

Hlungwane Jackson

INSTITUUT VIR EIETDSE GESKIEDENIS

Die Universiteit van die Oranje-Vrystaat



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REVIEWS
Resplendent icon of SA's
fine art

REVIEW/ART JACKSON HLUNGWANE, at 140 Bree Street, Newtown

1330
THIS is not your common or garden art exhibition. Set in a revamped warehouse in the heart of thespian Newtown, the Jackson Hlungwane retrospective — the second major exhibition curated under the banner of BMW SA — is dominated by a three-metre high wooden rendition of Adam staring benignly out at passing commuters.

A foray into the exhibition-space reveals more than 300 works arrayed in thematic clusters — from traditional functional carvings to monumental religious statements.

There are bowls and sticks and panels and prints and entire wooden bestiaries of birds and lions and rhinos and bulls. Schools of fish vary in size from the tiniest piscine icon to two-metre long ichthyological marvels ('Whale' or Oil fish). There are crowded congregations of biblical figures — from delicately carved crucifixes to the imposing monolithic Cains, Abels, Seths and Gabriels.

Spectacular

The most spectacular of all is the monumental Altar Piece. What gallery cogniscenti would refer to as an installation-piece is a reconstruction of an original outdoor altar. Incorporating a splendid pantheon — Cain, Abel, Gabriel, Christ — the assembled elements vary in size from the life-size Christ figure (with pith helmet) down to the tiniest Shangaan warrior and an almost insignificant stick-like Abel figure, tenuously attached to a wire "Aerial of God". The

piece is surrounded by a rough oval enclosure — constructed from boulders from Hlungwane's temple-home in Gazankulu.

And seated on the cold concrete floor in the midst of it all is the diminutive artist himself. Dwarfed by his own creations, he perches with his one leg outstretched and warming at a crude bar heater, industriously hacking away at yet another of, what he terms, "God's works".

Word has spread that Hlungwane is in town and the artist is perpetually interrupted by troubled community members seeking spiritual advice. They take their turns in line with eager art patrons, anxious for aesthetic elucidation. For Hlungwane the two are one. With bible in hand and the traditional "Hallelujah" greeting echoing through the room, Hlungwane approaches all with equal enthusiasm, equal humility and explosive *joie de vivre*.

A vital reflector of First and Third World energies, of material and spiritual matters, this exhibition stands as a resplendent icon of our age.

What began as a new epoch for the fine arts — with increasing interest from big business in the form of high-profile competitions, commissions and sponsorship deals — came of its own with BMW's first entrée into the exhibition arena with the startling Tributaries Exhibition. Aimed at

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"extracting the contemporary spirit of art making in SA", it also managed to change the course of SA art history.

Whereas previously the SA fine arts scene was characterised by subtle and unobtrusive divisions, marking the schisms between First and Third World experiences (high art versus craft, the unique artwork and its solitary inspired creator versus the functional collective artefact), such conventions were radically transformed with the Tributaries exhibition.

Visionary

Names such as Jackson Hlungwane, Noria Mabasa, Nelson Makhuba, Johannes Maswanganyi and Doctor Phutuma Seoka suddenly sprang to the fore. Tributaries travelled to Germany; SA fine art flourished; and last year saw the standing of the mammoth Neglected Tradition exhibition at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. This month SA exile Gerard Sekoto has been accorded a massive retrospective exhibition in the same venue.

The Hlungwane exhibition became a reality when BMW's arts adviser, Ricky Burnett, posed the hypothetical question: Given the chance to sponsor a one-person exhibition that would be seen to be representative of

South African fine art activity, while simultaneously presenting an innovative vision to an international audience, who would he choose? Burnett came up with Hlungwane's name.

Artist, visionary and lay-preacher, Jackson Hlungwane hails from the tiny village of Mbhakata in Gazankulu. And it is atop a mountainous eerie on the foundation of an iron-age settlement that he has established a home and temple for himself and his disciples dedicated to the works of God.

Yet it is still with a feeling of unease that the sensitive viewer approaches the work. While it is quite miraculous to see this vast volume of work gathered together in one venue, there is still an odd sense of dislocation.

While few can dispute the value of preserving and institutionalising a masterpiece such as the Altar Piece, one is overwhelmed by a sense of loss. Removed from its hilltop sanctum, where it once functioned as a pulpit and sacred site, it is now imbued with another kind of sanctity — that of the displaced mystical object of veneration.

The value of this exhibition then lies not only in the work itself, but in the web of cultural questions traversed. The Hlungwane exhibition is gradually chipping away at easy paradigms and established dogma, and slowly beginning to redefine a new cross-cultural work-space.

The exhibition is due to travel to Windhoek, Harare and Maritzburg.

CATHY BERMAN

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