

# STANDARD BANK YOUNG ARTIST AWARD 1989



he Young Artist Awards that are made available to three major disciplines - Drama, Music, and Fine Arts - constitute a large part of the Standard Bank National Festival of the Arts. The selection process for the visual arts is carried out by a committee of artists, critics, gallery directors and heads of teaching institutions. Their recommendations are then presented to the entire Festival Committee for approval and final ratification. In approaching a task as difficult as selecting one artist, consideration is taken of the many diverse and highly creative individuals who work in this country at present.

This is indeed an awesome task as there are many women and men in South Africa eminently capable of producing a one-person exhibition in a comparatively short period of time. This latter issue is formidable since the eyes of the country are on the quality of the works and the wisdom of the selection committee. Furthermore, this exhibition is the most widely traveled one-person show in the country and the gift of maximum exposure is an important component of the award. If one looks back on the past eight award winners and considers their subsequent progress, we can justifiably be proud of our track record.

Helen Sebidi is an artist eminently worthy of the 1989 award. Her bold, extrovert and sometimes exuberant imagery is different from that of any other of the exhibitors chosen over the past decade. Versatile in big and small scale drawings and paintings, she has also gained recognition from her sculpture. Sebidi's work bears no sign of inhibition. Large scale, strong colour, multitudes of people, crowds and activity all find a place in her work. It is her energy in the art of creating which is so positive and compelling to the viewer. Her production also seems limitless.

The duty of this Festival is to reflect the changes in this society. In the visual arts we certainly believe that this is of prime concern. I am certain that this exhibition of Helen Sebidi's work does precisely that.

ALAN CRUMP

# HELEN MMAGGOBA MMAPULA SEBIDI: 'THE SHARP SIDE OF THE KNIFE'



'nonymous was a woman'. This used to be a wry joke between feminists who did not believe that the prolific and ubiquitous artist/writer, Anonymous, was male. In many instances, Anonymous probably was a woman, one of the many who were assigned to nameless historical oblivion. But nowadays women artists have names; they are known; they are visible.

Helen Mmakgoba Mmapula Sebidi has four names, a common African practice. The names African people are given help to bestow an identity, and it is considered important that one lives up to one's names. Mmakgoba, 'mother of animals', alludes to the significance African people attribute to animals. Often perceived in a symbolic way, animals - the first inhabitants of the earth - are believed to guide human destiny. Mmapula means 'mother of rain' and Helen Sebidi considers this name to be a privilege. Just after she was born a long drought was broken and the community insisted that the baby be given a name to commemorate the rain. Sebidi itself means 'boiling' and metaphorically it could be said to signify energy. If so, Helen Sebidi does indeed live up to her name; she is an extremely energetic artist.

Sebidi not only has names but she has a gender; she is a woman artist. This is important. In many societies certain professions (as opposed to accomplishments) came to be associated with one sex or the other. In Europe, an artist was assumed to be male, just as a prostitute was assumed to be female. With both words, qualification has become necessary as contemporary boundaries of categorization are adjusted in the process of socialization. Today we acknowledge that there are, women artists' and 'male prostitutes'.<sup>1</sup> As a woman, Sebidi has had particular experiences which, consciously and unconsciously, have defined her expression as a visual artist.

Artistic consciousness is shaped by an innate personal predisposition to work with images, visual language and materials, and by social factors, including the family, community, and society at large. Helen Sebidi became an artist because of both family and social circumstances. She was brought up by her grandmother at Marapyane (Skilpadfontein) in the Hammanskraal area, north of Pretoria. From her grandmother, a traditional mural painter, the young Sebidi not only inherited an artistic sensibility and the will to make art, but she learnt the meaning of courage and a respect for those

1. Although only occasional efforts have been made to use the terrible term, 'paintress', both 'poetess' and 'sculptress' have made more than a furtive appearance into the English language, thus confirming that poets and sculptors were considered, *ipso facto*, to be men.



traditional values which instilled a sense of selfhood and dignity. Sebidi's grandmother, her mentor, was a dominant and stabilizing force in her family and Sebidi speaks of her often, with pride and affection.

**I**t is the family which first instils gender consciousness in a child, and defines the expectations and restrictions associated with femininity and masculinity. These are then reinforced by the needs of the community. The opportunities for self-definition and fulfilment that are available to members of a particular community are, in turn, determined by social organization.

**I**n the fractured apartheid society of late twentieth-century South Africa, colour controls every aspect of personal, political and social life.<sup>2</sup> And so it is important to draw attention to the fact that Helen Sebidi is a black artist. In South Africa race determines where one lives, which schools one attends, and what employment opportunities are available. It affects the wages received, whether one has freedom of movement and whether one votes. In an insidious manner, racism is allied to sexism. Women, white as well as black, were - and to a large extent still are - considered to be passive, domestic, subordinate to men, and apolitical.<sup>3</sup> They are admitted to the work force to areas where they pose the fewest threats to men, to do jobs considered to be 'women's work' for women's pay.

**H**elen Sebidi's family, her race and gender have made her the artist that she is. The figures she depicts are not just people; they are black people, restlessly moving through and across the picture formats in compressed spatial fields. Her art, which always has the human being as its focus, cannot be assessed meaningfully unless she herself is contextualized within South African society. Her achievements as an artist are the result of her ability to negotiate the formidable obstacles which confront a black woman in South Africa.

**P**rior to white domination in South Africa, life amongst the Bantu-speaking people was structured so that each member of the community had a role to play which contributed to the overall well-being of the nuclear family, the extended family, the community, and the larger tribal or language group. Utilitarian tasks were assigned to men and women, and both sexes contributed to spiritual activities and practices. A patriarchal power and value system existed,<sup>4</sup> and under

2. Class tends to be subsumed by race in South Africa. So vicious a system is legislated racism that even affluent, university-educated blacks who could be called 'middle class' in terms of income and lifestyle are considered by poor white right wingers to be their inferiors because white South Africans possess the symbol of status - the vote - and blacks do not.

3. The Hertzog government enfranchised white South African women in 1930 not because it wished to redress a wrong but to diminish the small African electorate. The enfranchisement of white women reduced the African electorate from 3.1% to 1.4% of the total electorate. It is interesting to note that when the ANC constitution was drawn up in 1919, women could not become full members of the organization.

They were granted auxiliary membership without voting rights. Only in 1943 did the ANC commit itself to a policy of universal adult suffrage and include women under the definition, 'adult'.



4. Patriarchy can be defined 'as a set of social relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish and create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women' (Heidi Hartmann, 'The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism' in *Capital and Class*, 8, 1979, p.11). Although individual men honour and respect individual women, the patriarchal system is organized for the benefit of men; they control the mechanisms of political and social power.

customary law women were deemed to be minors under the guardianship of the nearest male relatives. The men were, however, at hand to exercise their responsibilities. With the advent of white domination, this changed.

The migrant labour system which was introduced to sustain capitalist industrialization and the mining industry not only took men to urban centres to seek work but it initiated the rift between rural and urban lifestyles. It radically disrupted family life. Helen Sebidi's art investigates her perception and experience of black rural and urban existence. Her images are *of* people, but they are *about* complex social practices and ideological structures. To grasp the meaning of her works it is necessary to explore her own history as a rural child, an adolescent confronted with township life, and an adult who ponders the schisms which splinter families and separate people.

Sebidi had a rural childhood in the charge of her grandmother. She never knew her father and seldom saw her mother who, like so many urban, black women, was unable to keep a baby with her in Johannesburg and sent the child 'home'. Thus from her earliest years, Sebidi was conscious of social disruption in the family and aware of the schism between rural and urban existence. Under her grandmother's tutelage she learnt the traditional behaviour patterns of her people, Tswana who had been displaced northwards to the Hammanskraal district when the Afrikaners settled in the Pretoria area. She acquired a belief that people possess a creative capacity to deal effectively with life and she recalls that when she and the other girls worked in the fields, the task was lightened by song and dance. The girls knew the traditional songs but 'we went out into the fields and when we came home we had a new song'.<sup>5</sup>

Living with her grandmother, Sebidi also learnt to respect productive work, and to do it without complaint. She remembers her grandmother commenting, 'You cannot work by mouth; you can only work by mind and hands'. The young Helen was exposed to the craft and design created by her aunt and grandmother who were traditional workers in clay. They built and decorated the mud walls of the courtyards that were integrated with the brick and mortar living units.<sup>6</sup> This process involved a knowledge of materials, particularly the tensile strength of clay. Five or six different types of mud had to be mixed together to constitute a clay body strong enough to withstand rain. The final colour of the wall was also given consideration before the

5. All quotations attributed to Helen Sebidi are the outcome of discussions with the author, October 1988 - April 1989.

6. It must be noted that Sebidi's family were Tswana and the tradition of wall painting is not highly developed among the Tswana. However, with enforced resettlement the Tswana came into close proximity to the Ndebele who do decorate the walls of their courtyards and homes. 'Traditions' are not restricted to particular societies and amongst shifting populations social practices are borrowed and adapted.



design was created. The girls of the community had to locate and collect the different clays for the walls, and colours - grey, white, black, ochre and blue from earth, stones, charcoal and so on - for the painted designs.

The decorative process, usually carried out annually, was instigated to renew and not merely to restore the wall patterns, Sebidi recalls,

We liked to see something different. Images weren't the same every year.

This year we would use one idea; the next year it was boring.

This issue is important because it points to the fact that 'tradition' is not a process of repetition; it is evolutionary and not static, and for this reason it is difficult to determine fixed codes within the stylization and symbols used by African women for decorative purposes. They appear to have been guided by personal taste, intuition and inventiveness as much as by prescribed form and colour.

Sebidi's imagination was stimulated by her life in a community that valued visual and verbal expression, music and dance. Knowledge was transmitted through stories, proverbial wisdom and language rich in metaphor. The narratives told by the adults were both a preparation for life, and a creative response to visual and verbal stimuli. Sebidi's own work is narrative and in this respect it parallels the story-telling to which she was exposed as a child. She comments,

The old people told us stories about city life. It was like a dream to us because we didn't know the city. So they gave us stories about how people live, and they used to tell us stories about how to see. They 'read' the clouds. We used to sit outside in the courtyard, and especially in the very bright moonlight when there were a lot of clouds they used to read the stories for us and tell us - look at that, look at the soldiers, look at all this! And they would tell us - you're going to have to see other life that's coming. This life is going to be hard. Sometimes people will not have food. All that you can see here in the clouds, in the picture, is coming. When I came to the city in 1959, I encountered the stories [in reality].

These observations are interesting not only from a sociological perspective, but because they indicate that Sebidi's visual expression has a direct relationship to the sensory stimulation she received at an impressionable age. Her own mode of creativity parallels the interpretation of cloud imagery. She creates her own 'clouds', visual sources which suggest ideas. No longer does she begin her drawings and

7. Sebidi did not arrive at this *modus operandi* unaided. When she studied at the Johannesburg Art Foundation, the approach was suggested by artist/teacher Ilona Anderson. Nevertheless, an artist accepts or rejects a particular method, and Sebidi's acceptance of this procedure indicates that it satisfied her creative temperament.

pastels with a fixed and predetermined idea, but with marks, colour and images that can be torn apart, fragmented, reconstituted in collage, re-worked, and finally structured into rhythmic designs with strong internal relationships.<sup>7</sup> Her art making process is a metaphor for black female experience; it is about fragmentation and negotiation between opposing forces in order to constitute new unities which are often fragile and temporary.

The rural life which Sebidi knew as a child was both 'traditional' and the consequence of contemporary politics. The migrant labour system drew men to the cities, destroyed family life, made marriage an unstable institution, and created a high illegitimacy rate. In the reserves children tended to be malnourished, infant mortality was high, and trading stations and water supplies were often long distances from the place of residence. Many women were forced to become the *de facto* heads of households but their positions were not sanctioned legally or by African custom, making their status ambiguous.

In 1948, when Helen Sebidi was five years old, the Nationalist Party came to power and began to shape and implement the apartheid system to protect white interests and advance the cause of Afrikanerdom. Black rural existence entered a new phase of evolution and the social standing of women began to receive attention from the government. In 1952 influx control measures were tightened in an effort to restrict urban residence for blacks to productive workers only. Concomitant with this concept was that of establishing the 'homelands'.<sup>8</sup>

8. The Native Laws Amendment Act was amended to the Urban Areas Act. Black access to urban areas was restricted to 72 hours unless special permission had been obtained or people fell within a limited range of exempted categories.

Women were affected by the new legislation because their access to towns and cities was controlled in order to prevent them establishing permanent urban domicile. Not only was a woman's place considered to be in the home; it was now to be in the 'homelands'. To enforce restricted access to urban centres it was proposed to amend the pass laws so that black women, as well as black men, would have to carry reference books. The Minister of Native Affairs, speaking in a House of Assembly debate in 1950, indulged in an amazing piece of paternalistic and sexist hypocrisy to justify his policy:



It is constantly being said that the natives in the cities deteriorate. The undesirable conditions are largely caused by the presence of women who in many cases leave their homes contrary to the wishes of their fathers or guardians and contrary to tribal custom. To my mind there are already too many urbanized blacks who have turned their backs on the tribal customs and I do not intend to assist the process.<sup>9</sup>

9.

House of Assembly Debates, 1950, Col. 3766 and quoted in Cheryl Walker, *Women and Resistance in South Africa*. London: Onyx Press, 1982, p.127.

In 1952 the revised pass system was enacted but so unpopular was the idea of women carrying pass books that it was not until 1956 that the first moves were made to issue African women with reference books. From then on anti-pass protests increased. Black women became highly visible in the political arena and took a decisive stance against this assault on their dignity.<sup>10</sup>

10.

The story of women's resistance and political activity is told in Cheryl Walker, *Women and Resistance in South Africa*.

11.

Sebidi has two sons. The elder was born within a year of her going to Johannesburg and, like her, he was raised as a rural child.

12.

Sebidi recalls that she had a dream about what profession she should adopt. In her dream she saw her four uncles and heard the voice of someone who could not be seen. The voice asked her which uncle she would like to follow. The first was a traditional healer. She answered that this was a difficult job for a woman.

The second was a builder. She said that a woman does not have the physical strength for that work. The third was a grass worker who did thatching and fence building. She said that also demanded too much physical energy. The fourth was a housepainter. She answered 'Yes, I could do that. I already have my grandmother's training'.

In 1959, the adolescent Helen Sebidi went to Johannesburg to join her mother. She found the city and its values confusing and she felt ill at ease amongst her peers.<sup>11</sup> Township life was brash and vigorous but arguably more oppressive to women than tribalism in its presentation of women as sex objects in a consumer society.

Throughout the 1960s Sebidi worked in domestic service and as a dressmaker.

One employer - herself an amateur artist - encouraged Sebidi's interest in art and gave her a gift of some oil paints. This enabled Sebidi to begin painting.<sup>12</sup> Initially she worked on the unstable surface of shoe box cardboard.

In 1970 when she met the artist, John Koenakeefe Mohl (1903-1985), Sebidi gained her first real tuition in 'fine art' techniques. She did not study formally with Mohl, but he encouraged her and helped her to come to terms with Western illusionism. He introduced her to masonite as a support and taught her to render appearances in oil paint. Sebidi recalls:

He drew an aloe on a mountain and he said that I should copy it. He said I should do it again. I did it three times. He drew the township. I watched him and I drew it three times. Then landscape. After I did it, I drew it at home. Then he said 'Try and change it'.

In March 1975 Sebidi returned to her rural home to nurse her grandmother through her final illness. She continued with her painting, practising what she had learnt with Mohl and making trips to Johannesburg to show her efforts to her mentor. In June 1981 Sebidi's grandmother died, but she then assumed responsibility for her ailing uncle who died in 1983. Only then was she able to consider her own future. She had, however, started exhibiting her paintings. John Mohl not only praised her work but he framed it and arranged for Sebidi to exhibit at the 1977 'Artists under the Sun'



show in Joubert Park. The paintings, atmospheric landscape-cum-rural genre scenes in muted impasto colour, sold well to white purchasers, probably because in depicting the black peasantry at one with nature, they made no harsh social comment.

**J**ust before Mohl's death in 1985 Sebidi met Lucky Sibiya (b.1942).

He told her that her art was limited in range and suggested that she look at city life for new pictorial ideas. She had also become involved, almost accidentally, with the Katlehong Art Centre to which she was directed whilst searching for Stanley Nkosi's art gallery.<sup>13</sup> At Katlehong the artists were making graphic prints and working with clay.

13.  
Artist, Stanley Nkosi (1945-1988),  
built an art gallery in Katlehong.

Sebidi decided to consolidate on her knowledge of traditional clay forms, and she began making pottery and terra-cotta sculpture. Despite exhibiting this work successfully, her primary allegiance was to painting. Through contact with David Koloane (b.1938) Sebidi enrolled at the Johannesburg Art Foundation. Working with Bill Ainslie and Ilona Anderson, and participating in the Thupelo Workshop, she experimented with materials, methods and ideas. She began to locate ways of rendering the myriad of perceptions she had accumulated about life in contemporary South Africa.

**S**ebidi's work is about being a black woman in South Africa. It is about what she calls 'life cut in pieces' and it expresses the conflict between rural and urban life, women and men, past and present. Things, and people, are torn asunder literally and figuratively. Figures surge across the picture plane, a restless tangle of limbs, bodies and heads extending beyond the confines of the format but existing in a compressed pictorial space. This signifies the space of contemporary society and the overcrowded townships where violence erupts and psychological tension is generated. It is also a metaphorical space where value systems conflict with one another, male challenges female, and the first and third worlds collide. Within the layers of people are layers of forms. On some forms it is as if skin has been peeled back to reveal vulnerable flesh. Sometimes the reference to time and change is rendered through the juxtaposition of frontal and profile faces, caught in uneasy and momentary unity. These images are representations of movement in real time, but they also denote shifts in art-historical time. Created in the late twentieth-century by a black woman in Africa, the forms are reminiscent of the iconoclastic faces of Picasso, the white man who acknowledged the conceptual and emotive power of African art.



The dichotomy between rural and urban existence is depicted pictorially by the lack of communication between people who are subjected to both overt and insidious social forces. Sebidi says that her work is 'talking about what is happening now' and that 'it is a lot about push and pull'. She means this in a psychological sense, unlike Hans Hofmann who employed the same phrase in his teaching about the dynamics of colour and spatiality <sup>14</sup>.

14. Hans Hofmann (1880-1966) the Bauhaus teacher who settled in the United States, based his teaching on the tension between the two dimensional picture plane and three dimensional spatiality.

It would be relatively easy to package Sebidi's art within conventional interpretative frameworks - to analyse it in formal terms, and to discuss her as an expressionist artist with a strong decorative sense. This approach could, in fact, yield valuable information because her use of expressionistic visual language indicates a fusion of learned artistic stratagems, and deeply instinctual solutions to the issue of representation. But I have chosen to consider Helen Mmakgoba Mmakpula Sebidi as a black woman artist whose evocative and powerful images are a product of life in South Africa in the late eighties.

In many discussions on her painting Sebidi has talked both about community life and fellowship in the rural areas and the materialistic values prevalent in the townships. Her art, she says, is about locating a way to go. Commenting on *The Child's Mother Holds the Sharp Side of the Knife (Manguwana Otsbara Thipa Kabbaleng)* she says

I see a woman chained, pulling her tradition. In our language they always say - yours is yours. *You're* got to handle it, *you're* got to be, don't let go.... In African tradition they say it is the woman who holds the sharp side of the knife. Here, woman is holding the knife in this way and is saying - this is what I have to do, and it's my way.<sup>15</sup>

15.

It is interesting to note that Sebidi uses the same proverbial saying as Frances (Ma) Baard: We are mothers - we see what is taking place in this country. A mother will hold the knife on the sharp end. (Ma Baard quoted in ch.1, 'Union Women' in Vukani Makhosikazi: South African Women speak, London: Catholic Institute for International Relations, 1985, p.122.

Sebidi's art originates from personal experience, but it is presented in a politicized society. Her work is not flagrantly didactic or unequivocally judgmental, but it originates from South Africa and today in South Africa no image is neutral. For a black woman artist, victim of both white oppression and patriarchy, there is particularly poignant meaning in the feminist statement, 'The personal is political'.

MARION ARNOLD



# HELEN SEBIDI: CURRICULUM VITAE

- 1943 Born Marapyane, Hammanskraal area, Northern Transvaal
- 1959 Left Khutsong School after completing Standard 6 and went to Johannesburg
- 1960s Worked in domestic service and as a dressmaker
- 1970-75 Studied informally with John Koenakeefe Mohl
- 1975 Returned to Marapyane in March to care for her grandmother who died in 1981; continued to paint and to visit Mohl in Johannesburg
- 1977 First exhibited at Artists under the Sun, Joubert Park
- 1983 Her uncle died, leaving her free to plan her future
- 1984 Commuted between Marapyane and Johannesburg
- 1985 Began working with clay at Katlehong Art Centre
- 1986-87 Worked at the Johannesburg Art Foundation and taught art at the Alexandra Art Centre
- 1987-88 Participated in the Khula Udweba art teachers' project organized at FUNDA by the African Institute of Art
- 1988 Awarded a Fulbright scholarship to travel to the US
- 1988-89 Visited the United States and Europe, addressed many groups in different centres, worked at the Millay Colony for the Arts, Austerlitz, New York
- 1989 Visited Sweden

## EXHIBITIONS

- 1977-88 Artists under the Sun, Johannesburg
- 1980-88 Brush and Chisel Club, Johannesburg
- 1980-81 Washington, USA (organized by a private collector)
- 1985 SA Potters Association
- 1986 FUBA, Johannesburg (Solo show) Art for Alexandra, Sotheby's, Johannesburg  
Johannesburg Art Foundation Thupelo Workshop Exhibition, WITS, Johannesburg
- 1987 Vita Art Now, Johannesburg Art Gallery  
Delfin/FUBA Creative Quest Exhibition, FUBA FUBA (Seven Women Artists)  
Thupelo Workshop Exhibition, toured to Johannesburg Art Foundation; NSA Durban;  
National Museum and Art Gallery, Gaborone, Botswana Standard Bank National  
Drawing Competition, toured SA
- 1988 Detainees' Parents Support Committee - 100 artists protest against detention without trial,  
Market Gallery, Johannesburg  
The Neglected Tradition, Johannesburg Art Gallery
- 1988-89 Cape Town Triennial, toured SA
- 1989 Ten Years of Collecting, WITS Standard Bank National Festival of the Arts, touring solo  
show

## AWARDS

- 1988 STAR Woman of the Year finalist  
Fulbright Scholarship 1989  
Standard Bank Young Artist Award for Fine Art

## COLLECTIONS

Africana; Art Workshop, London; Sasol; Unisa; Unibo