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Raw talent from South Africa

Patricia Morison reviews a powerful exhibition currently at Oxford

Art from South Africa is the first major exhibition of art from the townships and rural villages of South Africa to reach this country. At the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford until 23 September, it will then go travelling, to Warwick, Aberdeen, Nottingham, and other points. Do not, whatever happens, miss it. This is MOMA's 25th anniversary year. Impressively visionary though its shows have been, this one is surely in a class of its own, so timely is it, and so powerfully evocative of achievement and suffering.

Art from South Africa is extraordinarily varied. More than anything else, the free-standing wooden figures impose themselves. There is a richly heterogeneous army of them, dapper painted images of policemen and politicians next to musicians and the swaggering exuberance of township heroes. There are also paintings, installations, beaded blankets, immaculately tiny wire toys, political banners, and film. Using few words, it relies principally on the ironic power and poignancy of the images to reflect on the experience of apartheid, on the rawness of art born from poverty and anguish.

Chicken Man, alias Fanio Mkize, sometimes dresses in a chicken outfit and sells his sculptures on the pavement in Pietermaritzburg. Derrick Nuxumal, not yet thirty, uses felt-tip pen to create dizzyly coloured, tilting vistas of the mine where he worked. Here you will find artists who are, or were, boxers, cooks, an acrobat and one-man band, political prisoners, a village herbalist, and a priest of the New Jerusalem. The ANC's selective cultural boycott introduced in 1987 makes it hardly necessary to point out that the exhibition is not sanctioned by the South African government. Initiated by MOMA, it is held in association with the Zabalaza Festival Co-ordinating Committee in London; "Zabalaza" is Zulu for "struggle." MOMA's director, David Elliott, must have shown extraordinary tact and fortitude as he travelled South Africa to select this show.

One of Elliott's problems is that no catalogues have yet been printed because, at the last minute, the sponsor pulled out. It seems absurd, particularly so in a university town not short of publishers. In fact, the essays are lucid and outline admirably the current debate about the relationship of culture to political power in South Africa. In the year of the unbanning of the ANC, old arguments look set to take on a new urgency as culture moves higher up the agenda.

In such a fragmented society, is there such a thing as South African art? Whose story would it tell, and what should be the relationship of the artist, or "cultural worker," to "the armed struggle"? For the moment, the best introduction is to buy Gavin Yonge's "Art of the South African Townships" (Thames & Hudson, 1988). Start your visit downstairs, in MOMA's café, and it is obvious that for the mostly black artists in this exhibition, the first struggle is simply one to produce anything at all. In Britain, linocuts are something every child fiddles about with in primary school. In the townships, schooling offers no such luxuries as art education. But a piece of lino and a penknife is relatively cheap, and requires almost no space in housing which is over-crowded and badly lit.

These prints have a brilliance and boldness which would of themselves justify the trip to Oxford. They depict myths and rituals, celebrations of Mandela's release, everyday scenes, and dramatic events such as a bull goring a man. Two young Cape Town artists, Vuyle Voyiya and Billy Mandindi, show particularly powerful work. Voyiya's series of prints uses perfectly spaced rows of claw-shaped marks to build the close-up image of a man. His handsome features wear an expression of unease and then, as he turns towards us, vague terror.

Like Voyiya, Mandindi has managed to acquire formal training in art, and his are some of the best things in the exhibition. "Prophecy," three prints, illustrates a Xhosa prophecy of the eventual defeat of the white man.



Mural for Congress of South African Trade Union's Rally, 1989 by INVAVA Artists Group

The prophetess wears a miner's lamp, and a fascinating gallery of images cluster round her; crouched or horned figures, playing-cards, guns, spears, a piano, and a wellington boot, dangling from one breast. In another Mandindi depicts in pastels a wonderfully refined image of a galloping giraffe. Two winged putti are borrowed from the vocabulary of the Renaissance, except that their faces are pumpkin-type masks. And they are caught in the act of sacrifice, as they hold the necklace of a flaming tyre around their victim's neck.

Delicacy and terror combine to create glowing intensity in Justice Sifiso Mkame's pastels, postcard-sized vignettes grouped together around the themes of "Love," "Torture," and "Letters for My Child." Dark groups of figures move against the fires of burning streets, or fires lit for dances. Figures hang, spreadeagled, in cells. In "Letters for My Child," the delicately placed white accents are the blooded shirts of schoolchildren, the priest's white robe, and the white crosses of a new cemetery.

Many of the works give a sense of time hanging heavy for black artists. What else can explain the awesome

patience of Tito Zungu? His ball-point pen pictures are the most eccentric feats of draughtsmanship I have ever seen. Zungu started out selling illustrated envelopes for workers to send home to their families. In the last ten years, Zungu's work has become highly sought after by dealers, but they have to wait as Zungu stipples his mesmerisingly geometric images of cityscapes and jets.

Many of the artists in the show are attracted by images of modernity, familiar as much from television and magazines. The irony is obvious, the more so when the material use is cast-offs, like the slate tiles, metal, and bottles which Titus Moteyene used for his paintings and his model, "Pan Am 747." There is a good market, too, for works like these and for the wooden sculptures of Venda, work by well-known artists like Johannes Maswanganyi, Dr Phuthuma Seoka, and Noria Mabasa.

For the sophisticated radical, the relationship between white consumers and artists is problematic, fraught with the suspicion that it perpetuates a century of colonialist dealings. "Transitional" is the term, borrowed from anthropology, now often used to

describe art which consciously or unconsciously is adapted to the palates of a white minority. Noria Mabasa's smooth and carefully painted sculptures show soldiers and policemen, repetitive and yet individuated. As images of authority, they carry no evident comment, unlike Johannes Chauke's "Pig-policeman", short-sightedly sniffing the air, powerful in its epaulettes and tie, but with pathetically vulnerable genitals.

Mabasa lives in the country, but some of her pieces attach strongly to the town. When Siamese twins born in Soweto were separated, they made headlines and she began to model them, pair after pair of babies in nursery clothes, neatly joined at the head. Then there are dream-images, the beautifully modelled figure of a naked woman with a yearning twist to her head, her stomach forming a great trumpet flower.

There is so much in this exhibition, from railway-sleepers fashioned into Stations of the Cross for the Catholic church to images of ANC martyrs produced by radical white feminist artists. This is an exhibition which sets up reverberations which will take a long time to fade away.