondera

The multimedia artist [Wallen Mapondera](#) has borne witness to many social and political upheavals in his native Zimbabwe – and these experiences largely inform his work. In large-scale, tapestry-like installations that are woven together from detritus, he comments on contemporary East African life. These sculptural works have contained everything from plastic bags, toilet paper, egg crates, cotton buds, and wax thread to a heavy-duty military tent, as seen in the large diptych *Mbeu (the seed) II & I* (2020).

As an artist who reclaims waste materials and found objects from the streets – reconfiguring them as metaphors for social, political, and environmental issues – Mapondera continues a long tradition of artists like [El Anatsui](#), [Nnenna Okore](#), [Sanaa Gateja](#), and [Dickens Otiemo](#) who demonstrate the value in reuse by exploring such materials' textural properties and site-specific contexts.

It these works, in particular, that have launched Mapondera onto the global stage. The artist, a recipient of Zimbabwe's prestigious National Arts Merit Award, will represent his country at the forthcoming 59th Venice Biennale, alongside artists Kressiah Mukwazhi, Ronald Muchatuta, and Terrance Musekwa. This success has come on the heels of significant achievements on the African continent, including appearances at the National Gallery of Zimbabwe, Harare (2017) and Zeitz MOCAA (2018–19).

But Mapondera didn't always work in abstraction. In earlier mixed media works, he depicted animals like goats and cows in states of captivity or restrained with ropes and chains, commenting on unequal power dynamics between humans and animals — where the use of force and coercion dominates.

These works may have been focused on interspecies relations, but they also expressed something about human power dynamics — about the oppressive, exploitative politics he experienced growing up as part of a younger generation that witnessed the many failures of the Zimbabwean nation state. Mapondera, who was born in Harare and now lives in Chitungwiza, Zimbabwe, has watched citizens suffer from high unemployment rates and numerous other hardships. He has also observed the resilience and survival strategies of many Zimbabweans in their daily lives, on the streets and in their migration south in search of better lives.

While he now makes abstract work, these same concerns and experiences are still present. “Even though I initially drew and started off with recognizable depictions on paper, I began to think more about this idea of the medium I was working on itself,” he said, “and bringing all these different materials together to construct an abstract image.”

This marked departure from representation to abstraction, for Mapondera, serves as a way to ruminate on the afterlife of materials he finds in the streets. It is also something of a symbolic act—to create amid scarcity and in difficult conditions, manifesting the same resourcefulness that he sees in his fellow citizens amid social and political struggles.

“Things I find on my walks, such as discarded newspapers, plastic sheets, and furniture, were once functional,” he explained, “but thrown away they also experience the hustle and bustle of every day which embodies them in a way—and now they are imbued with untold stories.”

Mapondera’s series “Tuck Shop,” perhaps his most poignant social commentary on the state of Zimbabwe, was made in response to the crippling effect of hyperinflation in the country—when shelves in popular supermarkets were completely emptied out, leaving people to turn only to local tuck shops for survival. The rudimentary stores were stocked with little more than snacks in plastic bags, tissue paper, and in some cases, lemons, at a time when basic staples like maize meal, rice, and oil for cooking were scarce.

To make the series, Mapondera replicated the informal architecture of tuckshops and limited supply goods by sandwiching together compressed packaging like cardboard egg crates and plastic food wrappers, along with distressed tarpaulin and toilet paper, between wooden frames to mimic shelves found in these small retailer units. He created dense layers of these mixed materials by folding, cutting, and stitching—transforming discarded materials into a visual tapestry of diverse forms and patterns. The works from this series conceptually examined a grave period in Zimbabwe’s recent history, where survival meant persevering through traumatic and

desperate realities.

While Mapondera's work is increasingly reaching an international audience, it's important to him that it speak to people in Zimbabwe. *Zimbabwean Flag Redesigned* (2020), for example, can be read as a call-to-arms of sorts for a new direction for a country that was one of Africa's most promising economies but that has drifted into deprivation and decay since the 1980s. He also makes a point of titling his works in Shona, one of the country's official languages, alongside Ndebele and English. In doing so, he explained "it is important for me to communicate meaning without this being lost in translation or Anglicized. I want to convey the real meaning of what I am trying to represent in these works in my mother tongue."

Whether addressing displacement and marginalization, land reclamation, or extractive industries, Mapondera's unique visual language carries a strong political message of resilience and protest. Themes of time and the afterlife come through in his work too, but in essence, his materials communicate something about the strength and creativity of his fellow Zimbabweans – about the everyday people who have found ways to survive on the most basic provisions.



Wallen Mapondera
Laboratory, 2020
SMAC



Wallen Mapondera
The Crack, 2021
SMAC



Wallen Mapondera
Untitled, 2021
SMAC



Wallen Mapondera
Before They Grow, 2021
SMAC



Wallen Mapondera
Untitled, 2021
SMAC



Wallen Mapondera
Zai Rakawora II, 2020
SMAC



Wallen Mapondera
I choose Happiness, 2020
SMAC



Wallen Mapondera
Song of the moment, 2021
SMAC