

“I like to do

Awards, a degree, the prospect of a
glittering future in the arts – fine. But
this is a young artist who also wants
to change the world

Words Alan Harper

big
things”

A prize-winning 2018 graduate from the Plymouth College of Art, Renovat Destiny Itangishaka Moody has lived in Devon for 14 of his 22 years. But both his art and his life are steeped in a fascination for his childhood in Burundi, for his family origins and for his heritage.

His names bring both worlds together: birth family and adoptive parents, Africa and England. And so does his art. "I'm proud of my heritage," he says, "I want to keep it close to me."

Glass-blowing might not one be of Burundi's acknowledged artistic pursuits, but the country does have a reputation for its craft traditions, principal among them being basket-weaving, which combines "functionality, exacting skills, and visually dazzling graphic elements," according to Yaëlle Biro, associate curator at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

"They're ceremonial and decorative, but also practical," says Reno. "Women would make the smaller ones and men the big storage vessels. There are also patterned wall panels. They're beautiful." For the work in his degree show Reno took inspiration from Burundi's famous basket forms, with their functional, full-bellied bases and dramatically extended conical lids, to create tall, pointed sculptures. Gourds and the familiar shapes of earthenware – universal, comforting, almost primeval – also make an appearance. In glass.

They are simple but at the same time highly decorative, which might serve as a metaphor for how they are made: untameable elemental forces teased into shape by fearless and determined human ingenuity. To listen to this slight young man, with his



Work from Reno's degree show: forms inspired by African baskets, gourds and pots, reimaged in glass.



steady gaze and impeccable manners, explain how a glass blower creates, for example, a rounded, open-mouthed vessel – a shape which any competent potter with some clay and a wheel could knock off by the dozen with hardly a thought – is to witness a duel between wonder and incredulity. The molten glass is frighteningly hot yet has to be manipulated constantly, twirled, tweezed, caressed and cut with an array of metal and wooden implements that would not look out of place in a medieval surgery. Glass-blowing doesn't just look difficult, it looks impossible. And when he describes the addition of colour to the object – molten glass drizzled into molten glass – it's like sorcery. Incredulity wins.

Struggling to comprehend how, the obvious next question is: why? Reno laughs. "I started in my first year at PCA doing work in ceramics, metal and wood," he explains. "Originally I considered specialising in jewellery, but my tutor told me I'd get bored, because I liked to do big things. The advice was to try glass. I knew immediately it was for me. After that I was in the studio the whole time."

Lawrence West, the glass studio co-ordinator at the College, adds: "We chose glass because of the immediacy of the making. It's technically and physically a very challenging discipline which will keep you entertained for a lifetime. It can be quite de-motivating when it goes wrong – Reno remained motivated. He has a good base knowledge and skill to build on."

While still a student, Reno was selling his work ▶

through commercial galleries including Glass!! on Plymouth's Barbican. In July the Brownston Gallery in nearby Modbury hosted an exhibition that included several new PCA graduates and afterwards – having given him the 'Fresh Young Talent' award for 2018 – elected to keep Reno on their books. Meanwhile, in Brussels, the arts and crafts emporium Kalungi Design also sought him out. "He's an African owner," recalls Reno. "He says he thinks I'm probably the first Burundian glass blower!" At his degree ceremony, Reno was presented with the Principal's Award for Enterprise.

So how did a young man from a small farm in the heart of Africa come to be studying art in the West Country? "It's a long story," he says. He was born in the middle of a civil war which claimed his father. There was a horrific childhood accident in which his legs were crushed by a bull. Fortuitous encounters with influential people while in a remote country hospital led to a mercy dash to Plymouth, where his treatment and rehabilitation could begin at Derriford Hospital. He was eight. He lived with a foster family who, with his mother's permission, adopted him. He attended school, on and off, while the treatment to his damaged legs continued for several years. He won a place at the art college. Through his older brother, who now lives in Canada, he managed to regain contact with his mother. Since then he has also been working to get back in touch with Burundi, and his past.

For Reno, this involves a lot more than simply taking artistic inspiration from the country of his birth. Small, agrarian, densely populated and desperately poor, in every global ranking of life expectancy, health and prosperity, Burundi comes close to the bottom. From the comparative privilege of a student's

life in Plymouth, for Reno the contrast was stark. He wants to change things. "I want to give something back," he says.

After his family was split up in the war, his mother returned to the family farm, and it is this which provides Reno with a focus for his ambitions. At the moment, he says, the farm is productive, but small. Some of the food it grows is already being distributed free to single mothers and other deserving cases, but that is just a start. If the farm was bigger, with more land and more cows, it could become self-sustaining: profitable as well as charitable. On his crowdfunding page (gofundme.com/burundi-a-vision-of-the-future) he explains: "I want to use the land to help develop the community. I want to breed cattle and grow food on the land. This will help provide employment, as well as help improve the living standards of the people."

The immediate aim, says Reno – who is ploughing half of the proceeds from his art sales into the project, while also looking to set up a studio in Plymouth with four fellow artists – is to buy generators, water pumps, a truck and three more hectares of land. Long term, he wants to see affordable housing – "living conditions are not great out there" – more jobs created – "there are lots of educated people, but few opportunities to work" – and even a children's home in the family compound.

At a time when most newly-minted graduates would be getting their breath back after finals, having a few beers and perhaps heading for the beach, Reno seems determined to take on ever more difficult challenges. But you do get the impression that he has hardly got started.

<http://picbear.online/renosglass>

Reno at work in the glass studio at Plymouth College of Art.



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