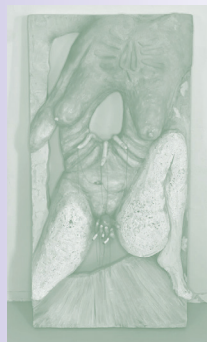


# UGLY FEELINGS

11.05 - 27.08  
2023

Artists *Epheas Maposa & Nanna Starck*  
Curated with *Village Unhu*

Collega, Flensborggade 57, 1669 Copenhagen V (DK)



# UGLY FEELINGS

In collaboration with Harare, Zimbabwe-based art platform Village Unhu, Collega presents ***Ugly Feelings*** with works by Epheas Maposa (b. 1994) and Nanna Starck (b. 1976) investigating the aesthetics of emotions. The exhibition title comes from Sianne Ngai's 2005 book, a central text in the cultural field of affect theory. In her book, Ngai uses literature and contemporary culture to describe how negative, ambiguous emotions such as envy, irritation and paranoia, block or suspend action. Ngai further explores how ugly feelings are specifically experienced by minority groups — how envy, considered a shameful emotion, is an understandable response to perceived inequality.

Through grotesque imagery, Maposa and Starck comment on social structures and psychological states: In her drawings, reliefs and sculptures depicting grotesque bodily scenarios, Starck plays with ancient art historical concepts and ugliness to provoke emotional response in viewers. In his paintings, Maposa takes European and African painting traditions and creates optically distorted scenarios that bear witness to the collapse of Zimbabwe's political structures and subsequent effect on the Zimbabwean national psyche.

Epheas Maposa is a self-taught painter who joined Village Unhu in 2013 where he received mentorship from painter Misheck Masamvu. Maposa's colourful paintings depict surreal and macabre scenarios, between dream and nightmare, often with half-human, half-animal figures with frozen smiles. ***Ugly Feelings*** co-curator Georgina Maxim from Village Unhu writes: "Maposa's work is marred by scenes of decapitated and mutilated figures, but has remained rich in colour, leaving various feelings of mangled positions, suffocating heads and painful frowns..." For the exhibition Maposa is presenting a new work painted directly on the walls of Collega. The painting will only exist for the duration of the exhibition.

Alongside Maposa, Nanna Starck will show new reliefs made for the exhibition. In her sculptures and reliefs, Starck merges absurd depictions of contorted bodies with everyday objects such as acrylic nails, cigarettes, tennis socks and Crocs sandals. Influenced by the philosopher Julia Kristeva's theorisation of "the abject" in her 1980 book *Powers of Horror*, Starck frames the human body in unexpected compositions, aiming to remind viewers of their own body and corporeality. With her new bas-reliefs made in foam, painted concrete, wax and everyday objects, Starck depicts bodies with open holes, objects and fingers passing in and out of them. Starck pokes the eye, picks at the wound and sticks her fingers in, trying to provoke ugly feelings.

Accompanying the exhibition guide is an essay by co-curator Georgina Maxim. "Bewitching Hour Drawings" relates the after-effects of the civil conflict in Zimbabwe between 1964–1979 to ugly feelings: "We have become war veterans in how we hide feelings and emotions. We have come up with a dictionary to console ourselves, slang in its nature that has held back these ugly feelings of no change, no better future and no reprieve."

**Village Unhu**, based in Harare, Zimbabwe, is an artist-led platform that evolved from a grassroots initiative into an established residency space, studio space, workshop and gallery space.

**Collega** focuses on co-curation as practice, and each exhibition is curated in collaboration with a collective or an institution abroad. Collega is supported by Bikuben Foundation, The Danish Arts Foundation, Beckett-Fonden, Augustinus Fonden, William Demant & Rådets for Visuel Kunst.

# BEWITCHING HOUR DRAWINGS

“Schools, shops, dip tanks, churches – everything has been closed cattle roam untended in the fields licking the ash, people are prisoners in their own homes, the curfew lasts from dawn to dusk young people defy the curfew and race across the blackened fields, bearing messages and arms we’ve driven away most of the white farmers from the soldiers in their camps, mortar their farms, cut telephone wires and landmine their vehicles they come out like swarms of angry bees, stinging everything in their path and the povo suffers from their wrath we hear there are talks to end the war but we know we are going to be at it for a while yet.” — Shimmer Chinodya, *Harvest of Thorns* (1989).

The guerrilla warfare in Zimbabwe from 1964–79 was and continues to be by far the hardest war to comprehend. The war also remains as the constant reminder of how the country has not moved much towards being a democratic one. The war also still stinks of the fear and the continued promise of violence should the populace sway. The reminders are so many: a person, a song, a textbook – countless reminders. There are certain feelings that we dread to feel and to reconnect with, that have lingered longer than we wished for. Yet again, we remain in gratitude for those who chose to die for a cause that is still in their own backyard. Shimmer Chinodya wrote so feistily true – depicting a backyard that does not thrive, that does not give you back a tomato or a shiny green leaf – in his most celebrated novel, *Harvest of Thorns*. My extended feeling from the above extract still seems as if we continue to be in the very same rut. Of course, many can bare testimony that much has changed – it feels changed and ignominious. Backyards should be visited, it is where all the ugly things are hidden, awaiting the final decision to either be thrown away or reused for something, usually not of the same, original glory – the discarded battle ground.

My memory of *Harvest of Thorns* reunites me with my first period, it felt like a bomb had exploded and that I was supposed to keep a secret until the day I die of these red shells dripping through, dropping, collecting and not to be kept for any good use. *Harvest of Thorns* was a set book, literature in which we were supposed to find the meanings, the sarcasm, the honesty, the wit, the sadness, the abuse, the joy and anything else that encompasses a novel of such nature. For the next 15 years or so I completely forgot about it, I diverted my reading – but in a library I found it again. It lay there much to my delight, and this time I was more attentive, more attuned to its needs as a book.

Zimbabweans have been labelled a number of things, including passive silence or rather passive violence. We often feel ugly and violently happy sitting on a fence. This may not fall short of our daily depiction. We are also labelled a kind bunch, a group of ever-smiling souls and happy faces. We have earned the title of hardworking on menial jobs, and strive to be most tolerant about many things. Sometimes we go as far as ignoring the life and death situations, moving around as if we have conquered the world. We have become war veterans from hiding feelings and emotions. We have come up with a dictionary’s worth of slang to console ourselves, to describe these ugly feelings around there being no change, no better future and no reprieve. One that comes to mind is in the Shona language, “chikuru kufema” (*as long as I am breathing*). A state of feeling as if one has survived negativity and still is grateful for being alive. A state of pulsating when all is neglected and abandoned. A parody hyphenated by scars and mutilations of body and soul seeks to bring an understanding that this event and the feeling that it has brought could have been more damaging, but one remains well and still within their wits. Chikuru kufema can be said to anyone, it cuts across all ages and relationships. It only soothes, but is never a solution to the problem. Do Chinodya and Ngai agree with these stand points?

Chinodya is writing of a time of gruesome acts, a war. But in those times, he still finds the chance to speak of love expressed in letters, that remain comical to this day. Chinodya throws you between two spaces: one speaking of intended love and everlasting feelings of love between two people, while the other speaks of the war and its effects. Ugly feelings, described by Sianne Ngai, are envy, anxiety, irritation and paranoia – the lesser negative emotions that one can experience every day, the very ones that do not drive one to cause grievous body harm to oneself and or to others. These are the kind of ugly feelings that as a nation we seem to carry around with us each day since Shimmer Chinodya wrote that passage about the state of war in the late 70s, before the ceasefire was called. It is a weakness and nastiness of feelings that should be investigated both historically and in a cultural context. Ugly feelings that Ngai’s book tends “to expand and transform the category of ‘aesthetic emotions,’ or feelings unique to our encounters with artworks.” It is at this point that we must look at Epheas Maposa the artist participating in the exhibition *Ugly Feelings*.

Epheas Maposa was introduced to Village Unhu through his *Bewitching*

*Hour Drawings* on the streets. It is believed that those who were curious looked forward to seeing white marks on the road every morning as they walked to work or other activities. For the rest it was a non-event — just white lines on the road. An irritation, possibly. 11 years later, under the tutelage of painter Misheck Masamvu, Maposa finds his street markings carefully placed on a canvas, and a debut in this project: a painting made directly on the wall.

“Painting, sculpture, music and poetry, through offering no material advantages, have attracted to themselves a degree of skill, effort and labour hardly inferior to that given to industries obviously useful; and their successful exponents have received honour and rewards comparable to those of the great leader or statesman.” — Felix Clay, *The Origin of Aesthetic Emotion* (1908).

Over the years, Maposa’s work has been marred by scenes of decapitated and decimated figures and portraits. The works have remained rich in colour, but leave feelings of mangled positions, suffocation and painful frowns. The flowers scattered around the works give hope of life and nature with sweet smells and ready to pluck moments. The tweed jackets give a sense of gentleman orderliness, a moment of the serious presentation of oneself of this half-man half-animal evolving in surreal and baroque universes. Maposa’s first solo exhibition with 31 Project, *Smiles of Clay* had the artist speaking of the “fluidity of beings, of these stories which are repeated in an often absurd, sometimes nightmarish [way] where the bodies struggle, stand still and relaunch... It’s a frozen smile... similar to a moulded impression in clay.” We are in hard times, and in order to manage at all, we need to know a great many skills and things, among them is how to think — a hard skill to come by. Being able to do that means contributing to the construction of a new humanity and a possible shift in culture, and, of course, art appreciation and education — two things that I consider separate from applied and creative art.

“In short, everyone has ugly feelings. What matters is what one does with them” — Micki McGee, “Review: Ugly Feelings”, *Women’s Studies Quarterly* (2006).

Finally, I have accepted that people are a conciliatory bunch and hide in small comforts while facing difficult times, which we have hardly given ourselves a chance to feel.

**Georgina Maxim, Village Unhu**

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