

ONE DAY SCULPTURE

A NEW ZEALAND-WIDE SERIES OF TEMPORARY PUBLIC ARTWORKS

ELIZABETH RANKIN CROSS-CULTURAL (UNDER)CURRENTS IN SOUTH AFRICAN SCULPTURE

This paper addresses issues of collaboration across ethnic divides in South Africa, some of the challenges and revelations as well as the dangers of replicating the patronising hegemony of a divided society.

As in many parts of Africa, there was a strong carving tradition in the south, although far less known than that of West Africa because it was largely non-figurative. Yet carved headrests, for example, were as skilfully made and as rich in meaning, imbued with powerful references to ancestors who were believed to visit the sleeper in dreams. European definitions of sculpture marginalised such forms, yet black sculptors who worked in a western mode were equally overlooked. By the 1980s a number of art historians and artists were concerned to draw black artists into mainstream discourse. In a world of inequality overcoming past neglect was not a straightforward process. In this paper I will revisit some of the challenges I met as researcher and curator of two large sculpture exhibitions, *Images of Wood* (1989) and *Images of Metal* (1994), which were among the first attempts to create a holistic history of South African art that included both black and white sculptors.

Of course the idea that I could present all these artists on a level playing field was an idealistic figment of my liberal imagination. The capitalist economy of colonialism had eroded cultural beliefs and historical forms of southern African art. Moreover, black artists who sought to work in European forms were denied an art education under apartheid and were starved of resources. In the later twentieth century, a few were supported by community centres, invariably headed by white teachers, which provided a limited substitute for formal art education. But recognition was still minimal, and dependent on the commercial ambitions of more adventurous art dealers.

There was virtually no pre-existing research to guide me in the discovery of sculptors who were little known. Relying on a process of networking, I had to become a field worker, more anthropologist than art historian, travelling to visit artists in out-of-the-way rural places and townships. Most black artists did not have transport to come to me, even had they been willing to do so. And they had little cause to trust me: white visitors were uncommon and a white lady professor toting a computer and a camera (and sometimes a picnic basket to share) unheard of. It was not always a safe experience, but what I had to be mindful of was the sense of discomfort that the artists might be experiencing. At times I was able to visit artists' homes on my own, but some found a nearby mission station or community centre with a translator or facilitator less intimidating. In such circumstances, I would sometimes find myself suddenly the centre of a group of artists all eager to recount their stories. For the reception I had was extraordinarily generous. While I have met with charges of appropriation from some academics, and accusations about white scholars promoting their own careers by exploiting black artists, the artists themselves were eager to be included once I had explained my project to increase knowledge about sculpture and sculptors. You might feel this is hardly surprising: surely any artist would welcome opportunities to become part of a big exhibition. But this is to forget the mistrust between black and white engendered by apartheid and the huge divide in circumstances which impeded understanding in both directions. Spending time with artists helped me to venture a little way across that divide and to understand something of the ideas that informed their art.

One of my most enlightening encounters was with a rare black woman artist, Noria Mabasa, living in Venda. She had adapted the woman's craft of potting to make sculptures, and told me how she had been prompted by a dream in which her grandmother told her to use clay to make figures. Initially she modelled and fired figures involved in 'traditional' practices, like girls taking part in the snake dance of Venda initiation. Although her own community was wary of this unconventional use of clay, and sometimes shunned her as a witch, Mabasa built up an increasingly profitable tourist trade. When her work attracted the interest of dealers in the cities, she began to produce contemporary personages prolifically, and sometimes on larger scale. They included replicated policemen and one gallery presented these diminutive sculptures lined up in a Parade, which seemed a political commentary on authoritarian figures who enforced apartheid's oppressive laws. But, when I asked her about this, Mabasa did not seem to have a negative attitude to the police, and told me they had

improved life in her village by locking up bad people. However, I came to realise that I had to take care that I was not being told what artists thought I wanted to hear. I did not intend to be a figure of authority myself, but it was easy for artists to perceive me that way. I learnt to avoid asking leading questions shaped by my own expectations, and rather to listen. This proved significant when we talked about Mabasa's more recent works – large carvings she had undertaken with the encouragement of a local craft centre, flying in the face of tradition as only men were permitted to carve. I was ready to write about this apocalyptic vision of intertwined humans and animals in relation to ancient Venda mythology. Imagine my surprise when Mabasa told me that the work depicted current floods in Natal – because they were hundreds of miles away, it had never entered my head that she would know about them. But she proudly pointed out the source of her information – a television she had purchased with her art profits, together with a generator to run it, in a village that had no electricity.

A rather different case of false expectations on my part related to Job Kekana, who made highly skilled representational carvings, including representations of biblical figures as Africans. I assumed that this was his interpretation, but I discovered that the crucifix for the Anglican cathedral in Harare had been made this way at the behest of the American priest who commissioned it, and it was he who thought that it was appropriate for Africa, not Kekana. When I tracked Job Kekana down to the rural mission of St Faith's in Rusape, he told me that it was historically inaccurate to represent religious figures this way, and that he only did so if his patrons insisted. His representations of the Madonna followed time honoured conventions, learnt when he trained in a mission carpentry shop, although sometimes Africanised on request. Yet when he spent time in England, outside the constraints of the mission environment, he also made more unusual images. One carving depicts the Madonna as a contemporary black woman, dressed as she would be to go to church, in western clothes and a headscarf. A work in stone goes even further, showing the Madonna nude. But to imagine that this reflects Kekana's knowledge of tribal women is incorrect. He told me it was facilitated by the life classes he attended at Sir John Cass college in London, and that his intention was to represent the Madonna's purity, as a woman without sin like Eve before the Fall. Moreover, the work was inspired by nude sculptures that he saw while travelling in Europe, after a win on the football pools.

The even more complex iconography of the Madonna as a Zulu woman at Njengabantu in remote KwaZulu-Natal was commissioned from Ruben Xulu by a Catholic missionary Father Maier, who thought it appropriate for his congregation, complementing the mission church he had designed to look like a Zulu beehive hut. He asked Xulu to carve the Madonna in the traditional regalia of the first wife of a Zulu chief, with the baby Christ as a young warrior whose cross transforms into a spear to impale the serpent of evil at his feet. Ironically, instead of feeling affinity with the image, African worshippers were rather suspicious of this unconventional form: it is chiefly Europeans who find such iconography appealing.

Agents of change do not need to belong to another ethnic group, however. Johannes Maswanganyi in Limpopo province carved works for traditional use, such as the

stoppers of gourd containers for ‘muti’ or medicines. A sangoma or traditional healer asked him to make special containers for him, and Maswanganyi fashioned Nyamisoro dolls decorated with poker work, where the container is a body and the stopper a removable head. When these pieces attracted attention on the art market, he began to produce independent figurative carvings, enlivened with bright household paints. Some of the resulting works represented public figures like *Verwoerd*, and, in the context of apartheid oppression, the art world appropriated them as ironic statements, although the artist himself made no such claims. But Maswanganyi’s works were made for a white audience, no doubt with some awareness of their likes and dislikes, though the artist may have imagined that his *Verwoerd* would be bought by the prime minister’s admirers, rather than the art gallery of a liberal university.

A more overt example of appropriation is the work of Jackson Hlungwane, made for the independent church he established on a mountainside in Gazankulu, where he transformed ancient stone remains into a sanctuary called New Jerusalem. Some of his carvings for the altars seem familiar Christian forms, but they reflect his syncretist beliefs. For example, the main altar had a tall cross-like structure which he explained as an aerial for speaking with God. And his large carvings of fish might be thought of as traditional symbols for Christ, but Hlungwane talks of fish swimming in local rivers as representations of the freedom of the soul. With a major exhibition sponsored by BMW in 1989, Hlungwane rocketed to fame in South Africa. Carvings brought from New Jerusalem for the show were eagerly bought up by private patrons and galleries, to be seen in quite different environments. That the artist subsequently became the owner of a BMW 7 series motor car gives questions of appropriation a new twist.

Of course the migration of works with symbolic meanings into art galleries was not new, but at this time African artefacts were chiefly seen in ethnographic collections. The Images of Wood exhibition with its focus on carved objects gave me an excuse to place historical examples into the Johannesburg Art Gallery to celebrate works long overlooked, and to demonstrate that ancient traditions of wood carving long preceded the advent of white colonial artists. It was exciting to see new audiences visiting the gallery that was usually perceived as an elitist white institution.

The idea of addressing new audiences led to the important decision to write the history in an accessible narrative style to reach a wider readership. It was also my goal to challenge stereotypes which expected the work of black and white artists to be easily distinguished – it became clear to me that the defining difference was not race but the kind of training that artists had experienced. An interesting case of cross-cultural exchange is Sydney Kumalo, who trained at an art centre with South African artist Cecil Skotnes and served an informal apprenticeship with the Italian immigrant sculptor Edoardo Villa. In the 1960s, art dealer Egon Guenther promoted his work as part of a group of South African artists who adopted a Zulu word as their name, Amadlozi, meaning spirit of our ancestors. They were all admirers of African art, and encouraged Kumalo to work in a distinctive style. But they also introduced him to the unfamiliar skill of modelling, normally reserved for African women. Moreover,

Guenther had Kumalo's works cast in bronze, giving them an added status in an art gallery context.

When I curated a second exhibition, this time focusing on sculpture in metal, I soon realised that, although few had Kumalo's opportunities, this did not deter black artists from experimenting with metal in varied ways. For example, Vincent Baloyi, who had worked for Volkswagen as a panel beater, deployed welding to make sculpture. Durant Sihlali used the arduous method of cold metal forging with heavy gauge plate from abandoned trucks to create images of labourers, where the physical effort required to make the figures evoked the harsh reality of work on the mines. Willie Bester gathered abandoned fragments from sites of confrontation, like Bisho in the Eastern Cape, where twenty-eight died when armed forces were brought in to halt a protest march. His assemblage memorialises this tragedy, and speaks of the trauma of violence. Others use waste materials to fashion figurative works. Titus Moteyane shaped old oil cans over a wire armature to make aeroplanes which gave tangible form to his desire to travel. Others used wire itself, developing the methods of African children making toys.

Migrant workers had long worked with wire, particularly the thin plastic-coated kind used for telephones, making fine baskets. This idea spurred a white artist Walter Oltmann to create large sculptures woven of wire, in forms and methods redolent of Africa. In this cross-cultural exchange, Oltmann did his own weaving. On the other hand, Andries Botha, inspired by the craftsmanship of Zulu homesteads, employed builders, thatchers and weavers from the Ntshalintshali family living on a farm in the Drakensberg to assist him to make sculptures in indigenous materials. Though puzzled by their lack of purpose, Maviwa, Myna and Agnes Ntshalintshali crafted the forms that Botha designed using his own body as a template for a series called *Human Structures*. They conjured up Egyptian sarcophagi in *Final Journey*, and images of African women carrying bundles on their heads in *Journey Through Time*. Although alluding to recognisable forms, they could readily be understood within a modernist idiom of abstraction, and their success prompted Botha to extend this practice when working in the city. Highly involved in Durban's community art workshop, he was aware of how under-resourced black artists adapted rural skills to work with waste materials like wire and old tyres. Botha adapted these displaced rural skills and throw away materials, redolent with connotations of disenfranchisement and deprivation, for monumental works intended as a symbolic empowerment of those who used them. He also heightened his political critique with more representational forms, as in an award-winning multi-media work of heroic proportions, *Dromedaris, donder! ... en ander dom dinge*. Named after the ship that brought the first Dutch settlers to South Africa, the work evokes Europe's rape of the mighty beast of Africa, and the ongoing onslaught of apartheid.

Botha's critics have not been unaware of the contradiction embedded in a programme to elevate the underprivileged that so successfully launched his own career. While studio assistants may be commonplace elsewhere, it is a particularly sensitive issue in South Africa, especially when the artist is white and his assistants black, compounded by the

fact that many of his co-workers have been women. Even though Botha paid his rural helpers fairly, the fact that he did not name them as collaborators and thus give them public acknowledgement was troublesome. It is true that the conceptualising of the sculptures was entirely his own, but the Ntshalinthshali's crafting of rural materials had been fundamental to his sculptures' form and meaning. Later another long-term collaborator Sam Ntshangase played a more proactive role. For *Container 96 - Art across Oceans* they together developed a vortical cornucopia form which viewers could experience visually, spatially and through touch and smell, as a symbol of the soul of South Africa, reflected in the Zulu title meaning *Touch the Heart*. Botha remarked how, as well as orchestrating women thatchers and weavers, Ntshangase peeled back the ritual resonances of the material and the crafts they worked with. It was Ntshangase too who insisted that the grasses should come from Nkandla because it would have rich associations with Zulu history through the royal kraals built in that particular grass, and that the colours woven into the panels should be similes for different manifestations of love in Zulu culture.

Yet it is Botha not Ntshangase who has gone on to win international commissions, which continue to draw on the lessons learnt from his collaborators. Botha has said '... we broke the imperative of Eurocentric culture by accentuating the potential of a neglected cultural tradition. By elevating the unique South African experience as primal source material for the creative imagination, the quest for self and national identity has been made possible.' (Botha 1993). But one needs to ask the question whether a search for identity by artists like Botha might obscure the identity of others. A recent monumental piece is intended to refer to tourism's exploitation of the concept of exotic Africa and trophy hunting. But the title, *You can buy my heart and soul*, has an unconscious irony as a comment on another kind of exploitation. I leave you with the question of whether drawing indigenous art into the mainstream has perhaps been at the expense of those who made it possible.

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