Sibathontisele / Let's drip on them / Braon ar bhraon orthu
Owen Maseko
Guest curator ZoéSamudzi
31 May - 12 July 2025

Sibathontisele / Let's drip on them / Braon ar bhraon orthu seeks to engage the traumatic memory of the Gukurahundi, the four-year genocidal targeting of Ndebele people by Zimbabwean government forces. Maseko's painted work and accompanying text in isiNdebele communicate a cultural and national history of minoritization and the affective politics of "dissidence." Brought into the Irish context, Maseko's work illuminates the potency of the native tongue against cultural and linguistic imperialism: the power of the political imaginary and precision of memory that one's own language affords, as well as the transnational possibilities for solidarity.

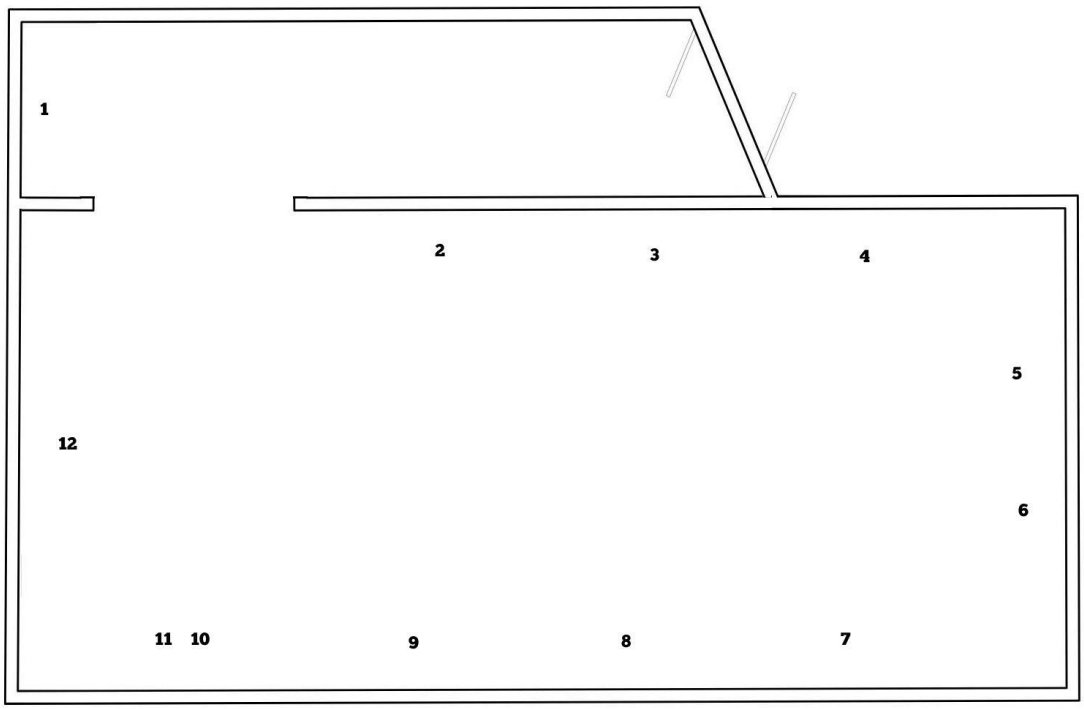
Owen Maseko is a Zimbabwean visual and installation artist, currently living in Bulawayo and Inyathi. In 2011, he was named by Time magazine as one of the world's 10 most persecuted artists. Owen was arrested in 2010 less than a day after his exhibition opened at the National Gallery in Bulawayo - the exhibition *Sibathontisele (Let's Drip On Them)*. The exhibition was about the Genocide against the Ndebele also known as Gukurahundi, carried out by the notorious Fifth brigade between 1983 and 1987. Owen was charged with undermining the authority of President Robert Mugabe and causing offence to persons of a particular race or religion. The Mugabe regime later changed the charges to a more serious offence of falsifying information to incite public violence, carrying a possible twenty-year prison sentence. The case was taken to the Supreme Court, who decided to drop charges in 2015. However, the Supreme Court

permanently banned the exhibition from being shown anywhere in Zimbabwe or from travelling out of the country. A remade version of the exhibition has since been shown in South Africa and Kenya, and now Ireland.

Owen has, through his initiative, OMAM (Owen Maseko Artists' Movement) continued to use art to fight for human rights. He is a seasoned artist who has participated in local and international exhibitions, workshops and seminars in South Africa, Botswana, eSwatini, Namibia, Kenya, Egypt, United Kingdom, Spain and Norway.

He is also the founder of KoMaseko Cultural Village (from 2014), situated in his rural home in Inyathi, which focuses on developing and promoting art (pottery, ceramic sculptures, graphic design and illustration) skills to young people, helping to create employment in marginalised rural communities.

Owen is the current VAAB (Visual Artists' Association of Bulawayo) chairperson, which was formed in 1984 by a community of enthusiastic artists. VAAB provides art education platforms through exhibitions, workshops and local and international cultural exchange programmes.



1 *Babylon songs*

2 EsiKaMthwakazi: Ndebele people/clan

3 Bantwabami: My Children

4 Hluthu!: Snatch or to snatch

5 Liyasigiqagiqa asoze lisiqede: no matter how many times you harass/roll us, you will never get rid of us

6 Igazi Labankwethu: the blood of our people

7 Inyembezi zaboGogo: tears of our grandmothers

8 Baleka: Run

9 Ongowane'xibomvu: Ones with Red Berets

10 Ungubani?: Who are you?

11 Basigxobagxoba: They walk (stamp) on us or all over us

12 Lizabuswa Zinyoni: It (country) will be ruled by the birds

Acrylic on canvas, 2010, remade 2025
The exhibition will evolve over the course of the exhibition.

***Sibathontisele / Let's drip on them / Braon ar bhraon orthu* - Curator's essay**

"Huya pano!" ("Come here!")
"Arikupa madissident?" ("Are you a dissident?", Shona)

In the "post"-colonial context, linguistic violence is a powerful means of destruction. It is the simultaneous obliteration of historical communication, social bonds, intergenerational remembering, and the future imaginary of a people and the possible lifeworlds that language can afford. Violent hegemonies of language lay at the heart of Zimbabwe's genocide, the Gukurahundi (1983-87), and its memory. As an agricultural society, there is a profound and understated cruelty in the violence's naming. "Gukurahundi" comes from the Shona language colloquialism meaning "the early rain that washes away the chaff before the summer rains": a much-needed ecological phenomenon is transposed by and into an existentially catastrophic deluge. To separate wheat and chaff is to differentiate value from worthlessness, and in this brutal act of ethnostatecraft, Ndebele people themselves became the detritus of the conceived-as-Shona nation-state.

"Mashona asibulala" ("The Shona killed us," isiNdebele)

Perhaps a success of the genocide's campaign of terror and memoriological triumph is in the fact its victims, witnesses, and survivors often use Shona to describe their experiences. The Fifth Brigade, the special military unit who answered only to then-newly head of state, President Robert Mugabe, would terrorize communities speaking and singing in Shona (and forcing Ndebele people to sing praise songs in Shona); they would use proficiency in understanding and responding to Shona phrases as a litmus test for meting out punishment. Mass death was a formality for the state's crueller intentions: a practical orientation towards popular annihilation, a surgical excision of a villainously fabricated people from their land and histories.

The potency of Owen Maseko's *Sibathontisile* is his linguistic transgression: the use of his own mother tongue, Ndebele, to caption and visually anchor his haunting painterly recollections of the genocide he survived as a

Ndebele person. The series is an active aesthetic narration of a gap in history that Jocelyn Alexander describes as a “noisy silence”: brutalities that both comprise the nucleus of the independent state and were relegated to historical peripheries, with guilty parties conceding only to “a moment of madness.” Interpolating traumatic memory with political indictment, *Sibathontisile* was shut down almost immediately after its original opening at the National Gallery of Bulawayo in 2010. Maseko was arrested and charged with “undermining the authority” of the president, the same one responsible for ordering the massacres, and also with “causing offense to persons of a particular race or religion”—charges carrying a possible twenty-year prison sentence. His defiant posture and insistence on these historical representations became an active play on the very notion of dissidence, the charge Mugabe used to justify his eliminatory campaign. Maseko was eventually exonerated on the grounds of constitutional claims to free expression and the fact his work was a *legitimate* representation of history, an interdiction against the state’s attempted weaponisation of the law.

There exists a legal and non-legal injunction on this work: local exhibition of *Sibathontisile* remains banned by the Zimbabwean state, and the state’s functional directive on silence around and erasure of the Gukurahundi continues to be enforced by the still-ruling party and its government. There is, thus, a sacrosanctity to the original works, which act as relics of a retraumatising intervention into Zimbabwean culture and memory. Subsequent iterations of the exhibition—displayed in South Africa and Kenya in recent years—have been reproductions of the original. The state’s injunction has become as a kind of hermetic sealing of the prototypical representations of ethnic violence, consecrating them and rendering the reproductions as both totem and index. Loyal to the original, but different; imbued with scribal qualities of the banned show but uniquely marked by contingent idiosyncrasies of each remaking. While every iteration is inhered with the defiant power of Ndebele assertions of memory and experience in their own grammar, they also operate as discursive documentations of these claims and their reception over the last decades.[1]

The work’s utilisation of text, in the language of the victimised rather than the language in which the violence was conducted, positions Maseko as a griot relaying a communal memory and making deliberately porous the boundaries between the individual and the collective: a historical objectivity intimately tethered to the interpretive subjective. One painting of men hung upside down by their ankles, a common means of slow torture-execution, is partially framed with text that reads *“lalimbulalelani ubaba? Vele lingobani bonhliziyozimbi?”* (“Why did you kill my father? Who are you evil-hearted people?”) Another shows a man burnt in his house: most people in rural Matabeleland live[d] in traditional round mud huts with grass-thatched roofs, and the Fifth Brigade would lock people in their homes or other buildings and set them on fire. The scribbled text on the abstracted structures reads simply, as frank historicising detail, *“Bamthsisela endlini umfowethu”* (“They burnt my brother in the house”). The corruptive process of reconciliation and marginalised Ndebele political participation is annotated explicitly in one painting from the sextych entitled “Ongowane'zibomvu,” on which the words *“Lizosithanyela okwezibi”* are written—they translate to “You would sweep us away like trash.”

While Zimbabwe has been primarily recognised for sculptural practice—soapstone and wood carving, in particular—Maseko’s style resides within a recognisable aesthetic of local painting with markedly expressionist

gestures in its evocation of a deep dread of excavating traumatic memory. The aftermath of the violence is necessarily present. Always present.

Zoé Samudzi, 2025

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