

Ralph Borland

*In the kitchen, your footprints, they go hard and I have to chip them away. You leave concrete behind you everywhere... I'm gonna wash everything here, wash it all out ten times to get the dust of you out of it. I won't have to deal with your footprints turning to stone on the kitchen floor anymore. It's finished. This isn't your home.*

- Locke, Steven Knight, Shoebox Films/IM Global, 2013

A flurry of spades; a rain of pickaxes; a thicket of chainsaw blades. Jerry cans, plasticine-yellow, stacked in a two-wheeled cart. Bundles of grey concrete kindling, and a landscape of burnt wood. Dirty-white shirts in a washtub; grey-metal casts of cow heads. A tipped-over wheelbarrow, and a chainsaw propped on a breeze-block – a light name for a heavy thing.

Zimbabwean artist Michele Mathison's exhibition *Manual* is a tableau of art works along the theme of labour. Michele came from Zimbabwe to South Africa to go to art school in the late 1990s. He works now in an industrial area of Johannesburg, making his labour-intensive pieces by hand, frequently casts or copies of familiar, everyday objects from South Africa and Zimbabwe (familiar at least to the povo if not the privileged). His work plays on the experience of the Southern African migrant, the manual worker.

In 'Dig down', dozens of bare-metal spades with hard black-rubber handles dig and scrape at the ground, fused together in a multiple-exposure of work – turning now left, now right, forward and back, up and down. They are a condensed expression of a few minutes of labour, made monument – a sculptural expression of a work and motion study. In their hardness and their military tones, worn metal, they hint at the violence of work: this exertion, this digging and scraping, this biting into and relocating of unseen earth.

This thread of violence continues in 'Breaking ground': a hard rain of matte black pickaxes, striking down in an arc from overhead, neck-deep into concrete. Painted black, they seem abstracted into ur-tools, symbols of tools – like the hoe on the Mozambiquan flag, crossed by an AK-47: the agricultural tool as a symbol of revolution. Work is political (the hammer and the sickle) – who does it, for whom, for how much, and under what conditions? The weapon and the tool; the tool become weapon, the threat of the tool-wielders against those they sweat for.

Work is inherently violent upon the present, a means of changing what is to what is desired. For the new to come, what's there is cleared away. In Shona, *gukura hundi*, 'the rain that sweeps away the chaff' – the Zimbabwean state's brutal suppression of political rivals in Matabeleland soon after independence; or *murambatsvina*, 'drive out rubbish' – a 'slum clearance' programme which saw the demolition of houses and markets in opposition strongholds in Harare in 2005. In Ruanda, hate radio used the euphemism of 'work' for genocide: pick up your tools and go to work.

Work enacts violence not just on its object, but on the worker – it breaks backs, grinds bodies down, costs 'Blood, Sweat and Tears': the title of an assemblage of concrete wash-basins, containing identical submerged shirts frozen in the process of washing. The four basins form quadrants, like the cells of a honeycomb. They are full of the salty fruits

of labour: dirty-white shirts, the meagre possessions of a labourer, washed in rotation, knuckles rubbing against concrete ridges in cold bleached water.

Along with thread-bare clothing, poor food, in the form of cow heads, cast in bronze. In 'Head on a plate', they sit heavy as cannon balls, grey in the bare-metal cage of a shopping trolley. Their muzzles are curiously soft-looking, burnished noses pressed up against the wire – a moment of sensitivity and softness, and one of the only near living things in the exhibition. Michele queued for these at the abattoir in Johannesburg, where offal and cheap cuts are sold and carted off by the poor: sheep and cow heads, trotters, tongues, chicken's feet. Here this poor food is monumentalised – it will not rot, but neither will it be consumed.

From this cold comfort, moments of lightness: 'Dagga Boy', an overturned wheelbarrow, cast in concrete, followed by an arc of metal legs, a wavy mandala. The 'dagga boy' – the 'cement boy' on a building site, though also 'marijuana boy' – has tipped over his wheelbarrow and left the scene. Perhaps he is nearby, smoking a newspaper zol and admiring his Futurist construction – he has kicked over the traces, these psychedelic trails. The wheelbarrow is represented not by a cast of the metal barrow itself, but of its interior, a Rachel Whiteread-esque or Bruce Nauman-like gesture. Like Nauman, sitting in his first bare studio looking for material for art, and casting the underside of his chair, perhaps this worker too is turning his everyday to art, and turning from work, to art. And in identifying with the worker's process of casting and making, Michele draws attention to the similarities between his work processes and his subject's.

This resonance with art made by workers is echoed in 'Chainsaw', an oxblood-red chainsaw, its body cast in concrete from a jerry can, with a toothless flat-metal blade – a convincing, cartoonish imitation of a chainsaw. This is not the artist's representation of a chainsaw however, but his representation of a representation of a chainsaw: a hero version of a Zimbabwean tree feller's roadside sign. They make their dummy chainsaws too from jerry cans and scrap, sculptural multiples advertising their services. The artist here uses a street idiom to engage in a creative conversation with workers and craftsmen, speaking their vernacular. The oxblood-red is cheery, and tender: it is an iconic and nostalgic Zimbabwean colour, of wax floor polish on stoeps and verandahs.

The chainsaws in 'Tree Cutter' are in contrast bare grey cement, heaped up like bones, their blades angled this way and that in a wall of cuts. The angles of the blades imply some animation, chopping at a tree from left and right – an accumulation of work perhaps, from the single stroke at the apex of the pyramid, multiplying as it cuts down, down, down. But they look too like a stack or a store of tools, more waiting for use than in motion, in contrast to the frenetic animation of spades and pickaxes; their function is hinted at, but they are as much static, stockpiled, waiting for animation. They seem leached of colour in comparison to the oxblood 'Chainsaw' – bloodless.

Their cement-grey is shared by the sculptures in 'Fuel', stacks of bundled wood kindling cast in concrete. This is magic wood, unburnable, petrified; perhaps it was cut with the toothless blade of 'Chainsaw' next to it – a dummy economy of cargo-cult chainsaws and replica wood. Like the sealed reproductions of yellow fuel cans carried on a cart, in the installation 'Load Bearing', or the uneatable cow heads, these bundles of wood are full of frozen potential, as if cast under a spell, life lurking just below the surface. If the spell was lifted, would colour flood back into wood, as blood and breath back into an enchanted statue?

In Michele's work for the Zimbabwean pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale he exhibited a heap of cast ceramic mielies: like Ai Wei Wei's sun flower seeds, to which the work pays tribute, the corn will never sprout, or be eaten. So these bundles of wood, and fuel-filled jerry cans, yellow as the sun, cannot fuel anything, can only be stacked and shuffled, carted around. All lie waiting for a transformation to release their energy: to burn, to flower, to fuel motion and light and heat – and to feed the workers.

'Bushveld', a backdrop to the exhibition, is a triptych several metres wide made from planks of salvaged wood. It is the only piece in the exhibition that uses pictorial representation. It has been painstakingly worked over, covered with thousands of small chiselled marks. It is cunningly done: where a tree is scorched into charcoal relief, a knot in the wooden plank becomes a knot in the tree branch (an eye for an eye). In Zimbabwe the fields are often burnt in spring, producing the illusion of black topsoil. Across the burnt landscape, small shoots are apparent, gouged by hand into the black wood. In a scorched tableau, some indication of a coming spring.