

## A VIGIL OF DEPARTURE - LOUIS KHEHLA MAQHUBELA

### A Retrospective: 1960 – 2010

- Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg, 3 Aug – 16 Sept 2010
- Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town, 27 Oct 2010 – 13 Feb 2011
- Durban Art Gallery, 23 Feb – 24 April 2011

The thrust behind the exhibition and catalogue is to assess Louis Maqhubela's (b. 1939) place in, and contribution to, the history of South African art. Many South Africans have never heard of him, others have forgotten him, and the intention is to remind the public of a great artist, to return Maqhubela from obscurity and to re-inscribe him into the history of art of this country.

Maqhubela's name is strongly associated with the Polly Street Art Centre, where he studied under Cecil Skotnes and Sydney Kumalo from 1957 to 1959. At a time of increasing apartheid restrictions, Polly Street, the first large-scale urban art centre in South Africa, emerged as a place where black artists could learn their craft, participate in practical and theoretical discussions and read art books and magazines. Here white artists could meet their black compatriots and share their skills as volunteer teachers.

"Polly Street," says Maqhubela, "became our magical password, our ID, to break into the exclusive echelons of the Johannesburg art scene, 'worthy' to exhibit as equals. That is the legacy of Cecil Skotnes..."

Maqhubela had success early in his career, in spite of a hostile environment created by the apartheid government. In 1966 he won first prize at the Adler Fielding Gallery's annual 'Artists of Fame and Promise' exhibition, which included a return air ticket to Europe. The following year, before embarking on his trip to Europe, Maqhubela held his first one-person exhibition at the same gallery in Johannesburg. His work was much in demand at this time, and he was able to augment his prize money of R1,000.

Maqhubela's trip abroad, his exposure to European art and artists, and in particular the time he spent with Douglas Portway in Cornwall in the UK, offered him a means decisively to break out of the conventions and stylistic mannerisms of a genre that had been labelled "Township Art" – the depiction of everyday activities and the way of life in black urban environments created under apartheid. Contrary to what had become a clichéd genre, Maqhubela, as much as his pioneer contemporaries – notably Sydney Kumalo, Durant Sihlali and Dumile Feni – always had a personal essence and style, and for them change was inevitable. As Maqhubela told readers of *The Star* (14 June 1968), he wanted to "get away from what is expected of a township artist – to depict township scenes".

Maqhubela's new direction meant the end of figurative expressionism and the beginning of a personal engagement with modernist abstraction, accompanied by the development of an artistic language and iconography inspired by his quest for spiritual growth. His work now became less about recording views of his environment, or observed reality, and more about using line, form, shape and colour as expressive means in and of themselves. In *Emancipation* (1972) and *Composition* (1972), for example, he uses a nervous, wiry line that seems to start somewhere and meander endlessly through the work. As with other works from this period, *Emancipation* and *Composition* are characterised by coloured floating shapes – triangles, squares and circles – with human figures, birds or animals merging with, or emerging from, layers of marks and colours, creating various moods.

Reflecting on the relation between black artists and abstraction, and the market expectation that such artists should make township art, Maqhubela had this to say in 2010:

Even abstract art by a black practitioner was a declaration of war against being stereotyped, bearing in mind that abstraction has, for centuries, always been Africa's premier form of expression. Why would our ancestral form of expression suddenly be deemed to be "foreign" to the black man of the 20<sup>th</sup> century?

Maqhubela and his family left the country for Spain in 1973, chiefly for political reasons. In 1976, having travelled to the English capital over the preceding two years, the Maqhubela family settled in London for good. He continued to exhibit extensively in South Africa, in group as well as solo shows, and featured prominently in Esmé Berman's book, *The History of South African Painting* (1975).

Always keen to expand his knowledge and broaden his horizons, Maqhubela completed a year of study at Goldsmiths College (1984-85) before transferring to the Slade School of Art (1985-88), both in London. Stimulated by his contact with British artists, his work became increasingly abstract and at the Slade he mastered a new expressive vehicle: etching (*Untitled XIX*, 1990 and *Two Birds*, 1986). His first solo exhibition in the country of his birth since 1977 opened at the Everard Read Gallery, Johannesburg in March 1990.

A trip to South Africa in 1994 to experience the euphoria of freedom firsthand, and again in 2001, 2002 and 2004, had a powerful impact on Maqhubela and gave renewed impetus to his work, both thematically and technically (*Ndebele Gate*, 2010).

On the death of Cecil Skotnes in 2009, Maqhubela was invited to contribute to *Homage*, a portfolio of prints created as a tribute to his one-time mentor. His *Greetings Cecil* recalls the early days at the Polly Street Art Centre, both stylistically and spiritually.

Maqhubela lives and works in London. His spiritual journey and concomitant search for a higher plane through form and colour may explain why he has no immediate successors in the stylistic sense: his art is too personal and private, too enigmatic for followers to emulate. History will judge the final quality of Maqhubela's work in the South African tradition, but in the meantime the importance of the bridge that he created for township artists, away from prescriptive expressionism and into internationalist styles and concerns, can hardly be overestimated.

In the catalogue to Maqhubela's exhibition, Marilyn Martin, the show's curator writes, "In spite of trials and challenges he faced during his life, Maqhubela's art is characterised by a profound humanism, inner joy and affirmation of life that transcends technique and analysis; [his works] spring from a deep spiritual and metaphysical well." The time has come for South Africans once again to welcome and embrace a significant artist who, for too long, has been absent from our consciousness and our art history books.

### **Standard Bank Gallery**

Corner Simmonds and Frederick Street, Johannesburg

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Gallery hours: Mon-Fri, 08:00-16:30; Saturday, 09:00-13:00

The gallery is closed on Sundays and public holidays.

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