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*L'un des artistes les plus remarquables de l'Afrique du Sud est Mhlaba Dumile. Ses oeuvres expriment la douleur, la tristesse et la colère des Africains de son pays natal.*

*Dumile est né en 1942 à Worcester dans la Province du Cap. Il est devenu célèbre comme artiste en Afrique du Sud, ce qui est significatif dans ce pays. Mais lorsque, comme noir, il devait prouver son emploi, sa profession d'artiste n'était pas acceptée. Obligé de s'installer ailleurs, il a choisi Londres.*

*Il peint des figures tristes qui manifestent l'angoisse et la privation de son peuple, comme dans le tableau de la couverture.*

*La passion de Dumile c'est le jazz. Il a dédié à Ray Charles une esquisse à l'encre d'une femme cambrée en arrière, reproduite ci-dessous. Sur son estomac un enfant s'accroche joyeusement. Dumile considère que le point culminant de sa carrière a été une manifestation gratuite de jazz et d'art dans une commune africaine. L'art, dit-il, doit être pour le peuple, vécu par lui et ne saurait être seulement une communication à sens unique.*

# DUMILE: *a profile*

LIONEL NGAKANE

One of the most successful artists in South Africa, regardless of colour, is Mhlaba Dumile, whose sculptures and drawings portray the pain, sorrow and anger of the Africans in South Africa. Dumile himself is an angry young man, small in stature, sensitive in temperament, eloquent about the tragedy of his people and completely dedicated to his work.

Dumile's life is in itself an example of the lot of the black man in South Africa. He was born in 1942 in the little town of Worcester in Cape Province. His father was a fervent Christian and active lay preacher, his mother a regular churchgoer who insisted on morning and evening prayers daily in the home. When Dumile was 6 years old, his mother died and the family moved to Cape Town. At 11 years of age he was sent to Johannesburg to live with his uncle's family, and that same year he left school. As a child, his main preoccupation was drawing and carving. His first job as a boy was in a pottery, painting African scenes. In 1963 he contracted tuberculosis and spent three months in a sanatorium where his painting attracted the matron's attention. She then asked Dumile to paint murals for the sanatorium. When he left there, he had his first art exhibition in Johannesburg. The gallery was impressed with his small clay and soapstone sculptures and put him under contract. Dumile was now a professional artist.

Within two years he had several notable successes. He had three one-man exhibitions, represented South Africa at the Sao Paulo Biennale with five works, and participated in several group exhibitions such as the Transvaal Academy (1965 and 1966) in which he was awarded one of the main prizes. In 1968, his portrait sculpture of the African leader and Nobel Prize winner, the late Chief Albert Luthuli, was the highlight of an exhibition in Pretoria.

It is significant that in colour-conscious South Africa, Dumile participated in group exhibitions with white artists.

Despite his impressive list of achievements, and his stature as a leading South African artist, Dumile was a Black Man in South Africa, and as such had to prove that he was employed, failing which he would be sent to his place of birth or to some tribal area. Dumile failed to convince the authorities that being an artist was a profession, and he was eventually expelled from Johannesburg and sent back to Cape Town. In Cape Town he was given fourteen days to leave and was endorsed to his town of birth, Worcester. Worcester also refused him a resident's permit and in turn gave him fourteen days to leave or be arrested and sent to a tribal reservation. Dumile, in desperation, returned to Johannesburg and applied for a passport to leave the country. He had to wait a year before he was granted the passport. Today, Dumile is in London.

Dumile's sculptures, sketches and drawings not only tell the story of the suffering and deprivation of his people in South Africa, but also act as a safety valve for his own personal pain and anger. To fathom the significance of his work, it is necessary to understand the complex being that is Dumile. He talks of his intense love for his mother even though he hardly remembers her. He remembers the hymns she sang as she worked at home. All the mother figures in his work are emotional experiences. An example is the pen and ink sketch dedicated to Ray Charles in which a woman is arched backwards in agony whilst a child crawls playfully on her stomach. Another drawing is of a mother and three naked children. The children are picking flowers and handing them to their unhappy mother who is looking at an empty plate being held up by one of the children.



Ask Dumile about his experiences as a black man in South Africa. His eyes narrow as he looks into the distance, as though he is able to see South Africa from London, and in a quiet voice he tells you about one of his drawings of three Africans in a cafe being served genitals on a platter. "The South African whites have always served us shit, and we've ate it for too long," is his brief explanation. His explanation of a large pastel-sketch of an African head, reminiscent of an African mask, is that the green shade represents the green grass on which cattle graze in peace and the red stands for the blood of Africans who are being killed in various ways by the whites. The same theme applies to the pen and ink sketch of five heads, proud heads that are "memorials" to the thousands of Africans who have been executed over the years. There is very little humour in Dumile's drawings.

Dumile's one love is jazz. In South Africa he possessed a large collection of jazz records, and in London he spends most of his meager income at jazz concerts and at Ronny Scott's Jazz Club. He treasures his friendship with several noted American jazz musicians. "When I listen to jazz, I get ideas. Even in London my mind is taken back home." Several of his drawings feature musicians screaming with pain, or soulful, but never seeming to enjoy their music. Even his dancers are sad figures in contorted poses. A number of his drawings are dedicated to musicians such as Roland Kirk and Sidney Bechet. One large charcoal drawing of three figures and a saxophone he describes as portraying the anguish of Africans in South Africa. Another of a man in a collar and tie, yet naked below the waist, playing the saxophone, with his mouth wide open as though screaming with pain, Dumile describes as showing Africans who try to ape the white man and yet lack the resources.

Respect is a word that often crops up in a conversation with Dumile, not just the traditional African respect for one's elders who may be only a day older, but respect for human beings as beings. One of his large pen and ink sketches, "Theme to Bloke," despite its delicate and intricate draughtsmanship, is perhaps the most powerful of his current work. Bloke Modisane is a South African writer, now in exile in London, who took Dumile into his apartment when he arrived in London. The sketch is of a woman and represents Dumile's respect for Bloke, "because women are always respected and as mothers they always worry about their children's safety." To illustrate respect, Dumile tells a story: one day in a Johannesburg street he saw a group of men handcuffed together, arrested for not being in possession of passes. Everyone felt sorry for them. Just then a funeral cortege drove past and each of the prisoners tried to remove his hat despite his own plight. The scene was comical, but he understood why they forgot they were handcuffed.

Today Dumile is in Europe and plans to visit America, the home of jazz. Eventually he hopes to settle in Africa — if not in South Africa, then any other African country. He maintains that only Africa can keep him inspired because he understands the day-to-day problems of Africans and regards himself as part of the entire continent and not just South Africa.

There is no doubt that Dumile is one of the foremost artists in Africa and deserves international recognition. Africa today is producing its share of artists who are not only genuine products of their environments, but also speak loudly and clearly for their continent. The whites who patronizingly admire their work miss, or are unable to recognise, the violent protest in a great number of works. Dumile believes that art should not only relate to the people, but must also be for the people. The highlight of his career, as far as he is concerned, was a free jazz and art exhibition in an African township. He speaks of the thousands of men, women and children who flocked into the hall and saw their first art exhibition and understood. There is no doubt, to the African, Dumile makes sense. ■

