

# Mzimba's works

New Nation 9-4-87

## on display

EGOLI — a one-man exhibition of fine art depicting conditions of mine-workers — will open at Leephy Studios Gallery on April 13.

Soweto artist Velaphi Mzimba studied art at Mofolo Art Centre and completed his training at the Johannesburg Art Foundation in 1980.

A year later, he held his first one-man show at the Carlton Hotel.

He then participated in many group shows throughout the country. Highlights in his career to date were a solo exhibition in Ulster, Northern Ireland in 1984, and in Washington, United States, this year.

Life in the township is the normal theme of Mzimba's work.

He delights in capturing the simple subjects of everyday life in his paintings and regards his work as a form of historic documentation.

Most recently the black man's role in the mining industry has captured his imagination, a role which he believes will be diminished by continual advances in technology.

He has provided paintings that are meritorious not only for their artistic worth, but also as a record for posterity.

While not a miner himself, he has made a careful study of black miners at work.

The exhibition runs until month end.



One of Mzimba's works depicts miners operating a drill.

## 'Milestone for mining' by Soweto artist

Citizen 4-4-87

ANY painter will know that working at night is fine, if the light is good (although paintings done by artificial light tend to have the colours appear, in daylight, a touch harsher than would initially have been realised): but to paint by the light of a single candle, as Velaphi Mzimba often has done, is virtually working with just a touch more light than that shed by a full moon...

Velaphi's father, Peter (who has encouraged his son's art since Velaphi was nine), has had the garage of their Soweto home converted into an artist's studio — and it is from there that Velaphi has evolved many studies of Soweto's people and buildings that have been exhibited in his solo exhibitions in Johannesburg, Swaziland, Cape Town — and also in Ulster, Northern Ireland, and Washington, USA.

"Until now, township life and themes have been

my solo subjects," this 28-year-old Soweto-born artist reflected, stating that aside from the aesthetic angle of his art, he feels that such paintings are a form of important historical record (particularly in our rapidly changing world).

Velaphi Mzimba's latest exhibition, however (that opens at 7pm next Friday, April 10, at Leephy Studios Gallery, 11 Jonkershoek Road, Bergbron, Western Johannesburg), is entirely concentrated on the part that Blacks play in the gold mining industry.

Having recently been down two different gold mines (at Driefontein and Carletonville), Velaphi has first-hand artistic observation of modern mining methods (the claustrophobic atmosphere of the working life, far below ground — the gumboots,

protective helmets and waterproofs worn by miners) for him to have produced 30 paintings, in oils (of various sizes), devoted to, or inspired by, those underground visits when he spent hours browsing around and doing innumerable rapid sketches of what he saw around him.

"Although the six major gold mining groups in South Africa might own art collections," Mzimba said, "I'm sure few of them have many art pieces directly related to the subject."

"I decided to create an exhibition of art entirely devoted to the mining 'picture', feeling that it would serve as a kind of art milestone for the mining industry — as well as provide a type of historical 'document' of gold mining in 1987."

*Velaphi Mzimba*





VELAPHI MZIMBA ... watercolours, oils and pastels on view from Tuesday, April 19.

## The butterflies begin...

CITIZEN 7-4-83  
ON Monday, April 4, a piece appeared in The Citizen about young Zulu artist Velaphi Mzimba's assurance about his paintings and drawings, saying he had a kind of deep inner conviction that his art would, one day, bring him "universal" acclaim.

This was the impression given while Velaphi's one-man exhibition was yet a few weeks in the future.

But, like artists the world over, he is possibly becoming a bit jittery and apprehensive because his collection of watercolours, oils and pastels will officially be on view from 6 pm on Tuesday, April 19 (here's hoping, for his sake, that exhibition-opening-goers will flood into Joe Maseko's Black Gallery, on the second floor of the Colosseum Building — entrance on Commissioner Street, nearest Kruis Street — for this event, the second solo show held by the 23-year-old who says he was already painting "seriously" when he was nine!).

Probably only an artist knows and understands that sick feeling that's syno-

nymous with an opening (in Johannesburg, anyway).

All that art work and time "invested" — and, more important in our business-oriented Western culture, the personal cash the artist has needed to spend before the first visitor nonchalantly takes up a glass of wine, or embarks on an animatedly frothy conversation with the next visitor (ignoring the art — the reason why, after all, the visitor is there at all!).

It's only the art section of our culture that is totally financed by the artists themselves: so Tuesday evening, April 19, just might have Velaphi Mzimba wondering if he's crazy to have sacrificed his spare cash framing his effort, when so many other things could have been done with the R1 000 or so which his framer's account will be — aside from other "incidental" expenses.

So, if you visit his show, don't put on an arty, intellectual act: really look at the work — and appreciate the sacrifices an artist must make in order that you can

## Mzimba is impressive, from Dube to Dublin

SUNDAY TIMES 1/5/83

T S ELIOT once said our beginnings never know our ends.

VELAPHI MZIMBA, whose second one-man exhibition is on at the Art Mart, Johannesburg, could surely never have known, when, at the age of nine he was making wire cars to sell to friends, that he would one day be hailed as "the most sought-after budding artist" on the black art scene.

Pay very close attention indeed: this talented young man is not "just another township artist".

Granted, his subject matter, the peoples of Soweto, is not new.

But what is new is Mzimba's feel for them and the

way he is able to extract the essence of a culture and translate it into images filled with warmth and compassion.

Mzimba imbues everyday township scenes with a timeless quality, a dignity and a quiet, still as the fall of an autumn leaf.

A glance at his CV corroborates that his artistic development has been exceptional.

A string of artistic triumphs culminated recently in an Irish gallery commissioning him to do a series of paintings of miners.

From downtown Soweto to Dublin by the age of 23 is no mean achievement, Mr Mzimba.

Jani Allan

## Rand Daily Mail

RDM By DOC BIKITSHA 13/4/83

SOWETO artist Velaphi Mzimba opened his first one-man art exhibition at the Art Mart, 140 Commissioner Street, on the second and third floors of the Colosseum Building yesterday. The exhibition runs until April 30.

Velaphi's first exhibition was in 1975 at the Carlton Centre where he won first prize in a contest organised by Bill Hart. His next was in 1977 at the South African Association of Arts exhibition, and he exhibited again in 1978, 1979 and early this year at the Gallery 21.

Velaphi has been in the design and art world since the tender age of nine when he designed wire cars and sold them to friends. At primary school his favourite subject was drawing and he always came top of the class in art.

At high school he concentrated on pastel and water colours and in 1975, a teacher at Mofolo Centre, Mr A Gongo, took him under his care. Velaphi was introduced to another art teacher, Dan Rakgoathe, who influenced his life and guided him. He started painting portraits and landscapes in 1976.

Velaphi furthered his studies under Bill Ainslie's guidance at his art school in Johannesburg from January 1978 until July 1980. His first one-man exhibition was in 1981 at the Carlton Hotel.

Gallery Hours are from Monday to Friday, 10 am to 6 pm, and on Saturday's from 8 am until 3 pm. Joe Maseko, the talented artist, is the brains behind this viewing.

Velaphi Mzimba



## Depicting life in the townships

Velaphi Mzimba is a quiet, slightly intense young artist from Soweto, who bluntly states that without his mother, Violet, and his father, Peter, who gave him as much freedom as possible to follow his painting career, he'd probably be earning a living doing work utterly unconnected with art.

Yet this twenty-six-year-old has had quite a deal of success in the few years he has exhibited professionally, managing to pay the heavy framing accounts, and cost of artist's materials, and still squeeze a bit of profit from his painting, "which I give my mother".

To illustrate how high any artist's framing account can be, Velaphi will possibly end up owing his framer about R2 000 for the 30 to 40 paintings he will be exhibiting at Shell Gallery, 51 Plein Street, Johannesburg, from next Wednesday.

The show will be open-

ed at 5.15 pm by Mr Lance K Japhet, director of group public affairs of Premier Group Holdings.

Velaphi Mzimba shares his art knowledge by teaching several times a week, for three or four hours at a time, at the Thusong Youth Centre in Alexandra Township. There he instructs young people between nine and 20, in various styles of painting and drawing.

This centre, where he says sport can be played and where there are computer and cooking classes, is sponsored by Sandton's Civic Foundation.

When asked how many of the 15 or so pupils who look to him for art guidance are girls, he looked mildly surprised admitting that there are none, which rather emphasises that few Black women follow any form of art careers, while in the White

cultural world there are about two or three women to every man.

Velaphi Mzimba is a great one for sketching on any handy scrap of paper — scenes from both Soweto and Alexandra, and then evolving the sketches into oil paintings in his father's garage, which he uses as a studio.

He says teaching art at Alexandra has also helped his own art as on his way to or from the art classes, he often sees people or scenes that he rapidly sketches as future painting ideas.

His oils show an artist passionately involved in depicting life in these overcrowded areas, where an artist is such a rarity that people hardly give the young man a glance as he stands sketching.

## Exhibition at Gallery

Simple subjects with striking features, colours and tones make Velaphi Mzimba's works engrossing some form of historical documentation.

The young Soweto artist is exhibiting his paintings at the Shell Gallery in Johannesburg — his third one-man exhibition.

In his paintings Velaphi chooses to depict the down to earth subjects — tightly packed

dors, washerwomen and penny whistlers.

His paintings are a recording of a people's lifestyles — historical documentation. "Soon it will be gone," lifestyles will change in the future," he says.

Velaphi uses colour effectively to create mood. The township scenes live through his choice of colour.

"Our country is warm, so I express that through colour. A picture should bring you

joy. It should decorate your home."

His involvement with art and the community has led him to the Thusong Youth Centre in Johannesburg. At the centre, he assists with the teaching of art.

The painter held his first one-man exhibition at the Carlton Hotel in 1981. In the same year he exhibited alongside artists such as Lucas Seage, Ezrom Leage and Nat Mogotsi at Gallery 21.

## Ghetto comes on his life alive canvas

VELAPHI Mzimba is a 26-year-old artist who has a passionate interest in depicting the vibrancy of life in Soweto and Alexandra.

The young artist, whose oils show a keen appreciation of movement and colour, is exhibiting his latest works at the Shell Gallery, 51 Plein Street, Johannesburg.

The opening ceremony was performed by Premier Group director of public affairs, Lance K Japhet.

Mzimba's interest in art developed at an early age. When he was nine, his parents — his father was a lorry driver — noted his interest in drawing. Unlike his friends at school, he not only drew in class, but also after school, at home, in the streets, wherever he was.

Though the family was poor, his father encouraged his talent by buying him painting materials. He uses his father's garage as a studio.

He began formal art training at the Mofolo Art Centre in 1975 under the tutelage of Dan Rakgothi, and that year won first prize in an art competition for art students in Soweto. The works were exhibited at the Carlton Hotel.

He was introduced to Bill Almslie, director of the Johannesburg Art Foundation.

who was so impressed with his work that he awarded him a two-year bursary to study the history of art, drawing and painting which he did from 1978 to 1980.

He held his first one-man exhibition at the Carlton Hotel in 1981 and later that year his works were shown at Gallery 21 alongside that of Lucas Seage, Nat Mogotsi and Ezrom Leage. All the work in display had been selected from entries for a competition organised by the Haenggi Foundation.

His last exhibition was also his first internationally. His work was exhibited at the Gallery, Bango Road, Groomport on Ulster, in August last year.

He regards his paintings as a form of historical documentation and likes to choose simple subjects — tightly packed houses, vendors of vegetables and fruit, washerwomen, penny whistlers and the street gamblers.

"Soon it will be all gone," he says. "Lifestyles will change."

He uses colour to suggest atmosphere and create mood. The township scenes are a riot of colour. "Our country has warmth, so I express that with colour. A picture should bring you joy; it should decorate your home," he says.

He teaches art at the Thusong Youth Centre at Alexandra Township as part of his commitment to art and his community. He does this several times a week for three or four hours at a time. His pupils are young people between nine and 20.

## Paintings for the future...

ART/June Levy

Township scenes of Soweto and Alexandra by Velaphi Mzimba. Shell Gallery, Plein Street, Johannesburg

VELAPHI MZIMBA is showing his latest paintings of township scenes at the Shell Gallery until 20 September. This young artist is no novice to the exhibition route. He has exhibited both here and overseas.

Velaphi says that his paintings are a form of historical documentation. Soon they (the shanties of Soweto and Alexandra) will be gone, lifestyles will change in the future.

This opinion is based on the fact that District Six is no longer and the present character of the Johannesburg black townships may soon disappear. The artist aims to capture situations and scenes typical of township life today. Washerwomen and vegetable vendors, gamblers, men queuing for a bus, hostel inmates.

For me the most successful and animated composition is one entitled "Faces of Alexandra". It shows numerous small dwellings jammed together.

Wavy ridges of corrugated roof flowing one into another. Rocks and old tyres strewn across the roofs to batten-down against the elements. Metal chimneys poking out at odd angles. The rusted chassis of an old truck. Washing on a line. Stacks of boxes and crates and steel drums.

A woman leaning forward from a doorway, emptying the water from her bucket on to the road in front of her home. Muted reds, steel blue and mauve, smokey colours with shape

delimited by black and grey echo throughout all of the paintings.

In this particular painting the viewer is given a glimpse of the everyday realities of township life. Velaphi makes simple surface statements, but where is the violence and tension, the energy that undeniably is part and parcel of the atmosphere of Soweto and Alexandra?

Most of the subjects are seen as individual figures set against bland backgrounds. The artist needs to think in terms of total composition.

The Shell Gallery is a free venue for all artists, donated by Shell South Africa. Sponsorship of this nature by the business sector can never be acknowledged frequently enough.



VELAPHI MZIMBA ... "Soon they will be gone"

## Township tapestries

VELAPHI Mzimba, Sowetan artist (whose exhibition at Shell Gallery ended yesterday), in attempting to show both an impression of true township life — or, rather, the crowded conditions of township homes — as well as present such evocations with technical skill, naturally faces a formidable, if not impossible, task.

The conglomerations of small, ugly buildings pose a problem of uniformity for any artist, however skilled — and that Mzimba manages to evolve them as painting tapestries (of endless walls, endless corrugated-iron roofs, and occasional chimney-pipes, at angles) of rather vivid tones, implies a highly ingenious and individualistic imagination.

In doing this, he tends to make the squalid and unattractive take on a subtle glow of simple beauty — emphasising with a blunt but assured touch sunshine sweeping down runnels of corrugated-iron and flowing over walls.

In turn, this tends slightly to obscure his aim — to portray the Sowetan and Alexandran areas with not so much truth as fairly strict realism.

The tapestries have

their own harsh aesthetic appeal, for Mzimba deliberately creates a distorted perspective, "seeing" six or seven rows of houses virtually one on top of another (for a split second having such compositions appear as four or five or six storey buildings), with small wraithlike figures drifting in the foreground street, or road.

This is certainly artistry — though, obviously, it wouldn't please those dogmatic art minds that prefer lesser technical ability and more "message giving" in such indigenous art.

But Mzimba has considerable tact, neither stressing poverty, nor turning his people into creatures of agony, sorrow, humiliation or anger.

Because so many Blacks are inherently extrovert, Mzimba tends faintly to lose out on his depictions of washerwomen, women with paraffin tins on their heads, men playing cards, people gossiping, and so on.

This is only because this natural extrovertism, instead of being a touch exaggerated is rather muted, consequently losing that particular character of utterly uninhibited stance, movement, gesture and repose that yet is

more synonymous with Blacks than with their less flamboyant, more sophisticated White counterparts.

In "seeing" his humans too solidly and stolidly, the chance of snatching at the individualism of the persons tends, as yet, to have been rather ignored in striving for more accurate, but stilted, renditions.

The tact, again, is apparent: or, maybe, in trying to avoid caricature, Mzimba rather drains his humans of that spirit, liveliness, exuberance and vitality which (to this scribe, anyway) are such a fundamental part of most Blacks when the other side of the picture (the poverty, sorrow and frequently impossible situations) can somehow be forgotten.

Mzimba, only 26, has such promise in his painting that, with the imagination he so truly has in those "tapestries" of buildings, he very well could infuse a more distinctive and real touch to his figure compositions.

At the moment, these are faintly the stereotypes which the man-in-the-street expects of Black artists. Getting to the soul of the people he so earnestly paints (no easy thing, admittedly) probably only can successfully be done by a dash of gentle, loving caricature.

*Velaphi Mzimba*

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