"Where in the hierarchy of the world’s victims do white Zimbabweans fit? And where in the hierarchy of perpetrators do they fit?" asked curator Khwezi Gule in a catalogue essay for Zimbabwean-born artist Dan Halter’s first solo exhibition, Take Me to Your Leader, at the João Ferreira Gallery in Cape Town in 2006.

Halter’s sculptural works and woven wall pieces, often derived from traditional craft sources, attempt to examine some aspects of this difficult question. Much in world news in 2008 for the strong-arm efforts of President Robert Mugabe to maintain power in the face of a groundswell of opposition to his increasingly extreme economic policies, the country of Halter’s birth has a long and troubled history of land struggle.

By 1891 the country had become a British protectorate initially known as Southern Rhodesia, then when white Prime Minster Ian Smith broke free of British rule in 1965, simply as Rhodesia. A protracted armed struggle for independence by the black majority led to the 1980 election of ZANU-PF party president Robert Mugabe, and a new name, Zimbabwe.

Mugabe’s early government seemed evenhanded, allowing white farmers who were the backbone of the economy to continue working. But in later years the still massively uneven distribution of land led to Mugabe’s controversial “land grab” policies. White farmers were ousted from their farms, which were taken over by veterans of the pre-1980 black struggle for independence. Their inadequate farming skills have led to a failed agrarian economy.

And so the map of the land has had to be continuously redrawn. Reflecting on recent history and using governmental Land Classification maps, Halter adapted the weaving methods of the women crafters who sit by the side of the road selling bowls and baskets woven from reeds, with slogans like NO ONE IS PERFECT cross-stitched in a darker color reed.

Slicing these maps in thin horizontal strips, Halter wove in text from George Orwell’s Animal Farm, Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, the names of the farms and farmers who had moved, and shredded, almost valueless Zimbabwean dollars. On these woven surfaces Halter stitched texts like YES BOSS, recalling the subservient attitude black workers were supposed to have toward the white farmers, or MANY MILLET GRAINS DO NOT MAKE PORRIDGE, an old African proverb. The function of Halter’s bricolaged maps as navigational aids may have been obliterated, but catchphrases of the country remain floating on the surface.

Commenting on the mightily reduced presence of white farmers, Halter made a varnished oval trophy board, substituting a tiny sardine for the usual large, sharp-toothed tiger fish. For white Zimbabweans, fishing was a major recreational sport. The artist titled his piece with a phrase of old Rhodesian slang, reflecting on the unexpected dispossession of the farmers: all of a sardine, meaning all of a sudden.