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The Fuba Files

The *Fuba Files (Federated Union of Black Artists' Files)* are kept in the library of the Johannesburg Art Gallery. This resource unit was compiled by Elza Miles during her tenure as researcher in residence at Fuba Academy (1992 to 1993). The Royal Embassy of the Netherlands sponsored Fuba Academy and granted eighty thousand rand for research into the lives and artworks of African artists in South Africa. In 1988 Miles had already discussed with Sipho Sepamla the director of Fuba Academy the need of establishing such a research unit and wrote a proposal to the effect of compiling resources. At that time she was teaching history of art at Fuba and was alerted to her students' need of local role models. In the pipeline was Barbara Lindop's book *Gerard Sekoto*, but what about the other artists who, within the framework of 20th century artistic trends, pioneered the visual arts?

Miles started her new job at Fuba Academy on 1 February 1992 without an assistant. Tanki Mokhele, the young artist and art historian who was designated for this task died in a motorcar accident.

Her first day at work turned out to be one of bizarre events. She called the secretary Thembi Sithole to apologise for being late and did not realise that she would not clock in at Fuba that day. She had to meet the artist Alfred Thoba with money to bail him out at 9 am from *Sun City*, the prison in Diepkloof, Soweto. (Tanya Welz, a medical student and a friend of Thoba advanced the bail money.) Eventually Miles and her daughter Elske left the prison with Thoba at 5pm that day after Miles had been sent backwards and forwards through a bureaucratic maze. Thoba's offence was that he had illicitly used electricity in the garage which served as his home and studio in Troyeville. In the file on Thoba in the Fuba archives there are photographs showing the artist working by the light of an improvised oil lamp after his access to electricity had been barred.

At the outset Miles and Sepamla agreed that a handbook on artists was indispensable. As the life and art of Gerard Sekoto had been covered in the text by Lindop and a copy of the book had been donated to the library of Fuba Academy they selected the following artists for discussion: Sydney Kumalo, Ernest Mancoba, John Koenakeefe Mohl, Ephraim Ngatane, George Pemba and Lucas Sithole. The manual had to serve the art students at the Academy and Miles conceived that each discussion of an artist's life and work concluded with assignments. (Presumably the draft manuscript of the manual is still in one of the drawers at Fuba Academy.)

In the first year Miles divided her work week accordingly: Wednesdays were alternatively devoted to archival research at the State Archives in Pretoria and fieldwork in GaRankuwa. The rest of the week involved filing, writing, gallery visits and interviews with artists in the Johannesburg neighbourhood. The State Archives became her major resource. There from 8 am – 4 pm she spent Wednesdays, working through boxes of newspaper clippings, catalogues, programmes and journal articles, et cetera, which were supplied by Luana Brewis of the National Film, Video and Sound Archives in Pretoria. These boxes, compiled by the Bureau of Human Resources were treasure troves on South African art. Confronted with the first batch of material Miles diverted from the decision of merely focusing on the selected artists and photo-copied everything that related to African art, artists and their work. Very soon the idea of a calendar (similar to the Metropolitan Art Museum's Birthday Calendar of 1984) crossed Miles' mind and she realised that an *Artists' Birthday Calendar* for 1993 would not only showcase the research unit at Fuba Academy but also give her the opportunity to pay tribute to the art by hitherto unknown artists such as Micha Kgasi and Thomas Masekela, two of South Africa's underrated

sculptors. Moreover, she hoped the calendar would lead to response from readers by providing information on artists whose names were listed in the introduction. Eventually, in the case of Albert Adams, a painter who left South Africa in 1960 and was completely forgotten in the country of his birth, this happened when Jane Alexander responded from the Irma Stern Museum with a package on Adams. The *Artists' Birthday Calendar* was published with the financial assistance of Gencor Development Trust, the Creative Arts and Sanlam. (Miles raised these funds in-between her research.)

In GaRankuwa she relied on the invaluable assistance of the printmaker and sculptor David Phoshoko. He introduced her to the local artists whom she interviewed. She photographed and documented their work and on several occasions her son, Karel accompanied them; then he was responsible for the photography.

Miles visited Botswana twice; once accompanied by Jacob Dhlamini, then cadet journalist and on the second occasion with Karel. In Botswana she followed the tracts of John Mohl and the fieldwork was adventurous. As inexpensive accommodation was not always available they booked in at dubious lodgings. In Gabarone she and Karel slept in a brothel which Miles mistook for a nurses' home.

On Miles' first visit she met Ismail Matlhaku, Mohls' first cousin and owner of the landscape *Mountain View of Sabie Eastern Transvaal* which she later borrowed for the *Land and Lives* exhibition at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 1997. On a moonlit night she drove from bar (shebeen) to bar asking for directions to the home of Ismail Matlhaku who lived in Mochudi. Eventually she arrived at his home to find Ismail at his gate besides himself, presuming that she got lost. Yet the location of the historical scenes, commissioned by Kgosi Tshekedi Khama remained unattainable. Eventually she accepted that they were destroyed during the Bamangwato-uprising. On her second visit she discovered other paintings by Mohl at Pilikwe, Kgosi Tshekedi's new home after he had self-exiled himself from Serowe, the Bamangwato capital. These, also commissioned by Kgosi Tshekedi, were two renderings of the college at Moeng that the Kgosi had established and the Khama burial site in Serowe entitled *King Khama's Memorial Stone*. Two of these paintings were also included in the *Land and Lives* show.

The Fuba files also comprise Miles' research in KwaZulu Natal where she gleaned valuable information on Zulu artists and especially on Laduma Madela from the documentation by Katesa Schlosser held in the Killie Campbell Africana Library, Durban. During her fieldwork in KwaZulu Natal Miles experienced moments of utter despair as she drove past deserted homesteads and particularly when she was held up in the midst of a protest march at Appelsbosch. Yet the peacefulness which she had experienced in the Appelsbosch Chapel with Michael Zondi's powerful *Christ on the Cross* above the altar prior to her wrong timing, gave her courage to continue the journey to Mtulwa where she still had to interview Zondi, who was also the architect of the chapel.

Her research took her to Port Elizabeth where she interviewed George Pemba several times as well as to the University of Fort Hare where she met Professor JE de Jager. In Cape Town she gleaned information on Cape artists in the library of the Iziko Museums and Emile Maurice and Fatima February (both of Iziko) respectively assisted her in meeting with the family of the painter Ferdinand Cloete at Genadendal and the widow of Henry Jordaan in Cape Town. Hence each morsel of information contained in the Fuba Files testifies to a journey through a landscape rich in artistry.