Art History and Myth-Making in South Africa
The Example of Azaria Mbatha

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In South Africa now the buzzwords are ‘cultural reconstruction’, ‘inclusiveness’, ‘affirmation’. The rhetoric of the New South African nationalism heralds an ‘inclusive’, ‘unified’ culture of ‘reconciliation’ and ‘tolerance’. I am concerned here with where this leaves a discipline like art history. On one hand, we may want to participate in the process of inventing a new South African culture (whether or not this ‘new culture’ takes on a national dimension), and to address artists and traditions that have previously been ignored in the writing of South African art history. On the other hand, however, we have to recognise that the discipline in which we work is bound to powerful institutions.

By this time it is common-place to point out that art history is itself a component of cultural hegemony and serves to maintain and reproduce dominant social relations. It does this through what it teaches, as much as what it fails to address, and through its selective and shifting definitions of history and art. Art history can never be pure, since it is written within the parameters of an institution, yet its subject, art, is claimed to possess a creativity and innovation that lies beyond the institution. Art history lies between the power of knowledge and the freedom of expression; between a site of power and a site of resistance. These comments are true of art history everywhere.

However, in South Africa, art history is caught in an additional set of power relations as well. In contemporary South Africa, some cultural workers are struggling to create a national, unified culture in the face of deeply held, local ethnic loyalties. It is not my purpose here to assess the validity of such a project. However, I do want to make the point that whenever writing stresses the ethnicity of the artist or attributes intrinsic ethnic qualities to a work of art, it may well be reinforcing a tradition of art history that serves to reduce art to no more than an expression of a culture, rather than the product of the individual. This means that even when historians are attempting to reclaim or restore a past in the name

1 While the seeds of this process were seen in the late 1980s, they have been widely expressed at a political level since the initiation of CODESA in December 1991. It is also interesting to note that these terms have filtered into popular thought and have influenced practices like advertising and journalism.
of empowering the people, they may indeed be perpetuating conceptually similar frameworks to those of the apartheid historians whose interests were best served by arguments that posited intrinsic ethnic characteristics. In other words, different standards are applied to works by black and white artists.

Leroy Vail has shown that some studies of ethnicity maintain that the term ‘ethnicity’ does not signpost those traditions that are intrinsic to a group, but rather that ethnicity is constructed. He shows that while groups of people in southern Africa today may define themselves and even affirm themselves in ethnic terms, ‘ethnicity’ has often been used by governments to divide people politically; in other words, to divide the opposition. So, for example, a colonial administration may create and support the idea of local chieftainships precisely because it separates people who may otherwise organise themselves together. He notes that the South African government has fostered ethnicity to these ends. The ‘homelands’ policy, for instance, stresses the so-called uniqueness of ‘tribal’ culture in an effort ‘to promote political divisions among the country’s African population’.2

While it may seem a long shot to connect a process that occurs at state level to a seemingly innocuous discipline like art history, it remains true that in South Africa art history is not only caught between the restrictions of the institution and resistance, but between ethnicity and nationalism as well.3

One recent study has recognised the way traditional black arts have been appropriated to exaggerate notions of tribalism rather than advance the idea of a unified, or at least ‘modern’, South African culture. Anitra Nettleton describes the way this contradiction operates when she writes that ethnic arts can be used by dominant cultures in their exploitation of subject groups. Paradoxically, instead of appropriating such ethnic arts to the enhancement of an image of a united cultural heritage, in South Africa the ethnic images have been used to maintain separate ethnicities.4

This paradox does not only operate in so-called traditional art forms, but may be identified in the way contemporary black art has been written about. There can be no doubt that in South Africa, art history has been complicit in constructing ethnicity and, in this way, has perpetuated racist and essentialist myths about exotic, black, rural tribalism.5

In this paper, I argue that while ethnic labels have been a useful way for traditional art historians in South Africa to assert and maintain essentialist truths about black existence, more recent and more academic attempts to investigate the work of black artists, in the name of ‘cultural exchange’ and ‘inclusion’, have often been guilty of the same kind of essentialism. Even more interestingly, though, is the fact that black artists often define themselves in ethnic terms, perhaps for a white market. Some artists almost seem to heighten their exoticism and to ‘Otherise’ themselves in a way that makes their work and their writings seem uncritical and unreflective. Highlighting their ‘ethnic roots’ in their work may be important for black artists, but it is also almost certain that the project is at least in part designed with the white audience in mind. Further, the reasons that an artist may have for constructing him/herself in a particular way, may not be received in that way by the white audience, for whom the work may remain a typical example of a so-called ethnic style.

Azaria Mbathe (b.1941) provides an excellent example of an artist whose art and biography have often been used by a body of literature rather than to their own ends. It may be argued that since his ‘discovery’ in 1961 by representatives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC), first the ELC, then art historians and later Mbathe himself, have ‘Otherised’ him, and have made him come to stand
for a host of so-called truths about black creative production in general. I do not attempt to measure all the different constructions of Mbatha against a 'real' Mbatha, but rather I try to identify what values these constructions of the artist defend. In South African art history, there is no real Azaria Mbatha. The term 'Mbatha' has numerous different authors. It may well be argued that 'Mbatha the artist' was made, rather than born, by the Lutherans, by art historians and, later, by his own autobiographical recollections. In some ways, he is a spectre of apartheid art history, which is why he proves so difficult to recuperate today.

I will contextualise Mbatha's early art training at the missionary school in Rorke's Drift, Natal, and look at the way the missionaries informed, if not determined, later writings about the centre and Mbatha in particular. I will suggest that the readings of his work made by art historians were based more on how the individual art historians interpreted the hopes and aims of the missionaries than on any serious understanding of Mbatha's work. Recent comments on Mbatha, however, show that art historians who are committed to finding alternatives to the way black artists have been written about in South Africa, themselves continue to perpetuate a naive vision of black cultural production.

Throughout the paper, extracts from Mbatha's autobiographical writings will be used. These extracts demonstrate that Mbatha is immersed in a Western tradition of the isolated, alienated artist, while his style remains naive and, because of this, reinforces the way whites perceive black artists.

II

Mbatha's autobiography, *The Great Indaba of Alienation* is, at once, confession and declaration. In a way his autobiography is utopian. It expresses a point of resolution by reconciling an idealised past with a glorified future, and the artist takes the role of mediator/seer/teacher, the figure who can lead us to this point of resolution. It may be argued that Mbatha represents himself uncritically as the romantic artist, misunderstood and alone, filled with a mission with a capital 'M'. He is guided by a process that is beyond him; in a weird way he is an extension of the mission's will. The ultimate paradox is that at the same time he sets himself up as a representative of Zulu culture. It is ironic that the Lutherans, conservative art historians, more progressive art historians and Mbatha himself all draw on the same tradition: they all eulogise the individual Artist/Great Master while at the same time they find in his art an example of 'essential' Zulu culture.

Until the 1960s there were almost no art centres at all for the training of black artists in South Africa. This accounts for why the mission school, situated in the rural district of Rorke's Drift in Natal, occupies near-legendary status in South African art history. Rorke's Drift was chosen as the site for an Arts and Crafts Centre because the Church of Sweden already owned land in Rorke's Drift and had established a theological seminary there as early as 1875. The land was, until the 1960s, used primarily as a theological seminary for the training of black priests. But in 1961, the Church of Sweden Mission, together with the Swedish Commission for the Advancement of African Art and Craft, met in Stockholm where they agreed to initiate an African Art and Craft Centre. The initial motivation for this project was to train nurses to use art, as a means of occupational therapy in hospitals. Ulla and Peder Gowenius, a missionary couple, were sent to South Africa to work at the Ceza Mission Hospital in Zululand and this is where they met Azaria Mbatha, who was a patient at the hospital, suffering from chest
pains.

Azaria left the hospital with Ulla and Peder Gowenius and was involved with them when they established an art and craft centre. The ELC Art and Craft Centre was established at Umpumulo, Natal, in 1962, but soon moved to Rorke’s Drift in 1963. From 1963 onwards, the financial support provided by the ELC was reduced steadily and the centre developed into a largely self-supporting business which trained artists to produce so-called local crafts. These brought in the funds to support the workers and to train nurses in occupational therapy. From about 1967, a two-year formal fine art course was offered which — although it closed down in 1982 — has had an enormous impact on black artists in South Africa, because so many of its graduates have become teachers in contemporary art centres operating today.\(^6\)

What is important here, is to state that the ELC’s aims for the Centre were informed by these underlying principles and values. For the ELC, the Centre had four main aims:

1. To nurture the unique artistic heritage of Africa.
2. To extend, with new influences, this heritage so that it will find its rightful place in a changing society.
3. To ensure that it grows with the changes in society and that its products will find increasingly profitable outlets.
4. To assist in raising the standard of living by extending its teaching influence, especially in the workshops, where employment is created for local people.\(^7\)

While these are admirable and honest aims, which in some ways remain the aims of art centres today, the combination of white European humanitarianism with heritage-making has dangerous implications for heritage-making in South Africa today. The aims assume an ‘authentic’, ‘rural’ African art which is opposed to ‘tourist’, ‘transitional’ or ‘craft’ objects. It is also opposed to the art produced by black artists in the city which, in this representation, has been influenced by the evil of industrialisation. In this way, the aims implicitly suggest an ‘essential’ ethnicity, an ‘authenticity’ and a ‘natural’ rustic existence.

There are two main ways in which these aims have come to inform and to entrench other simplistic ideas about black production. First, some critics (Berman, Snyman, de Jager, for example) have looked at the art produced by the ELC Centre and seen in it a naive, ideal, harmonious representation of the simple rural African without ambition and at one with his uncomplicated environment. This kind of art history entrenches Western images of undisturbed tribal life. Second, in the new South Africa, art historians and curators (Sack and Crump, for example) who are trying to challenge this racist legacy, use the art that emerged from Rorke’s Drift to signal ‘authentic’ African art even though the missionaries were teaching unfamiliar techniques to unemployed people whose choice of art as a career was far from uncomplicated. It is an unbelievable paradox of history that what South African art historians call authentic African art today was invented by the missionaries.\(^8\)

It is telling that even though Mbatha’s work is used by both groups of art historians as a signpost of black rural art, hardly any of his work that has been published dates from 1961-63. In 1964, Mbatha left South Africa and went to study at the Konst Fack Art School in Stockholm on a bursary that the Swedish Mission offered to him. He studied there between the years 1965 and 1967. Although he returned to South Africa in 1967 and taught the first students of the Fine Art Course at Rorke’s Drift, he did not stay for long. The very next year, 1968, he

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\(^7\) These can be found in literature from Rorke’s Drift Art and Craft Centre.

\(^8\) Many of the Swedish art teachers at Rorke’s Drift were trained at the Konst Art School in Stockholm. Ironically, there is some evidence to suggest that this school was heavily influenced by the Arts and Crafts Movement and, so, they may have imported to Africa a utopian projection of artmaking from the outset. I introduce the point here merely to suggest that the complexities of influence and identity may be compounded even further.
settled in Sweden and has been living there in self-imposed exile ever since.\textsuperscript{9} Works like \textit{Dingaan}, and \textit{He Rode into Jerusalem}, may all date from after he left South Africa to study abroad.\textsuperscript{10} So, it is highly ironic that works that are used to point to intrinsic values about black creativity, were done after he met with the Gowenius couple and was taught how to make linocuts by them. For the most part, the works even postdate his entry into a Western tertiary education system in a European country. This point is completely ignored in the writings of South African art historians and critics. This ‘oversight’ is all the more glaring since, in his autobiography, Mbatha recognises that when he was admitted to hospital he was doing clerical work and intended to return to his job when he recovered. Until he met the Gowenius couple, he had not tried to make art since his pre-school days and had no intention of becoming an artist. He notes that until Ulla and Peder Gowenius gave him drawing books, he had never drawn before. He writes:

\begin{quote}
Anyway I became friends with this couple. We used to sit together with them. At this stage I had not yet tried anything but I was about to start doing my drawings.\textsuperscript{11}
\end{quote}

Mbatha’s artistic career was born when he came into contact with the people who were to become his European teachers and, therefore, his influences were never purely African. This certainly does not diminish the quality of the work that he produced, but it does question the reductive art historical interpretation of his work as exemplary of ‘true’, ‘original’ African creativity.

Esme Berman’s writings represent the first way in which the Centre’s aims have been manipulated. Her writing is significant for the way it brings all the different strands of essentialism together. In her analysis of Mbatha’s \textit{Revelation of St. John},
a linocut from 1965, she makes reference — in a single paragraph — to the naive, untrained vision of the artist, reduces him to an ethnic icon, and manages to suggest that his art was made possible only because of the influence of the Europeans in his environment. She even goes so far as to suggest that until there was white intervention, there was no art to speak of in black South Africa.

Commenting on the way a sequence of events has been introduced into a single image in the Revelation, she writes:

This pictorial convention was common in Medieval art, it is also encountered in one of the rare occurrences of South African Bantu pictorial expression — the relief wood-friezes of the Zulu tribes. Mbatthia is a Zulu.

She goes on to asserts:

There is thus a psychological affinity between the two traditions. Both might also be described as ‘primitive’ in the nature of their pictorial devices. The simplified conventions used, for instance, in portraying trees, the linear definition of facial features and the consistency of frontal presentation of the human eye, which are so typical of the devices adopted by the untutored artist, would seem to suggest that the hint of Romanesque influence is a purely fortuitous feature of Mbattha’s work. However, closer examination of the garments and the demoniac beasts with radiating horns and scales, of the decorative space-filling between the images (a typical expression of Medieval horror vacui) reveals a source of influence remote from the indigenous traditions and immediate background of the young artist.¹²

This argument which, it should be noted, ignores completely the subject matter (it is after all a Revelation scene) in discussing the artist’s choice of form, was formulated fairly recently. The quote is taken from the 1983 revised edition of her Art and Artists of South Africa. The reverence with which she writes of black African art of quality naturalises the stereotyping of rural artistic production entrenched in her writing. If her argument was an isolated and idiosyncratic example of a reading of Mbattha’s work it would be easy to dismiss, but because it is part of a body of art history that voices similar opinions, we are forced to look more closely at them.

In 1973, de Jager expressed his opinion this way:

The little artistic skill that did exist was limited mainly to wall decorations and their crafts such as beadwork, weaving, etc. Nevertheless, the contemporary African artist does have an innate and inherent artistic ability, and perhaps some impulse which has remained dormant over the centuries.¹³

Some other examples of the genre include Ute Scholz who wrote in 1980 that:

The black artists in general are still in a situation where they wish to have contact with the white artists. They want to be told what to do and how to do it.¹⁴

Ironically, this body of art historical material actually represents the work of people supposedly committed to giving African art a voice where it had previously been ignored. In the case of de Jager, the problem is deepened by the fact that he did not possess the skills of the art historian as he is an anthropologist by training. In this way black artists and their work are reduced by a curious mixture of admiration and specious generalisations about style and identity.

P.G.W. Snyman, for example, in an analysis of Mbattha’s Invitation, almost

¹² E. Berman, Art and Artists, op cit, p 281.
¹⁴ Scholz, Phafu-Nyika, op cit, p 140.
duplicates word-for-word some of Berman’s comments on the *Revelation*. He writes:

In his *Invitation* Mbatha uses a compositional pattern which demonstrates qualities not only of the relief carving of the Zulu, but also of their woodcarving in general. The division of the different narrative episodes which are delineated through planes which are defined by means of geometric motifs, consist of the same motifs that are, for example, found on the headrests of the Zulu.\textsuperscript{15}

He then footnotes this arbitrarily to *The Art of Africa* published in 1958 by Battiss, Franz, Grossert and Junod. He quotes from the chapter that describes headrests:

> An analysis of the forms created to support the concave neck-rests show that the following have been used: rectangular blocks, ribs, cylinders, circular discs, spirals, parabolic curves, saltires (X’s) and various combinations of these.

The logic is astounding. Practically every geometric shape under the sun has been used on headrests yet, since Mbatha uses geometric designs here, he is clearly using motifs that ‘truly’ belong to the cultural heritage of his people. Snyman proves this beyond a shadow of a doubt when he comments quite seriously that, “the same geometric motifs are also found on other Zulu objects, for example in their beadwork”\textsuperscript{16}

This kind of analysis has two implications. First, it serves to situate Mbatha within a ‘genuine’, ‘original’, ‘exotic’ rural heritage totally separate and distant from white production. Second, it implies that even when a black artist produces fine art his work may only be situated within the lesser category of ‘design’ rather than ‘invention’. By introducing a black preference for geometry, authors are able to suggest that black artists are only concerned with design. By identifying other art forms that have traditionally been situated within the framework of craft as sources for Mbatha, these authors reinforce the idea that their work is design rather than art. De Jager and others point speciously to beadwork, weaving and wall decoration as sources for Mbatha. So Mbatha may practice within the high art arena, but his products are clearly aligned with the so-called decorative crafts. The fact that he uses human figures in his works already represents a change from so-called traditional Zulu art, yet this is ignored by the art historians, who also ignore any serious reading of the subject matter or the formal components of the works that may lie beyond design. Also, art historians do not take account of the fact that Mbatha is Christian, and has been Christian from birth, which may inform his choice of subject matter as much as the fact that he was born in Zululand. Because these art historians like to think of his art as ‘typically Zulu’, they do not allow conflicting aspects of his personal story to inform their readings of his work.

Eulogies of the ELC Centre that also manage to speak on behalf of an ‘original’ and ‘timeless’ rural black life are scattered throughout narrations of South African art. Battiss combines a belief in the child-like rural black vision, with integrity of design and an opinion about craft, when he writes: “The African craftsmen and women at Rorke’s Drift, with originality and an integral simplicity, have somehow been enabled to achieve a visual expression which often transcends the bounds of craft.”\textsuperscript{17}

While many South African art historians are doing more academic work in this field today, for example Liz Rankin and Brenda Danilowitz, it is sometimes swamped by the coffee table art history that I have been quoting, or by the many articles that have been written on Rorke’s Drift and Mbatha by people who are
not trained in art history but have an interest in art. There are many writers like this and, despite the fact that they are not professional, their writings get published in pamphlets that accompany exhibitions and in popular magazines. This means that the common-sense art history that they perpetuate is widely read, while the work of committed and professional art historians has a more limited audience.

Such critics include Essie Greenwood who echoes the theme that Rorke’s Drift stands for authenticity; art that sometimes transcends design; and the role of the white educators in recognising this potential talent. She writes:

Culturally the African needed new impulses for artistic self-expression; economically they needed to gain a livelihood from these activities, and this at a time when what passes for African work is either degenerate curio-fare or pathetic attempts at accommodation within the European tradition. What stands for this tradition on the other hand is the sorry result of export trade, commercialism and often dilettante artistry. What the South Africans needed was a sense of discrimination. This means to reject so-called artistic vulgarities in crafts and develop a fresh sensitivity to recognise when an object of applied art becomes in all humanity true art.18

Her rage against commercial art and her promotion of ‘authenticity’ seems out of place here since the ELC Centre was designed to sell products. While Greenwood’s comments are directed at the crafts rather than the arts that emerged from Rorke’s Drift, her writing is an example of the way Rorke’s Drift represents essential Africa. When analyses of the fine artists that emerged from Rorke’s Drift are undertaken, they seem to borrow the terms that have been used to describe its crafts and they discuss the fine artists as signs of real African creative production as well. Here Greenwood speaks more about her own understanding of what legitimate black African art should look like, than what it can be. But the most spectacular comment that she makes is on the quality of European intervention. In a bizarre application of watered-down eugenics, she praises the fact that it was only the Swedes who acted as teachers.

It was, however, lucky that the knowledge came from a country that was not yet too sophisticated, with a healthy peasant tradition which could make a fusion with another unsophisticated culture.19

Sheila Henderson has a different bias regarding the European teachers, but basically the same concept of black artists. In her opinion,

This meeting of fine-arts experts from Sweden, bred in the established European tradition, with sometimes unlettered African children, raised in poor townships or found in the desert sands of far Namibia, produced great results.20

Finally, Professor H. W. van der Merwe echoed these themes in his opening address at the exhibition of craft from Rorke’s Drift, which was held at the South African Association of Arts in Cape Town in 1973. I quote from van der Merwe’s address:

Rorke’s Drift Art and Craft Centre is unique in that the minimum personal influence is exerted by the teachers. The emphasis is on free, individual artistic expression and high technical standards, resulting in the production of genuine African art.21

So, it may be cross-cultural but it’s still genuine. His closing words read:
With the wish that this exhibition and the proposed closer contact between you and Rorke's Drift will contribute not only towards socio-economic development, but also towards greater understanding and goodwill among the peoples of South Africa, I have great pleasure in declaring this exhibition open.

Here we celebrate cultural exchange and understanding between peoples, but the effects of contact and exchange are measured against a white audience. The experience of colonial, or even straightforward paternalistic, contact for the black artist has yet to be investigated. Colin Richards has pointed to the tenuous nature of what we blithely call 'contact and exchange'. In his article, "Desperately Seeking Africa", he writes, in a section aptly called 'Stating the Obvious': "To speak of 'contact and exchange' is in a sense to misrepresent history. 'Conflict and dispossession' are perhaps rather more accurate terms."

Indeed 'conflict and dispossession' are major themes in Mbatha's own writing. He expresses a very different understanding of his experience with European missionaries from Greenwood, Henderson or van der Merwe. Consider his statement that,

> It was European civilization which brought the end of African civilization and replaced it with its own. I cannot find the words to describe what a terrible crime this is."

Or when he writes, "strangers tried to convince us that we could be masters of our future if only we believed in a future that had no connection with our past." Or, with specific reference to Rorke's Drift,

> For me, it is difficult to express gratitude since most white South Africans call themselves missionaries brought to South Africa to help black people. I sometimes wonder how a free South Africa will be able to mingle the majority of the country and the minorities because of the continuing arrogance from Europeans' side, and of being teachers.

I have tried here to illustrate how supposed homage and respect mask dispossession, and to show that ethnicity can be conflated with racism. It also demonstrates a series of other pernicious couplings: child-like vision with quality; employment and profit with dignity and self-esteem; European teaching with black industry; invention with design; cultural exchange with domination. Rural African art in the literature we have seen is arcadian, pre-industrial, pre-literate, primeval.

It is ironic, then, that studies that try to break with this kind of art history, only reinforce the stereotypes when they recuperate Rorke's Drift and Mbatha today. While these studies represent sincere attempts to construct a more representative South African culture, they too seek the 'real' Africa. They premise their attempts at rewriting South African art history on the fact that it suffers from omissions and exclusions and see their task as that of simply 'setting the record straight'. Steve Sack acknowledges in the introduction to the catalogue for the exhibition, *The Neglected Tradition: Towards a New History of South African Art (1930-1988)*:

> Anyone who has consulted the written histories on South African art will know how little information there is on the art of black South Africans."

The problem, however, is not simply that of exclusion and neglect, but of the new conviction that a true, accurate and complete history of South African art
Introspection 1982, linocut
is possible without questioning the ideological positions of the discipline itself. In the new narrative which Sack represents, Rorke’s Drift and Mbathe are no more real than they were previously. They are given a kind of originary status — the earlier standing for rural black culture, and Mbathe remaining the archetypal rural artist. Sack, for example, reinforces these stereotypes when he compares Rorke’s Drift with Polly Street, an urban art centre. According to him,

Polly Street was urban, Rorke’s Drift was rural. If Polly Street attempted a romantic re-connection to Africa, Rorke’s Drift was in Africa.\textsuperscript{27}

For this art history, Africans in the city can only approximate their heritage and yearn for their true culture, but Rorke’s Drift is this heritage. Rorke’s Drift becomes essence again. It is not insignificant that the works of Mbathe displayed in Sack’s show were all from the mid-60s. None of his works from the ’70s or ’80s were exhibited. Indeed, this replicates a pattern in the acquisition of Mbathe’s works in South African art museums in general.

In July 1992, the Standard Bank Group, as part of their annual Grahamstown Festival, mounted an exhibition of Mbathe’s work. It was one of many exhibitions mounted at the same time, but the Mbathe exhibition belonged to that part of the project which aims to display the work of one black artist annually in order to fill in the gaps in South African art history. Of the 49 works by Mbathe that had been found in South African galleries and comprised this exhibition, only 7 date to later than 1965. This may reflect a number of things: because Mbathe now lives in Sweden, his work is not as accessible to the South African gallery world as it was in the early ’60s before he left South Africa. Also the Swedish government have always been committed to the cultural boycott and may have actively prevented the sale of Mbathe’s works here. However, it does still mean that the exhibition, which claims to display the work of Mbathe, actually reinvents him as South African art history needs him to be: icon of a rural black past.

III

Popular writers like Greenwood and Henderson, as well as more professional art historians like Sack and Alan Crump (curator of the Grahamstown exhibition), seem unaware of Mbathe’s own position. He has written at length about Rorke’s Drift and his feelings reveal a very different attitude to any of these writers. While Mbathe recognises the value of his Rorke’s Drift experience, he often expresses reservations about the school. He writes, for example, that:

The failure of this school depended on the system of the country and European attitude that they alone will change the world and soon their contribution turns and become everlasting alienation to people they tried to help. This happens because Europeans want to lead and leave people they are helping outside the share of the creative ideas to plan for their own future of helping others and to be independent.\textsuperscript{28}

Elsewhere, writing of missionary schools and hospitals in general, he comments that “alienation grew out of these institutions”.\textsuperscript{29}

These writings have not been explored, and art historians and curators may well continue to overlook them because in the reinvention of South African culture, the construction of Rorke’s Drift’s first student as a sign for rural creativity means that Mbathe cannot be investigated as an articulate, modern, urban artist.
For mainstream South African art history, Mbatha is black; he is rural; he is connected to his tribal past and untainted by the modern, urban world. For the Swedish he is, forever, the perfect and acceptable image of the black artist. He is Africa. He is 1965. For now, at least, the real Mbatha remains the Mbatha of Nebuchadnezzar.

The work suits the reading of African art as ‘authentic’, quaint and picturesque. It is divided into horizontal bands, the forms are quite frontal, the heads of the protagonists are attached to their bodies in a uniform way that masks the neck area. Further, the composition is cramped and the figures take up the full-length of their zone, and the foliage decorates the background space while denying great depth. Finally, the thick lines which delineate forms appeal to an aesthetic similar to medieval or expressionist schools. The sense of primitivism and the charm can only be increased for critics by the unevenness of the ink which is a tell-tale sign of the spoon method, where artists who had no printing press used the back of a spoon to press down the inked area onto the paper. These features are never treated as a corollary of the method or the medium or the subject matter, but rather as sure signs of genuine ‘Africa’.

It is not entirely insignificant then that South African art museums have collected Mbatha’s early, biblical works and omitted those he produced after going to Sweden, especially since the latter no longer confirm ethnicity but, arguably, confront it. In works such as Introspection, 1982, and At Crossroads, 1990, Mbatha’s concerns seem to be those of the exile trying to resolve his two selves; his new home with his first home. Since the culture brokers of the new South African need a rustic ‘Mbatha’ more than they do a questioning, melancholic one, these works are elided. The new art history, while it may bear the stamp of restoring the omissions of the past, dismisses art that does not meet the needs of our new self-constructions.

In these later works, Mbatha is concerned with the experience of exile, albeit a self-imposed exile. Sometimes he expresses the belief that he has been absorbed by a community; at other times he underscores the loneliness of the individual who is alienated from both the community into which he was born and the community in which he finds himself. Introspection represents the belief that he is part of a community. The composition is held together by a central figure dressed in priestly clothes. The community of the faithful are arranged in an arch which envelops and contains him. Stones on either side of the figure and on the outer edges of the image extend the idea of a single unified structure, a community, while the plants which echo the semi-circular formation of figures signify life, growth and fertility. Mbatha’s own words concur with this reading:

You search your own memories, search your knowledge of yourself and discover that you are surrounded by many people who mean very much to you. Because of them, you are not alone. Realizing this makes you aware that communion is more than just a dream. 30

At Crossroads, however, may illustrate the isolation of the artist as he sits alone in his lounge, in exile, watching scenes from home on television. On the wall hangs his Brotherhood from 1968. It may be argued that in this work the artist confronts, with melancholy, his past and present, his separation both from his past and from his new environment. While Mbatha has not commented on this work directly, the title lends credibility to this reading.

Mbatha has discussed the role of the artist extensively. For example, he has commented on his belief that he has a special vision, over which he has no control.
He has also expressed his belief that it is his duty to use this vision to teach and show the way. These statements all point to the secluded and withdrawn life the artist must lead as a universal representative of the forsaken. It is this figure, alone and isolated, that we find in works like *At Crossroads*. For example, he writes:

The creative forces are not something I can control. An artist somehow takes part in creation. He becomes, with his experiences, a speaker for all those with similar experiences.\(^3\)

He represents himself as a spokesperson for the dispossessed everywhere:

In writing these lines, I have chosen the symbols that I have in order to send a

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\(^3\) Ibid, p 7.
message to those who, like me, suffer in this modern world from isolation, alienation and anxiety.  

He shows this again when he writes:

I hope however, that, in trying to portray the African experience, I am also expressing the powerlessness and isolation of many African people who cannot be heard.  

and, again:

I hope that, in portraying the African experience, I am also expressing the powerlessness and isolation of those people who are separated from the wealth of their country and left alone to die, and for all who are working for peace. These people are the dreamers.  

My purpose here has not been to assign the 'proper' meanings to Mbatha's work, but to show, through his writings, how his ideas of himself conflict with the convenient image which art historians have foisted on him. The image of the black artist with an uncomplicated bond to his ethnicity was fostered by the Evangelical Lutheran Church and by art historians who entrenched ethnicity uncritically, as well as those now trying to construct a new South African art history. Mbatha's writings, however, present him not only as a representative and bearer of his culture but also as an alienated, isolated creator. What we see, then, are an artist and his commentators who are all immersed in the same historical tradition which informs the way they write and think about art, even when they are trying to subvert that tradition. If we are going to be able to redeem art history, we obviously have to challenge the way the discipline is constructed.