



FROM A COLLECTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

Wanted to discover the forces that inform Emile Stipp's art collection, and how these influence his role as an advisor to the Tate Modern

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Emile Stipp, with, from left: Edson Chagas, Found not Taken, Luanda, 2013; Edson Chagas, Found not Taken, Luanda, 2009; Mohau Modisakeng, Untitled (Frame IV), 2012; and from Edson Chagas' Tipo Passe series, 2014; Diogo K Puenba; Diana S Sakulombo; and Jean P Mbayo

TYPICALLY, AN ARTWORK, EXHIBITION, or sort of eureka moment sets an art collector on a definitive path, determining the kind of works they will acquire. Emile Stipp can recall two such moments. Both defining encounters occurred at exhibitions: a 2011 exhibition at Stevenson Gallery — lešobana!! lešobana! lešobana!! (le bulegile) lešobana! lešobana! lešobana!! (go phunyegile), by Dineo Seshee Bopape — and Intersections by David Goldblatt, at the Goodman Gallery in 2005. Superficially, Bopape and Goldblatt have little in common. Bopape is a multimedia artist who produces films and installations, and film installations combining objects and video. Her art is playful, assembled with found objects, and abstract, recalling Moshekwa Langa's early '90s installations. Bopape's work is almost impossible to "collect" in a way — how does one recreate one of her installations or show a film in a home? Goldblatt, on the other hand, offers photographs documenting often banal scenes in contemporary South African life that reveal the country's sociopolitical context.

Yet it was bodies of work by these two artists that spoke to Stipp of an immediate relevancy. Put more simply: they struck him as undeniably contemporary. "I wanted to have a relevant collection, reflecting what is happening now, in art. Art is not decorative: it has to be about meaning, in the work — and the bigger meaning it has to our society," Stipp says. The ebb and flow of South Africa's social and political life fills Stipp's Pretoria home. Not only are there works by Bopape — mostly films displayed on screens — but the who's who of the South African art world is also represented. There are photographic works by Zanele Muholi, and Nicholas Hlobo's distinctive sculptural, embroidered works. Stipp's large collection of 75 video works cannot be immediately seen or hung on walls. "Initially, I resisted buying video works," Stipp says. "I asked myself: 'What is the point of watching the same film over and over again?' Dineo Bopape's 2011 exhibition convinced me I can't ignore this kind of work if I want a relevant collection." Stipp has placed screens and projectors in different rooms, so he can display and enjoy his video collection. "You can change the atmosphere in a room by switching

on a different video work," he says. It is likely Stipp was expecting art to fulfill a decorative function when he started his collection. "It was a mundane start, though I was always interested in art. I bought a new house in 2005 and needed to find some art," he says. A meeting with the art dealer and former gallerist Warren Siebrits set Stipp on the path to becoming the well-known art collector he is today. Stipp is known and admired in the business world as the Chief Actuary at Discovery Health; however, he has also garnered a reputation in art circles. This led to the creation of an annual event tied to the Joburg Art Fair, where works from his extensive video art collection are curated into a programme of films. "Video art is so much easier to share: all you need is a room with a projector," Stipp says. "Art only gets meaning when you share it and communicate what it is about — and get people's reactions and feedback." As an established art collector, Stipp is frequently asked about the criteria that inform his purchases. Apart from budget limitations, it is not always so easy to pinpoint these criteria, Stipp suggests. This quality of the "now" that an art work is able to encapsulate perhaps evades easy explanation. "I wanted to build a collection that has its own character," he says. "I didn't want to just have the big names because they fetch good auction prices." At a fundamental level, Stipp is largely interested in artists who already have gallery representation, although he has works in his collection produced by artists straight out of university. "Buying a work is a form of patronage," he says. Stipp's reputation as a discerning collector has spread beyond the continent's borders. He now serves on the Africa Acquisitions Committee for the Tate Modern, advising on works from Africa for the museum collection. A committee of up to 30 people meet twice a year to advise on works selected by the curators at the Tate Modern, and vote on which works should be acquired. The committee's discussions have been rich and rewarding for Stipp. "It has been interesting to see how people respond to African art, and looking at how particular works fit into a museum collection and inform other works," he says. "The Tate has a very international collection, and (African art) is integrated with the rest of the collection, and is not always labelled as 'African'. For a public museum to have that ambition is important." As always, Stipp is interested in how the meaning of a work becomes more layered once it enters a global art narrative. However, Stipp's relationship with art hinges on the psychic pay-off it offers him. "Art helps me understand the world in a different way," he says. W

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