

# JOE MADISIA

TODAY VETERAN NAMIBIAN VISUAL ARTIST



A piece from:  
**FROM MY BIOGRAPHY**

This is dedicate to **Olja Dzuverovic**, a very special friend with whom I spend a lot of quality time to allow that she excavate my childhood.

She was an Astrologer, Archeologist, Women Activist, Art Historian and former Yugoslavian Ambassador to South Africa.

She was the Personal Adviser to the Min. N Ndaitwah in Ministry of Women and Gender Affairs during her short stay in Namibia

She wrote the text of this biography after many hours of interviews between 2004 and 2005.

Olja passed away in January 2006, and her ash was spread in the the Tinten Palace Gardens in Windhoek, Namibia

She was born in Yugoslavia

**May her soul rest in Peace.**

## **CHILDHOOD TRAUMAS AS GATEWAY TO INNER SELF**

The only among his mother's five children born out of wedlock, young Joseph was sent to his grandmother when only three years old. In his words, "my grandmother was the only real mother that I knew". The elderly lady loved him fondly, but in the years following the Second World War life was tough for disadvantaged urban communities at the Atlantic coast. She lived on a modest pension and served as a volunteer in the Roman Catholic Church Community. When she realized that little Joseph was lagging behind in his physical development, there wasn't much she could do. Specialist medical attention was beyond her reach; Joseph was already five when he learned to walk. Even then it would not have happened had it not been for the perseverance and love of his grandmother.

As he was an extremely intelligent infant, Joseph still remembers his anguish when seeing other children his age running and jumping around. It appears that early suffering creates some special kind of sensitivity and awareness in naturally gifted and clever children. In this case it gave rise to fear of powerlessness and desire to mobilize all inner strength to acquire control over one's growth to full emotional, intellectual and physical potentials. Once his handicap had been overcome, nothing could stop young Joseph from leaping into life with the appetite to probe and challenge, learn, discover and accomplish.

Another decisive influence was that of the Catholic Church. It hasn't made Joseph particularly religious, but it did influence his general worldview and his fundamentally spiritual attitude towards existential life's issues. Growing up in a devout Catholic community helped him discover early the questions of life's meaning and purpose of existence, the nature of the universe, the issues of morality, compassion and empathy. At the same time it

also indirectly taught him how to be pragmatic and even heretic when circumstances demand.

*“ My grandmother always let me carry her cigarettes, as well as the keys of our little house in my pocket and whenever she wanted to smoke in public, she would call me aside around the corner, away from the clergies, to have a few puffs. At home, she smoked pipe.”*



Young Joe Madisia with his Grandmother standing next to his mother in background and brothers and sisters

When his grandmother died in 1965, Joseph briefly joined his mother in Walvis Bay, only to be quickly sent to a Roman Catholic Hostel in Swakopmund. “One good thing of the hostel life” he says, “was that it enabled me to develop interpersonal skills”.

At the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, Joseph was expelled from school, not because he wasn't a good student, but because he had an argument with one of the tutors. Since then he joined the working class.

While still at school, Joseph was recognized as a “school artist”. His interest in art hadn't subsided when he started his apprenticeship in wood work (cabinet making) company in 1971. The following year saw him as glasscutter, glazer and windscreen fitter. He then briefly operated a forklift at Mobil Oil Co. and afterwards found employment at a fishing factory as a canning operator in Walvis Bay.

## **ALL ROADS LEAD TO ART**

Luderitz is a port town as well as Walvis Bay. Many large vessels from all over the world are always docked in the two ports. For young and inquisitive Joseph the presence of sailors in town was a window to the world. He used to visit the ports regularly, making

acquaintances with young men his age and learning about their various backgrounds and the places they had visited. Those were the years around '68, when youth in the whole world was influenced by new values and lifestyles.

“I became a hippie at an early age. It was unthinkable for the black Namibian youth of that time to play electronic music, but at 17 I was part of a band called “Children from Pluto”<sup>1</sup> that composed and played music, inspired by the Beatles, Jimmy Hendricks, and black American groups emerging in the 70-ties.

From 1974 until 1983 Madisia worked as operator instructor at Rossing Uranium Mine. Those were the years when he discovered his talent for innovation and used it to simplify certain operations of the machines he was working on. At the same time, his old love for visual arts resurged and he started experimenting with different media and techniques. In the period between 1978 and 1982 – the years he had his home in Swakopmund – he also received his first informal art instruction from Koos van Ellinckhuizen – landscape and surrealist painter and philately stamp designer who taught him basic artistic principles.

At about the same time, in 1982, Madisia attended a two week watercolour course organized by “Die Kunst Kabinette”. The course was run by Prof. Edda Mally from Vienna, Austria, former student of Oscar Kokoscha.

In 1983 Madisia moved to Windhoek. There he found a job as an assistant photographer and designer at a public relations agency. A year later he was promoted to a graphic designer and assistant photographer at the same company. In the evenings, he attended art classes at the Academy for Tertiary Education (1983-1985). This was serious and systematic curriculum, encompassing painting under F. De Necker in 1983, Drawing und M. Aqular

1983 as well as Printmaking (1984-1985) where he received instruction from Demetrois spirou and H. van Vuuren.

Madisia's association with Spirou proved to be one of the most powerful influences not only in his artistic development but also in his intellectual growth and evolution of his worldview in general. It stimulated his inborn curiosity and encouraged him to see art as a way of communication. Madisia is one of the first Namibian artists who had the courage to break free from the rather conservative and parochial dominant paradigm that dominated Namibia's art scene when he arrived at it. Thanks largely to Spirou, Madisia was able to open up towards the global art currents and to integrate some of the newly acquired insights into this work. He is among the first Namibian artists who made a shift from representation to meaning – an understanding that radicalized the whole art environment in the country. Unfortunately, Madisia's fruitful artistic association with his mentor was interrupted by Spirou's death in a car accident in 1985.

## **AS YOUNG ARTIST IN HIS STUDIO**

When I visited Madisia's studio in Windhoek, among many books on visual arts, history, philosophy, anthropology and African studies, prominent place at the bookshelf occupies a pile of old issues of the "Omni" magazine. "I used to buy 'Omni' regularly in the early eighties", says Madisia, adding that it opened for him new horizons in many areas. The magazine reported on new discoveries in science and technology and published essays and interviews with some of the most penetrating social and philosophical thinkers of our time. It also published fine science fiction, but most importantly, it reproduced artwork by contemporary neosurrealist painters and representatives of "fantastic realism" (Ernst Fuchs, Rudolf Hausner), "fantasy art and illustration" by Rowena Morrill as well as works by Gerald Di-Maccio, Gallardo Gervasio, Donald Roller Wilson, psychedelic vistas by Bob Venosa or paintings and photographs inducing

psychological anxiety by Gottfried Helnwein. Some of those unconventional and highly provocative works encouraged Madisia to continue his own exploration into the themes of tradition and modernity, morality and hypocrisy, society and politics, cultural identity and change.

The first public recognitions came to Madisia in the early '80-ties. He staged his first solo exhibition in 1982 at AMA ( African Marketing Agency) Gallery in Windhoek. Particularly important for him were 184 Student award of the year and bursary for one year of tuition fees sponsored by Arts Association of Namibia and the Merit Award for Best Graphic Print in the student section of Standard Bank Art Biennale of 1985.

Madisia quit extra curricular evening classes in 1986 and until 1989 experimented extensively in private studio. Those were the years when he tried all kinds of media, both traditional and unconventional, primarily in graphic techniques. He tested the responsiveness of different materials, their tactile and plastic values, their textures and impressive/expressive potentials. That was also the time when he started developing cardboard printing – a technique that was later to become his trademark and his original contribution to the expressive spectrum of the Namibian visual arts. Madisia experimented in collage and mixed media, oil painting, wood carving and stone sculptures, as well as cloth printing, ceramics and installations. The multitude of skills he acquired during this “working class” days were now put into the service of visual arts, helping this artist to enrich his vocabulary and develop his peculiar semantics.

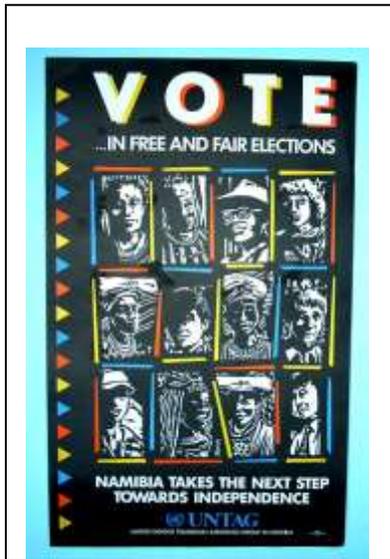
In 1987/88 Madisia has his second one-man exhibition at the Arts Association Studio (today National Art Gallery of Namibia), and a year later another one in Swakopmund, at “Die Muschel” Gallery.

By the end of the decade Madisia’s “hand” became distinguishable and recognizable; he had reached considerable stylistic refinement

and his artwork was beginning to receive public acclaim and admiration.

## **1990-2002: STUDY TOURS, MATURATION, PROMINENCE**

Namibia's independence of 21 March 1990 represented a big opening and opportunity in this artist's evolution. Although he had



not joined freedom fighters in exile and physically was not part of the armed liberation struggle, he fully identified with the people's aspiration at self determination. Proclamation of independence was therefore a big boost and inspiration for Madisia and other black Namibian artists. During transitions towards independence Madisia produced posters and illustrated publications for UNTAG<sup>ii</sup>. He also enthusiastically contributed to the elaboration of new

visual symbols for the country, from designing Namibia's flag and the coat of arms to stamps and posters to calendars and logos. Madisia was a driving force in this effort as can be seen from many of his "heraldic" works from this period. But this activity never really detracted him from the continuity of purely artistic explorations.

## **EXPOSED BEYOND BORDERS:**

Two months into independence, Madisia's paintings and prints, along those of late John Muafangejo, sculptures by Dorte Berner and photographs by Katherine and Eckhard Klenker were selected to represent Namibia's visual arts in India, during the celebrations of Africa Day in that country. Madisia was a member of the Namibian cultural delegation to India where he also presented lectures on Namibian history and culture and workshops on

graphic arts. His study tour included visit to IALIT Kala Academy in new Delhi, while his paintings and graphics were shown at Pragadi Maidan Centre in New Delhi.

The trip to India was the first in a series of foreign travels that have exposed Madisia to cultural heritage of distant lands and inspired him to transpose what he understood as country's "spirit" into his graphics. On August 31, 1990 his solo exhibition entitled "Images of India" was opened at the Artelier Kendzia in Windhoek.

In the years that followed Madisia visited Switzerland, South Africa, Germany, Norway, France, Brazil and Botswana as part of collective or individual study tours cum exhibitions. In Brazil he represented Namibia at the 22 Sao Paulo Biennale of 1994. His work was also exhibited at the 21<sup>st</sup> International print Biennale in Ljubljana, Slovenia (1995). All those proved to be precious experiences and opportunities for learning, cross-fertilization and artistic maturation.

### **EXHIBITIONS:**

His solo exhibitions of 1991 at the council of Churches premises in Katutura and at the Commercial Bank of Namibia Foyer in Windhoek testify of those new sources of inspiration.

Madisia's steady artistic growth is further confirmed by his 1992 solo exhibitions at "Loft" Gallery in Windhoek and another one of 1994 at the Commercial Bank of Namibia in Walvis Bay. But the most important ones are undoubtedly the exhibitions held at prestigious National Art Gallery of Namibia in 1995 and 1999 respectively.

Internationally, Madisia had one-man exhibitions in Switzerland, Germany, Norway and South Africa (see appendices, pages and ).

In 1996 Madisia enrolled for BA Degree course at the University of Namibia, which he completed in 1999, after being nominated

“the best student of the year” for two consecutive terms. As he was already a master painter, he chose subjects such as Philosophy and Fashion Design to graduate from.

## PEDAGOGICAL WORK

Of particular importance is Madisia’s pedagogical work with young Namibian artists.



From the days when he still had his private studio in Katutura until recent he never discontinued his activity of an art teacher and supporter of the young. Of special cultural importance for the development of the arts in Namibia

was a series of workshops he conducted at the France-Namibian Cultural Centre in Windhoek during 1993. this course culminated



RASTA ARTIST ... Dashunye "Rastaman" Shikongo (centre) chats with a young fan at the opening of the art exhibition, Joe Madisia and Friends, at the Franco Namibian Cultural Centre on Thursday. Dashunye has a number of works on show. On the left is his grandmother.

in a collective exhibition showing the works of students and their teacher, which was entitled “Joe Madisia and Friends” ( 1993). Many of his former students are among the most prominent Namibian artists today, such as Ndasuunje Shikongeni, Kosta Shipenga

and Andrew van Wyk.

Madisia often visits schools to give ad hoc free art instruction to school children. He also helps women groups involved in handcrafts to improve and refine their designs. He continues to conduct public workshops in Windhoek and elsewhere across Namibia on various art techniques, particularly cardboard and paperboard printing.

The artist was until 2004 the Manager of the Katutura Community Art Centre (KCAC) – former contract workers’ compound in Katutura, now a new institution aiming to uplift the previously disadvantaged community at the outskirts of Windhoek and to contribute to the development and democratization of arts in Namibia generally.

Joseph Madisia has his home and studio in Khomasdal since 1996, Windhoek, where he lives with his wife Josephine and their three children.



Reprimandations of Temptation 1993<sup>iii</sup>

### **Namibia’s Art Scene in the Second Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

The first Namibian black artist that has emerged in the early seventies and early eighties were not initially considered part of the “mainstream” art, for at least two reasons. Firstly, the art establishment of the time would not accept to treat them on equal grounds irrespective of their talent and merit, and secondly, they themselves never really felt that they belonged there. Madisia, like Muafangejo before him in the 70-ties, felt that their sources of

inspiration, art agenda and mission were different from those whose works decorated rich homes and enjoyed admiration of the privileged classes.



They wanted to assert new artistic sensibility and systems of values—something that was an intimate part of their social and creative beings. In contrast to landscape painters who dominated the art scene in the first and well into the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, artworks of Muafangejo, Madisia and few other black artists\* were subtle and yet powerful statements about life conditions and aspirations of the majority of Namibians. In such as way they demonstrated a radically new understanding of art – moving beyond “art for the art’s sake” towards a concept of socially sensitive art that puts the plight of the majority into its focus. Yet, neither Muafangejo’s nor Madisia’s involvements are anywhere near simplistic “social realism” prescripts.

In an interview entitled ‘Artist with a Conscience’ of August 30 1985 in the liberal daily “The Namibian” Gwen Lister rightly observed that Madisia was “a person with unmistakable social consciousness<sup>iv</sup>, (whose) work ranges from expressions of township life to political comment”. She also quoted Madisia as saying that ‘African art should be taken out of the curio shops into the galleries.’\*\*

Nevertheless, as no artist can manifest out of nowhere and does reflect his or her environment even when being emotionally opposed to its dominant paradigm, it is worth mentioning here the main features of the Namibia’s art scene during Madisia’s formative years as an artist. As Annaleen Eins, then Curator of the National Art Gallery of Namibia, pointed out in 1996.

“Traditionally a country’s history, politics, social and economic development are mirrored in the arts”.

According to Adelheid Lilienthal art historian from German descend, “the tradition of Namibian landscape painting began early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with European artists who came to live in the country”:

“Artists like Hans Anton Aschenborn, Carl Ossmann, Axel Eriksson and Paul Nüchterlein established a mode of painting which still has an enthusiastic following today. It encompasses large, panoramic views with many kilometers of grassland extending into illusions of depth, clusters of bush and picturesque mountain ranges on the horizon. Small, confined sections of the landscape were painted less frequently because the unusual colour gradations and impressions of great distance reveal themselves effectively only in large overall concepts.”

Adelheid Lilienthal admits that Namibia remained practically untouched by the great art movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when she notices that while “abstract art – like constructivism, tachisme, of art, abstract expressionism and minimal art – achieved popularity in America and Europe, art in Namibia, except for a few deviations....., remained loyal to descriptive depiction.”

The very titles of the early graphics by Madisia are indicative of the new understanding of art and artists’ role; “Botsotso” (“The Thief”), “Lamenting Wailers”, “Back to my Roots” and “Spade and Spear” are verbal equivalents of profound pictorial statements about Namibian reality of the early eighties.

Early works of art: examination of individual propensities, basic artistic determinants and identity

There are few works left from the period of learning at Koos van Ellinckhuijzen's studio. Those that are preserved testify of the artist's efforts to acquire a solid drawing skill – something that even at that early stage Madisia understood to be a foundation upon which to build a more personalized artistic expression.



Mr Koos van Ellinckhuijzen and Mr Joseph Madisia  
Mr Van Ellinckhuijzen designed this exclusive stamp collection, portraying John Maufengejo for the National Art Gallery of Namibia. Here he is handing it over to the Director of the Gallery, Mr Madisia - 27/03/2006

Ellinckhuijzen's meticulously executed drawings inspired Madisia towards striving to achieve "look alike" effects in his early pencil drawings, watercolours and graphics. Like his teacher who attaches great significance to detail, particularly in his stamp designs, Madisia also developed impressive precision of line and the skill to use light-dark contrasts effectively. These features are visible in a

series of realistic portraits from the early eighties. His "Mother and Child" still represents a student training work, somewhat static and lacking spontaneity. Nevertheless, it points to the direction Madisia would take in his later experiments aimed at mastering form, space and dimensionality.

"Mother and Child" also contains a touch of magical realism otherwise pronounced in Ellinckhuijzen's works. As Isabel Allende said, "Magical Realism is a genre that combines reality and surreality onto the same plane". Madisia placed his figures in to an

eggshell as if to indicate early separation from purely realistic approach and the direction he would explore in his later works.

Among his early works are those produced for the Namib Advertising and Public Relations Company, which include book illustrations and advertisements in the print media. Here, he respected the limitations imposed by the requirements of advertising business and yet, occasionally found possibilities to give his creative impulse a greater freedom. General characteristics of these illustrations are their impeccable drawing skill, attention to detail and balanced composition.

Madisia's early works of art are still under considerable influence of illustration – rather narrative and “poster-like” as Adelheid Lilienthal observed. They are proportionally correct and “dry” representations of humane figures, objects and their relationships in space. This phase in the artist's growth served to deepen his understanding of visual arts' basics, such as line and form, colour and light, mass and matter; rhythm and hand-stroke. Gradually, with each new work, one can detect heightened understanding of plastic problems as they are reflected in artist's feelings and consciousness, giving rise to more personalized and metaphorical responses.



An early graphic work entitled “Spade and Spear” can be seen as the starting point in the emancipation from the dictates of illustration. Thematically, it is an emotional journey in to the landscapes of identity and culture – something that would become Madisia's lifelong field of inspiration and exploration. At the visual level, it is a balanced play of contrasting patterned patches of “structures” that characterize Namibian environment,

Left: Artwork titled: “Spade and Spear” - Silkscreen

with a portrait of a young man placed in the centre, at the intersection of two diagonals. Such composition might be indicative of ethical and political crossroads confronting Madisia's generation.... "A human silhouette".

Madisia currently lives and work from his studio in Mariental, which is about 120 kilometers from the Rural Communal lands where his wife is registered as a Female Communal Farmer goes with him.

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i [Namibia: Tribute to a Departed Local Hero Tommy ...](#)

[allafrica.com/stories/201205240971.html](http://allafrica.com/stories/201205240971.html)

24 May 2012 - **New Era** (Windhoek) ... Walvis Bay pop **band Children From Pluto** (CFP), in years gone by. ... WINDHOEK - **Tommy** was born Thomas **Kaimbi** in Walvis Bay on the 2nd ... **Tommy**, alongside **Joe Madisia**, Ruben "Beau" Ipinge and Meisie ... **Children From Pluto** were probably one of the most adored musical ...

ii Posters in Action: **Visuality in the Making of an African Nation** edited by Giorgio Miescher, Lorena Rizzo, Jeremy Silvester

iii 1997: "Art in Namibia" – Adelheid Lilienthal –ISBN 99916 30 73 2

iv The Namibian - "Life Arts" page 27, 30<sup>th</sup> August 1985. Editor Gwen Lister