

INTRODUCTION

The work on this exhibition is different. It looks and feels different to other work which has been exhibited recently. At the same time, these images of football players and men in shades and bright shirts seem familiar, not perhaps as art, but as images drawn from our society. Images of the ubiquitous worker, silently thronging to a distant workplace.

We are familiar with the image of men walking barefooted, but this familiarity has not prepared us for the reflection of that image in the work of an artist like Phutuma Seoka. Similarly the celebration of daily action found in the work of Noria Mabasa (not exhibited) is singularly unartistic, that is, if we accept the standpoint of contemporary Western sculpture which canonises the extraordinary and worships the obscure. Why then does this work strike home with such immediacy? Since none of these artists went to an art school, I believe that a partial answer lies in the circumstances surrounding the making of this work.

Four of the five sculptors exhibiting work on this exhibition were workers. The exception, Hendrik Nekhofe, is also the youngest. Nekhofe succeeded in selling his work whilst he was still at school. The death of his father led to great hardship for his family at Muledane, and is shown in works bearing titles like "Strandedness". Like other African sculptors, and here one thinks of work by Gabriel Kubhoni and Philomon Sangweni, Nekhofe does not depict the specific incident, choosing instead to give common expression to a personal dilemma.

Phutuma Seoka was born on a farm in the Duiwelskloof area of the Northern Transvaal, where his father worked as a cow hand. As a young man Seoka sought employment on the Reef and worked at various jobs until 1966 when he heard that his father had lost his job on the farm and been forced to move to Molototsi, a resettlement area in Lebowa. Seoka left his job and came to look after his father. A barbershop on the main road to Giyani brought in a bit of money to augment that earned by selling herbal and patent medicines. Hamba Ko Doctor Phutuma so Kosezwa! - Go to Dr Phutuma he will help you!

Why did he start making sculptures? Why does any artist decide to paint or make sculptures? In Dr Phutuma's case he says that the idea was suggested to him by a traditional doctor as a cure for a recurring dream about a large mountain snake. Before laughing this off as a quaint anecdote, let us hold in mind the fact that thoughts, that is the imagination, can have real effects. How else are we, to explain the extraordinary power some images have over us, even when they were the work of people belonging to a culture and society long since superseded by others?

By avoiding the usual subject matter of contemporary sculpture Seoka has avoided the ideological trap of mystifying his living conditions. His work is "political" in the sense that it seeks to identify and define in its own terms, working-class culture. Although his marching figures are partly suggested by the forms found in the natural forms of Velvet Corkwood. They also flow from his lived experience as a contract worker. That the figures are all individuals is evident in the treatment of the heads. In an important sense his work is a form of portrait sculpture shown particularly in the sculpture he carved of Maditukwana Mohale, the headman of the village of Botsha Belo. This carving was not 'commissioned' by Mohale. Seoka saw invested in this local dignitary all the power of a ruler. Clean white shirt, two-tone shoes and a rifle clamped between his knees. From my Western perspective the sculpture is good because it bears a strong likeness to the headman; from Seoka's perspective it is a good sculpture, if it succeeds in eliciting an agreement to be governed. It is the sculptural equivalent of a praise poem.

It has been said that traditional African sculpture is the symbolic terrain for the communal expression of something which is intractably personal. This formulation has application today despite the fact that contemporary African society has been torn apart by political and economic forces. Jackson Hlungwani now lives in his stone walled Jerusalem at Mbokote. Like the sons of countless workers on the mines of Johannesburg he too went to eGoli where he worked for a tea and coffee merchant before he was laid off after losing his finger in an industrial accident. Ordained into the African Zionist Church in 1946 Jackson Hlungwani had waist-length hair and led services in his hilltop, open-air church.

His sculpture is unashamedly religious and has a significance to the artist which other Christians might hold to be blasphemous. Jackson will not sell his figures depicting Cain and Abel saying that one cannot sell Christ.

He says of his double-headed animals that they look in two directions at once, lest they be trapped by like two-faced people with their meaningless promises and talk. Often a blade of unworked wood rises from the head of his carvings. He describes these as a "map" by means of which the animal or figure must live its life. For Jackson Hlungwani, sculpture itself is not symbolic, it is a real object in a world which is symbolic. The depiction of thought processes by means of a visual element in the design is a literal solution to a problem which is often left aside by sculptors who look only at the external form or appearance of the subject. The story of contemporary Black art is also a story of contact with Western influences. This has led to art becoming the site of a struggle for survival in a social environment which has

always undervalued African social and religious values. The form that this struggle has taken is not easy to chart and one looks in vain for subject matter which is overtly "political".

In the last century, South Africa was a principal target of European and American missionaries. A number of mission stations offered converts land and education and became centres of African learning. Places such as Edendale and Adams College outside Durban produced numerous political and social leaders. In the field of music, these religious influences gave form to extremely popular styles such as *Makwaya*. Taken from the English word "choir", this style was adopted for political songs. For example, Enoch Sontonga's composition, *Nkosi Sikelel iAfrika*, adapted hymnal part structures.

Marabi, as a musical style, grew up in opposition to this concert-hall culture. Taken from the Sesothu word for gangster, Marabi had an essentially working-class following and sprang up in the 1920's during a period of rapid industrialisation. During this period, contact between the races was not mediated through the Missions and working-class culture developed its own idiom in the compounds and backyard slums of the industrial centres.

Nelson Mkhumba was affected by that idiom. In the 1960's his Marabi dance band recorded with such names as the *Zoutpansberg Merry Makers*, the *Music Men* and *Nelson and the Phiri Boys*. At the time he was working either as a teacher, carpenter, welder, gardener, supervisor or house painter. He even tried his hand at a bit of upholstery. Today he greets visitors to his house and studio at Tshakuma with blasts on the Kudu horn. His visitor's book has entries from all over the world and his work is in South African University and Municipal collections, as well as in private collections in Europe and America.

The reason for this success is not hard to find. The range of his subject matter crosses the boundaries of class interest and we marvel at work which individualises the protagonists in a boxing match or a ballet performance with consummate command of the formal devices of sculpture. The expressions on the faces of almost all of his works match the concentration of physical and psychic energy evident in the stances of these figures. His work freezes movement in much the same way as a camera shutter does, indeed, he often works from a newspaper or magazine photograph. Of course, this is also a comment on our society: he has no option but to work from photographs since he would not be allowed to attend a ballet performance in any of the nearby towns.

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