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Globalization and Its Discontents, at MoAD

“After the Thrill Is Gone,” Zimbabwean artist Kudzanai Chiurai’s exhibit at the Museum of the African Diaspora, tests the hopes and disappointments of post-Apartheid South Africa and neighboring Zimbabwe.

[Jonathan Curiel \(<http://www.sfweekly.com/author/jonathan-curiel/>\)](http://www.sfweekly.com/author/jonathan-curiel/) / Wed Aug 8th, 2018 5:20pm /

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Kudzanai Chiurai, Revelations X. Courtesy of the artist

The photos that **Kudzanai Chiurai** created for his “**Revelations**” series are like comical Hollywood stage sets. The African actors in each scene glisten with sweat and their characters have exaggerated expressions that suggest corruption, conniving, or some kind of excess. Chiurai depicts scenes from a decolonized, liberated Africa where the “rebirth” that Nelson Mandela championed is led not by Madiba (Mandela’s nickname) but by a group of posing, slapstick-ish comedians. Ha-ha-ha.

But the artistic joke is partly on the viewer, because Chiurai is using Western perceptions of Africa to shape his images. Like celebrated African writer Binyavanga Wainaina, whose essay ***How to Write About Africa*** is a masterpiece of satire — “Always use the word ‘Africa’ or ‘darkness’ or ‘safari’ in your title” — Chiurai reflects back stereotypes, especially visual stereotypes, that inculcate people’s images of a continent European colonizers overran for hundreds of years. Chiurai also critiques globalization and its relatively new influence on Africa. ***Revelations X***, for example, has a bug-eyed African politician addressing a room of seven men as he stands before a world map with Barack Obama at its center.

Chiurai is one of the standout artists in the **Museum of the African Diaspora’s** exhibit, “**After the Thrill Is Gone: Fashion, Politics and Culture in Contemporary South African Art**” (<https://www.moadsf.org/exhibition/after-the-thrill-is-gone->

fashion-politics-and-culture-in-contemporary-south-african-art/)." The "thrill" in the title is that which swept through South Africa and the entire continent in the wake of Mandela's 1990 prison release, the subsequent end of apartheid in 1991, and Mandela's 1994 election as South Africa's president. Everything was supposed to be different — not just in South Africa but in neighboring countries like Chiurai's native Zimbabwe and all across the world's second-most populous continent.

Chiurai went to college in South Africa, where he was the first Black person to graduate with a bachelor's degree in fine art from the University of Pretoria. He's been back in Zimbabwe for four years.

"It's a perspective on how image production of a continent is expressed — and I'm reflecting it back to the audience, as image and media and production of image is very critical and crucial to understanding African politics," Chiurai tells *SF Weekly* by phone from Zimbabwe. That understanding, he adds, "has been image-driven. Should we continue to use that image as our source of engagement, or can we go beyond the image — and start to look at more substantial and real engagements that can change the course of how one speaks to another person?"

Chiurai's previous art — as in his recent **National Gallery of Zimbabwe** exhibit, "We Need New Names" — has critiqued Zimbabwe's post-colonial politics, which **Robert Mugabe** led autocratically for almost four decades until the Zimbabwean military forced him out in 2017. **Emmerson Mnangagwa**, Mugabe's former vice president and a member of the same ruling political party, won last week's presidential vote in an election that Mnangagwa's opponent, Nelson Chamisa, roundly criticized as rigged. In South Africa, Mandela was succeeded by leaders of the same African National Congress party, who, through mismanaged economic policies, corruption, and other issues, squandered the momentum that Mandela had begun. But the reasons for these squanderings are complex, and Chiurai and other artists in MoAD's exhibit indirectly address the failings — and successes — of societies where these artists are on the inside looking out.

Chiurai says being an artist in Zimbabwe is, by default, a political career, since "everything is political. Because of our current structures of institutions, everything has to be political — it can't be otherwise. ... The institutions have made everything political. Bread is a political subject, from where you get the resources for wheat and how that impacts the environment, and oversupply, and over-demand. All these things are linked to politicized spaces."

Identity issues are a big theme in “After the Thrill Is Gone.” In ***Night of the Long Knives I***, artist **Athi-Patra Ruga** photographs himself almost completely covered with balloons as he rides a donkey and wears pink stockings and heels amid a set of plastic-looking plants. Ruga’s dress-up and set-up connotes a fictive African land called Azania that’s also been part of his performance art, which he performed at YBCA in 2014. As Ruga walks around, those balloons break open. Heels can be difficult to walk in — especially if you’re wearing scores of heavy balloons. In real life, Ruga navigates societal expectations.

“You’re not white enough, you’re not Black enough, you’re not gay enough,” Ruga says in wall text that accompanies his MoAD work. “So when I wear the balloons, it brings me to tears because not only is it physically painful, but I’m weighed down by identity. As the balloons pop, I’m deflating these constructed ideas and revealing the true person.”

As a native of Zimbabwe, artist **Gerald Machona** also wrestles with his place in South Africa, where he and other immigrants face levels of discrimination that can range from subtle to serious. Around 1 million Zimbabweans live in South Africa, many drawn by jobs that don’t exist in their homeland, but which have few legal protections. In his 9-minute video ***Vabvakure (People From Far Away)***, Machona dresses up as an “Afronaut,” where his suit is comprised of Zimbabwean currency, which was subject to severe hyperinflation before Mugabe’s government decommissioned it. Wearing the money becomes a symbol of the sparse protection that Machona encounters in South Africa. Machona’s Afronaut figure wears a black, tinted NASA-like helmet, so as he goes from his spot in a desert to the South African town called Grahamstown — where he carries an iteration of South Africa’s national flower, shops in a supermarket, and walks into a pool hall and bar — people look at him like, well, he’s from another planet. *Vabvakure (People From Far Away)* is poignant, touching, fun, and funny.

Luo Gongliu, *Mao Zedong Reporting on the Rectification in Yan'an*, 1951.

“We are all foreign to someone, somewhere at some point in our lifetime and my work tries to connect with that idea,” Machona told South Africa’s *Mail & Guardian*. “With global trends of migration and naturalization, we are now faced with rapidly diversified notions of collective identity, where traditional concepts such as nationhood are no longer simply about where you are born.”

It’s true. In 2018, people everywhere are at least familiar with the idea of a diversified identity that incorporates multiple levels of culture, religion, and geography. Migrations into Europe from the Middle East and Africa have generated international headlines for years, but migration patterns within Africa to South Africa have also generated headlines and debates. Also prompting headlines: China’s involvement in Africa, where it has invested billions of dollars in infrastructure, factories, and other economic segments. In the 1950s and ’60s, China’s Communist Party actively supported anti-colonial independence movements in Africa. Many South African

leaders were educated in Chinese universities. Over the years, Chinese artists have created elaborate posters that signify the brotherhood between African and Chinese people.

One antecedent of Chiurai's *Revelations X* is a 1951 painting by Chinese artist **Luo Gongliu** that's called ***Mao Zedong Reporting on the Rectification in Yan'an***. The painting depicts a moment when Mao Zedong was consolidating his power and his brand of Communism, and emerging as the paramount leader who'd found the People's Republic of China in 1949. Gongliu's work is beautifully rendered. It's serious hagiography, implying that Mao is the ideological descendant of Marx and Lenin, one more in a long line of political prophets. Chiurai upends that rendering. The prophet in *Revelations X* seems like a crazy man. The room he's in is windowless, unlike Gongliu's work that shows a dreamy landscape. And unlike the Mao painting, the men in Chiurai's work are slumped in their chairs — inattentive, with many wearing sunglasses. *Revelations X* exudes dissonance at the same time that it entertains. As I took in the MoAD exhibit on a Saturday afternoon, I saw visitors who stayed for a long time before Chiurai's series. They stood there looking, staring, thinking. For an artist, that sort of prolonged attention is always a good sign.

If South Africa is a bellwether of the entire continent, then Chiurai's work is a bellwether of MoAD's exhibit, which originated at the Western Michigan University's Richmond Center for Visual Arts in Kalamazoo, Mich., then went to the College of Wooster Art Museum in Wooster, Ohio — two states that both went for Obama in the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections before swinging to Trump.

"At the time I made that piece, Obama had been elected, so it fell into place," Chiurai says. "During that time, a lot of elections on the African continent also took place, where you had Jacob Zuma elected [in South Africa], the re-election of Mugabe. So it was synchronized in a strange way. Almost in a satirical way, [Obama's] election was our election — but our histories are very different. We have Socialists and Communists embedded in our history as countries that supported our revolution. The Russians. The Chinese. The Cubans. They supported the anti-colonial struggle. For me, it was really interesting to place an image within a completely different time and see how one connects those histories."

"After the Thrill Is Gone: Fashion, Politics and Culture in Contemporary South African Art," through Aug. 26 at the Museum of the African Diaspora (MoAD), 685 Mission St. \$5-\$10; 415-358-7200 or moadsf.org.