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DUMILE, Zwelidumile - Artist Profile

dumile

(1939 – 1991)

“One day I was in the Township with this driver and we went past a line of men who were all handcuffed. I don’t know what for, maybe for having no pass or something. Anyway the driver said, ‘Why don’t you ever draw things like that?’ I didn’t know what to say. Then just when I was still thinking, a funeral for a child came past. A funeral on a Monday morning. You know, all the people in black on a lorry. And as the funeral went past those men in handcuffs, those men watched it go past, and those with hats took off their hats. I said to the guy I was with, ‘That’s what I want to draw!’ “

Dumile is the Flaneur of South Africa. It was Guillaume Appolinaire who at the end of the 19th Century coined the term when describing the artist Edouard Manet and how he documented and observed in his paintings the reality of Modern day life. Dumile continued this tradition but chose as his subject the reality of life as a Black man in South Africa.

This introduction will fail where the illustrations will hopefully succeed in demonstrating the intensity of the artist’s work and his ability to convey emotion. Nor will it reveal the loneliness and perils Dumile suffered, penniless and humiliated throughout his life. His legacy is a limited amount of drawings and sculptures which are in most major South African museums. This collection of drawings bought directly from the artist represents works from his period in exile from South Africa beginning from his arrival in England in 1968 and ending in 1991 with his death in New York.

DUMILE was born on 1st of May 1942 in Worcestor, a little town in the Cape Province to devout Christian parents who were members of the Xhosa tribe. His father was an active lay preacher. At the age of 6, after his mother’s death, the family moved to Cape Town. Life was hard as the artists recollected: “One day when I was very small, I was walking in the street and I found a guitar. A real, new guitar just lying there! I picked it up and took it home. Hey, I was so happy! But my Father was evangelist and he wouldn’t let me play it. So it just sat there. And then one day I pulled off one string and another day I pulled off another string. It wasn’t being used. Then I began to pull it apart and one day we used it for firewood.¹”

From an early age he loved drawing and carving. He was known to draw on every conceivable surface which led to trouble at school where he would be punished for defacing school books. For him it was a compulsion and so as to avoid punishment and to hang around with his friends he began to skip lessons, although when playing truant he would still sit and draw whilst his friends would do more boyish things.

At the age of eleven his father’s health was deteriorating and he was sent to live with his uncle in Johannesburg. Six years later in 1959 his father died. The same year Dumile began working in a pottery, painting “native scenes” (aloes, huts, hillsides, blanketed figures). He continued working in the pottery until 1963 when he contracted tuberculosis and was isolated in the Baragwanath Sanatorium for 3 months. Fortuitously he met another talented young man who would also later become an artist and lifelong friend Ephraim Ngatane. By this stage Dumile had begun doing his own sculptures and was keen to develop his skill as a stone carver and his confidence was building when the nurses asked him to paint murals in the sanatorium.

Encouraged by this experience Dumile began to show an interest in Fine Art. He visited an exhibition of Boboreki's sculpture, one of the first exhibitions he had ever seen. He tried to meet the artist and went along to the Gallery 101. There he met Madame Haengi, the director who was willing to see the young artist's work. He showed her some of his small sculptures and drawings. She was obviously impressed and this led to his first break and an exhibition.

Dumile's name and reputation spread pretty fast in the Art scene of Joburg and his strong expressive, direct drawings made a strong impact. Within two years Dumile had three one-man exhibitions, represented South Africa with five works at the Sao Paulo Biennale of 1967, and participated in several group exhibitions as well as prizes.

Despite the exhibitions and success, Dumile was in a tight corner on one side he was flying the flag for South Africa whilst his works were openly critical of the regime. It could not last and the publicity his works received led to him being targeted.

"I would not have had harassment that I had if not for my ideas and also the titles – always the titles – that I give my work. They couldn't take that, you know. Also some of the compositions that I did. 2"

At the time it was illegal for a Black person to move to a city without authority or full time employment. The authorities questioned Dumile's artistic merit asking him to prove that being an artist was a proper job. Despite having a contract with Gallery 101 he was refused the pass and threatened with eviction to a tribal reservation, which would have meant the end of artistic career. There was one alternative leave the country. "The Government have given me six months to stay in Johannesburg. Then they say I must go back to where I was born. To the reserve in the Cape. I want to stay in Johannesburg because here is where my friends are and art. I am trying to get a passport for overseas. I want to see America and Europe. Then I want to live in Swaziland. Why do I want to live in Swaziland? Well, because it isn't my home. So when bad things happen to me there, it won't hurt me so much.¹"

In 1967 Bill Ainslie wrote a letter to Eric Estorick of the Grosvenor Gallery asking him to invite Dumile to London for an exhibition. This letter would not be binding but it gave Dumile the opportunity to obtain his passport and Visa.

In 1968 he arrived in London. The Grosvenor Gallery turned out to be genuinely interested in his work and they had a very high regard for his drawings. In the summer of 1969 Dumile held a show of 37 drawings at the Gallery then at Davies Street. It was well reviewed Richard Walker of the Arts Review wrote

"Dumile, the African Negro artist, with delicate ink-line drawings of tribal life, achieves a balance between a detached, remarkable European formal expressionism and quiet depth, product of intimate identification with his subject"

Dumile continued to exhibit at the gallery, again in 1969 Terence Mulally reviewed his show: African Art Touches the Conscience By Terence Mullaly.

A Discovery at once heart-warming and sobering is to be made in the exhibition just opened at the Grosvenor Gallery, 30, Davies Street, Mayfair. In this exhibition, drawings by a young African artist, Dumile, whose work has not previously been exhibited in London, strike through conventions. They remain on view until Sept. 8.

It comes as a surprise, when most London galleries are showing nothing more exciting than mixed exhibitions of what is left in stock, to come upon a new talent of sustained power. Dumile's work, like all art that matters, is firmly rooted in his time, yet speaks for all time. What the Grosvenor Gallery is showing is a set of ink drawings.

The pen moves in a thin line outlining or shading. This pen line stands out against the startling white paper, yet in every case, and all these drawings are figure studies, bodies are defined, belief established. Dumile is an accomplished draughtsman. Yet to say not more is hardly to hint at the qualities that make his work so moving. In drawing after drawing he touches the nerves ends of our consciences. This young artist's theme is the universal agony of man, rendered specific through his own experience in South Africa. His figures are frozen in a kind of agonised despair. In some cases the twist of an arm, the sprawl of a leg, is as eloquent as a mask of pain for a face. At other times it is as though the music of some wild ritual dance has suddenly stopped. Its dying note lingers in the heart.

Despite these and other shows Dumile had a torrid time in London he had no income no money. and if it wasn't for Jazz music for which he had a passion.

In 1969 he finally managed to go to America, where he remained until his death. He continued drawing between odd jobs including designing record labels for Jazz records but spent more time sculpting. In 1986 he was working on a major exhibition entitled South African Exile that was to include 200 drawings ranging in size from 10 x 18 inches to 9 x 30 feet, as well as 150 sculptures. Dumile died in 1991.