

Weapons and Refuse as Media: The Potent Politics of Recycling in Mozambican Urban Arts

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Discarded plastic bags, broken door and window frames, styrofoam packing materials, cast off frying pans, bits of scrap metal, spent magazines from a destroyed AK-47: garbage or art? Perhaps both if you are looking at art made from recycled materials in Mozambique. These materials represent detritus from an African post-war urban society which becomes transformed into art by Mozambican artists. My dissertation research investigates Mozambican artists who use recycled materials as media to illuminate important environmental, economic, and cultural issues to determine how and why artists utilize recycled materials to create distinctly Mozambican art. I focus on individual art-



ists using various recycled materials and the Christian Council of Mozambique's NGO project, Transformação de Armas em Enxadas/Transforming Arms into Plowshares (TAE). TAE collects and destroys decommissioned weapons from Mozambican wars, subsequently transforming them into art.

Creating a context for art guides my research methodology in which I investigate the impact of the past lives of recycled materials and the ways in which these lives inscribe meaning as the materials are transformed into art. My research

demonstrates that Mozambican artists recycle both literally and figuratively, creating evocative art while deconstructing Mozambican history.

While artists connected with TAE work as a collective, many individual Mozambican artists use diverse recycled materials in their art. By incorporating these artists in my research, I explore the materiality of recycled objects and the impact of the artworks on both viewer and creator. These artists include Pekiwa, who creates artwork by recycling broken doors and window frames to make commentary on social situations; Sonia, who uses recycled styrofoam to create artworks steeped in Islamic imagery; Zeferino, inspired by African masks, uses cast off pots and pans to update historical African forms by creating them out of recycled materials; Makolwa, whose artworks vibrate with the tension of their materiality, as he links sharp metal nails with the smooth surfaces of discarded chairs and pounded scraps of metal; and Fiel, whose brother was kidnapped into service as a child soldier during the war, creates artworks which focus on the objecthood of the weapons, forcing the viewer to intimately connect to the meaning of the various arms and the intrinsic power of violence within each.

Each of these artists come from vastly different economic, social, and educational backgrounds, yet all create art using recycled materials. Working with these individuals and many others, I explore how and why Mozambican artists use recycled materials in the creation of their art to investigate larger themes related to recycling and its meaning in Mozambique and globally.

My desire to create a contex-

tual framework for recycled materials that become art has expanded my research this year to focus directly on the objects used by artists. This has led to interviews with municipal and national directors, administrators, and consultants of solid waste management, public and private garbage collectors, as well as the owners, operators, and workers at recycling facilities. I have visited solid



waste containers and dump sites where I have interviewed directors, workers, and independent entrepreneurs of the informal sector who buy and sell recycled materials. This allows me to analyze multiple waste streams to determine the course of an object's life before it becomes a media material for a Mozambican artist. Pre-dissertation research in Maputo in the summers of 2008 and 2009 began my engagement with the artists of Mozambique and has consequently expanded, strengthened, and enriched my research.

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