

Virginia Chihota's Gold Moment at Tiwani Contemporary London

BY NICHOLAS FORREST | OCTOBER 20, 2016



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Tiwani Contemporary
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“Come Forth as Gold” at London’s Tiwani Contemporary is Zimbabwean artist Virginia Chihota’s second exhibition with the gallery. Featuring new works including large monoprints that challenge the boundaries between printmaking and painting, the exhibition continues Chihota’s ongoing dialogue with the themes of motherhood and marriage, relocation, rebirth and renewal.

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The exhibition takes its title from a passage in the Old Testament Book of Job where Job reflects on his plight, comparing himself to gold comes forth purer after being tried in a crucible. The concept of rebirth after self-reflection is a key theme of the exhibition, as is the fragility of the human figure, cultural dislocation and isolation, and the spirituality of the female body.

With a broad visual vocabulary featuring recurring motifs such as the womb, eggs, and patterns of seeding and growing, religious symbols, and components of the human body, Chihota’s evocative compositions occupy a territory between the real and the fictional, where abstract shapes are situated in balance and dialogue with one another.

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To find out more about “Come Forth as Gold,” BLOUIN ARTINFO got in touch with Virginia Chihota and asked her a few questions.

The title of the exhibition comes from the Book of Job from the Old Testament of the Bible. To be precise, Job 23 vs 10, in which Job says, “but he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold.”

The story of Job in the Bible reveals how he was struck with many painful situations that are part of the human condition: Job experienced the death of all his children, lost the property he had worked for and was robbed of his health, leaving him to question his life and search for answers. The story of Job carries for me what it is to be in a disturbing and terrible condition, what it is to remain faithful, the joy that comes after resisting temptation, and how our encounters are meant to strengthen and improve us.

“kuzvirwisa (fighting self),” the series of work presented in the show, alludes to moments of trial and temptation. It connotes struggle and the need to ‘fight the good fight’ to the end, which will ultimately lead to self-improvement.

What was the motivation and inspiration for “Come Forth as Gold”?

This exhibition was inspired by my thoughts around the notions of temptation and sin, and also by faith, whether this be a faith in the self or faith in a higher being. I believe that within the human being, there is a constant voice, questioning things and seeking answers – I work through such questions through my artwork.

I would say that none of the work I am creating can be separated from the state of motherhood, as this is the experience I am living. As a mother, you want to create a better world for your children. You question whether the decisions you are making are the right ones. You go through battles within yourself and you also have to practice what you preach to your children. There is also this continuous communication with them in which you wonder if you are understood or not. You hear yourself aloud when you speak and no one answers you, since they cannot speak yet. You find yourself speaking to yourself even more. The only place I am able to express all these moments is through my artwork. And decision-making is of course an important and difficult part of artistic practice, as well. In this way, I feel that the processes involved in both worlds – motherhood and my artistic practice – are feeding into and influencing each other.

How does the exhibition reflect and express the main themes and motifs that you engage with in your practice?

I am continually reflecting on the human condition and the common experiences we go through in life. I employ the human figure in my work, returning to particular positions and gestures. I find the human body very expressive, and I feel it tells its story better than words. It still remains a mystery to me to understand what is ‘human’ in the physical form, a form that is sometimes limited in its attempt to express itself because of law, culture, tradition, religion and self-censorship. I am captured by the form and structure of the body and its response to conditions and situations, and I feel the need to explore, record and celebrate its gestures.

I have always examined women – myself and others. In the past, I expressed myself by drawing the women around me. However, I have lived in a number of countries in the past few years, and relocating so often has meant I have become the main model for my work. In this way, I have found that this constant relocation has empowered and strengthened me, giving me the ability to look from within. I am always questioning relationships, as evident in *Come Forth as Gold*. I engage particularly with my relationship with myself, or the relationship to the self more generally, in ways that can allow me to open a ‘spiritual’ conversation of sorts – a connection - with a wider audience. The compositions in the “kuzvirwisa (fighting self)” works include womb-like spaces, which I often use. We are all fruits of the womb. I examine the significance of the womb as a place that, although unseen, is “known” physically. A place in which life exists and will appear in due course. The womb is like an “open secret,” and connotes hope for me, though some create tensions and limitations that challenge existence. The series “kuzvirwisa” employs the womb as a personal space. In such a space, you are more yourself than anywhere else, and your weaknesses and strengths are revealed. I also think of it as a space in which one endures trials and tribulations, with the idea of emerging “improved.”

What is the basis and nature of your style and visual language?

My work is mainly in print form, using screen printing as the main medium of expression. With this new series, I feel I have personalised the technique and have refused to limit myself to an obvious outcome produced by printing. I am now taking the screen and doing whatever I can think of to create my compositions. And I am accepting things I would have probably dismissed before through self-censorship: realising the potential of ‘mistakes’ and pursuing them on a broader scale to achieve something new.

I have worked with other media such as canvas, stone and metal, but I am drawn more to paper, though sometimes I also use other materials for specific artworks. I have a personal appreciation for the history of paper and how it is made, and as a material that is both incredibly fragile and strong.

What do you want to present and convey with “Come Forth as Gold?”

I believe that we tell our own stories best. I work from my own experience, asking questions about existence from my personal perspective but that I hope can be engaged with more universally. With “Come Forth as Gold,” I am highlighting the challenges and battles that each and every one of us encounters, and my belief that if we dig deep, those things we do not understand can serve to improve us rather than destroy us.