

# The Woman with the Box

A conversation between Munya Madzima and Rebecca Garrett

Munya Madzima is a sculptor/painter/performance artist who exhibits internationally and is currently completing his Master's in Visual Art at York University in Toronto, Canada. Rebecca Garrett is a videographer, photographer and installation artist and teaches at the Ontario College of Art and Design in Toronto, Canada. The two artists met in Harare in 1990, and have recorded conversations about cross-cultural issues regularly since then, in both Zimbabwe and Canada. The following is a transcript of a conversation that occurred recently during a discussion of Garrett's photographs of the Siya so market in Harare.

R: Did I show you an issue of *Public*? This is the magazine we're thinking of putting the photos in, and as you can see it's a very nice, well-produced magazine. We talked earlier about art work that is made from found or recycled materials out of a situation of economic or political necessity, and then some funny things happen, there are shifts in meaning that occur when this work is put in an art gallery in the first world. And I'm just wondering if a similar thing will happen here. How do you think these photos would be read if you saw them in a magazine like this?

M: Yes, it's a very beautiful magazine. I don't know the people who look at this type of magazine.

R: I would think that the people who would buy it would be people who are educated in the world of art and invested in it in some way. I mean theoretically anybody can get it, just in the same way that anybody can go to an art gallery, but anybody doesn't go to an art gallery. So I'm wondering if you think the photographs will immediately become exoticized? Is what you say about them going to change that?

M: If people just come upon the photos they'll get a certain impression, but I think people will be really interested to find out what's behind them.

People will make assumptions about what they're seeing and the people in them. Like this one, this woman is carrying a huge box and it's self-explanatory. It's showing the struggle that women go through on a daily basis and one would put themselves in this position and say "would I be able to function even?" So it's like bridging the world, saying that across the world there's something different going on and people should be aware of this, that people are struggling.

R: But do you think there's another interpretation that people might have about the fact that she's African and she's got something here from Hong Kong that she's willing to struggle so hard for? Is that also a part of it?

M: For me, if I saw this picture, I know because I lived there that this box has nothing to do with Hong Kong but it has to do with a container, you know?

R: Well I'm assuming that there's a TV in there or something. A cassette deck. It says it right on it.

(laughter)

M: Yeah, a cassette deck model 204. (laughter) I know that, okay, it could be a container, it could be a real cassette deck, but I wouldn't read it as a cassette deck myself.

R: You wouldn't assume that there is a cassette deck in there?

M: No.

R: Why? It's just a handy container you mean?

M: Yeah, it could be any box with a label on it that originally had a cassette deck, but now...

R: It could be full of tomatoes or whatever...

M: Yes, because the issue of recycling is BIG there, it's so big. People find use for these things and that's what's going on, but people who are not aware of these things, the text is narrating its narrative.

R: Because I think that someone here might see it as ironic, that she wants this cassette deck, that she's poor but she wants it so much that

she's willing to take on this hardship. That she's aspiring to owning this cassette deck and there's some kind of irony in that. But you don't read it that way.

M: I read it at a very basic kind of level but if I want to be smart and sneaky I could take it to that dimension, making it into, like I could theorize it. But right now I'm so close to this culture, to this people, that how can I possibly start thinking about theory or shifting what is so clear to me and giving it a certain meaning? But for someone from here there's so much going on with the Hong Kong text, there's narrative. If there wasn't that narrative she would just be carrying a box.

R: Well there's just a disjunction of expectations around the things in the image I think. But you say you don't objectify the things in your culture in that way, to see them, and I'm curious about that because I think I do that all the time with my culture, all the time. I'm just constantly shifting the frame... like what I was saying earlier about the guys who have the second hand appliance store up the street and there's a way that they're just sort of obvious and I guess they were sort of invisible to me for years and years, they're just there and part of the culture, and then at some point I started to see them really differently, something shifted in the way I was seeing them, I think because as I got to know them better I realized that their way of life and livelihood was this kind of hereditary thing and when I lived on Queen Street I saw them when they weren't at work and were doing other things. And I guess I try to look at what's around me in different ways all the time, just because... I don't know why.

M: Yeah, I do it too. Like, you were the one that shot this picture. If I was the one holding the camera, if I see a woman, a black woman carrying a box with a thing on it that says Hong Kong Cassette Deck model number 204, would I run and say "Wow look! She's carrying a cassette deck, wow." (laughter) It's true that the text and the subject and what's going on, it really makes a story you know. I'm sure you might have thought of it like that, I don't know what went through your mind.

R: It's not even thought out like that, I immediately find it interesting and that's because of my own, where I'm coming from and my expectations or assumptions that I make culturally because of where I'm coming from because I was an outsider there, and so then you're reading things from outside the culture. After 2 or 3 years of living there I saw things a lot of the time that sort of made sense in a certain way and then every now and then something just jumps out, because you don't know, you

don't know—maybe that's what the interest is mainly, just not understanding, so you go "Oh, what's that?"

M: You know I can have the same feeling. If this woman was a white woman carrying the same box from Hong Kong on her head, I would run around and get a camera.

(laughter)

R: Exactly. And that's what's so interesting. I have a photo that I got someone to take for me, of Stephen Moyo's wife Cecilia and me, standing together. We're both facing the camera, we're both in exactly the same pose. And I have an African cloth wrapped as a skirt and she's wearing a European dress. And it's like we're both aspiring to these things about the other that neither of us are, but we want to be somehow, at this location. And I didn't think of that at all till I'd been back here a few years. At the time it was just me and Cecilia, like a family photo, and it's only with the distance of time and geography that now I think oh that's so funny.

M: Yeah. If I was to see that picture, immediately I would say "Wow, look at our culture that is disappearing. We are running to connect with the Western culture, whereas the people from the West are actually appreciating what we are running away from.

This woman in the photograph is carrying a box and the text on the box has to do with a commodity that comes in from a different culture, which means that with globalization people are now clinging to these foreign forms of communication or technology and people are now taking this as their culture and replacing a song or a cultural dance, the radio becomes the song, and because of the TV and radio, people want to become the people on TV, and these are very big issues.

R: I agree, but now I'm wondering: if this was a man, we'd read it so differently, wouldn't we? Or would we? If it was a man carrying the box instead of a woman.

M: Well there's the issue that in Africa women do a lot of the labour, and men do labour in the mines too but there's an idea in the culture that women do the labour.

R: So if it was a man carrying the box, would you assume he was an exceptional man? Or would you assume that he was being paid to carry that box?

M: Well, usually men don't carry things on their heads. So what happens as far as culture is concerned is that women have always been the ones who carry things on top of their heads. So it's like seeing a man carrying a baby on their back. Men do not carry babies on their backs, they carry them on their front and women carry babies on their backs. So if I saw a man carrying a baby on their back I would want to take a picture, I would run and say "Wow, let me take a picture of that man carrying a baby on his back." So now a man is carrying a box on his head and you're thinking what kind of a man is this? So that's about cultural issues now.

I have a picture that I took a long time ago of a man carrying a child on his back. I happened to have a camera with me, and this guy was carrying a baby on his back just like a woman and he's wearing pants and everything. At that time women didn't wear pants in Zimbabwe so when I saw the man carrying the baby on his back I wondered "Is it a woman wearing pants?" And then I saw no, it's actually a guy. So I shot the picture and ran after him and took another and I thought "Wow this is so ironic!"

R: So if a man was carrying the box, he'd have it where? On his shoulder?

M: Yeah, he'd have it on his shoulder or in front, showing that he's strong, that he can do it. You know carrying it on the head solves a lot of problems, it's balanced and doesn't cause back damage. But men put it on their shoulder even though they suffer because they want to maintain that macho-ness, to show that they can actually do it.

R: And do you think if it was a picture of a man carrying this same box on his shoulder, would we assume it's his box, in the way that when a woman carries it we assume it's her box? Or if it's a man do we think it's that he's a worker and that he's carrying it for someone else?

M: Well actually I would probably think that this guy might have bought this radio, I'd assume there's a radio in the box if it's a man carrying it. I'd think "Look, he's bought a radio, now what type of machine is it?"

(laughter)

R: Oh, I meant would we assume that it's not his box, that he's been hired by his boss to carry the box if it was a man.

M: No, he might have bought that radio if he was a man. The reason I say that is because when women carry things on their heads, for cultural reasons it is a vessel, a container. That's the cultural aspect, that the

things that are carried in these containers are things that don't have a connection to the outside part. Like a woman can be carrying a gourd but you don't know what's in the gourd. Like with this woman in the photograph, chances are it might be a radio, but it might not, because women carry different things inside containers. But with a man, they don't usually carry boxes on top of their heads, so when they finally do it, it has to be something that is very important.

Can I say one more thing about this box that we've gone so deeply into? The reason that this picture was taken could be the fact that the box has text on it, and if it didn't have text maybe it would be a struggling woman period.

R: Yes, and I think it would be very different, perhaps more exotic for a Western audience without the text, because then it's just about a struggling African woman carrying things on her head, whereas the text brings up a whole different set of considerations.

M: Yes, it reminds me of what happens when traditional cultures clash with globalization. So here there's this clash of culture, and you can see the way the woman is dressed, the cloth shows that this woman is inclined to her cultural way of dressing and it's clashing with globalization right away.

So with this one, just because it's a black woman and she's struggling and she could be a relative or someone I know and maybe I've carried a similar container like this, so when I see this automatically I know this woman is struggling. She's carrying a box and it's heavy and she's taking it from point A to point B. And then when you start getting into layers now, you can say well we have objects from Hong Kong coming into the country now, and not only from Hong Kong. The TV has become... It was 1979 that the TV hit Zimbabwe and it was black and white, and then in the 80's everyone wanted a TV, a colour TV. So if this was 1985 I might assume that she's carrying a TV, but now, at this point in time those things are outdated and it's just a box now. But for you I'm sure you'd see an issue, and people who will read the magazine, they can read it both ways, they have the choice to see it as a struggling woman, because you see the dress is really torn, so it shows that she's struggling and surviving, and someone else will think there's irony going on. So there's more than one way to read it.

R: Yeah. I wonder how someone in Hong Kong would read it?