

Contemporary African Sculpture in South Africa
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FORT HARE PAPERS

Dumile

Mhlaba Zwelidumile Mgxaji Feni known as Dumile, is one of Africa's greatest contemporary artists. He was born in 1939 at Worcester, in the Cape Province. After his mother's death in 1948 the family moved and later when Dumile was 11 years old, to Johannesburg. He is the product of urban life with which he is well acquainted. His exceptional talent was first noticed in 1964 while he was receiving treatment at a hospital in Johannesburg. In 1966 he gave his first one man exhibition in Johannesburg. In 1968 he went abroad where he has lived in exile ever since.

Dumile is both sculptor and graphic artist. It is his graphic and more particularly drawings which have won him the greatest acclaim. He has, nevertheless, created a number of outstanding sculptures. These are in terra cotta and some have been cast in bronze. Although his sculptural output is small it more than merits inclusion here. As with his graphics the content of his sculptures are also strongly based on social realism, drawing chiefly on the social conditions and problems affecting the Black man's identity in South Africa, especially in an urban environment. As such his graphics and sculptures are closely related and they complement each other.

His art is characterised by a distortion stemming from tremendous emotion. To some extent his work belongs to the art of the fantastic. The vitality of this work appears to be drawn from the artist's subconscious; as with his drawings, his sculpture contains strong elements of the subconscious. It is characterised by freedom from the limitation of reason and absence of any aesthetic preoccupation. The viewer gets the impression that they were executed spontaneously in accordance with the artist's subconscious thought and vision. Yet they are quite comprehensible and it is these very qualities which imbue his art with such poignant significance.

The human figure is of prime importance in Dumile's art, as is the successful manner in which these figures give utterance to emotions and feelings. By means of their posture, gestures, rhythm -- in short, pattern of body configuration -- they express inner and psychic experiences. The appearance of the figures and the distorted style in which they are executed fulfills a specific function, namely, heightening the sensation of the emotions they depict.