

Portia Zvavahera
*Ndakavata pasi ndikamutswa
nekuti anonditsigira*

15 September - 31 October 2020
24 Grafton Street, London



Portia Zvavahera, *This is where I travelled [4]*, 2020 © Portia Zvavahera.
Courtesy the artist, Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg, and David
Zwirner

David Zwirner is pleased to present *Ndakavata pasi ndikamutswa nekuti anonditsigira*, an exhibition of new paintings by the Zimbabwean artist Portia Zvavahera. The title translates from Shona to English as 'I took my rest in sleep and then I awoke for He sustained me.' On view in The Upper Room at the gallery's London location, this will be Zvavahera's first solo presentation in Europe.

In her paintings, Zvavahera gives form to emotions that manifest from other realms and dimensions beyond the domains of everyday life and thought. Her vivid imagery is rooted in the cornerstones of our earthly existence—life and death, pain and pleasure, isolation and connection, and love and loss. These deeply personal visions are realised through layers of vibrant colour and ornate, veil-like patterns that the artist builds up into palimpsestic surfaces through a combination of expressive brushwork and elaborate printmaking techniques. Zvavahera's compositions draw on particular traditions of figuration in past and present Zimbabwe, first expressed in the work of Thomas Mukarobgwa in the 1960s, while also pointing to postwar artistic practices that probe the nature of the human condition.

In these new works, produced at a time of intense solitude and collective struggle across the globe, Zvavahera returns to herself and to her dreams. Her particular process of alternating painting and printing results in images that communicate complex emotions in a play of tension and release. Zvavahera establishes the base of these canvases with preparatory sketches, drawing from a powerful visual vocabulary comprising women, her family, and shape-shifting animals, in scenes both metaphorical and fantastical. The real concerns of members of her community and daily life become situated in the

larger dreamscape of her subconscious. These paintings represent an effort to transcend suffering through individual practices of ritual and devotion. As Zvavahera states, 'It is me in the paintings.... I can only speak about myself.'¹

Against a starry purple background, a beast—part bull, part dog—looms ominously over two figures. Its presence is seen by the artist as a necessary evil, embodying that which must be battled and overcome: it is 'the problem but also the solution', in her words. In other works, a solitary central figure is simultaneously repressed by, and depicted emerging from, a surrounding group. In several paintings she makes use of intricate patterns taken from her own floral or classical Zimbabwean designs: a repeated scalloped edge is stamped using a block print across two different canvases, mingling with translucent red, green, orange, and purple inks. A wax-resist process found in batik textiles is used to reveal decorative elements beneath layers of pigment and, in a new technique for the artist, to create a vibrating field of marks in her cosmic surrounds.

Joining an intimate process of self-reflection with her singular perspective, Zvavahera, in the words of curator Gabi Ngcobo, 'speaks of feeling both challenged by the differences in her understanding of spirituality and optimistic about the recognition of a shared resistance against the powers that have threatened our humanity. Through her mind's eye Zvavahera transports us deeper and deeper towards our true selves. You can escape but you'll always need to come back.'²

Portia Zvavahera was born in 1985 in Juru, Zimbabwe. She currently lives and works in Harare, Zimbabwe. She studied at the BAT Visual Arts Studio, National Gallery of Zimbabwe, from 2003 to 2005. She then received a diploma in visual arts from Harare Polytechnic in 2006.

She has presented several solo exhibitions with Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg (2014–2019), and a solo exhibition with Marc Foxx Gallery, Los Angeles (2017). The National Gallery of Zimbabwe, Harare, presented her solo exhibition *Under My Skin* in 2010, and most recently, the Institute of Contemporary Art Indian Ocean, Port Louis, Mauritius, held her solo exhibition *Walk of Life* in 2020. She was invited to show her work as part of the Zimbabwean Pavilion exhibition *Dudziro: Interrogating the Visions of Religious Beliefs* at the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013.

Zvavahera's work is held in the collections of the Johannesburg Art Gallery; Minneapolis Institute of Art; National Gallery of Zimbabwe, Harare; Pérez Art Museum Miami; University of Chicago Booth School of Business; and the Weisman Art Museum, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota.

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¹ 'Lerato Bereng in Conversation with Portia Zvavahera', in *Portia Zvavahera: Wayfinding*. Exh. cat. (Johannesburg: Stevenson, 2014), p. 5.

² Gabi Ngcobo, 'Portia Zvavahera', 10th Berlin Biennale: *We don't need another hero*, accessed 24 July 2020, <https://bb10.berlinbiennale.de/artists/p/portia-zvavahera>.