

A sculpture of a man with a mustache, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and dark tie. He has large, black, circular ears on top of his head, resembling Mickey Mouse. The sculpture is set against a background of a white, textured wall with large, dark, abstract shapes. The top of the background features a red and purple pattern. The overall style is reminiscent of South African township art.

# Art of the South African Townships

Gavin Young

Foreword by Archbishop Desmond M. Tutu



## 'Culture within our struggle' Township Art and Politics

It will undoubtedly come as a surprise to many people that any art at all has surfaced through the bleak, dusty streets and urban squalor of the South African townships. The world at large is perhaps aware that the township residents queue for buses long before dawn and return home well after sunset to houses which often do not have the convenience of electric light. There seems little time or space for creative pursuits. It is therefore even more surprising that the work celebrated in this book should prove to be of such sustained quality and complexity.

Yet this art cannot be understood or appreciated without some knowledge of the artist's position within the townships and within the political struggle currently taking place in South Africa. At this point in time, many younger artists no longer have faith in the power of subtle, elusive and surprising art forms and either retire their talents or submerge them in organizational work. The promise of art as a form of human communication which is visually, emotionally and, at the very least, intellectually satisfying, has

been side-lined by the urgency of a social and political situation where children are detained, parents shot and collaborators burned. In fact, the status of the township artists as artists had eventually become so diminished that a number of anti-apartheid organizations and unions decided to reappraise the role of the creative arts within their struggle. The cultural co-ordinator of COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions) has remarked that 'the problem in the past has . . . never been given enough prominence within democratic organizations'. A pamphlet, *To All Organizations and Cultural Workers*, published on the occasion of the 1986 Cape Town Arts Festival, broached the issue directly: 'Organizations have been reawakened to the importance of culture within our struggle and the need to assert people's culture.'

This book concerns itself essentially with the emergence of that culture in the visual art of the townships. These segregated residential areas have been a fundamental feature of apartheid policy since the 1950s and the physical







Opposite: Lionel Davis leading poster workshop, Community Arts Project, Cape Town, 1985.

Above: Cape Youth Congress banner, acrylic on cloth, Cape Town, 1985.

Left: End Conscription Campaign banner, acrylic on cloth, Johannesburg, 1985.



# THE ZEBRA'S VOICE

NATIONAL MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY, GABORONE, BOTSWANA.

Vol. 9 No 2, 1982



## NATIONAL ART COMPETITION 1982

National Museum

27th SEPT - 15th OCT



LIONEL'S P913

photography craft works sculpture drawing graphics film making painting photography craft w



“Art Toward Social Development” Exhibition.



Removals — from a series of Linocuts by B. Dihomo



Economy Pack — a linocut by Lionel Davis.

The largest exhibition ever to be held at the National Museum and Art Gallery opened on June 10th. Over three hundred works of art including painting, sculpture, graphics and photography representing eighty-seven South African artists were on show. Due to the great number of works a large section of the exhibition had to be hung at the Anglican Church.

The exhibition was unique in many ways. It is significant that the artists themselves were responsible for the collection and selection of the pictures. As Mr. Mnye, an artist living in Botswana, said in his opening address, "This exhibition is a step towards creating an alternative for artists in South Africa. This exhibition is important in another respect as all South African peoples regardless of race, are represented. Cultural workers not only created the works of art but also actively participated in organising it and making decisions about what the exhibition has to say about the people of South Africa."

The exhibition closed on August 10th. It will be travelling to a number of museums in Europe.