

Financial Mail



Afronaut: Out of this world on Zim dollars. Picture: GOODMAN GALLERY

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THE ideal of Afrofuturism has an ugly cousin, xenophobia, and these two concepts are tackled by Zimbabwean artist Gerald Machona in his show Vabvakure (People From Far Away). Vabvakure is the Shona word for foreigner.

Machona uses various decommissioned currencies as his core material to explore and link contemporary trends to historical migrations on the African continent, specifically the movement of Zimbabweans to neighbouring countries. Incorporating an element of magical realism, an entire wall of the gallery is taken up by a video projection in which a space-suited character jives through a lunar-looking desert terrain. As the short film, *People From Far Away*, progresses, the peculiar-looking "Afronaut" moves into the real world and mingles with real people who seem to take no notice of his appearance.

The suit this stranger wears is made of woven decommissioned Zimbabwean dollars. This gives an unusual tactility to its appearance, suggesting a distinct otherness that separates him from the rest of the world. The motif of currency is continued throughout the film, which includes other props, such as a flag made up of old SA rands, Zimbabwean dollars, Mozambican meticaais, Angolan kwanzas and old zaires. Titled "Flagging the Nation", the flag stands erect in a pile of white dust, suggesting an alternative history of exploration.

This narrative is peppered with a more subversive element in the exhibition. In it Machona plays the role of another masked character, inspired by "Nyau", which is a masquerade that originated in Malawi. It is used by people living in various diasporas to challenge xenophobia and negative stereotypes associated with being a foreigner. Machona adopts the masquerade in a variety of settings, donning a mask made of Zimbabwean dollars. Using the Shona prefix Ndiri, which translates as "I Am", Machona plays the role of Ndiri Barber, Ndiri Barman and Ndiri Cross Border Trader.

These characters, Machona says, gave rise to the film's Ndiri Afronaut, which embodies the otherness he addresses in the exhibition.

This consciousness of difference is at the heart of the exhibition. Machona attempts to deconstruct the concept by making it visible. It is through this visibility of otherness that he feels the difference can be transcended.

VABVAKURE (People From Far Away)

Where: Goodman Gallery

When: Until July 5



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