

6.2.2.1

Tani Muzelle draft 1984  
Published in Staffrider, 1985  
& Rikaba 1985

THOUGHTS FOR BONGIWE

Bongiwe Dlomo recently held an exhibition at the Botswana National Museum and Art Gallery. When I went to this exhibit, it came into my mind that there is a new art growing at home. It is an historical event in our art that the climate there has developed to the point that it has given birth to a woman artist who can look so directly at the situation around her. Surrounded by Bongiwe's work, I could not help but go back and reflect on the growing of art within our society.

How can any graphic artist make public observations and suggestions on the state of the visual arts at home? The act of doing so carries with the the risk of implicating that artist as spokesman. Idealistic. Perhaps arrogant. On the other hand I find it equally dangerous that we should carry on the wornout culture of resignation when major decisions are made over our work, indeed over our lives as a people.

This paper is far from representative. Never the less in complete composure I think it is needed that certain things be said by the visual artist in my country. Failure to do so implies grave ignorance of those things which make or even can break our lives as a people. Over a lengthy period of time I have been asked why, in South Africa, when whole communities are threatened with extinction by a soaring coast of living; when whole communities suffer dismemberment through forced removal; when the broad majority of the people are declared foreigners in the country of their birth; when people are crudely and ruthlessly suppressed through rushed pieces of legislation, detentions, massacres of workers and students; when therefore, whole communities resist this genocide through organising themselves into civic organisations, trade unions, women's organisations and student organisations, there <sup>has been</sup> disturbingly little visual arts output in the country or abroad which is organically related to these community efforts. Neither has there been a groundedly political voice from this quarter, let alone a broad art movement with an obvious national commitment. So goes the concern.

It is my contention that the prolonged strife and struggle that manifests itself in cultural work, namely in the visual arts, can be traced down to the root of the national political situation in the country. Any understanding of the development of visual imagery must therefore recognise this. That principle which governs traditional art still is valid today; i.e. that art must have a function!

a walking song, the sculpture that serves as a chair, the majestically decorated houses of the Ndebele speaking communities. The subject matter is drawn from the actual activities of the people in the living surroundings, the source and supreme function of art. We may go further to say that the actual act of creating the visual imagery is informed by the community and nourished by it, consciously or unconsciously, and that it is the community which will or must act as audience. Again we can take the risk of stating that the skills of execution, the intimate workings of individual imagination etc. cannot exist outside human experience, i.e. the community.

In contrast, the development of visual art in South Africa in this century, or underdevelopment thereof, was shaped by the factors that wield political power, in defence of State interests. With effective employment of Capital and other means as high technology, skilled manpower, the state of the arts was determined and controlled. Art, galleries, the church, school, all formed and added the processing machinery, the finishing touch.

It will be noted that most artists in South Africa, like all of the indigenous majority, seldom managed to acquire formal education beyond secondary school. And to compound the problem no formal educational institution ran an arts course, at least for Africans; hence, the responsibility was taken over by foreign missionary stations. It is important to point this out in order to understand the workings of the system at an intellectual level. Fort Hare only introduced the art curriculum in the middle seventies, <sup>and</sup> ~~but~~ the course is at degree level. This means that even the highly talented person cannot take the course without a matriculation certificate. (Perhaps this has been changed.) Other schools that offer the course, like Endaleni in Natal, only do it without going beyond the mere level of crafts and handy work, as teaching aids. The mission art school offered the course 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. ¶ The art that sprang from this experience was seldom encouraged out and away from biblical themes, African landscape, wildlife, myths and

legends. No exploration of the immediate social political phenomena. Where an individual artist dared attempt to reflect a political theme, treatment of this issue lacked depth of involvement. The work seemed rushed and lacked conviction. Sometimes this type of work seemed too self-involved and was devoid of that outward thrust; it lacked an upright posture, an elevated head, a firm neck and a tight muscle. Or shall I put it this way: the images are totally abstracted without obvious course, distortion of the limbs is acute. The subject matter is mystified and at this extent the work has lost integration with real things in our life; the work sags under a heavy veil of mysteriousness. Perhaps this is the essence of the work? The disappointing fact about this approach to art is that the picture is deprived of that essential dynamic element: immediacy of communication with the community, the natural makers and consumers of art. Or perhaps the problem lies in that the artist had begun to look for a different audience, in the galleries and the critics who asked for "strange African art"? It is at this stage that the political motives (or clarity) of the artist are put into sharp focus: his class interests as opposed to those of the people. Art is not neutral, Dikobe stated.

The elements of distortion, mystification, abstraction, romanticism are not negative in themselves and can be put to positive and effective use, as in the indigenous idiom. This calls for maturity of temperament, clearer social awareness and skill of the working hand. I must confess that, in my opinion, we have not been successful enough in maintaining control over these factors.

It has become obvious that with developments at home today, the country is in grave need of a new calibre of cultural worker, notably in the visual arts and song. The one we have at this moment has yielded too willingly to the dictates of repression. We must now create this new man and woman whose visuals and song will be roundly informed by the most pressing needs and demands of his or her time, place and circumstances; he or she ought to be articulate but simple as to be accountable for his or her work. The country calls for that calibre of cultural worker with clear political insight, a skilled hand and firm revolutionary morality.

To Bongi herself I must point out though that her pictures need more concentrated working. The pictures deal with serious issues of our lives, but this is done with somewhat half-heartedness. E.g. that rubbish bin and the figure next to it ( . . . an oldx woman?) are mere shapes, dead images. There's no dust nor feeling thereof, no wet -- shall I say dampness? ~~um~~, no smell. --shall I say stench? The work seems extremely hurried. What unsettles me is that the work can easily degenerate into the realm of the trite and defeatist "township art". But make no mistake, Bongiwe is a committed artist. In South Africa, where women are doubly oppressed, it takes courage for a female visual artist to emerge and assert herself like Bongiwe Dhlomo has done.

There are ways, certainly, of improving our work, of ~~destroying~~ the negative image. We must change our understanding towards the profession. We must read, ~~discuss~~ <sup>research, travel</sup> broadly, and practice the profession in community development projects. To open ourselves to popular opinion from others and to take criticism well. To do practical organisational work within the arts. We must convene and attend seminars, workshops, be they within or without our profession. These are the actual things which inform and nourish our artwork. Our destinies are determined by them. We must avail our services as cultural workers as well as members of the community to the liberation struggle. This is not a favour but a duty. And finally we must consider adopting the graphic technique in our work for its scope and elastic capacity in regard to the particular nature and size of the issues of our country. One other aspect in line with our efforts to develop the graphic image of our country is the usage of scientific methods and means e.g. camera and the printing press. The equipments have to be conquered and tamed to suit our needs and social climate.

Apartheid is huge and ruthless. Therefore we must employ equally huge and complex graphic means to match the efforts of our people's resistance to work big in concept and size, to organise around unsentimental principles. There can never be artistic freedom or freedom of expression from a people in captivity. This is enough to base our ~~movement~~ <sup>cultural work and</sup> organisation on. To create paintings and songs of revolutionary optimism, paintings and songs of unity between the old and the young, men and women and whole communities. Let us

dip our brushes into bold colours of paint and confidence and let us all attack our walls with murals, posters, writings, cartoons, all soaked in the conscious language of revolution. We must restore dignity to the visual arts. The writing is on the wall.

The thoughts in this paper are hurried. The situation that besets my country may deem this the green idealism of a slave. But to reach out to grasp this vision is our task and our joy, both as cultural workers and as members of our communities. "Forward with the creation of a new calibre of cultural worker!" This was the call made at the gathering on Art Toward Social Development and Culture and Resistance in 1982 in Botswana. And in the land where the people have become actively critical of their enemies, like in the Vaal, Soweto, Kathlehong, Tembisa, Grahamstown, the demands made upon us as cultural workers cannot be more clear. Our people have taken the streets in the greatest possible ~~cultural~~ expression of hope and anger, of conscious understanding and wholesake committment: we as cultural workers must join with all our talents and skills in this expression.

**Collection Name: MEDU ON-LINE**

***PUBLISHER:***

*Publisher:* Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand

*Location:* Johannesburg

©2022

***LEGAL NOTICES:***

**Copyright Notice:**

All materials on the Historical Papers website are protected by South African copyright law and may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, displayed, or otherwise published in any format, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

**Disclaimer and Terms of Use:**

Provided that you maintain all copyright and other notices contained therein, you may download material (one machine readable copy and one print copy per page) for your personal and/or educational non-commercial use only.

People using these records relating to the archives of the Historical Papers Research Archive, at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, are reminded that such records sometimes contain material which is uncorroborated, inaccurate, distorted or untrue. While these digital records are true facsimiles of paper documents and the information contained herein is obtained from sources believed to be accurate and reliable, Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand has not independently verified their content. Consequently, the University is not responsible for any errors or omissions and excludes any and all liability for any errors in or omissions from the information on the website or any related information on third party websites accessible from this website.

This document is part of the MEDU Art Ensemble Consolidation Project, Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.