

Resilience and empathy: Sfiso Ka-Mkame at the AVA

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by Mario Pissarra

There is an integrity to Ka-Mkame's engagement with his materials and his subjects. His use of oil pastels is spectacular, the result of years of practice: "we understand each other" he says of this most modest of mediums. His subject matter also demonstrates continuity as he began chronicling the trials and tribulations of women in the eighties. Today this theme is more prominent, and his work is increasingly bold in scale, colour and pattern. He often contrasts naturalistic colour (usually applied to skin tone, land and sky) with a more subjective use of colour best seen in his depiction of female clothing, but also featuring sometimes in the landscape as with the intensely emotive red sky in *Sorrow Swallow Me*.

There is a sense of narrative and storytelling, but the content is not always explicit. Ka-Mkame acknowledges that for each work "there is a story" but "the interpretation is up to the individual". Some of his strongest works are concerned with the big themes of life and death, more specifically with pregnancy, birth, and abortion. See for example *No Light Voyage* and *Lament for Sister N*. There are also works dealing with HIV/Aids (*Protect One Another From One Another*) and *The Vagina Monologues* raises the issue of sexual abstinence by referencing the controversial practice of virginity testing that occurs in Kwa-Zulu Natal.

Despite the emotiveness of many of these themes Ka-Mkame does not adopt a judgmental or didactic tone, and despite the 'heaviness' of some of his subjects what comes across is a strong sense of the resilience of the human spirit and a celebration of life. His empathy for women he explains simply: "its because I love my mother."

Pan-Africanism is another dominant theme. His iconography references San Rock paintings, Ndebele murals, west and central African masks, and he creates his own brand of female attire that matches but does not copy the splendour of the very best of west African textiles. But his pan-Africanist vision is not exclusive: *No Light Voyage* has space for Macbeth's three witches and even traces of Gustav Klimt.

A powerful and inspiring show, Ka-Mkame's solo debut in Cape Town was a commercial failure. He has works in numerous public, corporate and private collections; has participated in several important international shows; and his previous exhibitions, he tells me, have all done very well. Was the work 'over-priced' and 'repetitive' as a few people have suggested? Does his work have more resonance for buyers in other parts of the country? Or was it that it didn't fit into current trends? A financial set-back for Ka-Mkame, but then this an artist charting his own course at his own pace, and that's how it should be.