

Sfiso Ka-Mkame: Charting his own course

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Sfiso Ka-Mkame first received national and international recognition as an artist in the late 80s when he produced a series of "letters". These took the form of full colour drawings that were themselves made up of different scenes, arranged in quasi-comic book format. However unlike comics these images did not suggest any sequential narrative. Rather each component told its own 'story', united by an overall theme. *Letters to God* (1988), which was bought by the South African National Gallery and appeared in several publications is probably the best known of these early works. For many Ka-Mkame was the quintessential resistance artist of the 80s. Among early publications that popularised his works he featured under the heading of "Artists and The Struggle" in Gavin Younge's *Art of the South African Townships* [1] and Sue Williamson's *Resistance Art in South Africa*. [2] While there is some merit in this perspective - Ka-Mkame was after all a youth activist in the United Democratic Front, and many of his early works contained representations of political conflict and resistance - he was at the root a chronicler of events around him. He commented to Williamson that "I have been told that my work is too political, but I say, my work is just what I see when I wake up in the morning."

What Ka-Mkame 'sees in the morning' has both evolved and changed with society and his own growth, as well as demonstrated a continuity that reflects his commitment and integrity as an artist and as a human being. One of the most striking features of his most recent exhibition, (at the Association of Visual Arts in Cape Town), is that here is a male artist who appears to be primarily concerned with representing women. While this is usually a recipe for phallocentrism I would be very surprised if Ka-Mkame's works would be viewed in this way. Rather there is an overwhelming sense of empathy and respect for women that comes across unambiguously. When I comment on this to him he responds immediately "It's because I love my mother!"

Women as a theme is not new to Ka-Mkame. See for example *Homage to the Mothers* and *Schoolgirls* (1988). [3] *Homage to the Mothers* highlights the hardships faced by black women. Some of these hardships are clearly located within the apartheid era (eg pass laws), although themes of unemployment and exploitation still resonate today. *Schoolgirls* references teenage mores and pregnancies, with the latter theme recurring in several recent works.

In fact, many of the new works reflect a preoccupation with life and death. This appears in works such as *Three Ages of a Woman* (2003) as well as in representations of pregnancy, birth, and abortion, (e.g. *No Light Voyage*, 2003; *Lament for Sister N*, 1995/6). While these works are undoubtedly emotive both in subject and treatment, there is no sense of didacticism or moralistic judgement implied. This can also be seen in his treatment of HIV/Aids as a subject (eg. *Protect One Another from One Another*, 2001/3). Sexual abstinence as an alternative form of 'protection' surfaces in his allusion to the controversial Zulu practice of virginity testing, in the provocatively titled *The Vagina Monologues* (2003).

Love is also a favored theme, with one new work jesting "this painting is not about pain!" (*The Unfettering of the Heart*, 2003), together with works about marriage (*Betrothal*, 2003; *The Coming of the Bride Nomalanga*, 2003). But it would be a mistake to see his interest in matters of the heart as a new development. Ka-Mkame recalls that in 1990 when the ANC's Albie Sachs challenged artists to paint about love that the *New African* newspaper replied "but hasn't he seen Sifiso's *Love Letters*?".

What is 'new' for Ka-Mkame is that works have become increasingly bold in composition, scale, colour and pattern, and this enhances the celebratory tone. In particular, he delights in creating spectacular dresses for his female subjects (it is not surprising to learn that he has also printed textiles). As a result, a room full of his recent works presents a most visually sumptuous experience, as much a festival for the eye as it is contemplative for the mind.

The contemplative qualities of Ka-Mkame's works result not only from his choice of themes, but also from the fact that, while there is a sense of narrative and storytelling, the content is not always explicit.

This is due, at least in part, to his technique and to his approach to creating meaning. He works organically, in the sense that his pictures develop as part of the creative process (i.e. he does not illustrate a preconceived idea or work from a preparatory sketch). Ka-Mkame's preferred media is oil pastels, and he begins intuitively, working from light to dark. He scratches, scrapes and also pours melted pastels onto his paper, creating rich textural surfaces and exquisite tonal contrasts. Ka-Mkame acknowledges that for each work "there is a story," but that "the interpretation is up to the individual". He also says that he sometimes leaves parts of his drawings 'incomplete' so that the viewer can 'finish' them themselves. The titles he usually etches into his works, and by so doing he provides clues about his intentions.

Contemplation is also enhanced through ambivalence and contrast. This can be achieved by expressing the depth and duality of emotions. For example, a painting about marriage is both celebratory and sad, since marriage simultaneously represents both gain and loss. Formally he often creates a visual tension by contrasting naturalistic colour (usually applied to skin tone, land and sky) with a more subjective use of colour. Expressive, symbolic and decorative colour is best seen in his depiction of female clothing, but also features sometimes in the landscape as with the intensely emotive red sky in *Sorrow Swallow Me* (1995/6 & 2003).

Ka-Mkame also effectively contrasts clothed and unclothed figures, with the representations of naked women often communicating a sense of transcendental spirit. This is achieved, not only by showing them in 'essential' form but also by locating these figures further from the picture plane and by giving them more movement than is usually accorded to the formal and composed representations of (clothed) women that take 'centre-stage'.

Another strong feature in Ka-Mkame's works is a sense of pan-Africanism. Ndebele murals, San rock paintings, masks as a vehicle for communication with the ancestral spirits and colourful robes, all of which are atypical of his native Kwa-Zulu Natal exemplify his inclusive sense of African identity, and complement those details that are more 'local'. He remarks that "I don't want to create borders. The art I make is not specifically made for one region. It's Africa. I'm part of Africa." Despite this strong sense of African identity, he also sometimes crosses the borders of western cultural history. The three witches in *Macbeth* appear in *No Light Voyage* and the menacing faces that appear in the lower right hand corner of this work he attributes to the influence of the Austrian art nouveau artist Gustav Klimt.

Ka-Mkame is an evocative and inspirational artist. That he achieves such startling results using such modest materials is further testament to his integrity and vision as an artist. At a time when so many of South Africa's 'leading' artists appear to be led themselves by the dominant trends in the art capitals of the world it is refreshing to know that Sfiso Ka-Mkame is charting his own course, and we can thank him for that.

Notes.

[1] Gavin Young, *Art of the South African Townships* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1988).

[2] Sue Williamson, *Resistance Art in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Juta & Company, 1989).

[3] See Williamson, *Resistance Art*.