

# Artists in elective politics: is it by 'Design' or 'Coincidence'?

Kuonyesha art Fund hosted its monthly online conversations on the 7th of August 2021. The topic for this month's conversation was 'Artists in elective politics', we explore the question, is it by 'Design' or 'Coincidence'?

To delve into this discussion, we were pleased to host Ugandan singer-songwriter, dancer, and now politician Hon. Rachel Magoola, Member of Parliament, and women's representative from Bugweri District.

A renowned teacher by profession, she prides herself in teaching with every career path she has chosen to undertake as a musician, singer, songwriter, and choreographer. In her vocation as a songwriter through her lyrics, she tells stories based on her personal experiences. In addition, she uses music as a medium to teach and share positive morals in her community. She has written several songs whose sole purpose was to create awareness in the community about social issues she is passionate about, such as sickle cell anaemia, HIV/Aids, tobacco control, teenage pregnancy, abstinence, and many others.

In her journey to become a politician like her mother and grandfather before her, she taught her team, the voters, and the competition the standard rules and manners of engagement when operating in the same society rooted in good moral ethics. It said that they scoffed at her ambitions and considered her weird. Undeterred, she went on to win the election. Her approach indeed touched a responsive chord.

Her teaching journey started in secondary education, then teacher education, moved to classroom teacher of English and Music education and in 10 years as a private teacher training college principals.

Hon. Racheal is intentional about supporting vulnerable children, allowing access to school education. As a teacher, she works with several teachers in service, especially the student teachers, constantly asking them to improve and learn the best practices in education. Her dream is to engage young people in rural communities who have limited or no access to education. She believes that they can also become leaders in their community; however, these skills must still be nurtured.

The conversation was moderated by a curated number of questions that were presented to Hon. Magoola by our ever candid and engaging Moderator, Owekitiibwa Nuwa Wamala Nyanzi, a distinguished visual arts practitioner/consultant for the last 42 years who has successfully developed personal skills in multi-media painting and graphic design.

**Question:** Who is your role model?

**“My journey into pop music started with ‘Mpongo’ Love, I was always impressed with her beauty and makeup. So, I wouldn’t leave the TV when she was on.”**

**In music:** She speaks fondly of her father, mother, and their love for music as her first role models who opened the way and nurtured the interest she had in music. Her passion for music started as a little girl. By the tender age of 8 years old, she was a powerful Soprano. She vividly remembers participating in several performances with her sister, both in the church and school choirs.

Growing up, Tina Turner, Miriam Makeba, and Diana Ross were her early inspirations for pop music, and her parents loved Jim Reeves and the Beach Boys. These were very key in her transition from the school and church choir singing to stage. The exposure to international music ignited her passion for becoming a pop musician.

**In politics:** Her grandfather was among the first three Ugandans in the parliament of Uganda. He accomplished much as a local chief appointed in the colonial days. His endeavors were a significant inspiration for her mum to become a politician. Hon. Racheal says she got into politics by accident, her mother an earnest politician, and she played a supportive role during her campaigns. Despite admiring her mothers’ accomplishments as a politician, she was also a first-hand witness to the other side. Watching her mother’s journey, Hon. Magoola recalls people being consistently rude, abusive, and presumptuous. With this in mind, she swore that she would never join politics.

When her mother left politics, her replacement did very little to fulfill her commitment. So, she got into politics because she was not happy with her mother’s predecessor, who, according to Hon. Racheal, the replacement, did very little or nothing when interacting with and establishing programs that would sustain the rural and village communities in Bugweri. So, she decided to join what she refers to as the **‘murky pond’** of politics from then on.

She constantly faced challenges from her team, who were adamant and preferred doing things the old way. However, they quickly learnt that Racheal had her way of going about achieving her goals. She reflects on timekeeping as one of the aspects that people take advantage of, especially when it comes to events. For example, if they say that the event starts at midday, it should begin at exactly midday! She held her team accountable, and the people in her community quickly adapted to her strict timekeeping guidelines. Her experience has been transformative and life-changing, especially when timekeeping and scheduling speeches at various events. But that aside, she does not regret her choice of joining politics reason, Hon. Racheal feels she has something to contribute to the country regardless of its measure.

## **“If I get to change at least 2 people I would have done my job.”**

**Joining politics by design:** Internationally, people join politics by design. Racheal references the ‘2020 US Presidential Elections’ where Artists and Museums were actively engaged, presenting exhibitions and public awareness campaigns, and encouraging voter participation. They focused on voting rights, American democracy, and various contemporary socio-political issues, including police brutality, COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 Census, mass incarceration, and immigration.

Meanwhile, galleries facilitated fundraising for racial justice causes, COVID-19 economic relief, and political candidates through benefit sales such as Artists for Biden, organized by David Zwirner gallery. Through Hauser & Wirth, “Sentinel IV,” a limited-edition bronze sculpture by Simone Leigh, was produced and sold to support the racial justice work of Colour of Change.

Artists in the US are involved by design because they know that they have a voice, and art influences mindsets. In Uganda, people are waking up and realizing that the arts can influence political perceptions and chronicles, drawing on the recent ‘People Power’ wave. Before such phenomenal events, people did not comprehend the power of the arts in influencing mindsets, culture, social issues, and narratives. Artists in Africa and Uganda need to unite and take their place beyond the artistic spaces that many people are unaware of. Racheal references a few examples that support the argument, namely;

Artists in Action International, a charitable non-profit whose goal is connecting, uniting, and channeling artistic forces towards raising the level of society and culture toward greater heights through the aesthetics of each and all art forms. A dynamic organization that firmly believes Art can literally impact the world and does. Artists have one of the most essential jobs in society – to imbue our culture with life.

Cuban artist Tania Bruguera at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts 2016 Summit said,

## **“If there was ever a time, we needed Artist in politics it is now. We need their radical ideas, visions, and perspectives in society.”**

British Artist - John Lathan dedicated his life to creating a world view that would unify science and the humanities. He believed that the world could only be changed by those willing to conceive of reality holistically and intuitively. And that initiative and holistic manner is usually born with the Artist. According to John, the artists are the best individuals equipped to do this because of how they live and perceive life. He was responsible for starting and establishing the Artist Placement Group that pioneered the concept of Art in the social context. Their notion of ‘placement’ acknowledged the marginalized position of the Artist and

sought to improve the situation by enabling artists to engage actively in non-art environments. This shifted the function of Art towards 'decision-making', expanding the reach for artists into the wider society and thought of the Artists as fulfilling a specific role in society, curving out a free space into which radical ideas could be expressed.

According to Hon. Racheal, Artists, are very influential in society; they change opinions and instill values like keeping time and being kind to one another, thus leading to behavioral change. She won the MP seat because most of her voters wondered why she did not follow what her competition was doing using inappropriate language in the campaign. Some of the challenges faced as a politician during her campaign trail included being called old, ugly, etc. She was unresponsive to their attacks. When asked why she never replied to their hecklings, Hon. Racheal responded that she was teaching her team and community to be respectful of one another. Regardless of whether they have divergent political views and ideologies, they cannot become personal vendettas. One quote stands out during the trying times, **“When they go low, we go high”**, by Michelle Obama.

Hon. Racheal has undertaken the journey to instill the values she learnt in her childhood among the people in her community and her team. Her life's purpose is to be a positive role model for the next generation and creating positive change. According to her, Artists can get into politics by design. However, artists must be part of the decision-making body to make their impact and help people understand the dynamics of being an artist and what they bring to the table in the different non-artistic spaces.

**Question:** How is Hon. Magoola fostering or nurturing positive change in her community as an NRM representative?

Hon. Magoola says she hit the ground running. She recalls a death in her community of a woman who bled to death after giving birth at a rural health centre. The reason was that there was no vehicle to transport her to the hospital. The only mode of transportation that was available was a motorbike. Though they tried to save her life by transporting her with the motorbike available, she soon bled out and died, leaving behind a family of 10 children. When Hon. Rachel Magoola heard this; at the time, she was planning on buying herself a personal vehicle; in that moment, she went back to the car dealer and asked him to give her a car that could fit a bed. So she went to Katwe, fitted it with a bed, branded it with the word ambulance and donated it to the health centre with the hind sight that, if the woman that had died had been transported in a vehicle, probably, she would still be alive. That, then became the first vehicle (Toyota Noah) in her community that could transport women to hospitals reducing the mother and child mortality rates during childbirth. It has so far saved up to 5000 or so women to date.

**Question:** How do you plan to use your new position in government to advance our cause as artists?

**Response:** Before we organize systems of how we manage Art, we will not go very far. I plan on using my position to advocate for a ministry that represents culture and Art only. The arts must be separated from the Ministry of gender. The Ministry needs its own vote to determine what must be put in place to support the arts. To create awareness of what the arts can do in the country. Artists need to come together to push the bill for an Arts Ministry. I have already started the research to address the relevance of having a separate Ministry that creates awareness about the arts and how they can fit into other spaces.

**Question:** How have you managed to keep sane as an artist during the lockdown?

**Response:** One day at a time is how you can make it through. We need to watch the silver lining and reach the finishing line regardless of what is happening around us. Before the lockdown, performing as an artist refreshed my spirit. It was like communing with my friends. Singing has allowed me to maintain a positive mindset, a light spirit, and laughing at the days' challenges, this always got me through.

During the lockdown, I wrote an entire album with ARC music in London, to be released on the 27th of August 2021. One song has got a phone recording of birds chirping in the morning and to have that incorporated in one of my songs was refreshing.

It is an album of 10 songs with 1 song in Acholi, Iteso song, Mbale song, a song from Kigezi, and other songs in Lusoga. So, the album is called songs from Uganda. On Friday at 8:00 pm, we will be playing the songs live on stream. Hon. Magoola hopes to continue performing with the Afrigo band on stage, in her own words, "I am going to be the biggest dancing MP ever."

In conclusion, Hon. Magoola Racheal agrees that connectivity in the arts industry is not at the level it is supposed to be. However, she hopes to continue having conversations with government representatives supporting the arts, such as the ICT Minister, the Tourism Minister, and others including most importantly, the creatives who have used their resources in reinventing themselves through the development of Apps like YOTV, Curatorial platforms like Njabala project by Martha Kazungu and many others.

**"Young people and artists need to invest in themselves. Art is a job like any other. The resource is you. For now if there is no money, invest time in you. Sing better, writer better, inform yourself about past present and future of the artists and art forms. So that when the opportunity arrives you are the gift that the world is waiting for."**



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