Theresa Musoke’s life and work as an artist and educator over the past six decades exemplify what is possible in the constant return to wonder as a compass.

*“The artist is challenged to bring up something new, which is always a magical part of the process.”*

The retrospective, The Presence of Living Things, offers an in-depth view of Theresa Musoke’s artistic practice, presenting prints, drawings and paintings made over the past sixty years. The earliest works in the exhibition include etchings and lithographs on paper from the 1960s, and the most recent works consist of a suite of paintings on canvas completed this year.

A self-described semi-abstract artist, Musoke’s work reflects on and draws from the natural world with a sustained attention to the landscape of East Africa and its wildlife. Primarily interested in capturing a feeling and expression for what cannot be put into words, Musoke begins in observation and proceeds to paint, draw and make prints from memory and imagination. What emerges then are finely distilled compositions of intertwined forms, blended colours often in a controlled palette, rendered in her characteristic and mesmerising play of light.

***“****The whole thought of painting is a strange one, most people want you to put it down in words, but the truth is, if I could tell it, then I wouldn’t paint it.”*

In her paintings on canvas, for which she is renowned, Musoke begins by dyeing the raw canvas. Once the pigment settles, she works intuitively in acrylic and/or oil paint, sometimes dyeing the canvas again, and responding to the marks until new forms emerge; pelicans merge with the water and the sky, antelopes and wildebeest in motion blur into the grass, and wilddogs in their packs swarm and swirl. Her commitment is to the impressions and relations built in the mark-making rather than a depiction of the natural world as it is, and with that, moving the viewer to a more contemplative state, one in which they can attend to a feeling.

Equally stunning are her figurative paintings, primarily self-portraits that offer viewers a brief and rare glimpse of the artist as she sees herself. In Self Portrait (Three faces) Musoke depicts herself in a fractaled tableau suggesting a kaleidoscopic view. A central figure, with two others in her likeness fill the foreground of the painting, each with subtly different facial expressions. Upon closer viewing, hints of a fourth face also emerge as suggested by an eye on the top right corner of the painting, a reward for close looking, as with all her paintings, to be enjoyed as slow as possible.

Classically trained as a printmaker at the Royal College of Arts, London and the University of Pennyslvania, Musoke’s early etchings and lithographs predominantly feature the human figure, abstracted or rendered in the simple forms alongside abstracted landscapes, animals and insects. This treatment of light and form carries through to her watercolour paintings, as well as drawings in ink on paper, attentive to value shifts and suggestive lines to bring forth recognisable forms.

There is a matter-of-fact way in which Musoke speaks of her life as an artist, “I don’t know what I would do if I did not paint”. Despite all odds, Musoke carved a path for herself and further made it possible for other African women artists to imagine a life of artmaking for themselves. She continues to maintain an active studio practice to date, in many ways embodying a line from Zora Neale Hurston’s autobiography, Dust tracks on the Road, “No i do not weep at the world–I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.”

Theresa Musoke has been a highly influential figure in Kenyan and Ugandan art, not only known for her celebrated visual arts practice but also as a distinguished educator. She lived in Kenya for over twenty years, teaching at the University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University. Throughout this time, Musoke exhibited frequently in local galleries such as Paa Ya Paa, Gallery Watatu and the African Heritage House. Her selected solo and group exhibitions include a solo show at the Uganda Museum, 1965; Sanaa: Contemporary Art from East Africa, Commonwealth Institute, London, 1984; Pioneer

Women of the Arts, Nairobi Gallery, 2018; A Retrospective of Three Artists: Theresa

Musoke, Tabitha wa Thuku, Yony Waite, Circle Art Gallery, 2022. Her work featured

in the travelling group show Mwili Akili Na Roho, at the Royal Academy, London and

Haus Der Kunst, Munich. Select publications include African Artists, Phaidon (2022)

Mwili, Akili na Roho, David Zwirner (2023) Theresa Musoke, Uhuru or Freedom, Art

Education (1989). Musoke’s work is part of several collections including the Nairobi

Contemporary Art Institute, The African Arts Trust and the Sharjah Art Foundation.

Works cited:

Female Pioneers: Theresa Musoke: A lifetime dedicated to Art in East Africa, in conversation with Martha Kazungu.2019

Theresa Musoke, ‘Africa through the eyes of Women Artists’,1991

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