

An excerpt from the University of Cape Town's Centre
for African Studies Permanent Artwork Collection
Catalogue*

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Introduction

In 1989, the Centre for African Studies (CAS) received a substantial amount of money with which to purchase artworks for their newly built department. This was in keeping with a policy adhered to by the University by which one percent of the budget for any new building on campus is set aside for the acquisition and installation of artworks. While many departments have had varying reactions to this rule, the staff at CAS enthusiastically embraced this opportunity to purchase a selection of artworks that dealt with the particular social and political climate of the time, purchasing mainly work produced by black South African artists which responded to their environment. Thus, the collection has been called a 'period piece' by some – encapsulating so many of the issues faced by South African society during that particular phase of the country's history. From the sorrowful to the joyful, the CAS collection is surely one to be celebrated and treasured. What follows is an excerpt from the CAS Permanent Artwork Collection Catalogue; a publication currently being finalised and due out very shortly.

Thembinkosi Goniwe (b. 1971) and Thobile Skepe (birth-date unknown)

While there is a rich amount of information on Thembinkosi Goniwe, very little is documented on Thobile Skepe. The two are friends, and at the time of painting the mural in CAS were very young and had little artistic experience. Since then Goniwe has gone on to an exciting artistic career, exhibiting widely overseas (in group exhibitions) from Japan to England, Australia to Iceland, as well as in many American cities, while he has also exhibited locally. His residencies have also been in many exciting and varying locations – Cape Town, London, Wales, Johannesburg, Florida and New Mexico. Currently he is completing a PhD in the History of Art at Cornell University in America, having completed his Masters of Fine Arts degree at Michaelis in 1999. Describing his work, Goniwe has stated that his primary concern is “the unspoken racial constructs that are visible and implicit in our ‘post-colonial’ and post-apartheid era”, and has focussed largely on Xhosa rituals (such as initiation) and its relation to today's South African society.



Untitled (undated, early 1990s)

According to one source these were then “two unknown township boys from Nyanga” with mining backgrounds, who were chosen by the Centre to complete a mural, after they had responded to an advertised invitation for entries. This brightly coloured and bold mural is situated

on the third level of the CAS building, by the stairwell leading from the second level up. Therefore it is seen by many who enter the Centre and is a reminder of days gone by in South African history. Depicting a large crowd of protesters walking through a desolate landscape of shacks, they are armed with various implements and placards proclaiming ‘People’s power’, ‘Free all’, ‘Free Mandela’ and the like. Painted in a naïve manner, the image contains a powerfully sincere message of hope, freedom and agency which is especially poignant given the artists that created it.

Jackson Hlungwani (b. 1923)

An enigmatic and intriguing sculptor, Jackson Hlungwani was brought to the attention of the South African public by curator Ricky Burnett in 1985 at the age of 62. The years that ensued saw his reputation and fortune rise at a meteoric rate, with many articles and rave reviews written on his exhibitions, winning numerous awards and commanding ever-higher prices for his artworks. This seems to be a combination of his masterful sculptures and his extraordinary character. Deeply religious, Hlungwani sees himself as a channel through which God’s work is made, and many of his sculptures have spiritual connotations: crucifixes, angels, fish, chairs for Christ and God etc. He also spent thirty years building a stone palace which he called the ‘New Jerusalem’ that sat above the shanty town of Soweto. Filled with his immense sculptures, Hlungwani lived there for some time with followers, preaching and sculpting. As others have noted, Hlungwani’s religious views are a mix of Christianity and his Tsonga heritage and this combination infuses his artworks with a unique flavour – one that is African, yet universal.

Kava Va Nga Heti
(date unknown, probably late 1980s)

According to the artist, the name of this piece means ‘a fish that is so big it cannot be finished/completely eaten’, and at 5 metres in length this is an apt description.

Fish feature prominently in Hlungwani’s oeuvre, and one can speculate a number of reasons for this. A recognized Christian symbol, others believe fish hold



the magical quality of bearing immortality, and more practically also refer to the local species that swim in streams near to the artist’s home. Furthermore, fish can be seen as a symbol for change, their constant movement suggesting fluidity and adaptability. Therefore it is unsurprising that Hlungwani likens his fish to people, and many of them bear human characteristics. This particular fish is quite sinister looking with its enormous scale and large teeth prominently bared. Constructed in a time when South Africa was going through the transition from apartheid to freedom, Hlungwani noted the significance of the fish stating “in the new country we must learn to swim like fish”. With its detailed craftsmanship, monumental size and multi-layered meanings and connotations, this work forms a powerful part of the CAS collection.

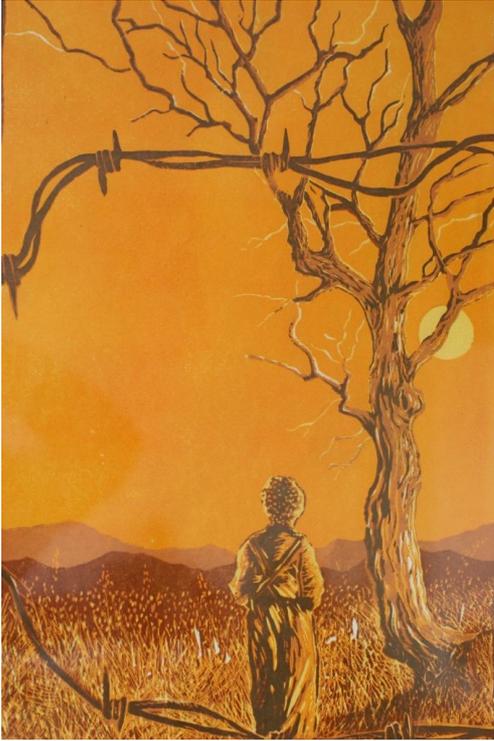
Alfredo Mkhabela (birth-date unknown)

As is the case with a number of those represented in the CAS collection, only very little is known about this artist. Born in Mozambique, he moved to South Africa in 1961, and was living in Tzaneen at the time the artwork was acquired. An artist and musician, Mkhabela has been noted for his puppets that he uses to enhance his busking performances.



Puppets (undated, purchased 1988)

A time-old source of entertainment, used for amusing adults and children alike, puppets have a rich history in many different cultures. A striking component of the CAS collection, this work is unusual in that it can be either a stationary sculpture or part of a moving, living performance. UNISA houses a similar set of puppets, which Mkhabela fashions with the intention of hanging them from his guitar that he plays on street corners. The figures, often (as with this set) two males and three females, dance on the end of the string, in time to the music he plays. While the artist has carved them, it is his wife that has dressed them – the males in denim jeans and the females in billowing skirts and close fitting tops. According to one source, when animated, the puppets bow to each other in a way that is reminiscent of formal acknowledgement in European royal courts. Often one of the men (as seen here) has a pipe in his mouth which, when the figures are moving, can be seen as a phallic symbol as the figures bend over and dance. Certainly there is an eerily real presence about these figures, and one is almost alarmed when first seeing the puppets hanging silently from the ceiling. With their blank expressions, wooden features, and commanding presence one can begin to see elements that can be found in the work of today's contemporary artists Claudette Schreuders and Doreen Southwood.



Solomon Siko (b. 1965)

Another artist that studied at CAP from 1987 to 1989, Solomon Siko lives in the Mbekweni Township. He is a talented painter and printmaker who exhibits regularly within South Africa and has also had exhibitions in numerous German cities. He is comfortable working with wet and dry media, using watercolours, oil paints, pen & ink and pencil, stating a strong partiality for the latter since they don't have to dry. However, it is his vivid, heavily textured oil paintings on board for which he is most well known. These large paintings are inspired from township life, often figurative works filled with vibrant colour and energy - one feels traces of Gerard Sekoto in these compositions. He is an observer; watching those around him, constantly sketching and absorbing his surrounds. In the tradition of many artists, Siko states that he also often uses his wife as a model. Like Hlati and Motswai, Siko is an

optimist who uses his art to try to show “happiness” and “beauty” - for him art *is* beauty.

Untitled (1988)

This work forms another part of the CAP collection of prints, and here Siko's focus on beauty is apparent. It has a wistful quality, the lone figure standing in the open, looking out to the hills beyond. The warm palette invokes a distinctly African atmosphere: the amber, ochre and sienna tones reminiscent of a dusty evening in the veld. Here, the barbed wire becomes another flowing line, echoing the shape of the tree branches and the curve of the mountains. It is an ambiguous image; one absorbs its aesthetic quality - the lulling beauty of the lines and colours invoking a harmonious, tranquil mood - which is then conflicted by the presence of the barbed wire, and the reference it makes to segregation. The figure becomes a captive, caught behind the dividing line, unable to break loose from this empty landscape, condemned to a life of loneliness and isolation. However, it is this intriguing mix of inferences that enriches the print, one is caught between admiring and despising what it depicts - an apt metaphor for South Africa itself.

Vuminkosi Zulu (1947-1996)

An artist from Kwa-Zulu Natal, Vumikosi Zulu has been noted for his excellence in many areas of art from printmaking to weaving, wood sculpture to pottery. He studied at Rorke's Drift for three years in the early 1970s learning the skills of etching, lino-printing, weaving and sculpting. A religious man, one can see a strong similarity between Zulu and Muafangejo's works in terms of influences and styles, both choosing religious as well as rural imagery in their emotive prints. Zulu lived in Sweden for a number of years and his works feature in various overseas and South African collections. Sadly, he died prematurely of a malignant tumour in his jaw in 1996.



Reading (1992)

The smallest piece within the CAS collection, this simple sculpture holds a magnetic quality that is hard to articulate. It might purely be that it *is* its simplicity and small scale that make it so enchanting. We are presented with a seated figure (a man) reading a book – an act we take for granted but which is so significant – for as one adage goes, “knowledge is power”. Placed within the physical setting of a learning institution, specifically a department dedicated to the study of Africa, the work becomes even more significant. Here students are encouraged to learn about African leaders who have contributed to the literary and social achievements of this complex and complicated continent. Unsurprisingly then, this sculpture has become an emblem of the Centre, pictured prominently in the official pamphlet. Zulu’s simple lines and forms here, as in his lino-prints, encapsulate so much dignity and strength in a subtle and captivating way.

* *postamble* would like to thank the authors of the catalogue who granted their permission to have the excerpt from the catalogue published in this issue.