



Cecil Skotnes (b.1926)

The first work by Cecil Skotnes that I saw was a large carved, incised and painted wood panel titled *South African Landscape*.¹ The work formed part of a Stephan Welz and Co/Sotheby's fine art auction held on Monday, 15 May 1989. As this auction marked the 20th anniversary of Sotheby's in South Africa, a unique catalogue was produced with colour illustrations of every work selected. Although undated, the work is one of Skotnes's first carved panels dating to the late 1950s or early 1960s. Large in scale and measuring 167 x 244 cm, this triptych by Skotnes had originally been commissioned for the foyer of a Johannesburg hotel.² The most remarkable feature, beyond its impressive scale, is that the work is without primary colour, which is the distinctive feature of all Skotnes's later carved panels. These panels were created using black ink only which contrasts beautifully with the raw timber. I have been fortunate over the years to see more than 100 carved and incised panels by Skotnes and this work still remains the only example without the use of primary colours.

This poses the questions of how Skotnes came to work with carved wood panels in the first place and why he made the progression from black and white to colour. In 1955 Skotnes met Egon Guenther who was an art connoisseur and collector extraordinaire. Guenther and Skotnes shared a mutual interest in woodcuts.³ As a result, Skotnes began to experiment with the woodcut medium and the following year produced his first woodcuts printed in black only. These prints were made from the original carved and incised wood panels created by Skotnes. Although the woodcut technique was then entirely new to Skotnes, he spent the next four years exclusively on printmaking, concentrating all his time mastering the woodcut. Within this short period, Skotnes matured into one of South Africa's most notable and distinguished graphic artists of the post-World War II period. The success of Skotnes's prints can be attributed directly to his meticulous and profound abilities as a craftsman during the carving process. The great beauty of the carved and incised wood panels led Skotnes to submit his first carved and painted wood panel for exhibition to the São Paulo Biennale in 1959. These early panels were monochromatic with the negative space of the relief shaded in white or grey. Sometimes Skotnes preferred to leave exposed the beauty of the raw timber beneath. The raised contour surface would be inked in stark black.

This first carved and incised panel was enthusiastically received by international art critics and visitors alike. Back in South Africa the following year, Skotnes held his first solo exhibition of carved wood panels at the Egon Guenther Gallery. Again, this exhibition was enthusiastically received by local critics and art collectors. From 1960 onwards the carved, incised and painted wood panels became Skotnes's main creative focus. By the mid-1960s Skotnes was beginning to introduce colour, starting initially with red only before incorporating further colours, particularly white, blue, orange and yellow. This use of primary colours was combined with his more subdued palette of earthy tones of ochre and brown. Although Skotnes produced his finest carved and painted panels in the late 1960s and early 1970s, he had not forgotten his love for printmaking.

In 1972 Skotnes illustrated a volume of poems by South African poet and beatnik Sinclair Beiles titled *Tales*.⁴ Beiles had spent time with William Burroughs, Gregory Corso and Brion Gyson living at the Beat Hotel in Paris. Beiles, Burroughs, Corso and Gyson co-authored the seminal cut-up poetry work titled *Minutes to Go* in 1959.⁵ Beiles was by then living in Greece and kept in close contact with his friend Stephen Gray, the South African poet and writer. Gray selected 21 poems by Beiles and asked his friend Cecil Skotnes to do the cover design and six colour woodcuts for the book. *Tales* was published in 1972 and was sold out almost immediately. It is now a collector's item. This first collaboration between Gray and Skotnes led to further portfolios of woodcuts that were accompanied by Stephen Gray's poems. These books have all become collectables and include *Shaka Zulu* (1973), *White Monday Disaster* (1975), *Baudelaire's Voyage* (1975), *Ten Landscapes* (1976) and *Man's Gold* (1977). Warren Siebrits

Previous page detail and opposite:
Skotnes, Cecil Edwin Frans (b.1926)
Night Figure I 1936
Oil on carved wood panel, 121.5 x 89.5 cm



Sydney Kumalo (1935-1988)

Sydney Kumalo was born in Western Native Township, adjacent to Sophiatown west of Johannesburg, and obtained his junior certificate from Madibane High School in Diepkloof near Johannesburg. In 1952 he enrolled at the Polly Street Art Centre, first working under and then collaborating with Cecil Skotnes. Skotnes immediately recognised Kumalo's potential as a sculptor from his proficient draughtsmanship and the two artists worked on several commissions. This included a series of murals, terracotta reliefs and sculptures for St Peter Claver Catholic Church at Seisoiville township in Kroonstad. Here Kumalo produced the *Fourteen Stations of the Cross*. Kumalo became Eduardo Villa's apprentice from 1958 to 1959 in order to enhance his three-dimensional sensibility. Villa, who probably has the most public commissions of any South African artist, introduced Kumalo to artists such as Marino Marini and Henry Moore. Kumalo was the first black African artist to produce a public sculpture – titled *The Blessing* (1980) – in Cape Town.

In 1960, when Skotnes resigned his position to become a full-time artist, Kumalo assumed the position of cultural officer at Polly Street. Kumalo became an artist-as-teacher role model, and was succeeded at Polly Street by Ezrom Legae and Ben Arnold. This period, along with his teaching at Jubilee Social Centre, provided a brief but formative and inspirational influence on a generation of artists. In many ways Polly Street became the prototype of the community art-centre concept, and the precursor of a system of art education in which established artists imparted skills to potential artists.

Other art centres that played an important role in art education include the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC) Arts and Crafts Centre (popularly known as Rorke's Drift) in KwaZulu-Natal, the Community Arts Project (CAP) in Cape Town, the Federated Union of Black Artists (FUBA) Academy and the Open School, both in Johannesburg, Funda Centre in Soweto and the Katlehong Art Centre on the East Rand. Among the students who emerged from the art-centre concept were David Mogano, Nathaniel Mokgosi, Percy Sedumedi, Cyril Kumalo and Leonard Matsoso. The art-centre concept gained momentum during the turbulent 1980s. Some of the centres that produced anti-apartheid posters and calendars were CAP and the Open School. Both were aligned with the mass democratic movement, and many artists also designed logos and posters for the labour movement. There are very few independent art centres still operating today due to funding and related problems.

Kumalo exhibited as part of the Amadlozi Group in 1961, along with Cecil Skotnes, Eduardo Villa, Guiseppe Cattaneo and Cecily Sash. Between 1963 and 1964 he exhibited with the Amadlozi Group in Rome, Milan, Venice and Florence.

Like Skotnes before him, Kumalo left teaching to become a full-time artist in 1964. This was the year in which he and Skotnes collaborated on *Three Players*, a fountain commission for the Johannesburg Civic Theatre, after the commission's original recipient, Ernest Ullman, was unable to take up the award. *Three Players* was Kumalo's baptism of fire into professionalism. Although Kumalo had a self-effacing personality, his stature as an artist became locally and internationally recognised with exhibitions at the Grosvenor Gallery in London in 1965 (first as part of a group show titled *Fifty Years of Sculpture* and then in a shared exhibition with Cecil Skotnes), the Republic Festival and Venice Biennale in 1966, and the São Paulo Biennale in 1967. In 1969 Kumalo's work was included in the exhibition *Contemporary South African Art* at the Camden Arts Centre in London.

The bronze *Whistling Boy* (1979-1980) by Kumalo is a striking composition of a standing figure with head tilted back and body taut with tension, arms thrust back and chest out as if releasing a shrill whistle. It is common in the townships to hear a dialogue conducted through whistle signals or code in the streets at night. **David Koloane**

Opposite:
Kumalo, Sydney (1935-1988)
Whistling Boy 1979-80
Bronze, 93 cm high





Left:
Villa, Edoardo (b.1920)
Confluence 1987
 Steel painted with enamel, 132 x 52 x 53 cm

Right:
Sithole, Lucas (1931-1994)
Mother Holding a Baby 1960
 Lead/white metal on wire mesh armature,
 108 x 16 x 14 cm

Opposite:
Legae, Ezrom Kgobokanyo Sebata (1938-1999)
Metamorphosis of a Fossilised Horse 1984
 Graphite and oil wash, 48 x 35 cm



Polly Street and the Amadlozi Group

The Polly Street Art Centre in Johannesburg opened in 1949 and gained momentum with the appointment of Cecil Skotnes as its cultural officer in 1952. In this position, Skotnes initiated a network of support for the Centre, including art materials, food and even offers of exhibitions from some galleries. At the time there were very few black sculptors in urban areas, primarily because of the inaccessibility of materials and lack of facilities. The Centre itself was without proper sculpture facilities, and catered primarily for painters. Watercolour painting was a favourite medium at the Centre because of its flexibility and spatial economy. Lucas Sithole, who later became a prominent sculptor, initially studied painting at Polly Street from 1959 to 1960. Skotnes eventually circumvented the lack of a sculpture programme by identifying prospective students with three-dimensional potential, including Tosby Keipelele, Sydney Kumalo, Ezrom Legae and Ben Arnold, and then introducing them to inexpensive terracotta clay that was traditionally used in manufacturing bricks. Legae's early sculptures, and later the drawings and graphics for which he became so well known, delicately straddled African and modernist sensibilities, creating powerful statements of the political violence. The introduction of the terracotta technique brought in its wake several commissions and exhibitions for the Polly Street artists.



ERON LEONE '84



Above:
Sibiya, Lucky Madlo (1942-1999)
Wedding Rehearsal 1990
Mixed media on paper, 57 x 75 cm

Skotnes himself was a painter until he met gallery owner and collector, Egon Guenther, whose African art collection, along with work by Willie Baumeister, had a significant influence on Skotnes's extension of his practice into wood engraving and printmaking. Egon Guenther had a passionate interest in African art. He immigrated to South Africa from Germany in 1951 and inspired numerous artists with his collection of African art. In 1961 Guenther persuaded Skotnes, Eduardo Villa, Sydney Kumalo, Giuseppe Cattaneo and Cecily Sash to stage an exhibition in his Johannesburg gallery. Inspired by African forms and a desire to incorporate African idioms into their work, the group became known as the Amadlozi Group, after Skotnes coined the name meaning "in the spirit of the ancestors". Villa's *Confluence* (1987), conceived in an elegant rhythm of forms, resonates a dance rhythm, while Lucas Sithole's *Mother Holding a Baby* (1960) is rendered in the artist's elongated form and economy of the time. Here the clinging forms of the figures melt into a single form or bond. *Metamorphosis of a Fossilised Horse* (1984) by Ezrom Legae is a surreal drawing delicately executed in a fusion of human and animal form, which imbues the composition with an impression of fragility. Legae was not only an innovative sculptor, but also one of the best draughtsmen in South Africa. Lucky Sibiya is also a product of Polly Street, having studied under Cecil Skotnes. His *Wedding Rehearsal* (1990) comprises dancing anthropomorphic figures in browns and reds, in a style that shares a number of similarities with Skotnes. When Ezrom Legae took over from Sydney Kumalo at Polly Street, one of his students was Leonard Matsoso. *Zulu Traditional Dancers II* (1980) by Matsoso is a three-dimensional drawing that utilises cubist elements to create rhythmic exuberance. David Koloane

Right:
Matsoso, Leonard (b. 1949)
Zulu Traditional Dancers II 1980
Oil pastel on paper, 178 x 83.5 cm



Lucky Sibiya (1942-1999)

Lucky Sibiya was born in Vryheid, KwaZulu-Natal, in 1942. This town forms part of the landscape where the English and Afrikaner, assisted by black South Africans on both sides, fought in the South African War (1899-1902) that paved the way for the Union of South Africa in 1910. The truce brought together English and Afrikaner nationalisms in a power sharing that left out the majority of Africans. This was to haunt the subsequent minority governments until the first democratic elections in 1994.

Vryheid is a rural town endowed with rolling hills and open spaces. The young Sibiya was consumed by its warm colours, which later manifested themselves in his paintings, sculptures and prints. While growing up, Sibiya enjoyed the beauty and the serene nature of Vryheid, oblivious of its trauma and how it would haunt him later in his artistic practice.

The young Sibiya and his eight siblings migrated with their sangoma father to Sophiatown, Johannesburg. Sophiatown was one of the jewels of multi-ethnic and multicultural life in South Africa before the ugly face of apartheid bulldozed it to the ground, making way for the whites-only suburb, Triomf. This was also to leave an imprint on Sibiya.

The Sibiya family then settled in Soweto, where most of Sophiatown's former residents were forced to live by the then National Party government. The observant Sibiya began carving designs on found objects. His father, who stressed the importance of education, sent the young Sibiya to Hammanskraal, about 150 kilometres north of Johannesburg, to St Peter's Seminary School, where he began and completed his schooling. On completion of his schooling, Sibiya worked at his designs, which he sold to local gallery owners.

It was during one of these gallery visits that Sibiya met Dumile Feni, who introduced him to one of the doyens of South African art, Bill Ainslie. Ainslie's studio in Saxonwold, one of Johannesburg's wealthy northern suburbs, was a haven for artists, musicians and poets at the height of apartheid. Ainslie, in turn, introduced Sibiya to Cecil Skotnes, who was in charge of the Polly Street Art Centre that offered art classes mainly to urban Africans.

In Sibiya's work Skotnes recognised a talent that needed to be nurtured outside the studio programmes given to other students. Skotnes felt the formal art programmes offered at the Centre would derail the excellence in Sibiya's oeuvre. Thus began a long mentorship between Skotnes and Sibiya, something that has confused scholars about who taught whom. Pipa Skotnes dismisses the mythologising of the relationship between the two artists: "Even though there was a mentoring relationship between Sibiya and my father, they were also good friends. Sibiya was interested in everything and absorbed influences from all over the place."¹

Sibiya was very sensitive and generous in nature, and worked hard to help support his siblings, as well as his own children. While his father's teachings were fundamental to Sibiya's sense of responsibility, the reality of working as an artist during apartheid drove him to severe drinking to hide his perceived failure to look after his family. Sibiya characteristically applied oils to carved wood panels, but also used other pigments on paper or canvas. His sculptures often featured wood, bone and metal, and his printmaking included serigraphs and woodcuts. As his friendship with Skotnes grew his work began to take a more conceptual focus. The most important characteristic of Sibiya's work is the use of colours, abstract shapes and forms. His palette is populated by reds, ambers, blues and browns. Later he would reminisce about missing the beautiful landscape of Vryheid. What set Sibiya apart from his mentor and peers alike was his pioneering use of found objects. He had a great sense of design and composition. His use of colour over the incised wood or rusted metal introduced the viewer to complex uses of shapes. For Sibiya the joy of art making was to experiment with various media and colours to produce pieces that repeatedly engaged the viewer's navigation of the composition.

In *The Spotted Brahman* (1990) the shapes evoke the forms of buffalo, rocks, earth and rusted metal. The selection and layout are not concerned with the narrative, but with the arrangement of shapes and forms. The balance in the use of colour is harmonious and subdued. It evokes Sibiya's memory of his sangoma father throwing bones. The shapes of the bones fascinated Sibiya so much that he began to incorporate them into his carvings. In the conflict between spiritual and real worlds, it is the ritual rather than the act that is significant. The diviner enters the spiritual realm to decipher shapes and forms. When put into the vocabulary of the diviner, these translations have particular meanings.

Sipho Mdana

Opposite:
Sibiya, *Lucky Madlo* (1942-1999)
The Spotted Brahman 1990
Oil on carved panel, 53.5 x 62.3 cm



Gerard Bhengu (1910-1990)

Along with Gerard Sekoto, George Pemba, Gladys Mgudlandlu, Ernest Mancoba and Nelson Mukhuba, Gerard Bhengu is now well recognised as one of the early pioneers of contemporary African art. But, as David Bunn asked in his opening address for the exhibition *Land and Lives: A Story of Early Black Artists*, "what is a 'pioneer'?" He suggested that, "the word speaks of frontiers ... to be a pioneer, in the old, ideologically charged sense of the word, meant to break new ground, in a spirit of innovation, against a field of resistances." Bhengu is a pioneer: To be a black artist in the bleak years of apartheid South Africa was to work against a field of resistance; he is a pioneer for the ways in which his life and art have assisted in establishing the syntax of contemporary African art. But there is no sense of the heroic, the mighty or the powerful in Bhengu's experience.

Born at the Mariannhill Mission at Centecow, KwaZulu-Natal in 1910, at the time of Union in South Africa and just before the catastrophic 1913 Natives Land Act, about which Sol Plaatje wrote in the *Native Life in South Africa* (1916) that it made the black person "not actually a slave, but a pariah in the land of his birth", Bhengu's life path would be fraught with politically driven difficulty. Bhengu was educated at the Roman Catholic Mission School at Centecow, in the Creighton district of KwaZulu-Natal. He was treated for tuberculosis by the mission station's doctor, Max Kohler, who noticed Bhengu's artistic talent and commissioned illustrations for his research on *Marriage Customs in Southern Natal* (1933), which was published by the Department of Native Affairs, and then commissioned further illustrations for his book *The Izangoma Diviners* (1941). Kohler also arranged a studio space at Centecow where Bhengu worked from 1926 to 1931. Later, the Department of Education also made studio space available to Bhengu in exchange for a series of illustrations for Zulu textbooks.

Although his talents as a painter were noticed and encouraged from early on and he received significant mentorship and support from several people, most of this nurturing seemed to uphold the notion that art should be imitative or life-like. Bhengu was encouraged along these lines, receiving first from Kohler, and then from others, images of great European landscapes, portraits, and Madonna figures. These unfamiliar influences, and the conservative, small, and mostly white buying public of the time who valued the standards of the British art academies, led to Bhengu's adoption of a range of Western pictorial conventions and the production of art that appeared natural and was often illustrative.

In many ways Bhengu's work reinforces the colonial view of African culture as hermetically sealed and unchanging. His *Sangomas* in full 'exotic' regalia, old gap-toothed Zulu men with headrings, and bare-breasted women are all visual affirmations of colonial stereotypes of a culturally-preserved or 'natural' Africa. It is ironic then that although made in a style and medium inherently contradictory to notions of a static and 'untainted' Africa, and commissioned to present a conservative view of Africans as traditional and 'culturally preserved', Bhengu's works sit strongly within the Western idiom of painting and likeness.

Bhengu's portraits are acutely observed studies of individuals. Made from life and with a focus on accuracy and detail, his unnamed portraits nonetheless appear stereotypical and ethnographic. They draw heavily on Western notions of portraiture where, in this example, the subject is presented head and shoulders, in a three-quarter pose, with a plain background (a device used to frame and focus attention on the head). His realist style and tendency to fade out the figure before it reaches the edge of the format, and the blank background, are reminiscent of early studio photography, which appealed to the same desire for a truthful record.

Along with the early European patronage and influence, Bhengu was also highly regarded and supported by Zulu intellectuals of the time, including Herbert Dhlomo (1903-1956), a celebrated literary figure and critic. Dhlomo's brother, the author R R R Dhlomo, commissioned Bhengu to illustrate his Zulu textbook *Izikhali Zanamuhla*. The ethnographer, Dr Killie Campbell, commissioned Bhengu from 1942 onwards. Phyllis Savory asked him to illustrate her book *Xhosa Fireside Tales* (1962), and he later produced a book with her titled *Gerard Bhengu: Zulu Artist* (1965), containing illustrations of people in traditional Zulu dress. Along with these commissions, Bhengu was featured in various group exhibitions in the 1940s. These opportunities for exposure all but dried up until acknowledgement and interest in his work picked up towards the end of his life with his inclusion in several ground-breaking exhibitions: *The Neglected Tradition* (1988); *Panoramas of Passage: Changing Landscapes of South Africa* (1995); *Gerard Bhengu 1910-1990: A Retrospective Exhibition* (1995); and *Land and Lives: A Story of Early Black Artists* (1997). **Joni Brenner**

Opposite:
Bhengu, Gerard (1910-1990)
Portrait of a Man Undated
Watercolour on paper, 36 x 27 cm