

REMEMBERING



Picture by BAH

SELBY MVUSI

By Ntongela Masilela

A new African Artist honed in exile

memorable occasions of my exile experience in Nairobi was a party organised by him and his wife Nisa at their house. What made this event so extraordinary was the presence of many South African exiles in Kenya at the time irrespective of their political affiliation.

The words of Frantz Fanon dedicating *Black Skin, White Masks* to his elder brother, remind me of the elegance I found so striking in Mvusi: "The greatness of a man is to be found not in his acts but in his style. Existence does not resemble a steadily rising curve, but a slow, and sometimes sad, series of ups and downs. I have a horror of weaknesses – I understand them, but I do not like them. I do not agree with those who think it possible to live life at an easy pace. I don't want this . . ." (Peter Geismar, Fanon, New York, 1971).

As I really began to take note of this pivotal New African artist between 1966 and 1967, I became aware of the scale of his artistic talent and his intellectual stature. My Indian art teacher at Lord Delamare Boys School (later Upper Hill Secondary School) who immigrated to Kenya from Goa with her parents was taught by Mvusi at the University of Nairobi. She admired Mvusi for his unending quest for new ideas, new formulations and new artistic forms of expression. One of his hallmarks was his astute synthesis of industrial design and the African artistic imagination. He had successfully taken part at the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID), at its meeting in Bruges, Belgium in 1964.

I remember, too, attending the African Studies Association meeting in San Francisco in 1995 and walking through the streets with Professor Makhosezwe Bernard Magubane and reflecting on our country's democratic victory and the memory of those who had not lived to see it. Professor Magubane also shared wonderful memories of my father from the time when they were both students

at the University of California in Los Angeles in the early 1960s.

New African Movement

I regularly interacted with South African literary critic Lewis Nkosi in the late 1990s and he too confirmed the intellectual significance of his late friend Selby Mvusi. The two had last been together in Brazil in 1966, a few months before Mvusi's tragic car accident near the University of Nairobi. Like my father, he had not lived to see the new South Africa. I discussed this fact with his widow Nisa Mvusi when in March 2006, accompanied by poet Sandile Ngidi; I met with her and her daughter Lindiwe, for the first time in nearly forty years at the Fort West Heritage Foundation in Tshwane. The two now run a gallery that mainly features Mvusi's art.

This great African artist may have obtained his MA in Fine Arts from Boston University in June 1960, but given that he graduated with a BA degree in English and History from Fort Hare in 1951, it seems to me that his intellectual formation and modernistic sensibilities were largely shaped in the late 1940s and early 1950s by New African stalwarts such as R.V. Selope Thema, Jordan Ngubane, H.I.E. Dhlomo and R.R.R. Dhlomo among others. These were formidable intellectual figures at the time and their influence was enormous. This influence is apparent in the remarkable papers that Mvusi delivered at international forums in the early 1960s such as "The Social Significance of the Arts in Africa Today", "Current Revolution and Future Prospects", and "Towards a Contemporary Art in Africa".

In her exhibition catalogue *Current of Africa: The Art of Selby Mvusi* (1996), Elza Miles opened Mvusi's artistic work to the intellectual imagination of all South Africans and beyond. Besides providing the most succinct and cogent biography on the man, the catalogue also places his formidable cultural sensibility in an

Last year marked the 40th anniversary of the death of Selby Mvusi in Nairobi in 1967. His death in a car accident shattered the South African exile community in Kenya.

I recall the memorial service we held for Mvusi a few days before his body was sent to South Africa for burial. The memory is as vivid as the burial of my father Albert Mahlathini in Nairobi a year later. Our exile community in Kenya was undergoing a process of intellectual depletion. I'll never forget spending the whole New Year's Eve of 1968 walking the streets of Nairobi moving from one night club to another with Tony Mphahlele, Ezekiel Mphahlele's eldest son, commiserating between ourselves whether we, the children of exiles, would live long enough to see a democratic change that would enable us to tell narratives of our parents' exile experiences in a liberated South Africa.

Intellectual sustenance

The impact of Mvusi's untimely death was devastating because he had been the intellectual centre around which we exiles gravitated for emotional, cultural and intellectual sustenance. Given that the Kenya government had banned all exiles (be they from Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi or the Congo, and particularly from South Africa) from participating in any kind of politics, intellectual culture was the means by which exiles could express both their philosophical desires and their political convictions. Mvusi took over the mantle of intellectual leadership when Ezekiel Mphahlele left Kenya in 1966 for a professorship at the University of Colorado in the United States. Selby Mvusi was a decade younger than Ezekiel Mphahlele who was born in 1919. Both were intellectuals who expressed themselves through the creative arts of painting and literature respectively.

My father, seven years older than Mphahlele, was an industrial psychologist



"Retreat" Charcoal by Selby Mvusi

for the East African Community Federation, the body that enabled the then Tanganyika, Uganda and Kenya to share industrial resources and social services – he left to work for the Anglo-American Corporation in Lusaka when in 1966 the tricountry federation collapsed.

What was not apparent to me then at the age of 18 was that in inheriting the mantle of intellectual leadership of the exile community, Mvusi represented a long line of intellectual and political South African figures before him. After he had left South Africa in 1958 after winning the Ella Lehman Cabot Fellowship to study art at Pennsylvania State University, other artists, writers and intellectuals of the last constellation of the New African Movement, known as the Sophiatown Renaissance, remained at home. They only went into exile in 1960 following the political defeat of the New African modernity in the aftermath of the Sharpeville massacre.

Stylish and statuesque

Two images of Mvusi have remained permanently etched in my mind: stylish and statuesque. He was a tall man with impeccable manners and was always immaculately dressed. One of the most

international context. Having lived and taught in Zimbabwe, Ghana and Kenya at the time of agitations for African independence, Mvusi was open to African Nationalism and Pan Africanism in a way that life in South Africa would perhaps not have made this possible. Notable thinkers such as Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Sekou Toure, Frantz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral and Patrice Lumumba markedly enriched his intellectual and political insights.

Latin American influence

A singular merit of *Current of Africa* is its convincing argument that Mvusi was as brilliant an intellectual as he was a “major artist”. Miles detects the influences of the English Vorticism and American artistic Abstract Expressionism in the mature and later work of Mvusi. In this regard, she mentions the names of Wyndham Lewis and Jackson Pollock. Personally, I think positioning Mvusi in terms of Latin American modernism is more pertinent. Specifically, there are parallels and similarities between the Mexican modernism of Rufino Tamayo and the pathways of Selby Mvusi in his search for the possible forms of African modernism.

I have in mind the best period of Tamayo, which was the 1940s, when he sought a synthesis between the School of Paris (Georges Braque, Pablo Picasso, Juan Gris and others) and the great Mexican muralists of the 1930s (Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siquieros and Jose Clemente Orozco). In the same way that Tamayo had to make sense of the meaning of the great Amerindian civilisations of the past in the context of modernity, likewise Mvusi had to make sense of the legacy of the Shakan

revolution exemplified by the great royal court poets Magolwane and Mshongweni, also in the context of modernity. It is to Miles’ credit that she takes Mvusi’s poetic genius seriously. It would be interesting to know whether his poetry was inspired by these court poets of the nineteenth century mediated by Benedict Wallet Bhambatha Vilakazi’s literary modernism.

Exile experience

However, his later works in the early 60s such as *Trilogy: Abstract I/Untitled* and, *Trilogy: Abstract III/Untitled* (1963) show Mvusi’s Euro-American modernist influences. It would also appear that from Latin American modernism he embraced the spatial form to realise abstractness.

The browns and the dark colours of Mvusi and Tamayo are hard to locate within European modernism. It seems therefore that the journey undertaken by Lewis Nkosi and Mvusi to Rio de Janeiro in 1966 was not only about intellectual and political solidarity. Instead this trip provided Mvusi painterly affinities and inspiration from a continent that had a lot to share with Africa.

Possibly as well, the varied contextual references in Selby Mvusi’s abstract paintings were influenced by his exile experience. For instance, the abstract work *City II* brings to mind the paintings of Wilfredo Lam, the Cuban master. This also speaks of the importance of the exile period in South African intellectual history during the twentieth century. At least, this is one bold statement that Mvusi’s small surviving work makes pretty well. It nevertheless does not take away the sad reality that it was also in exile that so many of his works were lost.