

~~A journey~~ From Fondwe to Naledi Station

It was a penniless Thomas Nkuna who arrived from Venda at Fuba Academy (Fuba: Federated Union of Black Artists) in 1985. Lack of funds prevented him from enrolling as an art student immediately.

Thomas Rulani Nkuna was born in the village of Njerere near Sibasa on 26 September 1959. He was the second child of Albert and the late Modjadji Nkuna. In his pre-school years he took part in ^{childhood} ~~puerile~~ activities such as swimming in the ^{river} ~~the~~ pools of the river which flows through the village and gathering clay from these spots to model a variety of images. Soon it was apparent that his clay figures were exceptionally good. Only when Thomas attended the Fondwe Primary School did he realize that he and his friends were producing "art" in their pastime.

At school his sketches drew the attention of his teachers who did not always approve of his preference for drawing ^{over} ~~(instead of)~~ the other school subjects. He soon devised a way in which he could sketch unobtrusively under his desk ^{neath?}. His childhood pastime became a passion and he was almost set on his way to become an artist when in 1982 the government of Venda awarded him a scholarship to pursue art at Rorke's Drift Art Centre in Natal.

Unfortunately for Thomas, the fine arts section of the Rorke's Drift Art Centre had to close ^{down} in that year because it did not generate income. This disappointment together with the French Government's failure to secure ^a ~~the~~ three year bursary which he had been promised from September 1991 left a slur on his short artistic career. He was brutally murdered on 17

September 1992 at the Dube Hostel in Soweto. Six days after ^{his} his disappearance his body was identified by friends in the government mortuary in Diepkloof.

Thomas Nkuna held his first solo exhibition at ^{A.G.} (the Art Gallery of) the Market Theatre in July 1991. He had completed his art studies at Fuba Academy in 1989. At the time of his final year, he showed a keen interest in the art of South African painters of the older generation, especially Pieter Wenning (1873-1921) and Maggie Laubser (1886-1973). He made a point of studying *Jour d'Hiver*, a painting by Wenning in the Johannesburg Art Gallery. Nkuna's application of marks gained in expressiveness after an analysis of the relationship between blank space and mark in that painting ^{by} Wenning. It was to ^{Wenning's} ~~this~~ idiosyncratic imagery ~~of Wenning~~ that Nkuna related when he embarked on his artistic career in 1990.

The pastels and oils which he showed on the occasion of his first exhibition in the Market Theatre bore the mark of a free ^{A.G.} spirit which was not going to succumb to the calls for clichéd "township" scenes. One of the learned visitors ^B to the show ^{localist?} sighed, "Where are the industrial sites"? She did not perceive that Nkuna's pastels which captured the unkept growth of gardens at railway stations, the blandness of the Nancefield hostel where he lived and the trains were the reservoirs ^{from where} (whence) industrial plants tapped human energy in monotonous job creation. Every painterly stroke in that exhibition portrayed the co-existence of natural growth and systematic pollution which has become part of urban life.

Nkuna's oeuvre is a record of his journey from the

~~From Rorke's Drift to Naledi Station~~

It was a penniless Thomas Nkuna who arrived from Venda at Fuba Academy (Fuba: Federated Union of Black Artists) in 1985. impasto slashes in 1989 to the Naledi station in Soweto where he was kidnapped for his execution on the night of 17 September 1992. This record has become Nkuna's private cartography in which he carefully names the places which he visited or passed by: Old Kippies, Booysens, Germiston, Anglers, Longdale, Krugersdorp. His paintings, drawings and graphics are personal accounts of his wanderings and travels: "As long as I am in the position that enables me to do or make art, I will do that. I am inseperable with art" (Nkuna, biographical information, Thupelo files). Succintly this credo is echoed in a landscape. Nkuna did not sign or date this oil pastel. Instead of the artist's signature, Nkuna places ^{particular} an easle with a blank piece of paper or canvas and the artist resting in the shade of some shrubbery (in a way that could simulate a signature).

After the disappointment of not being able to continue his art education at Rorke's Drift, a disillusioned Nkuna left school in Venda. He ^{then} brought his first visit to Johannesburg where he knew nobody. In an interview with M. N. Ndebele (Fuba Newsletter, June-July 1991) he related how, for less than a month, he found "accommodation" after sunset at the Braamfontein railway station where he would overnight in a stationary railway coach. This experience could account for one of the titles of a pastel drawing (April 1991), *The trucks I always trust.*

Nkuna got to know railway stations and trains intimately. A kind of a love affair spurred off from his contact with

trains. In his renderings one becomes aware of an almost religious reverence for these mundane vehicles. In one of his

September 1992 at the

his disappearance his

government mortuary in

Thomas Nkuna held his

pastel drawings of 1992 the pitched roof construction of the Krugersdorp station provides a triptych in which the engine Lynette, like an ~~eye~~ ^{eye} of omnipotence, is placed centrally, and flanked by Jenny (left) and 4859 (right). ^{in another reference?} The transience of existence is summarized in an acrylic painting of a train passing by. The faint inscription on the top left of the picture: My great times are gone, ^{→ like Kershaw's} adds to the idea of a vanitas ^{mi Kershaw} of the railroad. In another pastel drawing one finds in the rhythmic repetition of the orange trumpets on the carriages a reference to the sound and music of stations.

At the time of Nkuna's first job-hunting in Johannesburg he was appointed security guard at the O. K. Bazaar (Fuba Newsletter, June-July 1991). The sketches that Nkuna made of his fellow workers were brought to his employer's notice. The latter promised to send Nkuna to the Ndaleni College at Richmond in Natal. The offer was withdrawn when the employer ^{discovered/realized} ~~had~~ found out that sometimes, ~~Nkuna~~ ^{Nkuna} (instead of checking the customers' parcels) made sketches. (In 1982 the art course for which Ndaleni became known was transferred to the Transvaal Training College at Mabopane.)

Back at the Phiriphiri High School in 1984 where he studied for his standard 9, Nkuna read about Fuba Academy in the newspaper City Press. A dream was awakened and came true when he completed his art studies there under the guidance of Durant Sihlali (1935-). The latter was to become one of his

closest friends.

Nkuna did not have the means to enrol at Fuba in 1985. What had been important for him then, was that he got to know the school and it motivated him to look for a job and save money

for his future studies: "Once again, I walked the streets of Johannesburg throughout the day and slept in a train at night. Eventually, I got a job at Booysens and accommodation at the New Canada Hostel" (Fuba Newsletter, June-July 1991).

It was at this time that he befriended the commercial artist Lovemore Sibanda who helped Nkuna to obtain jobs as a signwriter. According to Sihlali, these assignments proved valuable experience and gave Nkuna a deft hand when it came to mural painting.

On completion of Nkuna's studies at Fuba, Sihlali, *β Nkuna* set themselves the difficult task to record on the spot in watercolour the bustle and movement in the daily lives of the street vendors of Kliptown. The stalwart Sihlali, an excellent water-colourist, felt obliged to introduce Nkuna to the street dynamics of plain air painting in Soweto. It differed from what Nkuna was used to in the Newtown precinct where Fuba Academy is situated. This endeavour did not imply pitching your easle *in order to* start painting, but a sequence of negotiations with the vendors to win their approval. To secure positions from where Sihlali and Nkuna could record business on Freedom Square and adjoining streets also involved settlement in cash.

During the course of their Kliptown painting excursion, Sihlali recalls that one of Nkuna's paintings was destroyed.

because he had painted the "shadow" of a passerby, implying that Nkuna had captured the guy's spirit by portaying him and therefore could harm him. Nkuna had already experienced the senseless destruction of a portfolio of his work when the Nancefield hostel, where he resided in 1989, was raided by gangsters.

This reluctance of people to have them^{selves} depicted on paper or on canvas is not peculiar to conditions in Soweto. Late in life, Gerard Bhengu (1910-89/90), another South African watercolourist and portrait painter, who was living in Section K of Umlazi near Durban, confided in Yvonne Winters of the Killie Campbell Library that he could no longer find models who were willing to sit for him. He was either accused of witchcraft or^{was} charged an exorbitant fee^{since} because he^{allegedly} sold his pictures to Europeans at high prices.

By exposing Nkuna to the dynamic interaction of Freedom Square, Sihlali wanted to prepare his ex-pupil for the life of an artist within a community which at times is suspicious of artists. (Nkuna would also encounter (At railway stations) intimidation and faction fighting which have become rifeⁱⁿ urban life^{during / since} in the late eighties.

Motifs that keep recurring in Nkuna's depictions are travellers who corroborate with migrant workers and the homeless, (notices of information), roads, vehicles and images of conflict. Willy nilly one identifies Nkuna with the homeless wanderer.

In a symbolic selfportrait from Nkuna's student days (dated