

Source: MAIL AND GUARDIAN

Date: 01-Aug-2013

Topic: 06

Ref No: 3950



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Striking art is his raison

d'être

Award-winning artist Mongezi Ncaphayi draws his audience in, hooking them in to a deeper reflection

Matthew Krouse

Mongezi Ncaphayi is the recipient of this year's Gerard Sekoto Award. The award forms part of the Absa L'Atelier Awards that are highly prized by young artists who may not have the resources to go abroad.

The drawcard is an opportunity to visit Paris for an extended stay — all expenses paid. For the overall winner, there's the promise of a solo exhibition upon their return.

This year's overall winner was Pauline Gutter from Bloemfontein. She presented a multimedia sculptural work that probes the issue of gender equality in Afrikaner farming communities.

Ncaphayi's work is much simpler. His print titled *Migrant Worker's Hostel* is made up of a series of lines and squares representing the monotony of a workers' barracks, but in a way that is light and full of mystery.

The Gerard Sekoto Award is given to a promising artist with an annual income of less than R60 000. As a reward for his effort, Ncaphayi is set to do a three-month residency in Paris.

that may show the hostel life in a harsher light?

I chose to work like this because I wanted to create a beautiful piece.

I don't like creating artworks that when you see them you feel very sad. From afar it had to draw you in. And then once you get closer to it you get a sense of what I'm talking about.

The work is actually kind of beautiful but the meaning behind it is not a good one. When I was studying art I used to draw people in the street, beggars and stuff. But if someone buys that art how can they live with it in their dining room? They have this artwork depicting beggars and at the same time people are eating?

So I thought I should have a different approach to it, where you don't get a sense of what it is from a distance, but when you get closer the title will guide you.

What is your experience of the hostels?

My grandfather once worked in a mine. But I don't think he lived in a hostel because I hear stories that before my grandfather and grandmother got a house they lived in another woman's house in Wattville, near Benoni. Growing up I used to go to the hostels and I used to sell stuff, trying to get pocket money. My friend's mother worked in a factory where they manufactured

roof nails. Somehow we got hold of those and we used to go there. People would buy the stuff and take it to the rural areas to build houses.

What other subjects have you dealt with?

I have always worked with the theme of migration. But before, my work used to be more representational. After receiving an exchange grant to go to the United States, I went to Boston to the School of the Museum

of Fine Arts. I got there and people were doing very abstract works. It was kind of like: "I'm home — this is what I want to do."

Who are the artists you admire now?

I admire Robin Rhode because he is explorative — even though I am a printmaker I like to see stuff that is out of the boundaries.

Who is your favourite musician?

Charles Lloyd is a saxophonist from Memphis but he is based in Los Angeles. Then, Charlie Parker and John Coltrane. Lloyd is a disciple of Coltrane. My work is inspired by music. I play the saxophone and I attended the Music Academy of Gauteng in Benoni, and when I got to Boston I found the students there

would be doing all forms of artwork. You would find someone doing painting and at the same time blowing glass, sometimes doing a sculpture and mixing it with sound. I was so inspired. What if I could create artworks out of which I would compose music? I could create a piece of music for each artwork.

When did you go to the Artist Proof Studio?

I started at the Artist Proof Studio in 2006 and was a student until 2008. After graduating I did an internship in their gallery for a year, and became the assistant in the gallery until I got the opportunity to go to Boston, and arrived back in June last year. I began producing and then my mother died ... I couldn't create art for the rest of the year.

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Do you think that winning the award will stimulate you to start producing again?

Yes. But this year I was invited back to the US. Some of my friends in Boston organised for me to attend a graphics conference for two weeks. When I got back, I started working on a two-man show with my colleague Themba Khumalo, also from Artist Proof Studios. He is doing cityscapes and my artwork will be mappings. So we didn't really discuss it but it will be about landscapes.

The top 100 works submitted to the Absa L'Atelier Awards will be on public display until August 22 at the Absa Gallery, upper ground level, Absa Towers North, 161 Main Street. Members of the public are requested to bring their ID books along for parking and entry purposes