



Nhlanhla Xaba *What everyone knows*

### ***What everyone knows***

Nhlanhla Xaba retrospective print exhibition

“In my art I attempt to convey a painter’s struggle. I am concerned with shifting boundaries, mental and physical. On the canvas, and in life, these boundaries are continuously shifting and are complex, revolving around the politics and economics of time and place and physical space; history and geography, in other words. These boundaries are also the urban and the rural, the contemporary and the traditional.

“I don’t attempt to convey the simplicity of representation. I am interested in a more complex and layered process. Neither the painting nor the approach I adopt in my art is an attempt to surprise the viewer – instead it recreates what everyone knows. It reflects the processes of life and of living” (1998).

The title of the exhibition is taken from the above excerpt from Nhlanhla Xaba’s artist’s statement in the catalogue that accompanied his Standard Bank Young Artist exhibition *In Between* in 1998. *What everyone knows* captures the vast body of knowledge and insight into human nature and circumstance that is contained within his oeuvre, created before his untimely death at the age of 43. He died on 9 March 2003 in the fire that destroyed the premises of the Artist Proof Studio in President Street, Johannesburg. He was working on a body of work for his solo exhibition at Art on Paper Gallery later that year.

Xaba’s artistic output ranges from depictions of life in rural South Africa destroyed by political forces, to images of resistance to oppression, the challenges of reconstructing a new nation, and the squalor and overcrowded living conditions of urban people, even after democracy. These political and economic realities have become all too familiar and indeed ‘common knowledge’ for all South Africans. Xaba’s art was, however, not merely an amalgam of typical images that readily captured the political and economic hardships of South Africa: it also captured what everyone *feels* about these atrocities.

Onlookers at the time had become accustomed to the stimulation of the visual spectacle: spectacular pictures of the events in our troubled country appeared in photographs printed in newspapers all over the world, or were simulated in news clips or film strips for broadcasting through an array of electronic media. Xaba, however, forced the viewer to assess the merits of the handmade print against those of the mechanical photograph or film through his extensive use of this medium. He looked afresh at the geography and history-in-the-making of South Africa and articulated these in an original, albeit common sense way that was accessible to everyone.

Xaba represented the quintessential post-apartheid dream: he epitomized the self-tailored black artist paying his way as a labourer while training as an artist, assisting young

Front cover

*Mapping the Terrain of Jesus (Bound by Spirituality and Space) (variation)* Collograph & etching 701X995mm

underprivileged artists and finally being awarded the highest accolade by the art establishment when he was named Standard Bank Young Artist in 1998.

Between 1977 and 1979 Xaba worked as an ordinary worker at Jabula Milling Company in Springs, funding his Matric studies with his wages, which he completed in 1981. Madi Phala (1955-2007), an artist and designer, acted as his artistic mentor at this time, the two of them living and working together for the sake of their art. In 1981 Xaba went to Rorke's Drift, the famous Evangelical Lutheran Church Art and Craft Centre in KwaZulu-Natal, only to experience the closure of this illustrious institution. Back in Gauteng Xaba took up manual labour again, working at an egg container manufacturing company in order to save money for tertiary studies. In 1985 he enrolled for an Architectural Drafting diploma at the Mangosutho Technikon, KwaZulu Natal. He had to leave after one year of studies because of a lack of funds.

Xaba then enrolled at the African Institute of Art at Funda Centre in Diepkloof, Soweto in 1986. (The arts education programme at Funda was originally linked to the Fine Arts Department of Unisa, and later to the Wits Fine Art and History of Art Departments, for accreditation purposes.) It was here that he met two of the most important people in his life: Charles Nkosi, who took artistic leadership at the Institution and Matsemela Manaka (1956 - 1998), who awakened in Xaba

a deep-seated political awareness at the time of the State of Emergency in South Africa. Nkosi, in a way, compensated for the disappointment Xaba suffered for not being able to study at Rorke's Drift by imparting many aspects of his own training there, and his artistic skills in printmaking to his Funda students. Manaka directly and indirectly stimulated many of the political themes that are readily observable in Xaba's art. Even Xaba's rural idyllic scenes assume a contradictory nature when viewed through Matsemela's political lens. The boy cattle herder in one of Xaba's linocut prints thus raises issues of child labour and an unequal education system in South Africa. The sangoma in one of his etchings pays respectful homage to his mother who was a practicing one, at the same time punting traditional health practices against Western notions of medical practices. Rural traditions come in sharp conflict with contemporary urban aspirations.

Xaba was not ignorant of the price of political freedom and depicted the innocent victims of the resistance movement, such as women and children who were often put in the front line of the struggle. The dawn of democracy saw Xaba articulating the urgent need for dialogue and understanding (*Talk to me*, 1998). Xaba is often described as an artist-activist and the period immediately following the elections of 1994, saw him wrestling with the complexities of the fledgling democracy, such as the continuing squalor and overcrowded living conditions of urban people and the rise in HIV/Aids cases in South Africa.

He was compelled to participate in creating awareness about these and other socio-political issues in and through his participation in various public print portfolio projects and campaigns. In 1991 Xaba became co-founder and co-director of the Artists Proof Studio, where he helped nurture a new generation of printmakers and where he also benefitted in his personal artistic capacity from the new, improved facilities for printmaking.

Although the iconography of Xaba's art seemed to be predominantly shaped by the socio-political situation in South Africa, his stylistic trajectory is more diverse. This ranges from his awareness of modernist styles and its execution, especially that of neo-expressionism, to the inspiration that he found in the stylized art of Lucky Sibiyi and Tony Nkotsi and the work of the Mexican muralist, Alvaro Siqueiros's social realist style. Siqueiros is also attributed as having influenced Xaba's use of contemporary political newspaper photographs as images of inspiration for his art.

Hazel Friedman, Xaba's Art History teacher at Funda, relates that he said to her art is like a flame, attracting him and at the same time scaring him. These were ironic yet prophetic words regarding the circumstances of his death, but everyone knows, however, that the luminosity of his art shines forever.

Wilhelm van Rensburg



Sculptor 1987 Linocut 1/15 510X387mm





left to right, top to bottom  
*(Homeward bound II)* Reduction linocut 420X590mm  
*Home-ward bound II* 1988 Reduction linocut 3/5 390X382mm  
*On freedom road ...* 1988 Linocut 2/5 420X594mm

top to bottom, left to right  
*... That's What Bleeds in S.Afrika* 1990 Linocut 7/10 581X510mm  
*Women & Children In Revolt* 1987 Linocut 12/20 498X650mm  
*Aids - Exodus* (from *Break the Silence* portfolio, 2000) Woodcut, collograph 539X783mm



left to right, top to bottom

*Music & Mystique* 1992 Colour etching AP 368X262mm

*Untitled (Domba I)* Colour etching 500X660mm

*Umhlanga I (Reed dance)* Colour etching 570X765mm



left to right

*Symbols and Healing* 1999 Lithograph 14/20 383X567mm

*Talk to me* 1998 Lithograph 17/25 570X762mm





left to right, top to bottom  
*Political Turmoil (People on the Boil)* 1993 Sugarlift, drypoint, softground  
 AP 500X654mm  
*Negotiated Settlement?* 1993 Sugarlift, drypoint, softground 1/4 332X455  
*Political Turmoil & Culture Vultures at Crossroads* 1994 Etching AP 496X705mm  
*The Making of Inauguration (To Phili)* 1994 Colour etching AP 378X454mm



*Devastated, desolate Home – Sharp(e)ville* 2001 (from *Sharpeville Remembered* commemorative print portfolio) Etching AP 380X565mm



left to right  
*Twisted Faith (Ngiyolala'phi)* 1998 Drypoint, sugarlift, rainbow roll AP 895X670mm  
*Dusk & Dawn of Humanity* 1998 Sugarlift, drypoint, aquatint, rainbow roll 960X646mm

*Confines of the Innocent* 2002 Etching, surface roll AP1/1 677X930mm





South Afrika Bound Between A Dungeon Of Hope 2001 Etching, aquatint 5/8 810X1205mm





Crossing 1997 Etching AP2/2 705X991mm



left to right  
*Land(scape) and Culture* Vultures at Crossroads (After S. Nhlengethwa) 2001 Linocut, collograph 2/5 700X1000mm  
*Fishing & Shelter* 2001 Linocut, collograph 2/5 680X998mm



Nhlanhla Xaba was born in Payneville, Springs in 1960. During his high school years he was taught art by Madi Phala. Xaba matriculated from Thakula High School, Kwa-Thema in 1981. He worked as an ordinary labourer until he was financially able to return to formal art education at Funda Art Centre in 1986. He enrolled for a Unisa BAFA degree through the African Institute of Art. Xaba studied Child Art Education between 1987 and 1989, compiling a textbook for teaching children's art, called *Khula Udweba*. He taught art on a part-time basis from 1987 to 1990, chiefly at such places as the Open School, Pimville, the Alexandra Art Centre, the Independent Visual Art & Craft Academy, Germiston, and the Othandweni Orphanage. He acted as a part-time lecturer at Fuba and at Artist Proof Studio between 1993 and 2003. He worked with Matsemela Manaka as an assistant curator in founding the Soweto Neighborhood Museum between 1991 and 1992. Xaba was co-founder of the Artist Proof Studio in 1991. He was awarded Standard Bank Young Artist in 1998. From 1978 Xaba participated in almost 30 group exhibitions, and held four important solo exhibitions: at the Luca Gansser Studio, Lugano, Switzerland (1990), at the Berman Gallery, Johannesburg (1992), at the National Arts Festival, Grahamstown (1998), and at Art on Paper Gallery, Johannesburg in 2004. His prints were included in numerous portfolios, mainly those creating awareness about human rights and HIV/Aids. He died in the fire that destroyed the Artist Proof Studio premises on 9 March 2003.

This catalogue accompanies the exhibition *What everyone knows*, a retrospective exhibition of prints by Nhlanhla Xaba at GALLERY AOP, Johannesburg, January/February 2012. GALLERY AOP acknowledges the support of Lebo Tshetlo, Priscilla Nicol, Ronnie and Nhlanhla Jnr.

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