# Ukumbusho

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Often memory needs to be fixed to an object that can be touched or lifted to the light. Without canvas or paper or something material, even the events that we live through may be difficult to hold.

The paintings are made of reclaimed flour sacks stretched tight and nailed to wood, so that when turned over, the pieces reveal old words across their backs, their provenance the place where bread is baked or burned. Each one is edged in a handmade frame, painted a complementary pink, brown, or pale blue.

Sometimes he signed his work Tshibumba Kanda Matulu. Sometimes Tshibumba K.M. In much of the literature he is referred to simply as Tshibumba or even TKM. In one of many transcribed interviews with anthropologist Johannes Fabian, the artist says, "I tell things through paintings. That is, through painting I show how events happened, right? I don't write but I bring ideas, I show how a certain event happened. In a way, I am producing a monument."

They are small and portable monuments. Most of the paintings measure approximately 15 by 24 inches; they weigh so little it's possible to carry six or seven stacked in one's arms.

How to describe these works of art? They always contain both illustration and text, each painting a representation of a particular moment from the history of the country once called Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), each piece given a detailed title, words written across the blue sky or over the mottled ground. In this way, they can be considered for what they show, for what they say, and for what image and language do together, overlapping.

In the 1970s, Tshibumba Kanda Matulu belonged to a group of artists in the area around Lubumbashi who were known as genre painters and who worked in a figurative style, depicting the landscape, folkloric characters, and traditional scenes of home and family. "[R]epresentations were appreciated," Fabian explains, "because they were required by the nature and purpose of genre paintings: to serve as 'reminders' of past experiences and past predicaments. *Ukumbusho*, an abstract noun formed from a causative verb, can clumsily but most accurately be translated as 'a quality capable of triggering memories.'" According to Fabian, genre paintings traditionally explore different levels of memory, *ukumbusho* divided into three categories: the ancestral world, the world of the past, and the world of the present.

Although Tshibumba's style remained recognizably that of a genre painter, his work began to diverge from the conventions of the form, when he conceived of an ambitious project to paint the history of

Zaire, a narrative that would include the ancestors then move to the more recent past and finally to the unstable present. While local residents might only purchase three or four paintings at most—severely limiting the opportunity to make a living from one's art, much less to undertake a series of such scope—he realized, through his conversations with Fabian, that visiting academics, businessmen, and diplomats might be likelier to invest in these linked, historical pieces. In *Grassroots Literacy: Writing, Identity and Voice in Central Africa*, scholar Jan Blommaert writes that Tshibumba's "first contacts with the academics were commercial: they bought paintings that he sold in the street, and they became his best customers. The intellectual engagements came as a side-effect of what was initially, and mainly, a provider-customer relationship. Material interests generated other interests and more profound forms of engagement." But despite this major development in Tshibumba's work, Fabian argues that, as an "artist-historian," the painter remained deeply connected to his aesthetic roots, his genius that "he began as a genre painter, never ceased to be one, and conceived his historical project in constant confrontation with genre painting."

Nearly thirty-five years after we left Africa, my parents give me two paintings; both belong to Tshibumba's *Une Histoire du Zaïre*. The first one depicts March 8, 1977: the start of Shaba I, when rebels invaded the province of Katanga and outside governments—including the United States—intervened to keep Zaire's military dictator, Mobutu Sese Seko, in power.

There is text placed throughout the first piece. A villager stands on the left side of the canvas pointing to something beyond the picture's frame. Below his arm, mirroring his gesture, a white road sign reads *KOLWEZI*, a prosperous copper-mining town of great strategic value during Shaba I. A soldier wearing an armband that marks him as Soviet carries a Katangan flag, a banner of red and white cut diagonally by a strip of green and the white field stamped with three red croisettes. Behind him, three soldiers bent sharply at the waist advance, their boots mashing the yellow grasses, armbands identifying them as Cuban, Portuguese, and Katangan. In the background, we see a row of homes with pointed grass roofs, and beyond the buildings, a haze of forest. The men's uniforms are the same dark green as the trees, their red berets the same bright blood of the flag.

The second painting provides just as much documentary information. We are staring at a railway station; a sign posted—*GARE MANIKA*—tells us where we are. Dozens of people, pushing against each other, fill the foreground. Women carry newborn babies. Men lift bags and suitcases. Someone runs. Figures climb through the windows of the crowded train. And in the sky, two fighter jets labeled FAZ (*Forces Armées Zaïroises*) sleek past, dragging gray contrails behind them. The sun, like a red target, hangs in the distance. Although the most dominant color in the painting is a luminous coral, this is a scene of war.

Both paintings were completed in 1978. Tshibumba's last existing work is dated three years later. 1981. In the catalogue for a 2004 exhibit at the Tropenmusem, "a Dutch institute with an acute colonial and postcolonial history," curator Paul Faber hypothesizes about what might have happened to the artist:

> [I]n the middle of the 1970s, tensions in the area escalated again, and the expatriates moved away. Tshibumba lost an important group of clients…Living conditions for painters deteriorated and increasingly, they stopped painting and sought other ways to make a living. Quite possibly, this is what Tshibumba did too.…Attempts to trace him have failed, and Tshibumba did not try to make contact himself. There is good reason to believe that he is no longer alive. He may have finally been a victim of one of the continuing armed conflicts in the unstable society that he carefully, and not without risk, tried to document.

Documentation, testimony, history—the paintings of Tshibumba Kanda Matulu offer image and word to say, *this happened*, an action that is indeed not without risk. Many of his pieces illustrate the brutality of Belgian colonial rule, men and women harvesting rubber plants, people whipped and beaten. Depending on the era, his paintings show decapitations, gunshot wounds, punctures from spears or arrows, a hanged man.

Other paintings explore episodes in the life of revered political activist Patrice Lumumba, described by *The New York Times* as "a leader of the Pan-Africanist Movement in the 1950's, and one of the first to demand the Congo's independence from Belgium." Lumumba was executed on January 17, 1961, reportedly under orders from Mobutu, "at the behest of the United States and with the covert aid of the Central Intelligence Agency." Tshibumba shows this killing too and the torture that came before it, Lumumba's white undershirt splashed with red.

Still other paintings depict Mobutu, the tyrant easily identifiable by his iconic black-rimmed glasses, leopard skin toque, and gray abacost (a suit that represented Mobutu's rejection of European dress, its very name a contraction of the political slogan, *à bas le costume!*). Not without risk: to have documented the ancestors and the vicious past and the shifting present, where foreign powers like the United States and the Soviet Union used local politics to fight their ideological battles. Or, as Fabian says, "[G]enre painters face political constraints. Authorities have an interest in controlling the challenge, indeed the subversive potential, of popular memory. Totalitarian regimes must discourage remembering that leads to thinking." Tshibumba's art cannot be regarded unthinkingly; even a viewer without knowledge of the history of the Congo—its many names and occupiers, its abundances and starvations—could recognize the way paint on canvas tells a story, bodies standing with weapons or crouched in subjugation, and always the exquisite sky and the lush forest witnesses to the narrative. Everything is always in medias res, the viewer's gaze interrupting legend or tragedy or the current moment.

In *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, Adam Hochschild observes:

> There was no written language in the Congo when Europeans first arrived, and this inevitably skewed the way that history was recorded. We have dozens

> of memoirs by the territory's white officials; we know the changing opinions of key people in the British Foreign Offices, sometimes on a day-to-day basis. But we do not have a full-length memoir or complete history of a single Congolese during the period of the greatest terror. Instead of African voices from this time there is largely silence."

As if in answer to this silence, Tshibumba once told Johannes Fabian, "That is the significance of what I produce: It is to help one another so that we learn the history of our country correctly."

Imagine the long monologue of colonizing voices. Imagine a man who taught himself to mix colors, to stretch flour sacks across wood frames, to dip the brush in a stroke of red. Imagine a man who became a painter because he had histories to tell. Imagine a man who was hungry and who lived in a place where most of his neighbors were hungry and terrorized. How he walked from the university to the consulate to the cultural center. How, in offices and private homes, he laid a row of paintings across the ground. How he perhaps asked these foreigners, which ones did they want for their walls. How the colors seemed to move then, like a hand stretching toward an open flame.

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