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'Statements in spring'

an art exhibition by

THAMI MNYELE

National Museum and Art Gallery

Gaborone, Botswana

3 - 12 September, 1980

INTRODUCTION

There is no way in which the art and artists in South Africa can be separated from the political situation in that country. When you address yourself to the art situation there, because of Apartheid, you necessarily will have to talk about black and white artists; their welfare and being is dictated to by the fact that some come from a fiercely oppressed majority and others from an extremely privileged minority.

On the other hand, the fact that South Africa's economic system is not only similar to, but tightly linked to that of the West: London, New York etc., cities that are supposed to be the vanguards of world culture, in the end, both black and white South African artists, aspire to those cities: recognition. . . What that means is that these cities set the standards for acceptable art to the galleries operating in South Africa, and thus, they set the standard for art in South Africa in general.

The black South African artist then is faced by two hideous odds: S/he has to struggle together together with the toiling masses of that country for survival, also as an artist, keep sharp focus of the activities of the people towards shaping their lives to be free men and women. Some artists struggle and keep the balance — a necessity for the language of a South Africa which will certainly be built, free of oppression and exploitation — some fall by the way side.

Here then, is Thamsanqa Harry Mnyele. Thami was born in Alexandra on the 10th December, 1948. He is the third of five children whose father is a minister of religion and their mother, as Thami says, "is a mother formed by the township".

Thami started drawing when he was fourteen. Then, his drawing were intensely influenced by the heavy religious atmosphere at home, which, when the home broke. and thus the protective shell round Thami shattered — he found himself out there in the uncompromisingly mean Alexandra streets and of course, South Africa as run by John Voster

contemporaries and the townships in general. He believes that he has been prematurely pushed by circumstances that he has been prematurely pushed by circumstances beyond his control to stage a one-man show now. His intention was to participate in more group exhibitions as often as possible and for a long time. In this way, he believes, he would have been exposed to works and experiences of other artists, an experience he values, and believes would have contributed to his development.

One such exhibition, called NEW DAY, held in Soweto and was the artistic expression of the June 16th 1976 events, in which Thami participated together together with the renowned painter and sculptor, Ben Arnold, and hardworking "mystic" Fikile, was very successful in that it attracted the youth in Soweto in large numbers, and was thus attended by a large number of people who otherwise never attend such events. Thami values that experience.

Thami, who now lives in Botswana as an exile, and a member of the Botswana-based Medu Art Ensemble, attended the ELC Art Centre in Natal, though largely, he is a self-taught artist. Before coming to Botswana, he worked as a layout artist in Johannesburg for six years. He once thought of himself as a musician, but the drawing pen took the upper hand in his life. One of the artists, who he says opened his eyes, is Dumile Feni, who now lives in exile in New York. Thami respects Dumile's ability, not only for the mastery that Dumile has of the craft, but also, the fact that Dumile succeeded in also portraying the community involvement and spirit of the black people of South Africa.

Thami says his work is realistic art. Through this art from and this school of art, and by direct participation in the struggle of the people for liberation, he strongly believes, he will be able to portray the lives and struggle of the people in South Africa with sincerity.

Mongane Serote.

MEANING IN MNYELES SKIES

Even though, until now, he has been denied the opportunity of an extended period of study at art school, The sensitivity and sombre power of Thami Mnyele's work shows that he promises to occupy the very first rank of South African artists by the time he reaches full maturity.

He has chosen pencil on cartridge paper as the basic form of his present work. Through an intense process of scrubbing, spotting, rubbing and erasing his drawings show evidence of a ritual quest to come to terms with and exercise the experience of life in South Africa.

In order to translate his institutions and ideas into intelligible visual communications, he relies on and freely uses a wide range of symbols, both public and private; conscious and unconscious. At one end of this spectrum are his chains and barbed wire, which are conventionally recognised as symbols of oppression, exclusion and (possibly) torture. Then there is a slightly more obtuse range of symbols: stones and stoney ground - alluding to hardship and barrenness; and parts (rather than the whole) of the human body which would seem to refer to a kind of alienation. And there is also the chasm or escarpment used in a few works to represent an impeding threat of disaster. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, there is the much more complex symbolism of Mnyele's spaces and skies.

It is the sky and misty space in the works that constitute the scene of his most subtly articulated set of meanings and where some of his unspeakable thoughts achieve a potent visual clarity.

'The sky is the daily bread of the eye' Emerson said. Judging by the area afforded to space and sky in almost all Mnyele's work, the sky would seem to be a basic datum of life for him too. 19th century American and European Romantics, such as Turner, saw the sky as the representation of the infinity of Nature. But for Mnyele it is rather the transcending index of an infinity of suffering and insecurity. His greyed skies and distant horizons are infused with feelings of sublime nausea, of neglect and absence. Often he rubs rust-dirt-and even sweat-coloured tempera pigments into the surface of the drawings, increasing the feeling of soiled second-handedness.



The infinite sky is the terrifying medium in which all suffering and loss is steeped. His figures turn from or stare at the viewer, transfixed in the void which surrounds their disjointed limbs, Frangmentation and suspension are present even in the technique Mnyele uses in rendering both his skies and his figures. The careful pointillism of thousands of dotted marks is used to evoke many of his mists and images. In several works even the land forms and earth dissolve into a swirling haze of spots and smudges to form a massive dark chaotic cloud.

His labour in achieving these powerful Gothic effects seems like a penance - a masochistic expurgation of pain inflicted by others.

However, despite the strong impulse of fear and foreboding emanating from the vacant space in each work, Mnyele always redeems and tempers this pervading negativity with a manifest love of human forms. Though seldom completely drawn, his figures are carefully guided into position within the picture space. His attitude of care and reverence is reminiscent of Rembrandt's rapport with his sitters that sometimes moved into an intense but subtle eroticism. The hope and strength of Mnyele's vision rests in the modest torsos and faces he draws. From these people comes the quite assurance that in time the all-enveloping mists will rise.

Basil Jones August 1980.





EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEWS



The following excerpts are quoted from interviews with Thami Mnyeale published in **Medu's Newsletter** (volume 2 number 1) and **Staffrider**.

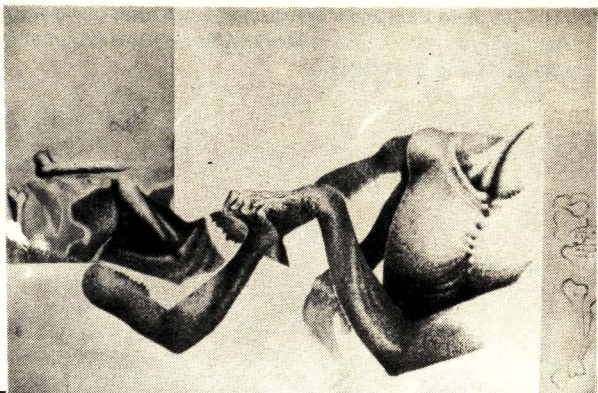
"...In Art, I am for technique as much as for content. I believe the artist should have full control over the 'beast' (medium of expression), and be clear about the intention and objectives of his expression. And I have not achieved this balance myself, in my work — not yet."

"...Our work as black South African painters has not, in my opinion, developed above the mere phase of protest and apathy. We are still cursing and begging and even that we do with inferiority of craftsmanship and with insincerity. My belief is that we need to partake actively in our struggles. to be able to paint, sing and write with sincerity and conviction."

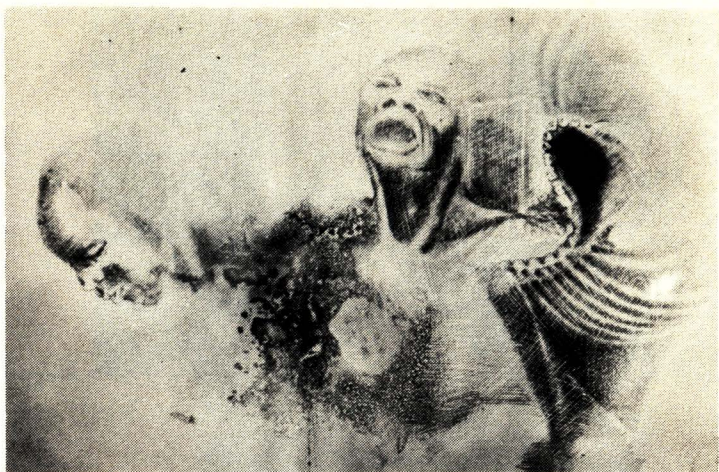
"...When one looks into our work, one encounters a disturbing sense of internal fear and uncertainty. Now this cruel but silent and secret disease has conquered us jealously and chaos rules supreme: art for art's sake", 'abstract art' (distortion of the human body-form for no apparent reason), a detachment from societal struggles, escapist 'religiousness' and then reaction. And the source of this general paralysis can be traced down to the root policies of our country."

"...My simple but humblest respect goes to Dumile, and not only because he is master of his craft but because of that noble element of communalness in his work, that generous warmth of spiritual closeness so common amongst fellowmen...that touching clinging together of simple people. Now this simple but rare essential is lacking in our work because it is lacking in our hearts, it is lacking in the policies by which our lives are governed. The touching warmth of simple but pained souls...this ingredient is there in ghettos and rural communities or in worker settlements of the world."

"...In my opinion creativeness in art means simply, to be able to learn, explore, develop and to preserve. And all of this should be an experience in togetherness and solidarity."







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