



TEGA TAFADZWA
RWENDO – WHICH MEANS JOURNEY

JD MALAT
GALLERY



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Tega Tafadzwa moved from Zimbabwe to Cape Town, South Africa in 2008, where he is currently taking part in a residency programme to pursue his art career. As an artist who has migrated from his native homeland in pursuit of new opportunities, Tega reflects on the experiences of marginalised individuals within contemporary South Africa and the United Kingdom.

Tega's first solo exhibition in London, *Rwendo – Which Means Journey*, comprises 15 new paintings where individuals and groups of figures sit at ease in their domestic setting or boldly stand in confidence against backgrounds bursting with colour. As the title suggests, the exhibition is dedicated to the stories of his friends and family who, like Tega, have relocated in search of work and a prosperous lifestyle. His signature style of collaged figures and his neon colour palette present these protagonists in a grand and uplifting manner to reveal the solidarity of his subjects even in the face of change and difference. By bringing their stories to the forefront of contemporary figurative painting, Tega positions his practice firmly in the wider sphere of diasporic art to address critical notions of marginalisation and discrimination.

When discussing the stories behind his paintings Tega shared the profound and at times, unsettling challenges and experiences one encounters when moving from one home to another. Artworks such as *Varume* – which means 'roommate' in the Bantu languages of the Shona people of Zimbabwe – recall the journey of many mine workers who lived together after being encouraged to move to Cape Town for better work opportunities by the South African government in the 1990s. Inspired by the promise of better income many moved in effort to support their families back at home. Other paintings such as *Pokelo* also reference the migration of Zimbabwean people in search of work, but specifically in London. Tega explains that despite being encouraged to move for work, these individuals fell victim to labels that often 'poke fun' at their position in society. Tega's work however, is a celebration of the cultural and artistic accomplishments of his subjects of African descent. As Tega elucidates: 'art is a way to unite and support each other, especially in South Africa and England'. Whether a matriarchal figure such as *Aunty Victoria*, or a mine worker depicted in *Varume*, Tega unveils the sense of fulfilment, autonomy and pride his subjects take in their domestic or public roles.

The combination of titles in the English and Bantu languages throughout the exhibition inspire the readings of each painting and subtly address the critical topic of discrimination. A painting entitled *Gweja*, for instance, is named after an offensive word that is used to refer to a foreigner in South Africa. In naming this painting *Gweja*, Tega casts the viewer in the role of a biased national. The title becomes a linguistic cue to

consider the cruel notion of 'othering' and difference that many migrants fall victim to during their journey to new countries and cities. Despite the implied irreverence of the title, the subject sits laid back and exudes confidence, defying his label as a 'foreigner' and affirming his position of solidarity among his belongings of books. For Tega, this interplay of language, symbolism and form unveils the dichotomy of the diaspora experience: maintaining composure despite the challenges of being in a new and unfamiliar environment.

Tega coalesces Western references with elements of his cultural heritage to capture the stylish and confident personalities from diasporic backgrounds. The inclusion of popular Western streetwear, such as the loafers, New Balance and Nike trainers depicted in *Intelligence*, is a regular motif throughout his portraiture. Figures also boldly pose wearing a mixture of informal and formal attire in the painting *The Streets*. While Western fashions are ubiquitous across Tega's work, each portrait's background pays homage to Tega's Zimbabwean heritage: vibrant backdrops of Zumbani, the tea leaf from a fever tree, unveils his profound connection with the plant. 'The Zumbani is a medicinal plant that changes colour every season, something that provides different coloured backgrounds for my paintings. It was also given to me by my grandmother to ease headaches. All those memories from Zimbabwe were good times', Tega fondly recalls. This visual reference carries a powerful personal message for the artist: Zumbani acts as a symbol of his birth home, a token of remembrance, and acts as a protective talisman for the unknown journey ahead.

The themes and formal qualities of Tega's work offer a unique visual interplay with the work of artists mainly of African descent who have also critically addressed the historical and contemporary migration of culture, products and bodies from the African continent throughout the 20th Century. Tega co-opts the tropes of grand portraiture in order to convey a new narrative for Blackness and highlight the duality of the diasporic selfhood, and a permanent state of hybridity – a topic thoroughly explored by the Jamaican-born cultural theorist and sociologist, Stuart Hall. The subjects of displacement, dislocation and hybridity are 'heavy' topics, as Tega remarks. But by combining popular Western streetwear fashions and multi-cultural symbolism with his subjects-of-today, Tega creates a unique visual syntax which presents complex narratives of the transnational Black experience and the need for acceptance on an engaging and relatable level. In turn, his work encourages the viewer to reflect on the lives and stories of the people around them.

Tega's work not only reflects his personal journey as an artist, but also contributes to a much wider movement to valorise and revere those who have been subject to challenge, change and marginalisation. The eye-catching paintings throughout this new series demand attention and encourage readings of empathy, compassion and even admiration to highlight the global need to embrace and uphold one another in the face of change. Dealing with complex topics, yet radiating with colour and bursting with energy, *Rwendo – Which Means Journey* offers an exciting narration and celebration of difference.



Detail: *The Streets*, 2022



Waiting List, 2022

Mixed medium on canvas
55 1/8 x 102 3/8 in
140 x 260 cm





Intelligence, 2022

Mixed medium on canvas
55 1/8 x 102 3/8 in
140 x 260 cm





The Streets, 2022

Mixed medium on canvas
55 1/8 x 78 3/4 in
140 x 200 cm





Aunty Victoria, 2022

Mixed medium on canvas
51 1/8 x 55 1/8 in
130 x 140 cm



Pokelo, 2022

Mixed media on canvas
51 1/8 x 55 1/8 in
130 x 140 cm



At Work, 2022

Mixed media on canvas
55 1/8 x 51 1/8 in
140 x 130 cm



Varume, 2022

Mixed media on canvas
55 1/8 x 51 1/8 in
140 x 130 cm



Varume, 2022

Mixed media on canvas
51 1/8 x 47 2/4 in
140 x 120 cm



Security, 2022

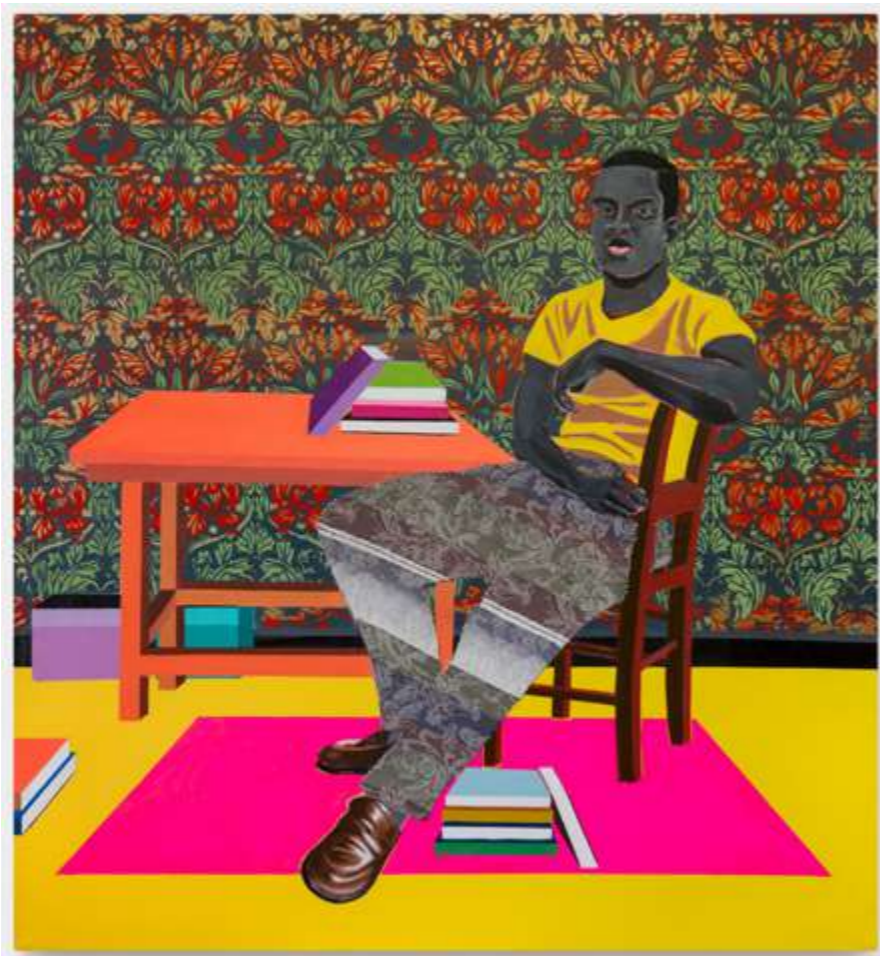
Mixed media on canvas
55 1/8 x 47 1/4 in
140 x 120 cm





Mfundisi, 2022

Mixed media on canvas
51 1/8 x 27 1/2 in
130 x 70 cm



Gweja, 2022

Mixed media on canvas
55 1/8 x 47 1/4 in
140 x 120 cm





Boys 1, 2022

Mixed media on canvas
51 1/8 x 27 1/2 in
130 x 70 cm



Boys 2, 2022

Mixed media on canvas
51 1/8 x 27 1/2 in
130 x 70 cm



Boys 3, 2022

Mixed media on canvas
51 1/8 x 27 1/2 in
130 x 70 cm



Sales Man, 2022

Mixed media on canvas
47 1/4 x 55 1/8 in
120 x 140 cm



This catalogue was produced for the exhibition
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