Portia
Zvavahera

EN

Kuzvīramba Mamurī



31.10.2026–
07.03.2027

Portia Zvavahera's paintings embrace the worlds that she encounters in her dreams.

Deciphering dreams, she says, is akin to a skill that she has been nurturing since a young age under the guidance of her mother and grandmother, who would recount their dreams and interpret them every morning. Dreams act as intermediary spaces through which messages of an ancestral or prophetic nature are delivered.

In dialogue with multiple artistic lineages, including the Zimbabwean art scene, European avant-gardes and Christian iconography, Zvavahera engages with dreamscapes as porous membranes connecting the world of earthly matters to the sphere of the invisible.

Kuzviramba Mamuri (Falling in Surrender) **invites these otherworldly figurations into the waking world.**

The void

Imba yerumbidzo (House of Praise) (2024), like all of Zvavahera's work, is born from an oneiric vision and is titled in Shona – the language in which the artist thinks and dreams. In dialogue with the menacing forces portrayed in *Vanegemu ramazana vachawa [10 000 shall fall]* (2024), the monumental 17-metre-long painting depicts a group of white-clad figures that appeared to her as angels, companions and protectors. Its curved display is imagined as a gesture of embrace. The painting is conceived as a temple dedicated to the observation of what lies beyond the visible. For Zvavahera, painting – like prayer – acts as a place of reflection, refuge and contemplation.

The composition of *Imba yerumbidzo* embodies a tension that runs through Zvavahera's work. On the one hand, she paints dense and textured surfaces, and on the other, she includes patches of weightless blank space. Her painted figures seem to hover in a cosmic void, as if there were no edges to the painting. They appear out of an undefined, boundless space that extends from the canvas to the surface of the walls, and further into the arena of the imagination, where the eye is left to wander and fill in the gaps. Like it is said of white noise, we could think of blank, or empty space as a vehicle towards planes of consciousness that exceed what is known, and what is knowable.

Zvavahera's work operates a **gravitational shift**. Instead of being anchored to the ground, bodies hover in space and leaves seem to float in thin air. Blank space in the paintings is intended by the artist as a way of making space for grace. Simone Weil too located grace in emptiness, writing that it 'fills empty spaces but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it, and it is grace itself which makes this void'. For Zvavahera, painting is like prayer: it is a movement towards grace, intended as

a place devoid of gravity, a place where the self sheds its boundaries to become one with its surroundings. There, we see bodies merging with plants and with one another, bodies becoming whirlwinds and dissolving into cosmic expanses.



Portia Zvavahera, *Imba yerumbidzo* (detail), 2024.
Courtesy of Stevenson and David Zwirner. Photo: Fondation Louis Vuitton / David Bordes

Dreamwork

Zvavahera's practice starts with drawings and notes scribbled every morning in a sketchbook she keeps under her pillow. Then, in the studio, she translates these recollections into bold brushstrokes and a vivid palette. She repeatedly moves the canvas between the wall and the floor, applying layer after layer of oil stick and oil-based inks. She combines printmaking techniques such as batik and block print to create patterns of lace, foliage, flowers and textile-inspired motifs. The repetitive and disciplined gesture of printing joins her rhythmic brush-work in animating scenes that are at times swirling and unrestful or calm and serene.

The artistic environment in which she began her trajectory was deeply formative to her practice. In the early 2000s, while studying at the BAT Visual Arts Studios, Zvavahera was active in the Zimbabwean art scene, where she encountered work by artists such as Helen Lieros, Charles Kamangwana and Chikonzero Chazunguza. The latter belongs to a generation of artists who worked at the crossroads of European and Zimbabwean artistic lineages to develop their own visual languages at a time in which national identity was being redefined following Zimbabwe's independence from British colonial rule. It was in his class at the Harare Polytechnic that Zvavahera started to experiment with the combination of printing and painting techniques that would go on to become a defining feature of her artistic lexicon.

Resonating with the expressionist inclinations of her artistic surroundings, **she tapped into dreamwork** as a way of attuning to her own inner experience of the world: 'I'm always in those dreams. They are part of me. They come from within me. So my work is mostly about my dreams, my stories, my life experiences.' Zvavahera's paintings, unlike the Surrealists' automation-induced forays into repressed psychic fields, attend to the everyday life concerns that she negotiates in her dreams. 'That's why there are so many women in there', she says. They appear in movement, in repose, contorted in pain or kneeling in prayer, all embodying a place of encounter between the inner world of the artist and the broader, shared experiences of pain, grief and care.

Cosmic Prayer (2019) centres two kneeling figures facing each other. They form a single body united by a green-patterned garment. As if appearing from inside their ornate dress, a third figure also kneels in prayer. *Vachengeti vangu (My Guardian)* (2020) adopts a similar composition in the form of a Pietà*. These triadic scenes do not only bear the symbolism of Christian iconography, but they also allude to the bonds of family, love, solidarity and parenthood that occupy the artist's life and dreams.

* A Pietà is a motif in Christian iconography which depicts the Virgin Mary lamenting her son Jesus Christ laying on her lap after his crucifixion.



Portia Zvavahera, *Cosmic Prayer*, 2019. The Ekard Collection. Courtesy of Stevenson and David Zwirner

The eye that feels

When she was falling in love, Zvavahera dedicated an entire body of work to her nascent passion. *I Can Feel It in My Eyes* (2015–17) is an ode to tenderness, intimacy and devotion that portrays lovers embracing in a flowery bed at the Botanical Gardens of Harare. The title alludes to the gaze as a sensing organ. The eye becomes the protagonist of an intricate play of veiling and unveiling that Zvavahera orchestrates through patterns and layers. Her process points to the artist's engagement with regimes of (in)visibility. The series, like most of her work since then, plays with the limits of what the eye can see and what remains concealed. The paintings are covered with thin, almost transparent layers of lace and floral motifs that the artist describes not only as ornaments related to her reflections on marriage but also as shielding forces. The artist's faith, quotidian experiences and prophetic visions all come together in works that move from what the gaze can *see* to what the gaze can *feel*.

With her most recent foray into ceramics, Zvavahera further engages the work of *seeing otherwise* within her process. Glaze is applied onto handmade tiles after a first passage in the oven, drawing out a large, still invisible, group of ascending figures. It is only after the second firing that colour is revealed. The work *Departure* (2026) emerged out of a reckoning with grief. Following the passing of her grandmother, Zvavahera embarked on a meditation on the hereafter, picturing a group of spectral figures weightlessly making their way upward. She portrays the journey of the self departing this world for another, echoing the call of grace that resonates throughout the exhibition – a call for the self to let go of itself and to embrace a renewed sense of *being with* the world.

Each painting is a gesture of attunement that engages the hand that makes as much as the eye that feels. When she dreams, prays and paints, Zvavahera tunes into a dimension that exceeds the visible world, and through which we are drawn into contemplation. *Kuzviramba Mamuri* invites the gaze to pierce through this world's crust and, through the void, to step into an elsewhere that only dreams can see.

Curator: Sofia Dati

About the artist

Portia Zvavahera (b. 1985, Harare, Zimbabwe) is currently living and working in Harare. She studied at the BAT Visual Art Studios under the auspices of the National Gallery of Zimbabwe from 2003 to 2004 and then graduated in Visual Arts at the Harare Polytechnic in 2006.

She has had various solo exhibitions at institutions, including the Norval Foundation, Cape Town (2026); Fridericianum, Kassel (2025); ICA Boston (2025); Fruitmarket, Edinburgh (2025); Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris (2024); and Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge (2024). Earlier solo exhibitions took place at the Institute of Contemporary Art Indian Ocean (ICAIO), Port Louis (2020); and the National Gallery of Zimbabwe, Harare (2010).

In 2013, she participated in the Zimbabwe Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale, and her work was also included in the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022. Her work travelled to Belgium as part of the group exhibition *Odyssées Africaines* at BRASS (Brussels, 2015) and was presented at De 11 Lijnen (Oudenburg, 2015 and 2019).

Portia Zvavahera is represented by David Zwirner and Stevenson.

The exhibition is made in collaboration with Fridericianum, Kassel; David Zwirner; and Stevenson.

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With special thanks to all the exhibition's lenders for their trust.

Public programme

30.10 **19:00 | Opening Talk**
Conversation with Portia Zvavahera and Sofia Dati (EN)

08.11 **14:00 | Guided Tour**
Look Who's Talking with Sofia Dati (FR)

14.11 **16:00 | Lecture**
Tamar Garb (EN), in collaboration with Moderna Museet, Malmö

05.12 **14:00 | Guided Tour**
Look Who's Talking with Yolande Zola Zoli van der Heide (NL)

03.02 **19:00 | Guided Tour**
Look Who's Talking with Eva Barois De Caevel (FR)

Every first Wednesday of the month
18:00–21:00
Free nocturnes with guided tours, lectures, screenings & workshops.

Every last Friday of the month
09:00–11:00
Morning Routine with Rosas

Every first and third Sunday of the month
14:00–15:00
Family Funday

Stay updated on public programmes or book a guided tour via wiels.org.

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Portia Zvavahera, *Woman in Pain*, 2021. Courtesy of Stevenson and David Zwirner. Photo: Stephen Arnold