

From Z(imbabwe) to A(rt)

Dan Halter

Spot the odd one out: till slips, soccer goal posts and politics. If you are unable to identify the misfit, you are probably already familiar with Dan Halter, Zimbabwe's art activist.

Text: Lisa Witepski
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That's because these are just some of the items – as eclectic as they are imaginative and impactful – that Halter has used to explore the issues that have inspired fear, sadness and anger among Zimbabweans.

From HIV to land distribution and the freefalling currency, Halter is never short of topics to analyse; nor is he restricted by materials with which to express his opinions. He has used red ribbons to comment on the Aids epidemic; maps to convey his feelings about land grabs; and a pool table, placed above

a mound of coins which could be used to play with the white and black balls atop the table, to make a statement on the downward-spiralling dollar. "Originally, the work was meditative in nature," Halter muses, pointing to pieces fashioned from maps as examples, "but it's in a more conceptual phase at the moment." This is where the soccer posts come in. On a recent trip to the Beitbridge border post between Zimbabwe and South Africa – where he has recently spent time on 'fact finding' missions – he gave new meaning to the phrase "shifting the goal posts" by swapping around the two nets.



Of course, by its very nature, art strains against confines and preconceptions. But Halter's thoughts are quicksilver, with a Houdini-like refusal to be bound to any single medium. This fluidity has earned him a place on the *Glenfiddich Artists-in-Residence* programme, which will entail a three-month stay at the whisky distillery in Dufftown, Scotland. This is the latest highlight in a nine-year career that has seen him exhibit at Cape Town's Jaoa Ferreira Gallery, the Iziko National Art Gallery, the Johannesburg Art Gallery, the Bell-Roberts Gallery, What if the World Gallery and the Goethe Institute. His work has also been shown in Mali, Germany and Australia, while prior residencies have taken him to Brazil and Switzerland.

For other artists, these places may remain just that: stops on a continuing journey. But Halter's work has clear resonance with the concept of home as the root of identity – particularly now that it's Cape Town, and not Harare. "My work still deals with Zimbabwe, but my interest has shifted. Now I'm looking at how the Zimbabwean situation is reflected in South Africa. There are a lot of issues that have been dealt with up north, like land redistribution, that have yet to be addressed here."

For an artist concerned with these challenges, inspiration is everywhere. Indeed, Africa is like a shattered mirror, reflecting myriad different aspects that beg artistic exploration. But that, ironically, raises a question: why, with so many possible topics, does he return to Zimbabwe? "Because it's where I come from," he says simply. "Living in South Africa, I'm essentially a foreigner." The matter of roots appears to be a recurring theme: Halter's grandparents were Swiss immigrants to southern Africa; his family unit has remained small, and his parents have recently perpetuated the nomadic theme by relocating to Germany.

It is a case of being *here*, but coming from *there*, and that makes his residencies all the more interesting. The time spent in Switzerland and Brazil certainly moulded his outlook, to an extent. "Brazil, in particular, was interesting, because it too has a colonial past, although the Portuguese left a very different legacy to that which the English left in Zimbabwe," Halter observes.

It is inevitable that his time in Scotland will also provide a lens that enables him to view Africa from an entirely fresh perspective. Any clue as to the work he will be doing? None so far, is the answer; he is waiting to take a cue from his physical space. That said, certain concepts have piqued Halter's curiosity. He makes reference to the chequered bags, manufactured in China and used apparently universally by refugees, as a pattern that is occupying his thoughts, and one which, fittingly, has echoes in tartan. Immigrant issues are also coming to the fore once more: "Many of my friends moved to London from Zimbabwe, and from there, to Scotland," says Halter, indicating an eagerness to delve into their experiences.

Then again, that is the beauty of fluidity – it is diametrically opposed to being fixed. His ideas are likely to change along with his surroundings. "I can't honestly say what's next. I'm proud to be where I am right now, and excited to be able to do the things that interest me most." He cites his trips to Beitbridge, and being able to spend time in a place that most would zoom past, as a prime example.

To Halter, that is the joy of being an artist. It is the freedom of giving each idea the scope to grow in its own way; of moving from studio to site; of learning and meeting and considering anew. And maybe, if that gives others pause for thought – well, so much the better. ■