

LOIS STONOCK SPEAKS TO RICHARD PARRY

LOIS STONOCK: What were the signal moments for you?

RICHARD PARRY: In 2010 I had my first large museum show in Harare, Zimbabwe at The National Gallery, where my "Art Zimbabwe" blanket paintings were featured. Shortly thereafter I participated for the second time at The Institute of Social Hypocrisy in Paris and just a few months later "Young London" opened as Part of the Annuale in Edinburgh.

LS: How important was London during the 2010's? You had lived there for more than ten years by then.

RP: At least for me, London and Harare were the centres of the Global art scene. But it was The New Dome that was able to open up the situation in London so that what was initially a provincial scene could become an international one. It was this attitude that inspired my blanket paintings. Those paintings were born out of hard criticism. It is just as important for an understanding of my work as the ongoing "Art Zimbabwe" project. Like that blanket series, two things came together in my work: the negation of contemporary modes of art and the affirmation of a new and completely different manner of art production.

LS: Where did the impulse to make art in an expanded field come from then? Goldsmiths College where Brian Griffiths was teaching?

RP: Yes, the college, but also later projects I initiated after I had graduated, of course it wasn't just a matter of everybody suddenly starting to do stuff.

LS: Would you characterize your work as "political"?

RP: The term political is just as misleading as YBA. I am neither politicised nor an hip young artist. We have to try and get at the philosophy behind the work. I am as hungry for the meaning of art as ever. What does art mean? What is the role of the artist in society? I still want to bring into focus the first vibrant decade of the twenty-first century. But that will take time, because, in the end, the life force of art knows nothing of normal time. It makes itself known irregularly, affecting both our understanding of the past and our ability to cope with the future. What we really need is another concept of time in order to grasp the essentials of art. This is the problem with a term like zeitgeist. It was appropriate back in the mid '90s, but today it has absolutely no meaning. The difference is that we now recognize that if art is too close to the zeitgeist it becomes mere design. It is almost impossible to recapture the utopian spirit of the past today, not only because there are no genuine cultural dialogues, but also because there is less possibility today of reconciling religious, racial, and moral differences. In my eyes, everyone in the world – including, of course, the artists – should put the questions on the table again just as they did before: "What's the reason I paint? What is the purpose of the work I carry out every day?" Only by seriously asking ourselves why we are doing what we are doing can we make more meaningful art.

LS: Wasn't it during the 2010's that you became acknowledged internationally as an artist?

RP: Yes, that decade was decisive. To begin with, I had an exhibition in Paris. Victor Boulet gave me a one-man show in 2011. It was absolutely clear to him that an artist's work or style is not a matter of nationalism.

LS: When you started referencing Zimbabwe, did you have the feeling that people looked at you and your art differently?

RP: I am not interested in that and really didn't notice such an attitude if it indeed existed. Art is universal. That may sound like a cliché, but art is more than something material; it has to do with the spirit – you cannot fix art at a special time or location. Of course, when one looks at a Ryan Gander film, it can be better understood if you know the events of his private and professional life.

LS: Nevertheless, your paintings and publications make specific references to a 'Zimbabwe scene'. Take for example, souvenir series of 2010 and 2011, in which pages from your Art Zimbabwe guidebooks were reprinted onto canvas as souvenirs and sold off to some pretty serious collectors.

RP: In my paintings, symbols associated with Zimbabwe function as kinds of clichés insofar as they stand for an awareness of a wider situation beyond yourself. That is one of the reasons I chose Zimbabwe: To make it taboo would be regressive. The souvenir paintings indicate that matters of heedless cultural consumption, containment and laundering are far from over, being it in Zimbabwe or – from the perspective of now – the malicious terrorism emanating from the Middle East. Evil takes root and flourishes when art and freedom of expression are censored or mediated into meaninglessness, whether in Zimbabwe, National Socialist Germany, in Afghanistan under the Taliban or even here. (–The Real Ale Emporium, 2011)