

Keepers of the Vision

By Patricia Crisafulli

Over the past year, I have made four trips to Rwanda, conducting research and interviews for a book I am co-authoring on the economic development of a country where, 18 years ago, a million people died in a horrific genocide that turned a tiny landlocked nation into hell on earth. Today, the revitalization of society, predicated on reconciliation and unification, has led to economic progress. Admittedly starting from a low base, GDP has grown by 7-8 percent a year. Universal education provides for nine years of schooling for all children, boys and girls equally, with a plan to expand to twelve years. Strides in healthcare and poverty reduction impress and inspire.

But what of the artists, I have asked myself. In a country that needs doctors and nurses, engineers and teachers, is there any room for those who work in paint and ink, song and dance? In a small gallery along a rutted road in the capital city of Kigali, I found my answer. Innocent Nkurunziza, a tall thin man of about thirty, is among the artists who display their work at Ivuka Arts, a gallery whose name translates into “reborn.” In a country torn apart by unspeakable division and violence, the name seems more than fitting.

“Fine art is nonexistent here,” Innocent tells me matter-of-factly, without complaint or blame, the way you’d observe the weather or the day of the week. “They don’t understand.”

I wonder who “they” is, but assume that it encompasses a broad swath of society, those who think that toiling away ten or more hours of day ought to produce more than a canvas that hangs on a wall until someone – a tourist, no doubt – takes it home.

The government offices we visited were surprisingly devoid of art. Some displayed the colorful handmade baskets, round and shallow as serving bowls, which are made by women. A few official spaces, such as where the cabinet meets, boasted canvases with scenes of Rwandan life. Yet, in the poorest of villages, people sometimes tack up a picture from a magazine or a calendar as a wall decoration. Yes, art has its place, and the human longing for beauty and inspiration is universal.

Innocent pursues his dream for practical as well as artistic reasons; this is what he is meant to do. “I found out I had a unique gift for visual art,” he told me, pointing to one of his recent works: a mixed media of traditional bark cloth and acrylic paint. In a workshop behind the gallery, one of his colleagues stood at a wooden easel, painting rows of tiny dots with an implement that looks like a toothpick. All of them, Innocent believes, must pursue their unique gifts. This is the advice he also gives to his five younger brothers for whom he is responsible.

In a country where women carry firewood and bananas on their heads, and tote jerry cans of water filled from a community spigot, the artists work just as hard at their craft. Theirs is the responsibility for keeping the vision and expressing it visually. Abstracts evoke emotions. Contemporary works capture everyday scenes in the market, around the cook stove, along a narrow path in a village. The reality of life, in its beauty and harshness, is presented on canvas. Viewing it, I cannot help but feel as if the vitality is stronger there, that the stakes being so high

to progress—to move beyond the past to a better future—creates a momentum that we in the more comfortable West cannot fully appreciate.

Even though I bought a painting, a swirling Van Gogh-inspired sky over a simple village and a river teeming with fish, I cannot immerse myself in the same understanding as the artist who created it out of personal experience. My view is the romantic one of the outsider, coveting the unfamiliar and the exotic, the adventure of it all. And yet the painting that hangs on my wall tethers me to a place that has changed me irreversibly and helped to shape my vision, as well.

In these paintings I find immediacy and intensity, a sense of life being lived more fully. Having come back from the brink of complete devastation, the country and its people have no choice but to move forward. This is the inspiration I covet most of all, when making change is not a convenient option to redecorate our lives the way we do our living rooms. It is an invitation to know life more deeply, to cut through the trappings that cloud our vision and move into the essence of what it is to be alive each day, one at a time.