

# INSTITUUT VIR EIETDSE GESKIEDENIS

Die Universiteit van die Oranje-Vrystaat



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## An Oasis for struggling artists

*For gallery owners and art dealers, paintings and sculpture are a way to wealth. Mario Sickle runs the only black art gallery in the Cape — one of only two black galleries in the whole country — but is not out to make his fortune. The gallery is there first and foremost as an oasis in an art-parched black community.*

MARIO SICKLE's Oasis gallery is a modest little place tucked away under the Klipfontein Road bridge into Athlone.

Just around the corner there is the bustle of business activity, street vendors, schoolchildren, but the bell alerting Sickle to callers seldom tinkles.

The visitors who do find their way to the gallery are usually tourists, mostly Germans and Americans, not the locals Sickle longs to see browsing.

Sickle himself is handsome and well-built. His powerful upper arms relate not only to his wooden sculptures which stand out against the artwork hanging on the walls, but to a background as a life-saver whose rescues on the Strandfontein coast have made the news pages more than once.

Sickle is angry at the lack of art opportunity for blacks and the lack of support for black art from business, black business in particular.

"They need a kick up their backsides to make them take notice! They sponsor sport. Never art. They don't even buy art for their homes."

Ballet was introduced as a subject in black schools some years ago, says Sickle. Art remains a Cinderella subject.

"Mitchells Plain has a population nearing 250 000 and not a single art institution."

Thirty-six and the father of four, Sickle refers to himself as a "late developer" in art. Largely because of his untailored education — he left school

Standard Six — but also because of his colour, as recently as '72 when he determined to give up a desk job for art, the doors of art schools in Cape Town were closed to him.

"I didn't have matric, but things like nude white models being sketched by a black man seemed to present problems ..."

Sickle gives recognition for his ultimate emergence as an artist to two

women. Barbara Pitt of the Foundation School of Art in Observatory who recognized his talent and was prepared to sponsor him, and his wife who was totally supportive in the difficult years when he was a student. He qualified only two years ago having finished a four-year graphic art course in three years.

Most of his earnings come from illustrating and designing book covers. His first love, however, is sculpture. The

University of the Western Cape owns three of his works.

Sickle opened the Oasis Gallery 14 months ago. In the 70's his friend, poet James Mathews, had tried the same thing. The fact that Mathews failed did not discourage him.

"A gallery is a necessity in the community. My purpose in establishing the Oasis is to give artists a chance to expose their work. Sales are secondary." Commission charges, only 15% (in larger galleries it can run to 40%) are ploughed back.

The gallery is also needed to encourage art in young children. "It is vital that art is introduced at grass roots level. Art encourages perception, debate, thought, ideas ... children are being given nothing for their minds."

In his own childhood, says Sickle, he was drawn to history and reference books. "I read as much as I could, but no education could have given me what I have learned through art."

Oasis is a meeting place for writers and artists within the community. Everyone knows everyone. It starts coming to life towards the end of the working day when people walk in, socialize and exchange ideas.

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