

CCAC Interview with Azwifarwi Ragimana on 19/10/2020 at Tharold's Book Farm-transcript

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Project Name: RagimanaAzwifarwi

Date of interview: 19 October 2020

Location of interview: Tharold's Book Farm

Language/s of interview: Zulu (compromised language as Azwifarwi's first language is Venda)

Length of interview: 01:02:09

Interviewer name (and acronym): Thina Miya (NTM)

Interviewee name (and acronym): Azwifarwi Simon Ragimana (ASR)

Name of translator, if applicable: Thina Miya (NTM)

Name of transcriber: Thina Miya (NTM)

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List of acronyms:

FLC: Francois Lion-Cachet

CM: Charles Mamorobela

ICC: International Cricket Council

Azwifarwi Ragimana is currently living and working at Tharold's book farm as an artist in residence, which is owned by Niel and Merwelyn van der Merwe. Other artists that used to have studios and their work sold through the book farm are Johannes Baloyi, Noria Mabasa and Collen Maswanganyi to name a few. The farm was first named Gallery 181 before it changed to Tharold's book farm. Niel operated as a gallerist, marketing the artists and their work. Niel has since passed on but Azwifarwi continues working with Merwelyn.

START OF AUDIO RECORDING: 00:18:15

NTM: Please tell us a bit about where you grew up and how you became an artist?

ASR: I first started working on sculptures when I was 15 years old when I was still a student. After school, I'd leave the school premises and go to a man by the name of Simon Mikofi. He was the one who taught me how to sculpt.

NTM: Did your family play any role in encouraging your art making practice?

ASR: Simon Mikofi was the one who encouraged me to a great extent to take up sculpting.

NTM: Are you related to him in any way?

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ASR: He is married to my sister and is therefore my brother in-law. He is the person that encouraged me to make art.

NTM: Did he have an art studio?

ASR: He had a little gallery in Venda, he had a small business that operated in selling wood sculptures.

NTM: So you would also sell your work?

ASR: I was working under him at the time.

NTM: Did your artworks start selling when you were 15 years old?

ASR: Yes, when I would make a piece we would also take artworks along, then sell our sculptures by the hospital and areas around. After that, I met Neil and he saw my sculpture pieces because I knew this other man named Dr Maria (art patron) that would come buy my work to find out he would collect work from me and sell it to Neil. After some time I'm sure Neil saw that he is familiar with Venda and works with a lot of artists from the area so who's this Azwifarwi guy. I'm sure it took up to 3 or 4 years without him being able to track me down until he found a guy who told him he knows me.

NTM: You can't be found, we also had to search for you.

ASR: One day I met Neil and he said to me that he's been looking for me for a very long time, then he started showing me pictures of my sculptures. I explained to him that I have been working with Dr. Maria (art patron). Neil said "yes, those days I was working hand in hand with Dr. Maria to find out he was actually selling me your work and that's when he decided to look for the artist behind the sculptures". Since that day me and Neil have become very close.

NTM: Do you still remember the year this was?

ASR: I think it was around 1999 or 2000. After that he wanted me to come to Johannesburg so we could do this and that, that's when I said no I don't want to work under anyone because I work for myself and that's why you found me working from home. Neil convinced me bit by bit until eventually I gave in and since then we started working very well together. He would help me market my work, he was very good at it. We worked very well together. I would produce the sculptures and he would market them, that's how I still live here.

NTM: Where did you grow up as a child?

ASR: I grew up in Venda Tshandama village.

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NTM: How was growing up at home and how many were you living together?

ASR: Growing up was a bit difficult because my father left when I was still very young, then my mom decided to go live with her family too. I had to alternate between the two families. My closest family member was my brother in-law, we spent a lot of time together.

NTM: Can you tell us about how, when and why the work was made?

ASR: Okay, we're referring to the bench right? Well... let's say when we received the order outlining the budget limitations details for the making of a bench for Judge Yacob. A bench where he could relax when he wanted to feel the sun or in his own time like tea time or whatever. We started by inspecting the space where the bench will be placed at the Constitutional Court. So I made the bench here on site(Thorolds Book Farm). I planned to make the bench with an umbrella for him to relax comfortably. That's way before we actually placed it near the door so when he came outside it was close to him to sit on.

NTM: So did the bench have an umbrella?

It was intended to have an umbrella after the installation of the bench, but I don't know if the addition was made, however, it was intended to have an umbrella. Upon delivery, we left the bench in its intended space. We spent some time taking pictures but I lost the pictures we took together. We started by going to inspect the place so we could plan for what the person would like and how they would like it in order to know what kind of bench they want. That's why you see we made it with a metal counter so that when he drinks his coffee he has a place to put it.

NTM: What was the reason for the design on the bench?

ASR: I planned the whole look of the bench that's why we came to the court to see what kind of person we are making the bench for. When I realised we were making a bench for a blind person, I thought that he must feel when he sits on the bench that's why the bench was made with so many texture elements. I designed the bench on my own, yeah, I designed it on my own.

NTM: who did you go inspect the bench with?

ASR: I went with Neil. When we came back that's when I started to design it then I went to Venda to conduct some research for a tree trunk that is of good quality, so it could be sculpted into the idea I had for the bench.

NTM: Did you make the bench in Venda?

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ASR: No, I just went there to collect the tree trunk. The trunk I got from Venda is pure Kiaat.

NTM: What were the tools you used to make the bench?

ASR: I used a chainsaw and an axe then a smaller carving tool. I mixed a little bit of metal, so I had to weld as well, the bench was made initially out of wood.

NTM: Did you weld the metal pieces yourself?

ASR: Yes, I also weld.

NTM: Where did you buy the metal you used?

ASR: I bought the flat metal sheet at a steel place close to the farm.

NTM: Could you tell us the story of when and why this artwork came to the Constitutional Court?

ASR: It was Made for Judge Yacoob.

NTM: Do you know who approached you and commissioned you to make the bench? Was it a woman?

ASR: It was a man

NTM: Was it Albie Sachs?

ASR: Yes Albie Sachs, He is the man because he only had one arm.

NTM: Do you mind if I ask you what was the budget they gave you for the bench?

ASR: No, that was Neil's business. I didn't get into it that much.

NTM: Okay, that's fine, we understand.

ASR: You see the way Neil and I used to work was that I would make a sculpture that Neil would buy from me then he would sell it so I could make money from the sculptures I make, so I would make a sculpture then he'd pay me for it and add his mockup.

NTM: Please tell us more about your relationship with Justice Yacoob? Did you know him much?

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ASR: I only knew him when we received the order for the bench but before that I didn't know him.

NTM: Did you have any conversations with him?

ASR: Yes we did speak, when I met him we sat down and spoke a lot, I actually know him a lot.

NTM: Did you become friends with him?

ASR: Yes, we became good friends, we used to talk a lot without any problem. That's why I'm saying I don't know where I lost the photos I took with him.

NTM: Did you meet again after the production of the sculpture?

ASR: Only when we were delivering the artwork. We had to check the progression of the installation. This was the last time I saw him.

NTM: What inspired the title of your artwork *Yacoob's Bench*?

ASR: Okay, as mentioned before, when we started off, we needed to go to the court and assess the environment and know the person we are making the artwork for. When we noticed that we are designing a bench for a blind guy, our first thought was to ensure that it is a tactile piece, while noting that a judge always needs truth, and truth comes from feeling. Thus the bench has carvings, for him to feel in order to get the truth. Our aim was for the blind judge to feel something. The judge needs truth; truth differs, it can never be one truth.

NTM: To which themes would you say this artwork speaks to? Does it aim to create awareness of those who are blind?

ASR: Yes, it was aimed at raising awareness thus the hand carvings all over. As soon as I found out it was for a blind judge, I knew I had to give it a sense of touch for him to feel free. I also made sure that when the public looks at it, they see the extreme beauty of the bench. Similarly, you guys keep praising the bench...this is exactly the desired outcome.

NTM: How do you feel about your artwork being part of the CCAC today? Additionally, what does the CCAC mean to you?

FLC: It might be worth asking if he has been to the court to look at the bench recently?

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NTM: No, He only came when he needed to assess the environment and meet the judge, then came back again for installation, but I will ask him again. So how do you feel about your artwork being part of the CCAC today?

ASR: I feel good about it because whenever your audience gets to see it, they'll start screaming Azwi, Azwi, Azwi, Azwi... Yes!

NTM: So you want your work and name to be known?

ASR: Yes, I want people to remember my name and know my work.

NTM: Have you been to the Court recently?

ASR: No I have not.

NTM: Okay, I wanted to ask what the CCAC means to you?

ASR: I love how it has improved and I love how you are recapturing its stories, it's good.

NTM: How do you see art as being connected to human rights in South Africa or universally?

ASR: Art is good because some artworks can teach you about life through its visuals. it connects to life in general. Art and life are parallel to each other.

NTM: Do you have advice on the preservation and display of the artwork?

ASR: I think the display part is up to you as the artwork is part of your collection. I have no issues on how it is displayed.

NTM: And how can we best preserve and maintain it?

ASR: Hmm.... Usually at the Sandton Convention Centre, they call us back to renew our artworks every two-three years. They assess their budget constraints for artwork maintenance. We obviously then check for any damaged parts in the process and find ways of fixing them while reapplying the varnishes, wax and oils.

NTM: What materials do you usually use to “renew” your pieces? Do you usually varnish?

ASR: It depends on the placement of the artwork. The outdoor artworks won't be varnished/shiny, but will still be fed with a different, maybe wax product for its longevity.

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NTM: Oh, okay. What do you use for outdoor sculptures?

ASR: I don't use varnish on any garden sculptures because they should not be shiny. I only feed the artworks with a different product to avoid quick damage.

NTM: Is Jacob's Bench meant to be installed outside?

ASR: Yes, however it needed the umbrella for protection from harsh sunlight and rain.

NTM: Your artwork was restored by conservator, Ernest Bellingan Scott, late 2019-early 2020 as it had water damages. After working on the damages, he fed the artwork with wax and oil. It still is not very shiny but he also worked on the metal piece. We're glad to know you are able to maintain it too.

ASR: Yes, I am available.

NTM: Judge Yacoob provided us with some braille books, We would like to display it alongside the artwork. would you mind?

ASR: No, I have no problem at all.

NTM: Is there any information you would like to have added in this interview?

ASR: No, otherwise you can always go through the documents I have provided as well if you need more information about me. Is Judge Sachs still there?

NTM: He does not work in close proximity with the artworks, however he still does attend some Trust related meetings at the court and provides tours too.

FLC: Did we get enough information on his meeting with the Judge?

NTM: Yes, they met when discussing the concept for the bench and upon delivery.

FLC: Was it at the old court building or the new one?

ASR: I think the old one as there were Mandela exhibitions and prisons around, with the Country's apartheid history and all...

NTM: They met in the new court building. You should come visit and see the new placement of the bench. It's actually placed inside the court now

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ASR: I will make time to come see it.

NTM: When was the artwork made?

ASR: Between 2003/2004

NTM: Was Niel given a budget to work on by Albie?

ASR: Yes.

NTM: Do you travel as part of your exhibitions?

ASR: Not really, but my work is all over. I have a few pieces at the University of Bloemfontein, the reserve bank too...

NTM: Any other collections?

ASR: Johannesburg Art Gallery, I even lose track of some of them. In 2003, I also designed a life sized drum for the ICC world cup. It's called a Marimba drum.

END OF AUDIO RECORDING: 00:55:47