Imaging struggle and change: Apartheid and African nationalism



... to organise our womenfolk into a powerful, united and active force for revolutionary change. This task falls on men and women alike – all of us as comrades.

FORWARD WITH THE YEAR OF THE WOMEN!

Above shows photograph of blind trade union leader Violet Hashe addressing a crowd in Fordsburg's Red Square in Johannesburg, at the start of the 1951 Defiance Campaign, picture from *Drum Magazine*. Poster made by Thami Mnyele for the ANC in Lusaka, offset litho, 1984. No. 4397

Eli Weinberg's photography does not stand as an isolated phenomenon. The rapid spread of South Africa's townships and cities formed fertile ground for a nascent genre of photographic imagery, which combined social documentary photography and resistance images.

After the Second World War, the black population of South Africa became increasingly urban and literate. The newly-elected Nationalist Party government clamped down, building the system called apartheid to control this influx. As a result, by the 1950s, on the one hand black townships boasted shebeens, dress styles, slang, movies, theatres, jazz, churches, social halls and political organisations — a new and vibrant lifestyle. On the other, the state-imposed rules broke down this cohesion — separating whites from blacks, and different groups of blacks from each other — in group areas, through education, in business, in housing, in access to health and welfare, even in marriage, and certainly in all forms of culture.

People responded with mass defiance. Organised resistance grew: the most notable campaigns included the 1946 African Miners' Strike, the ANC Youth League and the Defiance Campaign, the Alex Bus Boycott, mass mobilisation around the drafting of the Freedom Charter in 1956, and resistance to the forced removals in Sophiatown.

The new black urban culture found expression in the print media; and notably in photographic images in that media. Es'kia Mphahlele recalls the role of Drum Magazine:

'What put it together? I think it was a kind of collective consciousness. People had been suffering, and people had been living in harsh conditions without a voice. Well, they found a voice then.'

Drum provided fertile soil for a flowering of photographic images. The head of the photographic department, German-born Jurgen Schadeberg, recruited and trained people such as Ernest Cole, Alf Khumalo, Victor Xashimba, Gopal Narassamy and others. Peter Magubane — later one of the most eminent photographers — began as a driver and messenger and transferred to the photographic department. Every one of the photographers on Drum risked being beaten and arrested for taking photographs. The body of images of oppression and defiance established by Eli Weinberg gained mass and shape.

Photographers have often claimed their role is documentation, rather than 'merely aesthetics'. In the 1950s, photographers took on the role of documenting the reality of apartheid's oppression, and the actuality of people's resistance, 'fixing' images of struggle in people's awareness, not only in South Africa but throughout the world.

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ANC flag

Congress Wheel (1956) from ANC handbook 1958

ANC wheel, colours, shield, spear sticker designed by Thami Mnyele 1982

SACTU logo sticker published by SACTU Lusaka 1985

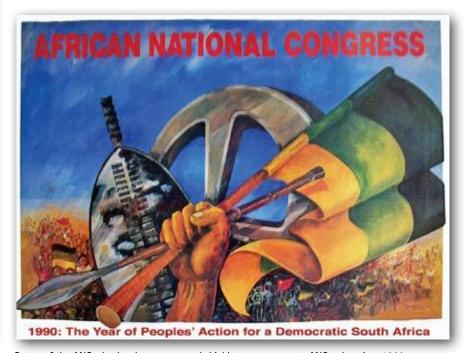
Symbols of resistance from the 1950s

In 1956, the ANC called for all the peoples of South Africa to draw up a declaration – the Freedom Charter. The adoption of the ideals expressed in the Freedom Charter, and subsequent mobilisation in the course of the liberation struggle, provided a wealth of symbols and images. These ranged from colours (green, black, gold, and red), to symbols (the flag, the wheel, the 'thumbs up' salute), and slogans such as 'The people shall govern'. The African National Congress Handbook, published in 1958, acknowledged:

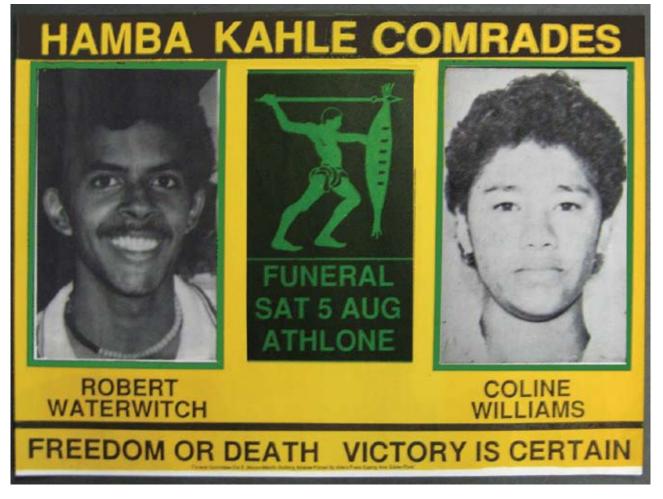
- a Congress Calendar and a Congress Flag 'The Congress flag represents the people (the black); the land and rolling veldt (the green); and the gleaming wealth of the country (the gold)';
- a Congress Salute 'Adopted in June 1949, the Congress salute is the right hand clenched with the thumb upraised. It represents the unity of the people of Africa';
- the Congress Anthems Nkosi Sikelel'i Africa, and Morena Boloka.²

The African nationalist movement and trade union movements of the time adopted other logos and symbols, including the SACTU image of people gathered under a banner reading 'An Injury to One is an Injury to All', and the Congress Wheel, showing the spokes of the Congress alliance partners joined at the hub to give the wheel shape and strength.

These symbols became fundamental to South Africa's visual vocabulary, and remain so today.



Poster of the ANC wheel, colours, spear and shield to commemorate ANC unbanning, 1990, Johannesburg, litho, drawn by Charlotte Schaer based upon drawing from a postcard published in Germany 1989. No. 899



Hamba Kahle Comrades, artist unknown, Cape Town, 1989. No. 3443

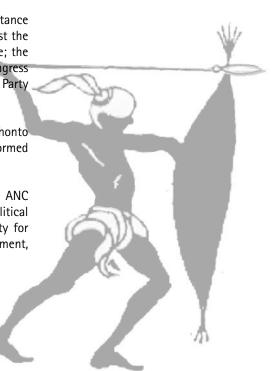
Bannings and the armed struggle

On 21 March 1960, the apartheid government answered the growing mass resistance to apartheid by opening fire on an unarmed crowd of people protesting against the pass laws, killing 69 people. The resistance movements called a general strike; the government imposed a state of emergency and banned the African National Congress (ANC), the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), and the South African Communist Party (SACP).

In December 1960, the ANC announced the formation of its armed wing, Umkhonto We Sizwe, and the launching of the armed struggle against apartheid. The PAC formed its armed wing, POQ0 (later restructured and renamed to become APLA).

By the 1960s, the lines of repression and resistance were established. The ANC put into place the four pillars of its struggle: the ANC underground, mass political resistance, the armed struggle, and the international anti-apartheid solidarity for democracy. The state countered with increasing repression, bannings, imprisonment, and the use of force.

Graphic for Umkhonto we Sizwe used from 1960s as a logo, often in publications published overseas such as the African Communist.





ANC Funeral in the Red location, Port Elizabeth, artist George Pemba, oil on board, 1965

'... It was driving us crazy, in the sixties.
Our leadership was in prison. Even talking you get arrested. We used to say, "even the walls have ears."

Percy Sedumedi³

Apartheid versus the flowers of culture

Where the decade of the 1950s saw a new black culture and a mass political movement emerge from the townships, the decade of the 1960s saw this new culture ground down. Richard Rive described the effects of this repression on writers at the time:

'The middle sixties saw an intensification of repressive political legislation which hit them (writers) very hard. Peter Abrahams and Bessie Head had already gone into voluntary exile. Alf Hutchinson, Todd Matshikiza, Alex la Guma, Bloke Modisane, Dennis Brutus and Lewis Nkosi were forced into exile. Can Themba and Arthur Maimane also left on exit visas ... many writers had books banned. Then in 1966 the names of six black writers living abroad were published as banned under the Suppression of Communism Act. It was to make all their writings and utterances illegal in their native land. South African literature had become white by law.'⁴

Musicians and performers faced their own restrictions. In the 1960s it became illegal for black musicians to play in licensed 'whites-only' venues. Trumpeter Johnny Mekoa recalls: 'Black musicians were smuggled into clubs: they would change your name (to play for whites). Mine was what — Jonny Keen?'⁵ The black townships had only a few, small venues for performance, most of them illegal.

Visual artists perhaps seemed less directly persecuted as they did not need a mass audience to perform their work. But black artists needed a work permit stamped in their pass to enter the cities or stay in urban townships, and 'visual arts' did not qualify as a job for a work permit or a residence permit. When Dumile Feni came from the Cape to Alex township in Johannesburg, he was granted residence as an unemployed TB patient: his work as an artist did not constitute 'legal' employment in terms of apartheid laws. Later, Dumile left the country.

Images from the underground and from exile

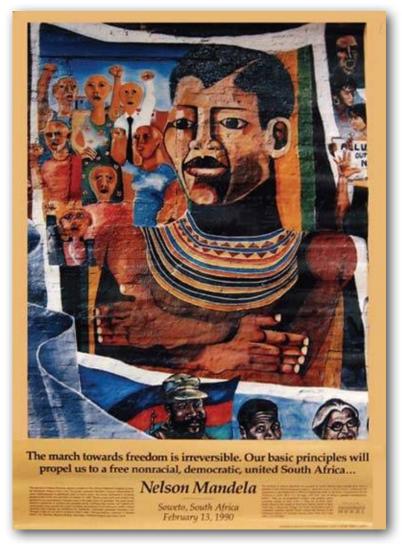
With the banning of the ANC and the PAC in 1960, there is a gap in the visual record. Publishing requires resources for printing, and distribution; it also requires an audience. With the emergency and the bannings, resistance graphics were at least temporarily reduced to writing on the wall – painted or stencilled at night by those who were willing to risk arrest.

But by the late 1960s, banned organisations did print material. Most often, it was produced overseas and smuggled into the country. Thin paper had to be used for easy clandestine transport and rapid, illegal distribution, which meant this material was ephemeral. Sometimes, material was disguised under a false cover to be sent into South Africa. New images were introduced: images and logos that told of 'our soldiers'.

During this time, the established South African 'art world' sent a very explicit message out to would-be visual artists about the role of politics:

'Again it was not long when one famous African sculptor from Springs told me that Dumile "had his work hung in the offices of the ANC (presumably in London), how dare an artist do that!"' (Thami Mnyele)⁷

Many artists who would not accept the restrictions on their art saw no option but to continue the expression of their resistance overseas, or elsewhere in Africa.



'1960s were for me the most fraught time - because political situation was frightening - bannings, house arrest - underground existence... 60s - bleak and frightening. Relationships were risky - visits from S.B.' Dumile Feni⁶

Poster shows mural of Nelson Mandela, painted by Dumile Feni in New York in 1989. No. 4498



Poster by Cecil Skotnes, late 1970s, adapting woodcut styles developed at Polly Street in the 1950s and 60s to what was labelled 'African' graphic style.

Polly Street and printing 'fine art'

In the 1950s, a small number of people coming out of these fast-growing urban black communities gained access to what was called a 'fine arts' education.

In 1948, an artist named Cecil Skotnes took over as the official in charge of the Bantu Men's Recreation Centre in Johannesburg. Trained in America, white, he began teaching classes in drawing, painting and sculpture, promoting classic European perspectives on 'academic' styles, and providing working space. Eventually the place was renamed 'The Polly Street Art Centre'. For many years, Polly Street remained one of the few places where black people could formally study the visual arts (as defined by the dominant discourse of apartheid) in South Africa.

In the late 1950s, Skotnes and co-teacher Sidney Khumalo explored the boundaries of what soon became labelled 'African' forms and aesthetics. Artworks predominantly consisted of wood-carved sculpture and wood-block prints. Stylistically, they replaced the 'realistic', 'classical European' approach to representation previously taught at Polly Street, to explore expressionist image and form, flowing lines, and repetitive shapes and patterns. Skotnes himself gave up painting for print-making and graphics using these styles. Many of the students — including Leonard Matsoso, Ezrom Legae, and Lucas Sithole — followed them. In 1963, gallery owner Egon Guenther brought Skotnes, Khumalo, and several others together in a group called Amadlozi, meaning 'Spirit of our Ancestors', in recognition of what he considered the African heritage of this work.

Unfortunately, there has been little effort on the part of art historians and critics – then or now — to unpack the 'Africanisation' of Polly Street, in terms of tracing the specific heritages it built upon, and how artists used these heritages to speak to their own times. As recently as the 1980s and 1990s, South African art critics would attribute the source of this 'African traditionalism' in Polly Street to a 'new interest' in West African sculpture, perpetuating the myth that South Africa has no rich art traditions of its own. Some commentators have viewed Polly Street work in the context of stereotyped 'African tradition', a glorification of a mythical exotic tribal past, and ultimately a result of apartheid's 'retribalisation'. None of these explanations seems to account adequately for the enduring resonance of these artworks.

Percy Sedumedi's story – Part 1: Finding visual arts in the early 1960s in Jo'burg

Percy Sedumedi was born in Sophiatown, on 6 October 1950. He points out: 'For the whole history of Sophiatown — of gangsters, politicians, singers — visual artists never prevailed: I knew of none in Sophiatown'. He went to pre-school at St Sebrantz under Father Huddleston, but then moved to another school in Meadowlands, where he simply repeated what he had learned in pre-school. He fought with the teachers, skipped classes, and started drawing — as he put it, 'that's where my problem started'. At the age of nine, school bored him, and teachers punished him. He ran away from home, to become a street kid living behind the Supreme Court in Johannesburg, 'in the underground toilets for whites only, that's where we used to sleep. In the morning we stole breakfast from OK Bazaars ... We stole books from the CNA, paper and pens, art books; we learned to draw! Sedumedi lived on the streets for three years.

In 1967, aged 17, he snatched a handbag in Jubilee Street, and ran into a building – and promptly forgot about the cops. 'I saw violin players, and they were black like me. I told them I was an artist ...' His mother sent him to Jubilee Art centre, then away to boarding school in Rustenburg (where he failed repeatedly), then back to the Jubilee Centre in 1969. In the early 1970s, Sedumedi began working with black consciousness theatre activists, and his understanding of his art shifted drastically.⁸

Rorke's Drift: making graphics from the mid-1960s

In the mid-1960s, a new centre for the visual arts emerged: the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC) Arts and Crafts Centre at Rorke's Drift in Natal. Originally started in 1961, this initiative aimed to promote the arts as occupational therapy and an income-generating measure for patients at the Lutheran-run TB hospital in rural Natal. But by the mid- and later 1960s, this mission school in rural Natal introduced formal full-time art studies, teaching block printing, textile-printing, weaving, and pottery, as well as visual arts techniques such as drawing and painting.

Unlike the Polly Street Centre, the Rorke's Drift Arts and Crafts Centre was seen by the authorities as primarily a craft-making institution, rather than a 'fine arts' school. In fact, it was permitted to function through a loop-hole in apartheid restrictions: students at the school were officially registered as apprentice workers learning craft industries; their passbooks had to have their 'employment' at the ELRC duly stamped every month.

Between 1963 and 1969, the first head and leading art teacher at Rorke's Drift art school was a Swedish national, Peder Gowenius. Gowenius had trained in Sweden in a German Expressionist style of graphic art; his co-teacher (and wife) Ulla was a trained weaver. They both came from the Swedish Konstfack school (Konstfackskolan), which followed Bauhaus principles of perceiving aesthetics as integral to form and function, rather than separated from them.

Gowenius approached graphics training at Rorke's Drift art as training in a productive and self-sustaining form of visual art that could be translated, inexpensively, into mass-produced images. He encouraged students to hold workshops and collective discussions amongst themselves in order to develop new forms of representation and patterns, and to share and exchange images and ideas. The process he used to generate images and concepts became a prototype for collective discussion of symbolism and meaning in the poster movement decades later:

'Many works were devoted to social topics that reflected the tensions of the student's urban life and commented on the political situation in South Africa. Engagement with current issues was encouraged by the teachers at Rorke's Drift, so that, although it was physically remote from centres of political dissent, it was not distanced from the debates of the country.

To encourage a sense of self-worth, Peder Gowenius engaged his students in discussions about Africa's history and heroes. These topics became subjects for prints, which particularly celebrate a glorious Zulu past ... The artists created images of powerful historical leaders such as Dingane by Mbatha and Shaka by Ndlovu and Gabashane.

Prints at Rorke's Drift also reflect more recent history. Violence under apartheid contained a record of confrontation, such as the racist murder of Sikanku Sibisi, a farm worker in the area, depicted in linocuts for a school project set by Peder Gowenius.

These scenes created a revisionist reading of African history and reclaimed it for the present.⁹

This intense exploration of symbol and meaning, in the context of a mission school, inevitably had a religious component — although Gowenius was not himself a missionary. Students explored symbolism and ideology in their art, working parallel with the emergence of black liberation theology. (One ELC student artist in the early 1970s, Charles Nkosi, had gone to high school in Marianhill with Bantu Steve Biko.)

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Phillipa Hobbs remarks:

'Within the Lutheran Mission Black Theology became a topic of urgent debate, and Fine Art Students came to realise the potential of religious subject matter to carry ideological messages. There were early messages of hope in the Old Testament accounts such as Azaria Mbatha's story of Moses liberating his people. Subjects such as the Crucifixion in Nkosi's Pain on the Cross series embodies suffering under apartheid, through the image of a black Christ.'¹¹

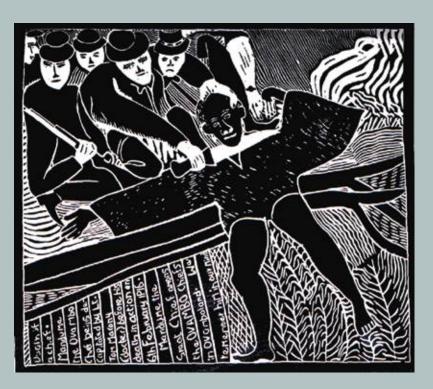
By the later 1960s and 1970s, these approaches to print making bore fruit, as styles and graphic elements developed at the school came to play a leading role in the graphic arts of Southern Africa. Namibian artist, John Muafangejo, interpreted the events of his own life and society into shapes and forms that he transformed into block prints, with hand-written words within the print design. Azaria Mbatha used similar stylistic approaches to re-interpret Christian themes and symbolism. Students such as Cyprian and Vuminkosi Zulu developed their own versions of printing styles.

However, by the early 1970s, the government and the Lutheran church began to tighten their hold on the art centre. Gowenius moved to Lesotho; he was subsequently deported from Lesotho, and then from South Africa. Thami Mnyele's comments on the teaching and management staff at Rorke's Drift in 1973, after Gowenius had left the school, sound quite a bitter note:

'The mission art school (at Rorke's Drift) offered the course (in fine arts) but also confined itself cautiously to the various art techniques and "art history", meaning European art history, with subtle avoidance of state confrontation. Maybe they subtly collaborated.¹²

As with the 'Africanisation' of Polly Street Centre, serious questions arise as to what extent students adopted, and saw their work in the light of, an African aesthetic.

Namibian artist, John Muafangejo, created a number of wood-block prints which take a central position in our perceptions of black South African print styles. In the example here, he based his conception on the photograph above, showing a 1916 photography of the beheading of a Namibian chief. In the original photograph (reproduced here from The Colonising Camera) it is claimed that the officer holding his head was 'treating' the chief before his death. In Muafangejo's linocut, the word 'treated' is altered to 'decapitated'. The hand drawn graphics thus make explicit something only suggested in the photograph: a practice that was consciously developed in later posters.¹⁰





Phillipa Hobbs, in her in-depth study of print-making at the ELC, firmly rejects the stereotyped interpretation of Rorke's Drift print making 'based on a paradigm of traditional Zulu crafts, apparently realised as a decorative black and white linocut print'. She argues this stereotype promotes the perception that:

'the development of the practice of print making at Rorke's Drift was static during the two decades; that the prints were regarded by the artists as craft/ art objects destined for the white tourist market; that of all the available print making media the prints were limited to the more "traditional" linocut medium (incorporating the assumption that the carving of a linocut renders it a "traditional" African medium); and that these prints demonstrated an uncomplicated continuity of "Africanness".¹³

Gowenius himself expressed serious concerns that artwork from the centre would be seen within the 're-tribalisation' framework, and dismissed on that basis.

Rejecting those stereotypes of 'African-art' super-imposed on this reading of Rorke's Drift and Polly Street art, however, does not lead us to reject the proposition that there was an aesthetic, an artistic vocabulary, and a process or conception that derived from the culture which students experienced and in which they lived. This culture was far broader and deeper than repeating the clichéd 'black figures in a white ground with decorative intent', that so many critics took at its whole import.

Furthermore, there can be no doubt that this aesthetic did indeed carry through into later South African art, particularly into poster making.

For the next two decades, a generation of visual artists showed the impact of the approaches developed at Rorke's Drift and Polly Street, both in terms of process, in workshopping and collective discussion of their work, and in terms of styles and imagery. By the late 1970s and 1980s, artists trained at Rorke's Drift worked within community arts centres and in graphics production units throughout the country: Charles Nkosi at Funda, Cyril Manganye at Mofolo Art Centre, Dumisani Mabaso at the Johannesburg Art Foundation, Lionel Davis at the Community Arts Project (CAP), Sydney Holo at Nyanga, Mzwake Nthlabatsi at South African Committee for Higher Education (SACHED) and then Graphic Equaliser, Bongi Dhlomo at the Alex Art Centre, and Thami Mnyele at SACHED and then with Medu (in exile in Gaborone, Botswana).

The underdevelopment of South Africa's visual arts: ghettoising 'township art'

During this period, a further problem overshadowed the South African visual arts scene: the limits on who saw, appreciated, interpreted, and ultimately paid for the artwork. Increasingly it became clear that the buyer played a role in determining what was painted; and, far more, in determining how the painting was understood. Thami Mnyele was in later years to describe what he called 'the underdevelopment of South Africa's visual arts':

It is at this point that I would like to comment on the outlets of artwork in South Africa, namely, the galleries and museums and also the critics who influence the forms and content of art in my country. These institutions are nothing else but agents of imperialist institutions, in London, Paris, New York, etc. That is to say, it is the tastes and wants of these business institutions and critics which decide which work will be exhibited, and bought, and which cultural worker will be regarded as a success. So far, the art critics have been nothing else but the mouthpieces of the tastes of these cities.¹¹⁶ 'Narrative linocuts with simple, bold arrangements of black figures in a white ground also matched widely held stereotypes of African culture.'

Philippa Hobbs14

'Skotnes advised Linda Goodman not to show a Dumile drawing of a servant waiting at a table, serving male genitals.' Bill Ainslee¹⁵

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'do not exhibit your sickness – i am tired of pictures in the abstract – if in stark reality you are stripped naked' Wopko Jensma, *Sing for our Execution*²⁰ He spells out in some detail the effect of this on the working artist:

'Artists in South Africa are grossly exploited by these institutions which also contribute to the element of alienation of the artists from the community, which communities in the first place make them and nurture them. It is not a surprise then that artists view galleries and museums with great awe, and the men and women who run them as extremely dangerous people. The art galleries are a menace in the memories of black artists, and museums themselves are lost in their own puritan obscurity.

On the other hand, since these are the only outlets, and the artists keep creating, a cruel vicious cycle is created and those artists who break it internally, are being lured with fame and fortune abroad, soon to realise how they have jumped out of the frying pan into the fire. This cruel and vicious cycle is explicitly reflected by the works of the artists: through meaningless distortions of limbs and bodies, mystification is apparent; and the deliberate shrouding of images in mystery. That then is the hopeless state of art in my country.¹⁷

This 'state of the art' posed an increasing burden on artists trying to find their own expression and self-definition. Other artists at the time commented on the hostility of the commercial galleries to their ideas and beliefs — including the few galleries considered 'supportive' of black art. Percy Sedumedi held his first exhibition in 1971 at the Lidchi Art gallery, but later commented:

'We were just taken as garbage ... Joburg galleries blacklisted BC people, who deliberately questioned contracts (with galleries). These contracts meant artists got art materials and monthly allowance from the gallery, but got peanuts from sold work. Like the monkey who was robbed. We questioned such a contract. The artists were in the townships, still; and the gallery made good money from us'.¹⁸

Ultimately, this became one of the pressures that drove so many fine artists to leave the country.



Poster: Wokpo Jensma for Ravan Press, circa 1973, No. 3100

Portrait of the Artist

one day you got tired tired of your soft voice tired of being their darling

it was the opening of motau's motau's people of violence motau's people wanting pity

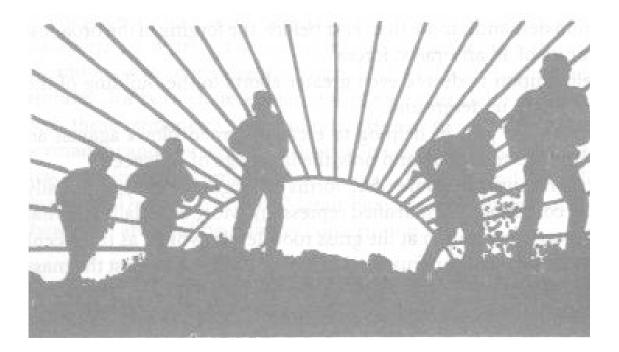
you pretended drunk walked up to the mike shouted in the mike patted the lady's bum you pretended drunk

they couldn't do a thing call the cops? no! kick you out? no! they couldn't do a thing they didn't want anyone to know offer the bantu a cigar! offer the bantu a seat! they didn't want anyone to know

today you've gone elsewhere you got sick of the mess sick of the galerie-dumile today you've gone elsewhere

one day you got tired tired of your soft voice tired of being their darling

(Wopko Jensma, Sing for our Execution)¹⁹



ENDNOTES

- 1 Es'kia Mphaphele, quoted in Staffrider. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1980, 3(1), p. 45.
- 2 ANC Handbook, 1958, SA Historical Papers, University of Witwatersrand.
- 3 Percy Sedumedi interview with J Seidman, Johannesburg, 16 January 2001.
- 4 Richard Rive, 'The Role of the Black Writer in South African Society'. Paper presented at Culture and Resistance Symposium, Gaborone, 1982 (JS papers).
- 5 Quoted in Gwen Ansell, Soweto Blues. New York: Continuum, New York. 2004, p.114.
- 6 Dumile Feni, spoken to Bill Ainslie, reported in Ainslie interview with Steve Sack, 1988.
- 7 Thami Mnyele, *Observations on the state of the contemporary visual arts in South Africa*, op. cit, p. 6.
- 8 Percy Sedumedi, interview 16 January 2001.
- 9 Phillipa Hobbs/ Elizabeth Rankin, *Empowering Prints* exhibition wall text, Johannesburg Art Gallery, July 2004.
- 10 Photograph and graphic from Hartmann, Wolfram and Silvester, Jeremy, (Eds.) Colonising Camera, Photographs in the making of Namibian History. Silvester, Hayes: UCT Press, 1998, p. 148. Photograph originally published and presumably accessed by Muafangejo in SWA Annual, 1968, under caption 'Death of a Chief, Mandumi the Ovambo Chief being treated by Lt. Tom Marony (doctor) before his death in action on 6th February 1916'. Muafangejo changed 'treated' to 'decapitated' in the woodcut version, done in 1971.
- 11 Op. Cit. Philippa Hobbs, "Shifting Paradigms in Printmaking Practice at the Evangelical Lutheran Church Art and Craft Centre, Rorke's Drift, 1962–76".
- 12 Thami Mnyele, Observations on the state of the contemporary visual arts in South Africa, op. cit, p. 6.
- 13 Philippa Hobbs and Elizabeth Rankin, *Empowering Prints* exhibition wall text, Johannesburg Art Gallery, July 2004.
- 14 Philippa Hobbs, Elizabeth Rankin, ibid.
- 15 Bill Ainslee, interview with Steve Sack, 1988.
- 16 Thami Mnyele, Opening remarks, 1982 South African Art Exhibition, Gaborone Culture and Resistance Festival. Unpublished paper, JS collection, p. 1.
- 17 Ibid, p. 2.
- 18 Percy Sedumedi, interview16 October 2001.
- 19 Wopko Jensma, Sing for our Execution, Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1973, p. 72.

20 Ibid.