

### Malcolm Payne 1946-

We have noted the emphasis on meaning, or content, in the art of the 1970s and 1980s. That inclination was frequently accompanied by critical analysis of visual conventions. And both trends were associated with contemporary interest in *Semiotics* — the study of signs and symbols and their meanings.

Linguistic in origin, Semiotic principles were developed as tools for the analysis of literary texts, but they had invaded art theory, by virtue of their relevance to all classes of communication. Artistic communication, no less than literary communication, takes place through the medium of language; and language makes use of systems of signs. Those sign-systems — visual and verbal — house the overt content of the message; but they also harbour hidden meanings, invested in the forms by the societal or cultural sources from which they stem.

Few South African artists of the period engaged in closer scrutiny of the relationship between image, form and meaning than did Malcolm Payne.

Payne had revealed himself as a provocatively independent spirit, even in his student years. He had only recently graduated from the Pretoria Tech when he won the top award on Art — South Africa — Today in 1971, with a distinctly unconventional sculptural exhibit. In 1972 he received the Montague White Bursary, which enabled him to study sculpture at St Martin's School of Art in London. He won the Afrox Open Prize for metal sculpture in 1976. And, although he has never entirely deserted sculpture, he has won equivalent attention for his handling of two-dimensional media.

197  
Malcolm PAYNE  
Colour Test  
1974 Serigraph 63 x 90  
University of the  
Witwatersrand



**Signs and Symbols.** Despite the hallmarks of conventional success, Payne has elected to travel a somewhat different path from most of the other prominent South African artists of his generation. The earliest work illustrated here reveals one of the distinctive features of his expression: the rejection of conventional narrative form. *Colour*  
197 *Test*, 1974, is an enlarged screen-printed facsimile of his personal identity card — a readymade, encoded document, which he has modified only by substituting, in the top lefthand corner, where his own photograph would normally appear, a replica of the standard test for colour-blindness.

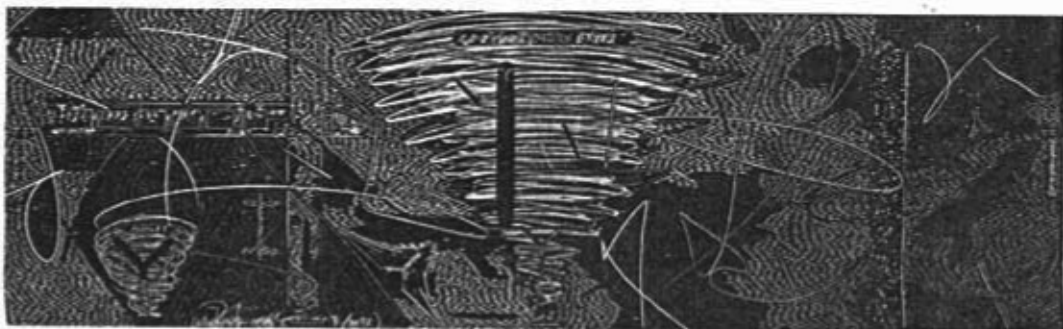
The primary element, the ID card, is in itself a charged symbol — an icon of Apartheid. Even without the regulation photograph, the printed code defines the 'colour' of the bearer. In such a context, the otherwise neutral optometrical device is instantly transformed into a metaphor; and the altered whole becomes a trenchant comment on the issue of identity in South African society.

The print reflects Payne's persisting absorption in the theme of South African identity; but neither here nor elsewhere does his approach conform with the typical regionalised solutions, or with the prevailing trends of self-affirmative and protest art. Payne was not satisfied that post-Renaissance narrative or allegorical models were truly relevant to the time and place in which he worked. He also questioned the deliberate adoption of either historical Western or traditional African conventions, since both were already impregnated with cultural or ideological meanings.

Convinced of the expressive potency of form itself, Payne continued to explore the potential of different kinds of signage, verbal and icon-ic, conventional and unconventional, sculptural and pictorial. He was seeking an idiom that might be so rich in symbolic values that it would communicate meaning without reference to extrinsic visual experience. Although that aim entailed the use of various abstract devices, it was diametrically divergent from the intentions of formal-ist abstraction.

His exhibition at the Market Gallery in 1980 was an important milestone on his path. Working in luminous water-soluble crayon on a black casein-coloured ground, he had produced a series of scintillating compositions, so taut with concentrated energy that the entire surface of each work was activated by the pyrotechnical dynamics. There was no focal point and no conclusive positive-negative, figure-ground relationship. A network of lines and dots, grids and ladders, letters, words and swirling arabesques was woven across the field, 'saturating the picture', in Payne's words, 'with a density of visual information'. None of that information was pictorially descriptive; but the esoteric symbols, words and ideograms interacted in free-associative fashion to disclose changing and evolving meanings.

198 The drawing *Early-rising Plasma*, 1981, in the Johannesburg Art Gallery, exemplifies that phase of Malcolm Payne's expression. The



198  
Malcolm PAYNE  
*Early-rising Plasma*  
1981 Oil pastel  
31,5 x 100  
Johannesburg  
Art Gallery

series culminated in the striking range of works created for his prestige solo exhibition at the Grahamstown Festival, as the 1983 Young Artist of the Year.

**Emblematic images.** The intensely introverted product of the past few years had had more to do with personal identity than with the broader issue of nationality. He now deliberately shifted focus, away from the hermetic density of the dynamic fields, in search of a more succinct form in which to house a specifically South African text.

The procedures and iconography of his next phase were founded in *Proto-Rhino*, 1984 — an ironic visual comment on previous South African endeavours to establish an identifiable regional artistic style. As we have seen, that aim had led to conscious Africanisation, either of content or of form. Payne was critical of both solutions. He saw no relevance in the hackneyed imagery favoured in wildlife and tourist art; nor could he accept the unquestioning imposition of African formal devices on otherwise conventional Western conceptions. His search for a more adequate response was prompted mainly by the challenge to create a work for the 1985 exhibition, *Tributaries*, an event of major consequence, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Payne's choice of the stereotypical image of the rhinoceros — a symbol of brute strength and an icon of colonial perceptions of Africa — was deliberate, a wry launching-pad from which to assail convention. The heraldically coloured, silhouetted form became the prototype for the series of 'Stacked Reliefs' that followed.

*Friday 25th May 1985 (Plate 93)*

Pl. 93

In company with all his other 'Stacked Reliefs', this large-scale work has been structured out of polystyrene foam, the individual elements each cut out, covered with canvas and layered one upon the other. The adaptable material has enabled Payne to contour the format to the shape of the symbolic image, and thereby to establish the most conspicuous of the work's multiple challenges to convention. Here,

format is synonymous with form. The image is not depicted against a background of illusionary space; it occupies the very space in which the viewer moves.

By the same token the object — the work of art — is also the subject. But again it challenges convention; for its artistic identity is ambiguous. Despite their three-dimensional presence, the silhouetted forms impart no sense of volume. Indeed, they seem to celebrate their flatness. Their colouring is heraldic and they are overlaid with graphic signs, which recall the ideograms of the previous series. The treatment of those characters is no less equivocal. For the most part they are positive, three-dimensional entities, created from paint squeezed onto felt, which was then cut out and glued to the surface. In proclaiming their independent materiality, they also flout the mystique of the 'artist's touch'.

All the formal strategies were designed to eliminate conventional illusionism and conditioned reading of the art object. Payne was intent on creating an idiom that would communicate without recourse to established narrative conventions. And, in his search for articulate forms, he had become alerted to the symbolic potency of emblems used repeatedly in political posters, trade union logos and guerrilla art. The moods and meanings in such signs are immediately accessible, even to the least literate of viewers. That non-elitist, unconditioned quality appealed to Payne's democratic instincts. He had thus selected a number of similarly resonant symbols and deployed them in the stacked reliefs.

In the example illustrated, the gorilla skull and kudu horn, icons from the environment, are juxtaposed with the anvil, icon of industrialism, to express directly through the signage a composite message about time and place, identity, survival, power and defiant faith.

199 **The Penumbra Series.** The series of 'Stacked Reliefs' was limited. Payne clearly recognised the risks of diminishing the iconic force of the emblematic forms through rhetorical repetition. But he was not ready to dispense with the symbolic images. He thus chose the course of transmutation, or what he called 'malchémé', in the *Penumbra Series*.

In that group of works, created in 1986, Malcolm Payne reverted to the use of conventional rectangular formats — but not to conventional pictorialism. Elements from the maquettes for the preceding reliefs were used variously as templates or stencils to create shadowy montages in the medium of lacquer sprayed on paper. An example is illustrated here.

Just as he had done before with abstract signs, he now saturated each surface with emblematic icons. By simultaneous use of images of different scale, presented from varying angles of view, he subverted traditional single-point perspective. And by ambiguous juxtaposition and superimposition of positive and negative forms, he cancelled any vestigial illusion of conventional pictorial space.



199  
Malcolm PAYNE  
*Penumbra*  
1986  
Nitro-cellulose  
lacquer 81 x 122  
Private collection

The small series — 12 works in all — bore affinities with the compacted imagery of urban graffiti. In their aggressive symbolism and anarchic disarrangement they coincided also with the psychological upheaval of the times. Their message of solidarity with the oppressed was clearly legible; but, inventive though the compositions were, they did not entirely transcend their sources in the shorthand of political incantation.

Turning briefly to the medium of terracotta, Malcolm Payne produced a group of sculptures based on the Iron Age 'Lydenburg heads' that are housed in the SA Museum in Cape Town. Then, in 1989, he embarked again on a phase of two-dimensional expression. Although he introduced new formal strategies, he remained constant to his central theme: exploration of the reality and meaning of South African identity, of being in that place, at that time in its history.