

The Zimbabwean youth Pardon Mapondera: creativity as a way of self-transformation  
and social intervention

By Lifang Zhang

In her stunning and haunting debut, *We Need New Names*, Zimbabwean writer Noviolet Bulawayo depicts the life in a district called Paradise through the eyes of a group of children: scarcity of food, bricks of money, parents who live in the diaspora, and so on. Pardon Mapondera, a young artist from Zimbabwe, brought closer to me many similar scenes from his teenage life during our interview, among which is how children on the playground were expecting a lorry arriving with food. In Mapondera's simple and impressive words, "The food got missing in the shops. When we were playing out there, when we saw any truck, we ran to catch a queue. Even you don't know what was there, we had to run there and the elders would find us there. They would come. And if they had it, valuable money, they would buy anything they could. These are some of the things, like you don't find food to eat."

It is after conversations with many Zimbabwean artists that I started to realize that, the social history of the Zimbabwean crisis has profoundly shaped the memory, body and identity of the ordinary Zimbabwean people. To young people of Pardon's generation, the falling apart of things, hunger, chaos and the sometimes loneliness of being left-behind has overwhelmed their primary and secondary school time, which should have been colourful and carefree. But as many other Zimbabweans, the answer is 'tinoronga' or 'tinoona yekutamba', they always "make a plan".

Pardon Mapondera was very determined to choose a career of art after he graduated from high school. He mainly focuses on the personal story of his past, present and future in his work. "It is about what I see, feel and believe in". As a sensitive and quiet person, art has provided him a way to deal with his teenage experiences, which are entangled with the social crisis in Zimbabwe. "In the work from back and now, somewhere somehow, I have anger". Representing the dogs' bristle up in anger, the work *Zenze* [Fig 1] brings out his unspoken emotion restored in his memory of the experiences in

the deteriorated society. *Chitvuku neni* [Fig 2], which is also made from plastic straws and represents skin's reaction to environment, delivers the same message as articulated in the title, which literally means "start a red thing with me" wherein the "red thing" refers to a fight or something painful, something that draws blood. The artist states "If you heat me with a fire. I will react in my work. The reaction, the pain, I will put in my work."

Pardon trusts visual expression more than words and often exercises it through the choices of materials. Recently, he works mostly with plastic as it is also sensitive to heat and often quiet. He is fascinated with the way it reacts to heat. On one side, it can lose its shape and even be destroyed. On the other side, more importantly, it is also a moment of transforming.

Experimenting with the transformation of materials in the natural environment and man-induced "violence" has become a significant process in his work, which is also a metaphor for the artist's constant seeking for self-transformation. The foundation of Pardon's early work, the *Black Book Series* [Fig 3], were a pile of wrecked books that had been left outside for a long time and exposed to the sun, rain and wind. He then worked on them with strings and metal. The artist explains, "The book symbolizes the experience of me. I left it outside to see how it goes by itself in the weather. Even they are rotten, you can still give them (something), like the white string. You hope their life can have some piece." In one of his paintings, he has also repeated the process of burning and layering the acrylic on cardboard to see how it transforms. The answer, perhaps, can be found in his recent work *Ndiwe Muroyi* [Fig 4] which represents the skin-shedding of a snake through the process of heating plastic bottles with a soldering gun. "I am shedding those troubles of yesterday. On the other side, healing myself. I am trying to be a new person".

As one of the young artists in Zimbabwe, Pardon Mapondera's work not only materialised his own history but also tells the story of a traumatized country. Meanwhile, his practice should be understood in a broader social and political process, as for the urban youths who form part of the large number of unemployed in Zimbabwe, creativity

has become an urgent need in order to deal with the hardship and make a living. Thus, this means of expression and the message Pardon is trying to deliver through his work, to some degree, is connected with the bigger story of the youths in Zimbabwe, even in many other African countries—creativity as a way of self-transformation, development as well as social intervention.



Fig 1

Title: zenze

Medium: plastic straw thread

Size: 228cm x128cm

Year: 2019



Fig 2

Title: chitsvuku neni

Medium: plastic straws

Size: 177cm x80cm

Year: 2019



Fig 3

Title: *Black book c*

Medium: mixed media metal paper and cotton string

Size: 23cm x 30cm x 15cm

Year: 2017



Fig 4

Title: Ndiwe muroyi

Medium: plastic bottle

Size: 42cm x 10cm

Year: 2019