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HLUNGWANI

Raymund van Niekerk

rely all art is the result of oneâ\200\231s having been in danger,
â\200\230aving gone through an experience all the way to the
where no one can go any further â\200\224 Rainer Maria

Â« Hlungwani, who lives and works in the vil-
- of Mbhokota in Gazankulu, is a former Zionist
â\200\234nest, founder of his own church, prophet, seer and
â\200\234culer, architect of a complex of numinous structures
â\200\230at he calls â\200\234The New Jerusalemâ\200\235, but above all
â\200\234â\200\234lptor of genius. A large retrospective exhibition of
â\200\234' sculptures, organised by Ricky Burnett with the
op of David Rossouw, and sponsored by BMW, was
â\200\234es In Johannesburg recently and had critics and art-
os" once agreeing in their acclaim of Hlungwant

and in their awed praise of his work. Here, almost
unannounced, was an artist of compelling power,
showing fully matured creative talents, possessed of
an indisputable command of his medium and of a
range of subject matter whose complexity will be a
challenge to critics and historians for a long time yet.
For some years, he and his work have been known
and sought out by a small group of admirers, but one
suspects that even they were taken aback by the scale
of this artistâ\200\231s achievement as revealed in the Johan-
nesburg show.

The diversity of scale and subject matter in the
works on exhibition, the change of mood from som-
bre to lighthearted, grotesque to lyrical, ensured the
amazement of the visitor. An enormous figure of

â\200\234BN,

(Above) A grouping of
sculptures at the exhibition of
the work of Jackson
Hlungwani. . . â\200\234Forms and
images from Africa,
memories of distant myths and
meanings, are smelted
together with an amalgam of
Judeo-Christian beliefs in

the crucible of Hlungwaniâ\200\231s

art.

Photographs by David Dodds.

(Above) Jackson
Hlungwani . . . â\200\234priest,
prophet, seer and healer,
architect of numinous
structures, but above all
sculptor of geniusâ\200\235.

(Right) One of a number of
thrones on exhibit...
â\200\234Sculpted high up on the
backs of the chairs the hand of
God inclines protectively
over the space below,
awaiting the blessed

occupant to come.â\200\235

Adam, four metres high, met one on arrival, fol-
lowed by great hieratic thrones; figures of Christ,
prophets and archangels; crucifixes; a throng of fishes
of all shapes and sizes, wondrously eloquent and
alive; great ritual bowls, mysterious of purpose; and
also bravura works of abstract art, birds and animals
of many kinds â\200\224 the list is longer.

An imaginative world of unforeseen profundity,
crowded with novel imagery, through which, at times,
the wry humour of the artist flashes, is mapped out in
Hlungwaniâ\200\231s art. The sculpture could speak for it-
self: the viewer would have been impressed, moved,
even amused (for Hlungwani is a man who laughs
with delight, and humour informs works of serious
didactic intent). But soon one needs to know more
about the artist himself, for that knowledge, hopeful-
ly, will explain the mysteries that confront one in the
works, and will contribute to an understanding of his
idiosyncratic symbols and personal myth.

His story is remarkable enough as an account of
individual experience, yet it conforms very nearly to
the archetypal myth of the shaman, seer and medicine
man. It begins in 1978. Hlungwani tells how one
night Satan shot an arrow through his legs which dis-

yp vared into his body and became a snake. The wounds caused such suffering that he eventually de-

ded to take his own life. As he waited for the appointed day, Jesus and two companions appeared to him. The account Hlungwani gives in a conversation with the Reverend Theo Schneider is striking:

Hlungwani: I saw them coming . . . I looked at them from head to foot, approaching from the horizon, stepping down firmly.

schneider: How did they look?

Jungwani: They looked like human beings.

schneider: Black people?

Hlungwani: Well, they were like human beings, just people. Yes, people. They had no particular colour.

In the course of the experience he is told, â\200\234You will serve God for your whole lifeâ\200\235; and soon after God appears to him. He reports: â\200\234I did not in fact see Godâ\200\231s full stature. I only saw his legs, from the knees wnâ\200\235. He is then bathed in a downpour of blood-

4 water and emerges to walk erect, endowed with valing powers and devoted to Godâ\200\231s service. Similar kccounts of the shamanâ\200\231s experience of vocation are recorded in many societies, the experience invariably heralded by a period of psychic disorientation associated with physical illness. The individual is then restored to health when he or she begins to shamanise.

From the moment of revelation the carving of the sculptures became part of Hlungwantâ\200\231s mission, part

f his teaching, the works themselves his sermons. As -e explains: â\200\234I am concentrating now in carving aings related to (the) God-given task.â\200\235 His creative itt is inseparable from his gifts as healer. Hlungwani states that his sculptures, like his healing, are the result of God working through him.

Lionel Abrahams, in a catalogue essay that analyses the art and its messages, draws instructive parallels between Hlungwani and William Blake. Blake insisted on the direct divine origin of his poems and drawings â\200\224 they came, in his words, â\200\234from immediate dictationâ\200\235. In discussing his own work, Blake wrote: â\200\234I may praise it, since I dare not pretend to be any other than the Secretary: the Authors are in Eternity.â\200\235 Los, in The Four Zoas, works with â\200\234his hands divine inspiredâ\200\235.

Whatever the sceptic may think, the psychic element in the creative processes of Hlungwani must be taken into account: it helps some way towards a comprehension of his remarkable artistic authority and of the technical command possessed by an artist almost votally uninstructed in the usual disciplines of the art. He had received practical instruction in wood-work-

ing and the making of furniture from his father, a carpenter (one moves lightly over this parallel: Hlungwani's identification with Jesus is real and expressed), but this only partly helps to explain his virtuosic use of home-made and improvised adzes, his preferred tool. With these, his raw material the wood from trees indigenous to the region, Hlungwani produces sculpture in which is evident such control of formal and expressive means, a range of style and approaches so broad, that one anxiously seeks the source

of inspiration and of the creative energies that can produce such masterful works of plastic art.

One necessarily speaks of the range of his sculptural syntax for he moves freely into different modes of expression: from open to closed forms, richly or roughly textured to smooth and rounded, tense and charged against flowing and supple, emphatically linear or full of sculptural corporeality. Critics have also noted the perplexing (and surely unconscious) echoes, in the sculptures, of stylistic elements from many cul-

(Top) Christ Playing
Football, 1983. The
Christ figure broods over
the football of humanity
in a world irrevocably
fallen, eternally the object
of his care.

(Above) Mongqi fish (1)
1987. Recurrent images

. . that testify to their
central importance in the
artist's mythical universe.

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(Above) Thrones and ritual
pot. . . â\200\234Magnificent as they
are as evocations of thrones,
their primary import is
sculptural and conceptual.
They are not seats for
ordinary beings.â\200\235

(Right) Crucifix (II),
1982. â\200\234Hlungwani states
that his sculptures, like his
healing, are the result of God
working through him.â\200\235

tures and historical periods. They have cited neolithic
art, Byzantine, Gothic, German Expressionism
amongst others: these correspondences are but further
evidence of the richness of Hlungwaniâ\200\231s artistic lan-
guage, the extent of his imaginative and formally in-
ventive reach. It is perhaps as well, at this juncture,
to point out that 90% of the work on exhibition had
been produced during the preceding decade.

One work, Christ playing football (580 mm high),
has been justly admired by all. The short, sturdy

legs, firmly tensed to hold the ball, contrast with the
long arms that are wrapped in a spiralling thrust
about the body: the result, a compelling ambiguity in
suggested movement and meaning. And the diagonal
impulse of the whole upper half of the figure is con-
tradicted by the solid and motionless legs and feet.
The logic and purpose of this deliberate tension is
found in the strongly modelled head of Christ that
bends to contemplate the ball he holds and cannot
kick away. The ball is, for Hlungwani, the world
and its peoples. With compassion and infinite tender-
ness in the shadowed, hooded eyes, the Christ figure
broods over the football of humanity in a world irrev-
ocably fallen, eternally the iect of his care. And
how cruelly Christ too is rent â\200\224 a lightening crack
runs through his head to a wound over his heart, just
above what could be the breast-pocket badge of his
soccer club. The badgeâ\200\231s emblem is composed of a
nest of rounded Vâ\200\231s â\200\224 a sign as old as the art of Stone
Age Africa. Forms and images from Africa, memo-
ries of distant myths and meanings, are smelted to-
gether with an amalgam of Judeo-Christian beliefs in
the crucible of Hlungwaniâ\200\231s art.

Images that recur in the sculptural oeuvre and tes-
tify to their central importance in the artistâ\200\231s mythical
universe are the fishes. Within the field of reference
of this artist, the obvious connotation is that of the
symbol of Christ. Certainly the interpretation is ac-
ceptable, yet significantly Hlungwani does not insist.
They seem to refer to people â\200\224 he even sees himself as
a fish â\200\224 and through their remarkable variety of
shapes and sizes and kinds, whether sinister, comic,
elegant or spiritual, they evoke a host of human char-
acteristics. But Hlungwani is also an acute observer

of nature. Many kinds of fish abound in the streams of Gazankulu and it has been noticed how faithfully he portrays the natural forms of different fishes known to him. These forms provide a basic vocabu-

lary from which the artist mines a treasure of sculptural inventions. Hlungwani says that fish, like humankind, can praise the Lord. He would understand a line from Christopher Smart's Jubilate Agno: "For the praise of God can give to a mute fish the notes of a nightingale."

Blake demanded that the work of art should serve as a receptacle yet to be filled by the imaginations of reader and viewer. The subject matter of Hlungwani's art will inevitably stimulate ever more complex interpretations but justifiably so in terms of the Blakean imperative.

In the writings of that devoted student of shamanism, Carl Jung, are to be found many suggestions of ways in which one could approach the fishes that are so important to our artist. Not least is Jung's observation that from earliest times Christ was associated with the start of the astrological age of the two fishes (roughly 1-2000 ab). He wrote: "To the extent that Christ was regarded as the new aeon, it would be clear to anyone acquainted with astrology that he was born as the first fish of the Pisces era." For Jung it was also significant that in alchemy the fish is the mysterious prima materia, the initial material of the alchemists' work, the piscis rotundus, the round fish in the sea. Alchemists believed that the fish exerts a magnetic attraction on human beings as a living stone, out of which the elixir of immortality could be produced. Anyone who has seen the marvellously round fish of Hlungwani, gleaming and fat and elegant and fruitful, will not easily reject the notion of possible magical import.

The sculptor's most recent work includes a series of large thrones. Unexpected constructions they are: tormented and weathered forms found in pieces of wood in a natural state contribute to the elaborate baroque character of several thrones. Yet, magnificent though they are as evocations of thrones, their primary import is sculptural and conceptual. They are not

seats for ordinary beings. Sculpted high up on the backs of the chairs the hand of God inclines protectively over the space below, awaiting the blessed occupant to come. These works are born of the artist's belief in resurrection and the triumph of Good. The presence of death and disease and evil in his world holds no terrors for him. Like Isaiah in Blake's Marriage of Heaven and Hell, all is sure. There he is asked: "Does a firm persuasion that a thing is so make it so?" And Isaiah replies: "All poets believe that it does." The sculptor and prophet and the saved will return to occupy such thrones.

For at all times and above all, Hlungwani is devoted to the service of the people of his community and the nature of their spiritual life. His knowledge of the Bible, the assured way in which he quotes apposite texts, are not more important in his mission than the creation of the sculptures which are used to instruct his followers and elucidate Holy Writ. His present fame has meant, unfortunately, that many of his most powerful sculptures, integral to his compound devo-

tional groups and altars, are being sold to institutions and private collectors. The sculptures are magnificent: one understands the need to have work by one of Africa's greatest sculptors in important collections. There are real dangers though, that the altars and chambers of The New Jerusalem and Kanana will be stripped of the images that the artist/priest destined as their permanent holy icons.

In a recent Leadership article (volume 8 number 8) by Neville Dubow, devoted to the Paris exhibition Magicians of the Earth, he suggested that several contemporary South African artists might have taken their places in that exhibition with confidence. The fact is that no one artist could have made a more significant and brilliant contribution in such a situation than Jackson Hlungwani. He is of world stature.

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(Below) Salmon (IV),
1987/89; Panoramic Panel,
1982; Flat Fish (11), 1989
. . virtuoso use of home-
made and improvised adzes,
the artist's preferred tool.