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Mhiripiri Gallery Presents Africa's Great Arts Tradition

By Dwight Hobbes

Artist and gallery owner Rex Mhiripiri is intensely serious when discussing the artwork in his crowded gallery off France Avenue in Edina. His conviction and commitment seem second only to his belief in God. "I believe my success lies in the hands of God," he says, "not in who will, or who will not, spend money in my gallery."

Throughout his 45-year career as an artist, Mhiripiri has enjoyed much success, and, after 14 years in the downtown Minneapolis area, Mhiripiri Gallery has found a second home in Edina (3519 W. 70th St.). "And, we are growing – we are thinking of a third store," says Mhiripiri.

"I am going to say some big things, and then I am going to prove them," says Mhiripiri in an example of the treatment his customers receive. Beginning with what you will and will not find in his gallery, Mhiripiri offers a mini-history lesson regarding the Shona stone sculpture his gallery specializes in. His pieces are not to be confused with the merchandise that can be found in other galleries and stores in the area which feature African imports. "The only similarity is that the things come from Africa. It's like saying bananas and pineapples come from Florida."

Shona stone sculpture has an artistic history native to Zimbabwe, like Mhiripiri himself. "The great house of stone," Mhiripiri explains is one translation of the name of his native country, Zimbabwe. The Shona tribe is the majority in Zimbabwe. However, Mhiripiri points out, the art is sometimes created by people not native to Zimbabwe, and even by those not native to Africa, indicating a snapshot of a German artist at work creating a large Shona stone sculpture.

Mhiripiri feels he's always had a "gift for art," and says he sold his first painting at age 20. Forty years later, in 1995, he focused on dealing in Shona stone sculpture in a serious capacity. In the new gallery alone, scores of pieces worth hundreds of thousands of dollars are displayed.

Mhiripiri strolls through what little space isn't filled by the numerous pieces, pointing out styles and artists the way a proud father talks about his children.

Mhiripiri Gallery sells the stone sculptures of artists who also have work can be found in New York's Museum of Modern Art and the private collection of the British royal family, among other prestigious collections, says Mhiripiri. Paging through dozens of art albums, Mhiripiri selects photographs of artists at work, indicates where those artists' creations can be found in his gallery, then presents photos of himself or his wife with those artists at work in their homelands. This, says Mhiripiri, puts the customer's mind at ease about the authenticity of a piece.

Each year, Mhiripiri travels extensively, hand-selecting the pieces that will be available in his gallery. "I am the only one who can say I like them all – because I bought them all," he says with a sweep of his hand above the expansive collection.

The sculpture is created from Serpentine stone, found primarily in Zimbabwe. The subtle color variances of the rock are revealed once the artist begins to chisel away at the light, rough outer edges to expose the dark, inner core. An experienced artist, says Mhiripiri, can determine what color lies beneath, before working through it. The possibilities for transformation are limited only by the artist's imagination.

"A lot {of the sculpture} depicts people," says Mhiripiri, "not just pole, but the emotions of people." With an air of familiarity, he selects examples throughout the large gallery. "A guy in absolute pain, whatever happened to him – emotions. A person pulling out a thorn from his foot – emotions. Here is a musician, {playing} the Mbira (a type of hand-held piano)."

Another common theme depicted in the art is love. "A lot of kissing and lovers – even lovers having sex," says Mhiripiri. "Intense emotion on the inside, liberty, the story of human events – human beings doing what human beings do."

The commitment Mhiripiri shows to his work ties into his own spiritual beliefs, and what he hopes to accomplish in the community and the world. "I am a Christian – a person who believes in Jesus as the only savior and {a person} who makes a commitment to live as this same Jesus would want him to live," he says after much thought. "Because the world has been

good to me and because I am a Black man, I want to be used as a bridge between myself and people of all colors.”

Mhiripiri says he realizes that because of the nature of his business, he is in the midst of upper-middle class White America each day. For a lot of his customers, he is the only Black person they have ever known. In this role, he says, he would like to be “used to correct some of the problems and misconceptions about Black people.”

Additionally, says Mhiripiri, he believes he has a duty to the Black community, and would like to see more Black businesses. “Africa is a part of history that they can be proud of,” he says looking out over the sea of chiseled stone. “Some of what we are doing here can be a part of their self-worth. This is as fine an art as has ever come from anywhere.”

In sharing his spiritual philosophy which proposes that God sends blessings through people, Mhiripiri hopes he is fulfilling his commitment to relate to people with love and respect both in his life and work. “Because I am a Christian, my life must reflect what I believe. I am a person at peace.”

At 65, he says there are no plans of retirement. “In the mornings, I really like to come here, to work.”