

A dazzling smile behind the scenes of a world unravelling

Zimbabwe-born Cape Town-based artist Richard Mudariki mixes gallows humour with stark reality

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NOT OIL RIGHT *'The History Book'* (oil on canvas).

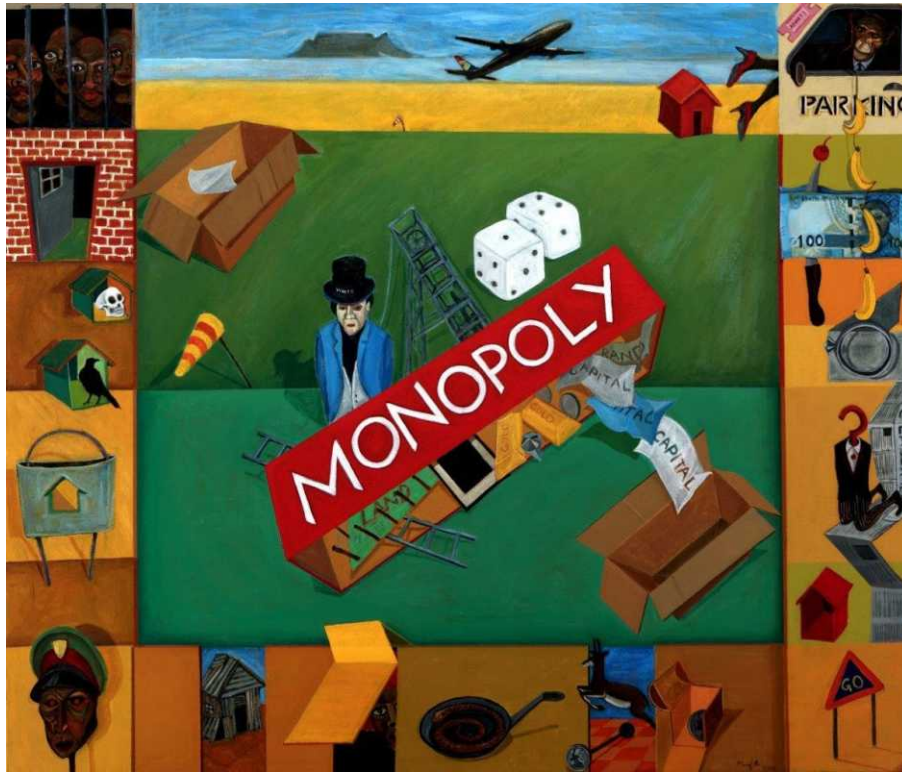
Richard Mudariki seamlessly translates 21st-century politics and society into the absurd on canvas, with *Monopoly* and *The World Cup* drawing out the gaming nature of politics.

The Zimbabwean-born artist topples the powerful with his alchemy of humour and stark reflection on the world and how it is unravelling.

His new show, *Maonero Angu (My Reality II)*, is more than a figurative interpretation of the contemporary world, extending to Brexit and Trump. It delves into personal realities with *Us & Them*: a naked figure steps through a stage curtain, under which pairs of feet protrude, hinting at what goes on out of the spotlight. *Intimacy*, a study of nudes, gives another glimpse into his self-reflection.

Mudariki's biting interpretations do not appear to align with the artist with a dazzling smile who welcomed me into his Woodstock studio soon after sunrise. Even though you can virtually touch the walls with outstretched arms it has a bright energy, like he does.

Mudariki first exhibited in 2001 when he was 16, at the National Gallery of Zimbabwe. Helen Leiros, Greg Shaw and others at the Gallery Delta in Harare and its Foundation for Arts and Humanities played a pivotal role in mentoring him for the next decade and a half. Johannesburg-based artist Allen Kupeta, also born in Zimbabwe, was another painter he admired and learned from.



DEADLY GAME 'Monopoly' (acrylic on canvas).

When Mudariki was about 12 and living outside Harare he wrote to Leiros, sending her cartoons and drawings. She would reply and, after four years, he was finally able to attend art classes at Zimbabwe's Gallery Delta.

“I would go on Saturday mornings. People there would be doing art as a hobby, but it was my art education,” said Mudariki, whose paintings have immense detail and figures with strong lines reminiscent of Shona sculpture. They have been exhibited every year since that first show.

Mudariki gained prominence in the 2000s, mostly in SA and Zimbabwe, but also in London, Berlin, New York and Miami.

The Fountainhead, from his time as a resident in Miami during the period Donald Trump was elected US president, is included in *Maonero Angu (My Reality II)*.

Ugochukwu-Smooth C Nzwei, African art curator at the Cleveland Museum of Art in the US, describes Mudariki's insights into critical issues in Zimbabwe, SA and further afield as “unique and searing. In his modernist paintings we track political satires and gallows humour.”

Mudariki also has four mesmerising paintings on display at the *Five Bhoobh* exhibition, currently on at the Zeitz MOCAA in Cape Town. *Five Bhoobh* is an exhibition of paintings from 29 contemporary Zimbabwean artists. Mudariki and two of his peers spent a six-week residency at the museum before the exhibition opened last month.

He said: “It means a lot to be in a show with some of my mentors and older artists I look up to and admire.



UNPALATABLE TRUTHS Richard Mudariki.

“There has not been any major exhibition of Zimbabwean artists like this for a long time,” he said. Mudariki moved to SA in 2008 when hyperinflation closed the university at which he was studying archaeology, cultural heritage and museum studies. Icons, symbols and artifacts feature prominently in his works, which also reference Western paintings.

In his Cape Town studio is a framed Z\$400m note from his first sale. It lost its value soon after he was paid. The young artist had a rough landing in SA, arriving during an outbreak of xenophobic violence, but stayed and worked hard. Doreen Sibanda, executive director of the National Gallery of Zimbabwe, said: “Even at 15 he was very accomplished, and it is good to see how he has matured and pursued his dream.”

Sanlam held a retrospective exhibition of Mudariki's works last year. Titled *Mutara Wenguva (Time Line)*, it was curated by Stefan Hundt, who had to borrow pieces from private collections. Cape Town's Iziko SA National Gallery now has one of Mudariki's paintings in its collection.

The Johans Borman Fine Art Gallery in Cape Town represented Mudariki until it closed last year. He was then approached by other galleries, choosing to work with the Barnard Gallery in Newlands, in the shadow of Table Mountain.

The gallery allows Mudariki's paintings the space they need to fulfil their theatrical power, starting with a large piece titled *The History Book*. A bare-breasted protester holding a playing card with the words “Gucci Grace” dominates the painting. The figure brandishes a flag while looming over serpentine soldiers, prostrate at her feet, and toy tanks, one with a cockerel at the helm. The text, next to other ominous images including a skull, is blanked out. That's quintessential Mudariki: no holds barred, but with a unique twist to every tale.

Richard Mudariki: Maonero Angu (My Reality II) is on at the Barnard Gallery from October 9 to November 20.