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Librarian, Central Collection

'Art cannot exist without society. There can be no line separating the artist from his community. The progressive effect of our society gives rise to cultural growth. The artist must seek new forms of changing his society for the better.'

Profound words dating back as far as 1987 and contained in a letter to the editor by a reader of a largely black-read newspaper, **The New Nation**. Words that embody much of what has transpired in the visual and other forms of art during the past three decades. We take a look at a selection of some very collectible artists whose work encapsulates protest or resistance art - a most powerful medium in the peoples of South Africa's struggle for liberation. Many of their works are held in stock.

### Sfiso Ka Mkame

Ka Mkame was born in Durban, an area where violence in the townships had become endemic, and the police were notoriously repressive.

He received a sporadic art education over the years - 'when we were growing up we made pictures in the sand, and cows out of clay. At school we did maps and I used to draw for other students, but I didn't realise it was art.'

'I have been told my work is too political, but I say, my work is what I see when I wake up in the morning,' Ka Mkame once said.

### Sue Williamson

'In August 1977, I spent seven days watching the total demolition by state employees in bulldozers backed up by police of the 2 000 houses of Modderdam, a settled squatter community just outside Cape Town.

'Witnessing the cold brutality of this operation had a profound effect on my life. I became involved in community action, an involvement which spilled over into my work in the studio.'

In 1981, bulldozers were knocking down the last houses in Cape Town's historic District Six, an overcrowded but dynamic coloured suburb, declared 'white' fifteen years previously.

She collected the rubble left behind - bricks, chunks of wall with layers of wall-paper, broken plates, discarded school books, piled it on the white tiled floor of a Cape Town gallery, and surrounded the pile with six chairs borrowed from Naz



Ebrahim, one of the last residents of District Six. The chairs were used in Naz's house for the last celebration of the Eid feast in District Six, and were draped with white sheets in mourning for those who had left. The installation was called *The last supper*. A tape played throughout: a recording I had made of statements and memories of the people of District Six, their music, the calls from the Mosque and the scraping, crashing sounds of the bulldozer.'

### Norman Catherine

Catherine is one of the hardest working artists in the country, working from nine in the morning to midnight daily in the studio of the house he built at Hartbeespoort Dam, near Johannesburg. Some years ago he was known for surrealistic images and the perfection of his airbrushed finishes, but the carefully-modulated hues then gave way to flat, often brilliant colour and strong patterning.

Catherine also makes frequent use of the sort of found objects township kids collect to make their toy cars and bicycles: tin cans, wire, metal scraps. Welding was a skill Catherine learned when building his house, and the technique gave birth to a whole new tribe of comically recognisable living-in-Africa characters - the sangoma with his bones, the kugel, and the BOSS figure, lackeys at his feet, who dominates and controls all the others.

Catherine's humour is often black, nourished by a fine sense of overkill.

The corrosive wit that amuses and shocks at the same time is equally apparent in two masterfully handled drypoints, **Dog of war** and **Carnivores**. 'It's the animal in man that I'm portraying - his carnivorous aspects, his territorial instincts.' The subject matter is classic Catherine.

### Sam Nhlengethwa

Sam Nhlengethwa was born on 9 January 1955 at Payneville Township, Springs. He studied art through the ELC Art and Craft Centre at Rorke's Drift. His experience also includes that of set designer.

### Pippa Skotnes

The few tiny groups of San who still exist today in the Kalahari Desert in Botswana are avidly studied by anthropologists, and have been the subject of a number of documentary films. But to the Dutch farmers of the eighteenth century the nomadic San, or Bushmen as they called them, were vermin to be tracked down and ruthlessly exterminated.

In South Africa, all that remain of the San are their beautiful and elegant rock paintings, executed in the colours of the earth, and to be found in shallow caves right across the country. It is known that painting was central to the life of the San people, that the images often referred to the state achieved in the trance dance when man would be imbued with the strengths and skills of the animals he hunted, but the precise interpretation of these images is often elusive.

*Style and the recovery of meaning in Southern rock paintings* was the title of a thesis for a Master's degree in archaeology by printmaker Pippa Skotnes.

Images from the past - the marks, structures and objects left behind by the plundered and the plunderers - constitute much of Skotnes's artistic vocabulary. Traditional etching techniques, sensitive crosshatching and aquatinting on copperplate produce tones down into the deepest velvety blacks. Her prints have an air of melancholy and a strange, heightened reality

### Willie Bester

Renowned Cape artist Willie Bester once said in an interview with erstwhile director of the Library Service Frans van der Merwe, that he sees art as part of our daily lives and people need to be constantly exposed to it. 'Art helps to create a certain amount of community pride - people want to be part thereof - it can even play a role in curbing the crime rate.'

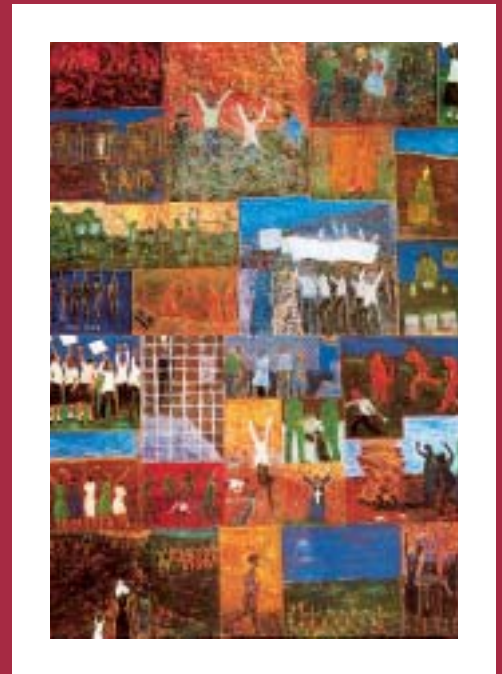
Today Bester, once runner-up in the 1991 Triennial, the country's most prestigious art competition, has gained international recognition.

### William Kentridge

Pierre-Auguste Renoir's famous painting **The boating party** gives us a vision of a golden world, shimmering with light and



▲ Charlotte Maxeke was the first black South African woman to obtain a university degree. This artwork, a photo etching/screenprint collage, is one of a series titled *A few South Africans* by Sue Williamson



► Sfiso Ka Mkame's artwork, titled *Letters to God* is done in oil pastel on paper



▲ Norman Catherine's colourful silkscreen work titled *Green Man Salon*



◀ Titled, *Human rights*, this collage by Willie Bester, is one of five in the *Central Collection*

▼ Sam Nhlengethwa's collage on paper titled *Putco Strike*



► One of six screenprints which are part of the portfolio done by Pippa Skotnes for her thesis for a Master's degree in archaeology in which she portrays ... 'a censure of man's arrogance and the destruction he has wrought around him'





△ Charcoal and pastel drawing titled *Wadeville* by William Kentridge

intoxicating colour, in which relaxed diners laze on the verandah of a riverside inn.

'The great impressionist and post-impressionist paintings give me such pleasure', says artist William Kentridge, 'a sense of well-being in the world, a vision of a state of grace in an achieved paradise.'

One of his works, the well-known mixed-media triptych *The boating party* (1985) is based on Renoir's painting. But the idyllic scene has changed to one of horror.

'The state of grace is inadmissible to me,' says Kentridge. 'I know this is contradictory. The world has not changed that much between then and now in terms of human misery. In bad years peasants starved in the countryside around Tiepolo's ceilings. But in paintings of the time the effect is not of history distorted but of a benevolent world. However, it is one thing to be grateful for those lies and quite another to perpetuate them.'

Kentridge's love of posters led to three striking silkscreens being made in 1988 - *Art in a state of grace*, *Art in a state of hope* and *Art in a state of siege*. The first is about an art that sees no further than its own pleasant horizons; the second believes optimistically that art can help to bring about the success of the revolution; the third concedes the possibility of defeat. The imagery used in this poster draws on the planned celebrations for Johannesburg's centennial year.

Kentridge puts forward as his symbol for the city's hundredth year a bloated businessman grown rich on the gold that brought Johannesburg into instant being in

1886. The celebrations were, in fact, cancelled after an outcry from concerned citizens who felt that the city had nothing to be proud of. Kentridge's powerful image, with its overtones of George Grosz's comments on Nazi Germany, reinforces that view.

### John Muafangejo

John Ndevasia Muafangejo's linocut *The Battle of Rorke's Drift* is one of the few he did on an historical subject, but like almost all of his work, is filled with action. The composition is strong, the lines crisply incised, and the massed figures cram the space.

Born in 1943 in Angola, Muafangejo was a graduate of the art centre at Rorke's Drift

▽ This linocut on paper, titled *The Battle of Rorke's Drift* by John Muafangejo is a good example of the strength of his work



and lived and worked in his native Namibia until his untimely death at the age of 43 in November 1987. His chosen medium was the linocut, printed almost always in black 'because it doesn't tire the eyes'. Reviewing his London exhibition in 1983, the critic Edward Lucie-Smith wrote that it represented 'consistently the best of all the modern African masters of this medium - Muafangejo is a printmaker of world class.'

Muafangejo was a Kuanyama of the Ovambo people who straddle the war-torn border between Angola and Namibia. A deeply religious man, the conflicts between church and state, the violence which beset his land, the racial prejudices of society and his own desire for reconciliation are all reflected in his prints. Denying that his work was political, Muafangejo once replied, 'It is the world which is political.'

### Billy Mandini

'At first, when I was thinking about art, I thought it was about drawing and all those things... I then suddenly became aware of what was happening around me and I tried to capture that. In our art, I think there was something missing. It's still missing. Some of the things that happened years ago, the results are still coming now, so in my work, I am trying to go far back and mix it with what is happening now.'

About his zinc sculpture, *Fire games* he said he wanted to do work that reflected the whole of 1985. Mandini has used the bright colours and the assorted small-scale elements to impart a toy-like quality to his piece, but this is a gameboard of a deadly kind. 'It's the watchtowers and vans and a factory and some banks and a jail and AK47s and all those things.' Mandini saw those watchtowers in Zwelethemba when he went to Worcester in 1985. 'This was the year of the first state of emergency. They had those towers around the townships, and the lights were going across the township. Things were tight there. It was serious, but it was like a game... people running, being beaten up, mass funerals, somebody being buried every week and the number of armoured cars - every time you go outside you see an armoured car.'

He was a student at the Michaelis School of Fine Art in Cape Town, a young artist with a deep commitment to his work. 'I'll only do art in my life, nothing but art, work about people, and

what's happening.' Mandindi not only depicts contemporary issues, but frequently creates work which gives a fresh perspective to an historical event.

He was once asked if he thinks art can change the way people look at things: 'If people would try to understand what the artist is trying to say, they can be like kids who are trying to grow.'

### Vuyile Cameron Vuyiya

Vuyile Cameron Vuyiya was a student at the Michaelis School of Fine Art near the exclusive Mount Nelson Hotel in Cape Town. During the apartheid years black men on the streets at night were likely to be picked up on suspicion.

'I was continually being harassed by the police when I went to Michaelis to work at night. "Where do you stay, what are you doing here at night?" Once they followed me, they stretched my arms against their car - they searched me. They had their guns out. They wouldn't believe I was a student, even though I showed them my student card and bag with paint brushes.'

One of his successful exhibits was his **Rhythm in 3/4 time** series which was part of an exhibition together with 16 artists from Mozambique, Angola, Zimbabwe and South Africa at the Stockholm City Culture House in Sweden.

'Rhythm in 3/4 time series is based on one guy in Langa. He was on Robben Island in the sixties. He's a bit insane.' Acknowledging that the subject of his **Rhythm in 3/4 time** looks very much like himself, Vuyiya comments: 'That experience could happen to anyone. You can say or do something not radically bad, and end up in prison. The fact of evading the blows, that had something to say about my interior fears.'



### Khulekile Hamilton Budaza

Born on 8 March 1958 in Kensington, Cape Town, Khulekile Hamilton Budaza's father worked in Cape Town on contract and he attended primary school in Ciskei. He completed his Junior Certificate in 1976 at Langa High School. He joined the Community Arts Project soon after it was established in 1977. He has exhibited regularly in group exhibitions in the Western Cape.

### Azaria Mbatha

Azaria Mbatha was born in Zululand in 1941, and graduated from the Rorke's Drift Art Centre in 1964. Today he lives and works in Sweden.

He says about the past: 'The past is part of one's identity. Naturally we cannot live in the past, but we must live with it. We need



to be reminded by and about our past, which we as Africans were compelled to forget.

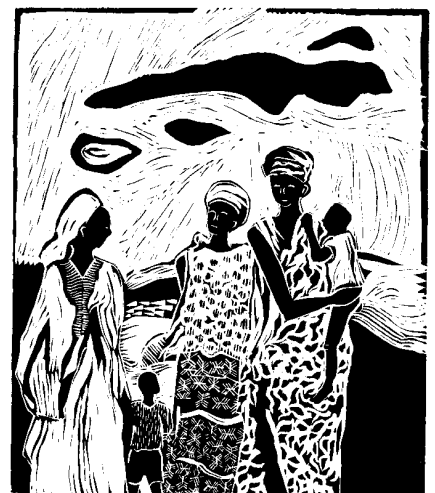
'Africans once were proud of their traditions, and some have begun again to study their origins. They understand that they were cheated. It was European civilisation which brought the end of African civilisation and replaced it with its own. I cannot find the words to describe what a terrible crime this is.'

### Sources

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Williamson, Sue. **Resistance art in South Africa.** - D. Philip, 1989.

Younge, Gavin. **Art of the South African townships.** - Thames, 1988.



△ **Losing one's head** - a linocut by Billy Mandindi. Besides being decorative his work also represents the struggle

◁ This linocut on paper by Vuyile Cameron Vuyiya is one in a series of six with the title **Rhythm in 3/4 Time**. The subject is said to resemble Vuyiya

△ Khulekile Hamilton Budaza's linocut - **Get together** emphasises the family support system

▽ Azaria Mbatha - linocut titled **The ladder** is strongly rooted in African tradition

