



Xpace Cultural Centre
2-303 Lansdowne Ave
Toronto ON M6K 2W5
416 849 2864
Tuesday-Saturday 12-6
www.xpace.info

Chiedza Pasipanodya

Munda (Field)

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Essay by Renelyn Quinicot

Does the modern use of the word ‘ancestor’ rather than ‘late grandparent’ or ‘past relative’ add a layer of mystique or romanticism to the persons imagined - maybe even more prestige and upon a perceived pedestal, more honour? In the words of African-American poet Dudley Randall, “Why are our ancestors always kings and princes and never the common people?”¹. What if our ancestors were much simpler than the assumed weight the modern use of this term carries? After spending my entire life imagining possibilities of what my mother’s father looked and acted like, she finally found a photo of him this past week. I use the photo as the lock screen on my phone to notice what recognizing him visually would bring up in me. His simple, tired body, scrawnier and smaller than I imagined, brings me to realize how much I had romanticized who he must have been. I see the reflection of my own silhouette overlay the image of him on my phone when the sun glares on its glass screen. We often hear phrases like “You are your ancestor’s wildest dream”² and I can’t help but wonder if sitting around on our electronic devices for hours in a day would’ve actually been what my elders would’ve hoped as the continuation of their legacy. If we had shared a lifetime, would our personalities even get along? Would our beliefs and ways of being align? Would I love and respect your being as much as I do your remembrance?

¹ Dudley Randall, “Ancestors” in *The Black Poets: A New Anthology*. New York: Bantam Book, 1985. pp148

² Referencing nothing in particular but a general use of this word as remembered in pop culture through social media captions, t-shirt slogans, lyrics and poetry.

On the first day of Spring, I visit Chiedza Pasipanodya's studio to view their work, *Munda (The Field)* in its last stages of completion. *Munda* stands as a collective of conical forms very similar to one another, but that differ in height, widths and markings. In their sameness yet difference, they illustrate the ghostly silhouette of a family, each height marking a different generation, or life lived. Chiedza smears more graphite over each figure as its final polish of skin. They bring their fingers up to my face so I can see the way graphite sparkles once spread into a fluid state.

In Innocent Pikirayi and Anders Lindahl's studies of the ethnohistory of ceramics, the use of graphite-burnishing in pottery is written about as a continuation of Zimbabwe-Shona (Chiedza's lineage's own) traditions. The two researchers share that its use allows for a metallic lustre much like an enameled pot's³. Graphite has been used as a tool for sealing a process, and binding a story of intimate care, touch and focused time. Though each structure of *Munda* is also finished to a shine, when pressed against skin, its top charcoal-coloured layer can recede further and reveal the memory of its first shades and original materials underneath. This last coating of Chiedza's pieces becomes a medium of interaction, through touch, but also through its ability to reflect the gaze of its viewers upon its polished finish. Impacted by every interaction it meets, each sculpture of *Munda* acts as a memory-keeper.

3 Innocent Pikirayi and Anders Lindahl, "Ceramics, Ethnohistory, and Ethnography: Locating Meaning in Southern African Iron Age Ceramic Assemblages". *The African Archaeological Review* Vol. 30, No. 4 (December 2013), pp. 455-473. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42641840?seq=1>

4 Nathalie Batrville and Shaya Ishaq, "Red Dust and Black Clay" / *Canadian Art*. January 28, 2021. <https://canadianart.ca/features/red-dust-and-black-clay/>

Munda is comprised of eight pieces total, with the tallest height at 6 feet. Some figures lay on their side to reveal their hollow interior, some stack almost seamlessly in support of one another. The element of change in each form is also present in the ways they will react to the times of the day. Once the sun is down, *Munda* fills the glass vitrine of Xpace with a stilled scenery of the first marker of change, and continued life we can recognize in nature - a sunset. Overhead lights of orange, rose and blue illuminate the glass-enclosed space of the window gallery. It is an environment that holds into meditation, the moment a day ends and begins to prepare for a new. Scholar and artists Nathalie Batrville and Shaya Ishaq describe the malleability of clay by writing: "The process of working with clay can feel as though it brings us closer to the chaos and perpetual change of life itself." This statement rings true in the pre- and post-treatment of Chiedza's work.

Chiedza's ceramic landscape's ongoing capacity to have its layers repolished, rubbed and cared for into further becoming, echoes the purpose of the Southern African termite mounds they are inspired by. These mounds are built using mainly termite saliva, feces and dirt⁴ - tools that act as evidence of life consumed, processed and shed⁵. These architectural forms outlive their makers and become a space of passing for new colonies to enter, pick up where the previous occupants left off, and continue to improve the structures for the beings that will follow. Similarly, the body is a meeting site : where past, present and future intertwine. Though a termite mound can easily collapse beneath heavy rainfall⁶, they become more informed by the

5 Stephanie L. Richards, PhD, Medical Entomologist, "Termite Mound Structures".

Terminix. <https://www.terminix.com/termite-control/colonies/termite-mounds/>

6 Our saliva is crucial to how we digest our food, dirt is what upholds and grows lands upon which termites live upon, feces act as a metaphor for what we learn to let go of psychologically, once processed in the body, mind and heart. <https://badgut.org/information-centre/a-z-digestive-topics/saliva-more-than-just-drool/>

labour that precedes them in order to rebuild homes even more resilient and strategic toward longevity and impact. The continuity of a mound's lifespan performs the very processes of inhabiting a family's lineage: we are born into a one, and consciously or not, we undertake actions of labour and care from where our ancestors left off. These efforts can stand as gestures of gratitude for how those before us have carried the lineage so far and helped land us into where we've ended up. We uphold this body as home to a continued story, carried within its being for the time we have, while constructing the future stories the next generation will tell of their ancestors. "Leave spaces better than you enter them", we often hear, is a reminder of how we can show respect.

It seems like a heavy weight of pressure to imagine. How can I possibly make up for the paths that have been laid out for me? Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estés writes, "The body is a living record of Life given, Life taken, Life hoped for, Life healed. Anywhere the flesh is pressed, wrung, even touched lightly, a memory may flow out a stream"⁷. The body inhabited by life at all, is a continuity of labour and loving. The body - like termite mounds are to new interaction, safekeeping and communal nourishment within it- , is a homecoming for stories, memory and imprints passing through. A body houses experiences of processing, lasting, and shedding to make room for more. The in-, and out-flow of breath is the continued reception and sharing of life given.

⁶ Lisa Margonelli. "Collective Mind in the Mound: How Do Termites Build Their Huge Structures?". National Geographic (2014).

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/140731-termites-mounds-insects-entomology-science>

⁷ Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estés. "Chapter: Joyous Body - the Wild Flesh". *Women Who Run with the Wolves. Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*. New York :Ballantine Books, 1992.

Chiedza prepares the kiln one last time to be left on its own for the night, the last pieces of the *Munda* installation inside, warming into its hardened form. Chiedza places the “DANGER EXTREMELY HOT” sign on top of the kiln warning their studio mate of the life being formed within. The care in Chiedza’s placement of the sign imitates the ways a parent would tuck their child in for bed. We both walk away from the kiln toward the exit, giggling at the nervousness of only being able to hope for the best in the way the last pieces of *Munda*’s forms will turn out. With our backs turned, I yell jokingly behind me to the pieces inside, “Good luck in there!”. You can spend hours - like I’ve been fortunate to witness through video documentation Chiedza has-, pressing, smoothing, wrapping your own body around your pieces with 360°, top to bottom care and precision toward the stacks and coils of its making and armoured protection. However, once it enters the kiln, it is freed into a life of its own. Once the timer marks its completion, the suspenseful lift of the kiln’s heavy lid can either reveal a disheartening, or exciting surprise of results. A new version of your making, shifted and warmed into decisions and altered states of its own. Offering lessons to learn for the next either way.

We walk out, into the residue of Winter, chilled winds competing with the new longer day of sun. We continue discussing our experiences with the book, *The Artist’s Way*⁸, which I had noticed sitting on Chiedza’s studio desk earlier. A read we both have in common which functions like a self-exploration and creativity course and includes a daily task to free write for three-pages every morning with no goal nor edits. It is an exercise of courage, commitment, and letting go. I think about this practice in relation to a ceramicist’s care for their creations.

8 Julia Cameron. *The Artist’s Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*. New York: J.P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2002.

Further, maybe this is a practice we can consider for *all* offerings in this lifetime. The free-writes, a part of the *Artists' Way*, teaches our creative-hand and mind to trust without attachment to the result. To live without the pressure of living better or more impressively. To love and honour without pedestal.

I go home to meditate, reconnect into my body, slightly overwhelmed by a rare outdoor venture since lockdowns. "Hold your breath with tenderness rather than tensing," the meditation-class teacher instructs, "like you could hold life without gripping"⁹. I imagine the visual of someone holding a tight fist and slowly unravelling their fingers one by one. Can you allow a life to sit here, in the softness of your own open palm, and trust that it can still be connected to you? Can you allow its state of being to feel held by you, but with space for it to be?

-Renelyn Quinicot

⁹ A Kundalini Yoga class taken on ZOOM with instructor, Krista Schilter owner of <https://www.goldenchainforever.com/>