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ANONYMOUS AND NAMED SCULPTORS OF WIRE

In rural South Africa and in township streets, small African boys have for decades played with toys made of galvanised wire, a material which is available in abundance, the residue of fences and electrical or telephone cables, and can be readily manipulated. Shaping and twisting the wire, they replicated forms from their immediate environment. Makorakora cars have been favoured images, not pulled along like western toys, but 'driven' by their makers who steer them from behind with long pieces of wire. In the country districts, where water has to be pumped from boreholes, small replicas of the characteristic Windmills were built, with pylons made of sturdy wire and vanes cut out of tin. They attracted the attention of passing tourists, and many roadside sales were negotiated. The wire windmills are a generic form, and the names of their makers go unrecorded.

In the context of a growing informal art market in cities, the production of objects in wire by adults, as novelties and souvenirs for sale, also began to flourish. Hawkers, for example, offered a regular range of objects made in wire - bicycles, tricycles, motorbikes and helicopters amongst the most common. Again their makers were anonymous, and each work tended to be produced according to a fairly standardised pattern. The recent introduction of gilt wire acknowledges their ornamental intention. But alongside this continuing production, enterprising individuals, fostered by craft shops, commercial galleries and art centres, began to fabricate works of greater variety and increasing complexity, and to develop recognisable â\200\230stylesâ\200\231. Sculptors of wire were no longer all anonymous.

The animal forms from the Sikhona Marekting cooperative in Grahamstown, for example, made in an unusual fine wire of dark colour, are distinctive, although the style is associated with the group rather than with individual names. Some sections of theâ\200\235 images are bound together with even thinner strands as in the conventional mode of construction, but forms are also coiled and looped, using the tensile strength of wire to form continuous linear shapes, like the head and tail feathers of the Ostrich. The coiling of the head and trunk of the Elephant allows them to vibrate gently. The Sikhona works have an unusual delicacy. In contrast is a sturdy, large Lizard (or small Crocodile?) fashioned by Isiah Nkosi from the more customary galvanised wire, with sections bound together with finer Wire. But this young artist, who fashioned images like this to pass the time while he was minding a vegetable stall in Noord Street, Johannesburg, has made effective use of different gauges of wire. The heaviest forms the frame of the creature, with lines of slightly, Maghter Wire fastened across the belly, suggesting lateral bands of a crocodile's underside, while longitudinal lines of crimped wire depicts the texture of the horny scales or plates on a reptile's back. The typical, horizontally-directed legs and five-toed feet of the lizard have also been carefully fashioned, but are given character as much by their shaping and binding in thick wire as by any imitation of natural forms.

Artists at the Katlehong Art Centre, where craftsmanship in Wire has particularly been encouraged, have developed a variety

of works and individual personal styles in this popular medium. Victor Mpopo (born 1965) made his Double Decker Bus in the mid-1980s. The details of the bus were painstakingly observed, with opening door, steps up into the bus and individual seats, all outlined in wire. Blue and yellow snuff boxes for wheels, and the use of coloured plastic-coated wire to bind the window frames in place created a decorative effect. The more recent Front-end Loader also uses galvanised wire is covered in plastic-coated strands in bright hues, not only to join pieces, but to wrap all the elements. Copper wire is also used, to define the grille and fan of the engine, for example. The articulated rear portion of the vehicle, which houses the engine, can be manoeuvred by the steering wheel in the forward section for the driver. There are also levers for manipulating the front-end loader, replicating the two separate movements of the arm and scoop bucket of the actual vehicle. Mpopo has clearly observed earth-moving machinery in some detail.

The same observation applies to the Volkswagen Beetle made by Moses Seleko (born 1963) from Katlehong. The distinctive shape of the classic 'Beetle' is captured to a nicety, as are all the details of the vehicle - rear view mirrors, headrests on the seats, and sprung suspension for the front tyres, for example. As with Mpopo's Front-end Loader, the engine is represented, but, although it is already accessible through the open form, the bonnet still opens, as do the boot and the doors. Seleko employs plastic-coated wire to bind around the galvanised wire frame, using distinct, chiefly primary colours for the different parts of the car. It reads almost like colour coding, interesting to compare with the colour that he uses for his wire animals, which is more decorative in effect. In Rhinoceros, multiple colours are used to bind each line of wire that models the animal's cumbersome form - strands of orange, yellow and green, or green, blue and white, for example - which tend to neutralise each other and read as pastel tints from a distance. Only the eyes and nostrils are depicted in plain wire, and the mouth and tusk in white. The general shape is well-observed, but it is notable that the animal's legs taper uncharacteristically, suggesting that Seleko has not had an opportunity to see a rhino's feet.

These works are formed exclusively in wire, although different types are employed. But David Moteane (born 1951), who has trained, worked and taught at Katlehong, has introduced different materials and found objects into his Motorbike. While the frame is still made of galvanised wire, and the exhausts and suspension of wire coils, the petrol tank is an old bottle of nail polish and the engine part of a discarded plastic toy rocket. A small cushion acts as a seat, and buttons represent reflectors and headlights. The wheels have appropriate strips of rubber wired on to them as tyres, and the mirrors and mudguards are fashioned from pieces of metal cut from a Coca Cola can.

Another modification of multi media forms incorporating wire is found in the work of 'Chicken Man' Johan Fanozi Mkize (born Chiaca 1950)! from Pietermaritzburg. He has made animals on wheels, their wood and wire frames covered with fur or porcupine quills. He has also created road signs of hardboard on wire stands, Which faithfully copy the information on traffic signs

although letters are grouped in a random way because Mkize is not literate. He has more recently painted personalised messages for his clients.

Napho Makoena has written of works in wire that "Although this form of craft does not address itself as an artistic medium, it does, however, have an aesthetic and creative dimension."8 The individuality of works such as those that have been discussed undeniably transcends the stereotyped production of novelties and souvenirs. They are three-dimensional (Drawings On) sareat ingenuity. And compositions in wire have also provided a basis for more ambitious works. The application of metal sheeting to a wire frame to create more substantial Oa ees example, has been developed by Titus Moteyane in his Concorde, and Nkosinathi Gumede of Durban has made huge articulated trailers. Billy Makhubela (born 1947) ,1 One Ot ae hen has Siteantco market wire works in craft shops and galleries, has made numerous fairly repetitive small wire images of birds to a recognisable formula for many years, as well as mechanical forms with moving parts like sewing machines. But he also creates human forms in Wire, and had an exhibition of large figungs at the Carriage House Gallery in Johannesburg in the 1980s.** And Andries Botha seems to have extended this tradition in using metal armatures of 6mm mild steel rod to shape figures in his monumental multimedia sculptures.

ENDNOTES

1. Information about Nkosi was supplied by Windsor Harper, assistant at the University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries. Nkosi had left Johannesburg for Vryheid, but a friend recounted that he had learnt to make wire ornaments from an uncle in Zululand. â\200\230
2. Short curriculum vitae for Katlehong artists were supplied by Kim Sacks Art Gallery. It is noteworthy that most of the artists do not confine their production to works in wire. Mpopo, for example, works in clay, and Moteane makes collages.
3. A work by Mpopo was included in the â\200\230Art from South Africa! exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxtord,. In 19906. (Bindot 1990; 83)
4. It was acquired by the University of the Witwatersrand Art Galleries in 1986.
5. Moteane attended the pilot project of the Udweba art teachers' course, under Michael McIlrath, at the African Art Institute at Funda in Soweto in 1985, before taking children's classes at Katlehong.
6. A similar work by Moteane was included in The Neglected Tradition exhibition (Sack 1988: 72, 117). See also Ogilvie 1988: 462.
7. This is the date given in Sacks 1988: do 59.959 Sa Givens n Elliott 1990: 48.

8. Elliot 1990: 83. One is tempted to draw comparisons with the early works of the American sculptor, Alexander Calder.

9. See the individual entry for Moteyane.

10. Gumede works on the premises of the Sculpture Department of the Natal Technikon. When Durban Art Gallery bought his truck and trailer, some, 240cm Long, he drove! it) through the streetsas to the gallery.

11. See Ogilvie 1988: 407.

12. Rankin 1989: 73 n 213. See also Arts Calendar Spring 1985:
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