

Township art: South Africa's political writing on the wall

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(2005 *Inaugural Ifa Lethu Brochure*)

“Works of art are the soul of the people, their history,” says Dr Vincent Maphai, company chairman of BHP Billiton.

To say that township art focuses on negative and positive realities of life in the townships during the dark decades of apartheid is just one definition. It says nothing, though, of those souls of negated people, struggling for some sense of humanity under oppressive conditions.

Then to describe township art as naïve is itself naïve, but it has been done. There are no typical visual clues to the genre as has been suggested, the more frequently mentioned being aerial views of townships, emphasis of streets, featuring of shebeens, buskers and distorted human figures. Embarrassingly, it has even been written that township art indicated that black artists have a different spatial and perspective sense to white artists. Rather than what it is, what township art did was mirror the conditions of the time in many ways and that art was the very soul of an ignored people, one of the few methods of expression not entirely forbidden.

Township art should not be confused with another extraordinary ‘art form,’ something that would best be described as paternalistic art. Township people were portrayed as subjects but these pieces were not created by people of the townships. Depictions might be of poor but happy, smiling children or kneeling, graceful women wearing little clothing, comical men with musical instruments – fantasies for European consumption. Paternalistic art glossed over a truly dreadful situation with a romantic patina.

Not surprisingly, the term township art has been rejected by angry artists and historians. It originated as a white gallery-given name and is often seen as a trite label that does no credit to talented artists. Today commercial websites advertising crafts as township art have just added further negativity to sentiment about the term.

There is no doubt that township art is a convenient way of placing art that came out of particular locations within a certain period of South Africa's history but it cannot be defined or described as having typical features or form. Compare some of the disparate modes employed by artists from various townships if possible. Fikile (Magadledla)'s soft-edged charcoal and watercolour presentations ensure that the screaming horror of his symbolic subject matter is even more haunting when the poetic veils are lifted mentally by the viewer. Lucky Sibiyá's etched gourds and fine woodcuts carry no more message than the yearning for perfection of organic form and the control and mastery of it. David Koloane's highly literate and complex-surfaced oils and acrylics are like abstract mutterings or long conversations about single-word topics like Workers or Aftermath.

For a better perspective of township art we should look at what townships were intended

to accomplish. In South Africa a township is a residential development that was established to confine so-called non-whites near - but not too near - the whites-only communities or industrial areas where they would work during their days. These townships still exist but without the curfews and raids and floodlighting that controlled nocturnal life in huge ghettos then. The townships were often larger, in terms of population, than the cities and towns they served. Under the government of the time, township people were to exist as homogenous groups rather than sentient human beings.

Soweto, Sebokeng, Alexandra, Mamalodi, Hammanskraal, Langa, Guguletu, Khayalitshe, Umlazi. The names are achingly evocative of grief, strife, overcrowding and squalour - each mass of humanity impersonally labelled with a word.

Official decisions about what was called Bantu Education was to have a dumbing down effect on people whose circumstances had already been made difficult by their restricted lifestyle. Girls were sufficiently educated for domestic service and boys for labour. Freedom of any kind was not the order of the day and freedom of expression would have been regarded as subversive. Art was not taught at 'black' schools. The souls of the people needed expression and, with limited access to materials, people created art – passionate art and much of it high quality art. Some of it carried anti-apartheid messages. There were artists like Bill Ainslie who defied government laws and threats and shared his art experience with black artists, many of whom are the more esteemed artists of South Africa today. And Cecil Skotnes, whose Polly Street, Johannesburg studio, was haven, home and art school.

Dehumanising the people of the townships, obliterating their identity somehow made it more important for people to find a sense of self. Art rises above the mundane and yet it provides a way in which people can relate on a personal and human level with other human persons despite the odds. So was born a fine and courageous art spirit in the townships.

There was no ready market for that art, however. People sold to each other and to those brave enough to venture into the townships. White South Africans in general did not buy the work. For their defiant stance and expression, many artists were regarded as being subversive. Some were killed. Some disappeared. Their art might have met the same fate had some of it not survived outside the country. It certainly was not going into its own country's art collections and galleries just then. However, good work is hard to ignore and some white dealers, sadly not all scrupulous, started to deal in certain commercial names from the townships.

Artists like Dumile Feni, Ezrom Legae and Abdussamad Arnold were invited to exhibit in the 60s already and, as seemingly successful artists selling through dealers, inspired keen admirers. Interestingly, the first two left the country and became exiles.

Even then there was little doubt from those who had managed to get to know it that this art of the townships was fine art. However, like its creators, it was separately classified. Great art was happening in the townships of the 50s, 60s but particularly during the 70s

and 80s, the nadir of apartheid. In 1989 Billy Mandindi, a much younger so-called township artist of Guguletu, painted his witty oil, “The Death of Township Art.” Much like the resistance murals and Free Mandela graffiti, South Africa’s political writing was on the wall by then.

People of the townships have not stopped creating but the spirit has changed, evolved into a new energy, marked by innovation. Our artists have moved beyond the confines of the name – township art. Art remains the soul of a now-free people.