

MSO-9091- 0001-003

SOLOMON MALOPE

Evan Oberholster

Prior to embarking on an appreciation of the life and work of Solomon Malope, I feel obliged to state that I am somewhat dubious about the validity of a white South African's ability to appreciate and criticize the contemporary Black art of South Africa. I feel that the situation is comparable to a scientist assessing a musical study. The Western regle is not an adequate assessor of this art and this is, once again, merely a European imposition.

A Black student who is conscious of the Black artist's predicament and who experiences it as well, would be in the position to formulate valid appreciations of this art. This, to my mind, would produce a more perceptive opinion than the majority of Europeans for whom it is difficult to remain objective, on either extreme, due to the present political situation.

Solomon Malope, commonly known as Solly, is extremely Westernized. Unlike Motshile Nthodi, author and illustrator of "From the Calabash", Solly is not reliant on the spectacular exoticism of his tradition. Solly's altruistic concerns are revealed by esoteric works on his theme of the complexities of man.

He depicts people and their conflicting principles, their vacillating standards and their different facades. A desire is expressed to reconcile these qualities by the simple revelation of the fundamental similarities that people share.

Solly was born of wedded Anglican Tswana parents on 16th June 1953, at Lady Selborne, near Pretoria. Ironically, this is the date which has become the anniversary of the 1976 Soweto Riots, for in his work there is very little reflection of the Black Consciousness movement or its acrimony.

Since the age of seven, Solly has been drawing, with the encouragement of his father, and selling his works through a Pretoria curio shop, to tourists. At the age of ten, in 1963, he mov-

ed with his family from Lady Selbourne to a Black township of Pretoria called Atteridgeville, where he still lives with his mother. This involuntary transfer of Black people from Lady Selbourne, - which was proclaimed a White residential area, to townships and homelands, was a traumatic experience for many, especially the artist Ranko Pudi, who expresses this as a subject in his art. Solly seems unaffected by this occurrence, for which he bears no grudge. However, Solly was affected by the death of his sister, who was three years his elder and who died at the age of 16 from sugar diabetes. As a result, Solly grew up lonely, like an only child.

In 1971, while still at school, Solly participated in an art competition and, although he had not received any formal art tuition, he won a Special Mention prize with a watercolour on the topic "Where I live"

An unsuccessful operation in 1973 caused the death of Solly's father, which was a great shock to the sensitive adolescent. He states that his father had artistic talent and that this helped him with his work. A putative guess of Solly's is that his father, had he lived in a different time, would have become a well-known artist.

Prior to his father's death, Solly began studying in 1972 at the

Hebron Teachers' Training College in Mabopane, which is a Black township north of Pretoria. After completing his studies in geography, psychology, Sesotho and the methodology of teaching, in 1973, he began teaching at the Patogeng Higher Primary School in Atteridgeville, without having matriculated.

In 1974 Solly won a bursary from the then Department of Bantu Education, which gained him admission to the unique Ndalení Art School at Richmond, near Pietermaritzburg, where he was to receive his first formal art training.

This admirable institution is the Alma Mater of the most prominent contemporary Black South African artists, especially those from the Cape and Natal. Not only did Solly acquire a knowledge of the history of occidental art, but he also developed an interest in sculpting, using railway sleepers of Jara wood, which he found to be an excellent medium because of its hard natural grain. Due to a lack of funds Solly has been unable to continue with this medium.

He claims that during his studies at the Ndalení Art School he was influenced by some of the European artists, especially Van Gogh and Matisse, and yet the most obvious influence is that of Picasso. Another influence is that of the African mask, for which the urban Black artist's interest was revived by the European's ardour for it. Solly utilizes the masks' traditional styles and designs as motifs in his work.

In 1976, because of the Soweto Riots, Solly was one of the many students who were unable to matriculate.

Through the patronage of foreign diplomats, particularly of the Canadian Embassy, Solly managed to live on the proceeds of his art during 1978. In 1979 he resumed teaching, once again at the Patogeng Higher Primary School, where he currently teaches geography, as art is not offered as a school subject.

After completing his matriculation at the end of this year (1979)

through a correspondence college â\200\224 Solly intends studying for a Fine Arts degree at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, or at a university in France if he is successful in obtaining a scholarship.

Solly exhibited privately in 1978 at the homes of various foreign

diplomats. As a member of the South African Association of Arts, he presented his first one-man show in 1979 at the Volkskas Building in Pretoria, and shortly afterwards he was the first Black artist to exhibit at the Montmartre Cafe in the Burlington Arcade in Pretoria.

With aid from a diplomat of the Canadian Embassy, Solly plans an exhibition for November 1979 at Gaborone, Botswana. The Hoffer Gallery in Pretoria is reserved for June 1980 for a further exhibition, and the Canadians intend to arrange an exhibition in Canada in the near future.

MOTHER EARTH
(Fig. 1)

This half-human, half-plant earth mother, portrayed with big, full breasts and roots replacing arms, is without a vagina or pubic hair.

Fig. 1 Solomon Malope
Mother Earth. 1978 ; ;
Pencil on paper. (43,5 x 58 cm) Private collection.

This is the result of self-imposed inhibitions caused by the artist's restrictive religion and society. The fertility theme is indicated by the round, swollen breasts and the rising sun, giving birth to a new day. The earth mother's figure is formed by a bulbous torso, a trunklike neck and head with hair turning to foliage full of nourishment, like the breasts of the mother plant. The large leaf growing from her forehead symbolizes a spiritual nutrient, as Solly places more importance on the psyche than on the physique.

Not only do the narrow hips and the absence of genitalia contradict the fertility theme, but the colour also does. The black pencil on grey paper seem sterile and devoid of any sign of vegetation or growth. This stern figure pertains to the artist's matriarchal upbringing; this dominant woman is possibly a subconscious portrayal of the artist's mother, and features in other pictures entitled Solitude in the Moon (Fig. 9), A Face not Familiar (Fig. 8), and Playing Time (Fig. 10).

The asymmetrical composition formed by strong vertical and horizontal lines, adds more vigour to the work. I would rather not compare the work to the archetypal mother, the Venus of Willendorf.

SHADOWS OF LIFE (Fig. 2)

This depiction of a family is reminiscent of the so-called township art. Although it lacks the sordidness of that style, the manner in which the big-bellied figures clutch one another is pathetic, primitive, and crude. The parents wear ponderous expressions and their heads are fused in spiritual agreement (Mother and Father are one, according to Solly). The one child peeks out inquisitively from behind his parent, while the other beams happily in ignorance. Although the standing figures are depicted in the nude, there are no visible bruises, no rags and no bared ribs — not even a hovel in the background. And yet, the group expresses tragedy and evokes sympathy. The cold white sun behind the family is no source of warmth. The children hide their sexes behind their hands, while the man bares an inconspicuous penis (without testicles).

The sense of unity is so strong that the family seems inseparable.
This is not a traditionally sized family, but then, neither was
Solly's.

It is a great pity that Solly's aesthetic appreciation of faces does
not extend to the body.

Fig. 3 Solomon Malope
Man Hiding. 1978
Pastel. (62 x 44,5 cm.) Private collection.

MAN HIDING
(Fig. 3)

Solly reveals his talent with this masterful stylization of fusing
faces, which share an eye, framed by the united bridges of each
face's nose. Man Hiding portrays a person, more specifically the
different guises concealing the psyche, fearing the vulnerability of
exposure. A parallel title would be the fence-sitter. This depic-

tion is the quintessence of the artist's theme, which is the self-
Fig. 2 Solomon Malope deceit of mankind and its nebulous facades and principles. These
Shadows of Life. 1978 : ; qualities are rendered successfully by subtle colours, which
con-
Pastel. (31,5 x 46 cm.) Private collection. tribute to the indistinctiveness desired by
man.

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s excessive and not utilized, the rile

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Although the negative spa | shapes is striking.

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composition a The half black, half white face, is an unusual portrayal of the
negroid and the aryan faces together. This depiction reinforces the
artist's theory of compatibility, with the integration of the races
and the fusion of the faces. The title 'Creation', suggests the
phrase 'All men are created equal'. The background ad-
ds
nothing to the picture and is superfluous. This is similar to the
compositional problem of Man Hiding (Fig. 3), where Solly per-
sists in using the horizontal rectangle instead of the vertical, which
is far more suitable. The colours are monotonous and do not con-
trast the very different heads to their fullest advantage.

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Fig. 4. Solomon Malope
You and Your Shad6w. 1979
Pastel. (59 x 49 cm.) Artist's collection.

YOU AND YOUR SHADOW
(Fig. 4)

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stylized frontal face, showing | : |
A igi LOR overshadows a diffident profile. The wae a : a |
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Lis personality makes use of the negative spaces far mor Fea tee bisa Vets calls
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successfully than in Man Hiding (Fig. 3).

IMAGINATION

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— 6 ee ain ST ineont eo aevelds larger one, the artist reveals his imaginary land where
the possibili-
could be open because of the convex line on the supposed eyelids. ty of spiritual union
or fusion between individuals may take place.

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Unfortunately the conglomeration of faces is executed in lugubrious colours, which dulls the fantasy to a prosaic experience. In pictures like this, Solly's superior talent, imagination and spirituality are shown. The ability to depict his visionary world makes Solly's art worthy of serious consideration.

IN YOUR OWN MIRROR
(Fig. 7)

The two faces gaze out, away from the dividing vertical, which is the mirror, refusing to look at the reflection of the self and implying reluctant self-examination. The real head is in colour, while the reflected image is higher and in black and white. This is a depiction of a woman wearing neatly coiffed hair and ear-rings. The contours of the hair add vigour to the strange composition.

A FACE NOT FAMILIAR
(Fig. 8)

By 'not familiar' the artist means strange, unusual. Here Solly reveals subtle colour sense, which is unparalleled in his other works. The perfect stylization with both the frontal view and the profile of one face on the same plane, is exceptionally Picasso-esque. The composition of the shapes in the head is ingenious, though the use of cubistic shapes and of colour in the body is without conviction (Solly seems to be at a loss when confronted with the body). The profile's nose, forehead, cheek and chin are reduced to one large 'C' shape of pastel ochre yellow, framed in black. This reduction and the arresting stare, make this one of Solly's most successful pieces.

SOLITUDE IN THE MOON
(Fig. 9)

A big-breasted woman is portrayed, with a blanket around her hips, tilting her head speculatively at her surroundings in search of a companion. The evening and the moon emphasize her femininity and solitude. (The artist's mother is a widow and never remarried.) The calves are conveniently omitted and the arms reveal the artist's ignorance of the human body. For once the use of black and white is satisfactory, as it enhances the woman's loneliness.

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Fig. 6. Solomon Malope
Imagination. 1978
Pastel. (69,5 x 49 cm.) Private collection.

Fig. 7. Solomon Malope
In Your Own Mirror. 1979
Pastel. (51 x 36 cm.) Private collection.

Fig. 9. Solomon Malope
Solitude in the Moon. 1978

Pastel. (32,5 x 46 cm.) Private collection. Pastel. (29,5 x 44,5 cm.) Private collection

Fig. 8. Solomon Malope
A Face not Familiar. 1979

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Conclusion

Solly feels that Black art in South Africa tends to be stereotyped and imitative, and in great need of improvement. He states that there is a need for new techniques and experiences to be reflected in Black art.

This is a criticism that can be partially levelled at his work, because of its repetitive, chromatic, medium and subject choice. The explanation for this is that Black artists have to make their art pay and this leads to the repetition of popular, commercially successful pieces. As the circumstances alter and the demand for Black art increases, the artists will be less dependent on repetition, and only then may one assess this criticism.

Solly is an isolated artist entangled in conflicting cultures and his art mirrors the contradictions that the westernized Black has to resolve. His reflections reveal an understanding for the psyche which should enable him to overcome all the conflicts, and eventually enrich his art. Solly is in the fortunate position where he may

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Fig. 10. Solomon Malope
Playing Time. 1978
Pencil. (45 x 29,5 cm). Private collection.

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benefit from two very different cultures, from the Balck and the European.

What is significant is that Solly is extremely westernized. Solly says, even as a child he drew people, but that they were white, not black. It was argued that this was the inherent portryal of idols, the traditional depiction of Gods in white. But Solly reiterates that they were European; thin-lipped with angular features and straight hair. Sollyâ\200\231s childhood fascination for the White is seen in his selfproclaimed acceptance, identification and adoption of western norms and ideals.

His main theme is man and his complexities, White and Black.