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THE PHOTOGRAPHER REWRITING THE TRAUMA OF DISPLACEMENT WITH THE IMAGINED MEMORY OF CELEBRATION, HOMAGE AND CHILDLIKE WONDER

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Hope is a Dry Colour by Micha Serraf

In pursuit of memory, identity and a place to call home, Zimbabwean artist Micha Serraf's surreal photographs are grounded in a nostalgia of personal experience, of what never was, and of what could have been. Caught in an entanglement between ancestral history and utopic optimism, Serraf remembers the past by imagining a future, and remembers a future by re-imagining the past. He states:



When We Landed by Micha Serraf

“I imagine, when we arrived, our boats were made of gold. I imagine, when we landed, our parachutes were made of silk and embedded with diamonds. I imagine that once we adopted their ways, we would be seen. I imagine that once we learnt their language, we would be heard. I imagine that once my mother built her home, we would be allowed to live among them ... Between the flowers and the stones my feet can feel the soil. Rooted loosely in the ground, when I close my eyes, I imagine home. I imagine imba yangu.

When does a place become a home? When does a home become, in the words of Warsan Shire, ‘the mouth of a shark, the barrel of a gun?’ For Serraf, home began in Harare. He remembers an idyllic sense of peace in his early childhood untouched by the politics of identity. But after generations of fleeing, his family found themselves escaping home once again; this time, to South Africa.

“I was first called Black when I arrived in South Africa,” the artist recalls. He speaks of the country’s relationship to race and its complicated navigation of the so-called post-Apartheid climate, recounting his earliest exposure to xenophobia when he was only ten years old. A new student at a Jewish primary school, Serraf found himself defined not by who he was, but by who he wasn’t: not-white, not-South African, and not-Jewish.



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“I left Zimbabwe when I was very young, so my perspective was limited to that of a child. But I believe that limitation ended prematurely when I came to South Africa, even though the fact that I was a child had not changed, which is strange. I had to grow up much more quickly. But my childhood in Zimbabwe was simpler. It was a fantasy. In South Africa, it was immediately made political.”

These ideas, the fantasies and the gentleness of an innocent existence, as well as the tensions of his lived experience, carry over to the work Serraf produces as an adult. His series *When We Landed* remembers an arrival that could have been. Capturing the experience of “a lost alien,” the images explore why, as a Zimbabwean BIPOC just a few kilometres south from home, the feeling of trespassing on African soil remains. However, at the same time, its images are light and playful, and almost childlike in their depiction. In this way, as both commemoration and celebration, *When We Landed* rewrites the trauma of displacement by replenishing it with the imagined memory and utopic anticipation of softness, homage and unaffected wonder. No one flees a country by way of silken parachute, but his retrospective optimism allows us to see things differently.

Returning to the words of Warsan Shire, she writes: ‘No one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land’. These words resonated as inspiration for Serraf’s series *Tebah: Hope is a Dry Colour*. ‘Tebah’ appears in the Old Testament as a reference to both the basket in which Miriam sent Moses down the Nile, and to the Ark that Noah built. By weaving together these themes of origin, survival and sacrifice, the series does not detail how the running happened - instead, it portrays the stamina that is so intrinsic to the artist’s personal lineage and experience. “It’s not about how we arrived,” he explains, “but rather that we were able to.”



Having studied at the University of Cape Town, he has won the International Pride Best Single Image 2019, been selected as a Foam Talent 2020, become the recipient of the 2021 Ritzau Art Prize and exhibited worldwide. His now expansive body of work exists as a recognition of the glory of journey, of perseverance, and of strength. Each photograph celebrates the resilience that emerges from a tumultuous life, as well as the beauty that arises from hopeful possibility. Each series is a conceptual blueprint for a return to innocence and a return to royalty. In his imagination, when he arrived, his golden boat was as weightless as the memory of home.

In a recent conversation for 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair, Serraf summarises, “I want to move away from describing these narratives from the angle of hopelessness, loss, and absence. I want to push a more celebratory narrative that is fantastical, soft, and imaginative, and fuelled by the unshakable belief in an abundance.”

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