





Portraiture

Made just prior to the Union of South Africa in 1910, which marked the official end of the British colonial era in South Africa, the sculpture by Anton van Wouw, tellingly titled *Zulu* (1907), reflects the colonial impulse of its time. Embodying an attitude typical of colonial presence in South Africa this portrait bust, while skilfully modelled and cast in bronze – a medium historically loaded with associations of importance and status – presents a type or category of person rather than any named individual, which would be usual for this kind of portraiture. Van Wouw arrived in South Africa from the Netherlands in 1890 and settled in Pretoria where he eventually received various public commissions, the first of which was a monumental sculpture of then-President Paul Kruger. Van Wouw identified closely with the Afrikaner nationalist struggle, and accepted several similar commissions, including the massive sculpture of Piet Retief and monumental mother with two children for the Voortrekker Monument, as well as the Women's Memorial sculpture in Bloemfontein. These heroic sculptures are of a different ilk altogether to his small, unnamed and generically classified studies of black South Africans, suggesting a very particular political and ideological moment in South Africa's history. Van Wouw's bronze *Zulu*, poignantly and sincerely crafted, is here coupled with contemporary artist Wim Botha's *Generic Self Portrait* (2003). Cast in reconstituted marble, from a mould rather than individually carved, Botha's work is suspended as though poised for removal or to be toppled. Undermining the values of status, originality and uniqueness inherent in the grand tradition of the portrait bust, Botha's sculpture presents a wry engagement with the cyclical processes of power and authority and their impact on representation. This evocative coupling of sculptures in the Collection presents an interesting meditation on portrait making – and on collecting – in this country.

Above:
Botha, Wim (b.1974)
Generic Self Portrait 2003 (set of five busts)
Artificial marble and velvet, 74 cm each



Right:
Van Wouw, Anton (1862-1945)
Zulu 1907
Bronze, 52 x 23 x 25 cm



Above:
Skotnes, Cecil Edwin Frans (b.1926)
Head IV 1987
 Oil on carved wood panel, 122 x 122 cm

Opposite:
Preller, Alexis (1911-1975)
The Great King 1962
 Oil and acrylic on canvas, 87 x 102 cm

While missionaries and educators brought Western artistic practices to the attention of black South African artists in the early part of the 20th century, what is significant about both Alexis Preller and Cecil Skotnes is their deep investigation and integration of African artistic processes and iconographies. Differently present in their works is an awareness of the art forms from across the African continent, including ancient Egyptian tomb paintings, articulated fractured masks and stylised sculpted heads of West and Central Africa, and conical stacked forms of Ndebele beaded figures of southern Africa. Preller's jewel-like, detailed painting *The Great King* (1962) shows a head in left profile. An auburn helmet-like headdress topped with a brown and gold skullcap frames the pensive young face, smooth and porcelain-like. The jaw-line is darkly underlined and rests atop a cylindrical and articulated neck, encircled at the base by two coiled bands that strongly evoke Ndebele beaded figures. The front-facing, lozenge-shaped eye and solid headdress recall ancient Egypt. The eye also recalls the exaggerated or elongated features of African masks, and the headdress evokes the matted hairstyles of South African Pedi child figures and other figurative carvings. Though delicate and painterly, Preller's head has a monumental sculptural presence. Strangely, though rendered with a high level of specificity, the identity of the subject remains ungraspable, presenting a surreal or fantastical image filled with evocative yet ambiguous emblems and symbols. Skotnes's iconic wood-carved panel, *Head IV* (1987), has a compelling monumentality and evokes the physicality of three-dimensional sculpture. Indeed, it is as if this fist-like head shifts between a frontal view with a horizontal row of scalloped forms for eyes, nose and mouth, and a left profile with fine straggly beard and thin neck. The composite forms that are melded together to create this head recall the fractured articulation of many African masks and sculptures. **Joni Brenner**



Gladys Mgudlandlu (1917-1979)

Forming part of the Expressionist tradition in South African art, but not exposed directly to German Expressionism like Maggie Laubser and Irma Stern, Gladys Mgudlandlu was a schoolteacher by day and a largely self-taught artist by night. After completing her schooling in Port Elizabeth and obtaining a teaching qualification from Lovedale College in Alice, Mgudlandlu turned to nursing for a period, before becoming a teacher. By 1944 she had moved to Cape Town with her father. After first teaching in Athlone, the combination of the Group Areas Act that proclaimed the area 'coloured' and the 1953 Bantu Education Act meant that Mgudlandlu was moved to schools in Nyanga and Guguletu, eventually ending up at Nobantu Lower Primary School, where she taught until 1977.¹

Mgudlandlu's oeuvre combines highly personal responses to the memory of her rural upbringing and, to a lesser extent, the reality of an urban existence in Cape Town where she lived and worked. Much of Mgudlandlu's work is preoccupied with memories of her childhood growing up in the care of a grandmother in the Eastern Cape. This imagined sense of rural life is not only informed by Xhosa and Fingo traditions, but is also composed in a manner that often renders these scenes idyllic. One of the unique strengths of Mgudlandlu's expression is her representational manipulation of the urban spaces around Cape Town: District Six, Guguletu, Langa, Nyanga and the ever-present Table Mountain, are collapsed, curled, twisted and regimented to over-emphasise the artist's emotive reading of swirling urban landscapes.

These cityscapes make little or no reference to the stark realities of social division effected by apartheid, and in her work more generally; Mgudlandlu rarely alludes to the social injustice that occurred under apartheid, especially in the 1960s when bannings and treason trials sought to crush the anti-apartheid struggle. In what is a telling irony, Mgudlandlu held her first exhibition in the Liberal Party offices in Cape Town in 1961.² This was followed by regular exhibitions at the Rodin Gallery in Cape Town for the rest of the decade. Not surprisingly, Mgudlandlu's art was popular among middle-class white society. But this did not preclude her from serious criticism. In 'Gladys Mgudlandlu: the Exuberant Innocent', first published in *The New African* in 1963, Bessie Head makes a comparison between Ephraim Ngatane and Mgudlandlu, differentiating between their respective artistic strengths and weaknesses: "Compared to the clean-cut, sharp and brilliant technique of the Johannesburg artist Ephraim Ngatane, Miss Mgudlandlu indulges in childish scrawl".³ Head goes on to describe Mgudlandlu as an "escapist" and makes this judgement the basis of her gallery success:

... I believe that it is on the appeal of this escape release that she so profusely and exuberantly provides, that Miss Mgudlandlu's phenomenal success rests. Miss Mgudlandlu is too innocent and unaware to have deliberately contrived this state of affairs. As an artist I believe her to be truthful within her capacities and limitations. There is simply a demand for escape and she is the unconscious supply. Had there not been this demand I for one do not believe that Miss Mgudlandlu would be basking in [the] warmth of overwhelming public adulation. In fact, such sweeping, hysterical uncritical acclaim is disastrous for an artist who must always be subjected to those agonising doubts which spur him on to greater and higher achievements.⁴

In many ways, Head makes Mgudlandlu the 'victim' of a gallery system that demanded particular kinds of work. But her strongly argued position in *The New African* only captures one side of the coin, for in spite of the absence of a political sensibility in her work, Mgudlandlu quite remarkably stands out as one of the few (and perhaps only) black women painting and exhibiting in South Africa in the 1960s. After a debilitating car accident in 1971, Mgudlandlu's artistic productivity declined and she held her last solo exhibition in 1972. She died poor and overlooked by the South African art public in 1979. She was quickly forgotten by a media that had so lavishly overwhelmed her with publicity each time she exhibited in galleries. The true extent of her contribution to South African visual art was only recuperated with a touring retrospective exhibition in 2002, organised by the Johannesburg Art Gallery and curated by Elza Miles. In 2003 Mgudlandlu was posthumously awarded the Order of Ikhamanga in Silver by the President of the Republic of South Africa, for her pioneering contribution to visual arts in South Africa.

Kneeling in prayer, the twin figures in Mgudlandlu's *Two Girls* (1967), like her other representational pairings of young girls, were probably inspired by the artist's twin granddaughters.⁵ Rory Bester

Opposite:
Mgudlandlu, Gladys (1917-1979)
Two Girls 1967
Gouache on paper, 55.5 x 37 cm



Ephraim Ngatane (1938-1971)

Ephraim Ngatane was born in Lesotho but came to Johannesburg as a young child, and spent the rest of his life there. After leaving Orlando High School he began studying art at the Polly Street Art Centre, under Cecil Skotnes. By 1956 he was teaching at the Jubilee Art Centre where he mentored artists such as Ben Macala and Winston Saoli. Ngatane's work was first shown as part of *Artists of Fame and Promise*, an exhibition at the Adler-Fielding Art Gallery in Johannesburg in 1960. He held his first solo exhibition in 1962, followed by another in 1964.

Set mainly in townships around Johannesburg, Ngatane's output commonly included both wide views and intimate details of an urban black working class shifting between the dehumanising hardships of an overcrowded environment with limited infrastructure, and the humanising effects of family and social life, music and sport. What distinguishes Ngatane's style is his use of abstraction's ability to move a composition beyond the simplicities of stereotypical and sentimental representation. His fragmented forms are subtle rather than overt in their observation of social reality. These observational renditions of everyday life made Ngatane one of the early 'township' artists, long before the category became tarnished by stereotypical views and scenes, and are most likely the inspiration for Bessie Head's forceful celebration of the 'failure' of his work in opposition to the gallery successes of Gladys Mgudlandlu in *The New African* in 1963:

... when he exhibited in Cape Town two months ago he received a dead-cold snub. He is an intense, passionate, controlled, vividly imaginative artist and his Township Scenes rebound and vibrate with life. The trouble with Mr Ngatane, it seems, is that his intensity and realistic approach is irksome. He reminds people, who would rather forget, that townships are nasty places where people have to walk some two hundred yards to fetch water from a communal tap shared by some 80,000 township inhabitants. He is annoying too, because, behind the colour, the hysterical exhilaration of his massed and teeming streets, is the degradation of poverty. Who wants to be reminded of the terrors of township living? It is ugly, horrible and sordid. So, let the ambiguous Mr Ngatane rot; the fate of all those who shatter the calm of society's built-in illusions.¹

While it is not clear to which solo or group exhibition Head is referring, from the various biographical compilations of the artist's exhibitions, it appears that Ngatane did not exhibit in Cape Town after 1963. While Mgudlandlu's urban landscapes are graphic in their organisation of unpeopled space, making little reference to everyday life, Ngatane's township views are often very particular in their introduction of spatial and atmospheric elements that have a direct and real bearing on the ordinary actions and activities of the human figures in the compositions.

When Ngatane and Dumile Feni happened to both be admitted to Baragwanath Hospital, the matron requested that they paint murals together on the hospital's walls. By this time Ngatane had already produced murals at the Tumelo Community School in Meadowlands and the St Mary's Chapel at the Mooki Memorial College in Orlando, which he painted as an acknowledgement to Mrs E L Mooki and the Reverend Obed Mooki, who had supported and encouraged him during his primary schooling.² In 1966 his work was included in an exhibition of African art at the Piccadilly Gallery in London, as well as in the *Republic Festival* exhibition. Ngatane died of tuberculosis at Baragwanath Hospital, Soweto, in 1971.

Ngatane's *Family Group* (1964) is noteworthy for two reasons. Firstly, it is an oil painting. Initially Ngatane worked in watercolour, gouache and charcoal, and only later turned to oil. Secondly, it is an interior view unlike the many exterior scenes for which the artist is so well known. The adults and children in the composition are tightly arranged in an interior that is more confined than defined. In combination with brushwork that is highly gestural and a limited colour range, Ngatane has created a domestic scene charged with a poignancy that is both quiet and expectant. **Rory Bester**

Opposite and detail overleaf left:
Ngatane, Ephraim (1938-1971)
Family Group 1964
Oil on canvas, 62 x 45.5 cm









The lure of water

Every nation's history of art has its group of artists who are attracted by water and the representation thereof. These water works often capture either the dramatic power of the sea or the contemplative quiet of streams and rivers. Many of the works include forms of human presence that are affected by and influence the currents and flows of water. Sea and riverscapes are well represented in the South African Reserve Bank's Art Collection. The riverscapes in the Collection generally have the image of water contextualised by flora, fauna and human presence. The seascapes mostly conform to one of three categories: Beach views of the open sea, harbour scenes, and the everyday life of fishing communities. The fishing village of Arniston, with its rambling cottages, washing lines and small boats, has attracted a lineage of South African artists. Similar to his many views of the Malay Quarter in Cape Town, Alexander Rose-Innes's undated *Arniston* is a picturesque rendition of the irregularity and dilapidation of a poor community struggling to make a living, in this case, from the sea. Important in the picturesque is the compositional selection and organisation of the canvas in ways that transform what are often gruelling material conditions into an agreeable subject for a picture (and hence the term "picturesque"). Pieter Wenning's *Kalk Bay* (1914), a quiet view across the rocks to a Cape Peninsula village harbour used by small fishing boats, is less sentimental in its rendition of the picturesque, due in part to the artist's focus on the harbour rather than the fishermen's dwellings, and the use of a more distant view of the primary subject.

Detail previous page and above:
Rose-Innes, Alexander (1915-1996)
Arniston Undated
 Oil on canvas, 56.5 x 71 cm

Opposite:
Wenning, Pieter Willem Frederik (1873-1921)
Kalk Bay 1914
 Oil on canvas, 38 x 48.5 cm