“Cows are owned by Rwandans, Horses are Owned by Foreigners”

2009. 32” H x 31” W, Acrylic on canvas and wood

Alice Musabende, genocide survivor and David Feinberg. Drawing contributions by artists Ali Abdulkadir, Bonnie Brabson, Mary George, Rachel Mosey, Rowan Pope, Ryan Rasmussen, Nicole Rodriguez, Stephanie Thompson, and Peter Lommen.

In 1994, genocide swept Rwanda during the unrest surrounding that countries’ Civil War. The war raged between the Hutu and Tutsi peoples, themselves victims of earlier Colonialism by the Germans and then the Belgians. The Europeans brought with them the racialist ideologies that would later culminate in The Holocaust on their own continent. The Tutsi’s were initially chosen as the indigenous ruling class, oppressing the Hutu majority. The tables turned after independence, this time it was a Hutu government that marginalized the Tutsi. Tutsi dissatisfaction resulted in the formation of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), resulting in a war roughly divided down ethnic lines. When a plane carrying Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana was shot down, massive and indiscriminate violence was exacted against the Tutsi’s and any suspected sympathizers. The genocide ended in July of 1994, 100 days after it had begun when the RPF deposed the former government.

Alice Musa-Bende is of Tutsi background and a survivor of the chaos. She chose the piece of dyed cloth because it looks like the blood soaked clothing from the people that were killed and left on the roadside.

The horses have their own story. Alice mentioned that she doesn’t really like horses. When she was a little girl, she remembers, downtown Kigali and the riding club where the rich white people would ride their horses around town. She thought it was fun to run after the horses when they would come through town.

The cows in the painting symbolize the importance that her people placed on these animals. The cows have a special place in Alice’s heart and have fond memories for her. She stated that the cows were her grandfather’s babies and every one of the cows had special names. Cows are a sign of prosperity in her culture. She said because her grandfather was a Tutsi, when the cows would get loose, people would complain and he would receive fines. Finally, one day he got tired of all of the complaints and fines and he sold all of his cows. Alice said he was never happy after that.