

THE SOFT-SPOKEN sculptor and painter, Ishmael Thyssen, lives and works in his small studio — a candle-lit wood and iron shack behind a council house in Steenberg. His double bed is surrounded by *objets d'art*: A nude oil painting, a few religious paintings, a wooden bust and two Bible studies certificates.

In an adjacent room lies several of his most recent sculptures and ceramic pieces that will be on exhibition at UCT's African Studies Department from Wednesday, April 25.

Thyssen, who is originally from Somerset West, started dabbling in art in the 1970s when he worked as a gardener.

"Then there were few black guys interested in art. We didn't even know that there was a market for black art."

He eventually left Somerset West in 1980 to move to Cape Town.

"I had nobody in my community to share what I wanted in life. When you feel you've got talent, you've got to move away from places like that," he said.

There are no community centres where people can meet to talk about "doing creative things with their hands".

For Thyssen, Cape Town was a cultural mecca. On arrival, he was directed to the Com-

First show for artist who makes 'hout poppe'

Ishmael Thyssen has come a long way since dabbling in art while working as a gardener in Somerset West. **HEATHER ROBERTSON** spoke to the artist in his studio cum room in Steenberg.



munity Arts Project, then based in Mowbray, where he studied from 1980 to 1984.

It was at CAP that he met his mentor, Cecil Skotnes. "He encouraged me a lot," says Thyssen. The other major artistic influences in Thyssen's work are sculptors Sidney Khumalo and Henry Moore. Merely seeing scraps of wood also inspires him.

"When I see a piece of wood I know exactly what I want to do with it," he says.

Thyssen alternates his creative work with building and paving, a trade acquired from his father.

"I feel I get new ideas for my art when I go and build. I get a fresh start and start feeling the need to go back to my art," he explains.

Thyssen veers away from realism in his work opting for more expressionist interpretations of reality. Religious imagery of crosses and families at prayer also permeate his work.

"The creative act is not acquired by itself, it is a gift."

One of Thyssen's major concerns at the moment is the lack of cultural activities in black communities whether theatre, art or discussion groups.

"Here in Steenberg, most people don't know what culture is. They see me as the man that makes "hout poppe", he jokes. □