

Scratching open our society's sore spots

SCRATCHING AT THE SORE SPOTS: IVOR POWELL interviews artist Malcolm Payne

IP: What were you trying to do? What kind of concerns motivated you to produce the art that has been on exhibition?

MP: Hell, since my student days, I've listened to a lot of talk about Africanism, about the need for political statements, about the need for a South African art. These questions have never stopped bothering me.

When I first started to exhibit my work, I was exposed to the new political aesthetic that Paul Stopforth was involved with, and Gavin Younge.

I never got into jackboots and policemen's hats and that sort of imagery. From the beginning I wanted to do something different. I wanted to undermine the viewer's notions of what art should be and what it shouldn't be.

After a while I stopped making that specifically political kind of work, but I never lost the ideas that lay behind it. I never stopped trying to identify my own experience and my role within that experience.

But I wanted to do something that wouldn't be what Fugard was doing or what Nadine Gordimer was doing. I didn't want anything to do with that whole sociological debate, because I despise it and I think it's a false debate. I don't want to be ideologically correct. I want to be artistically correct. I want to be as correct as Caravaggio ...

IP: Which raises an issue — the particular way that you're locating yourself in relation to the whole western tradition.

Your work is full of references: there are Cubist references and Duchampian references, references to Matisse, to recent American painting. But at the same time there's a kind of jive sensibility that's got everything to do with Soweto ... unlikely bedfellows if you look at it from this angle.

MP: Well, I've wanted to use ambiguous notions in the work ... to produce images that flip in and out of the traditions of western art, but that still have something specific about them, something specific to here, to this time and place.

So the colours I've used are what some people call Diagonal Street colours. These colours are important to me. But at the same time some of the colours and their relationships have been extremely difficult, from a formalist point of view, to construct. These things are also very important.

IP: What we're talking about is a playoff of the traditions within which you've been educated with the specificities of South African experience. It's a kind of layering that perhaps got acted out in the way you superimpose planes and images and detail in your work.

MP: For me the process of putting one image on top of another has something to do with the way the cave artists worked. The way they'd put their marks on top of the marks that somebody else had made. That kind of thing interests me in terms of the way one constructs a



A Malcolm Payne sculpture ... "For me, the colour of Africa is brilliant"

painting. It becomes a kind of palimpsest. It's got to do with a method, a process which in turn has something to do with my environment.

IP: A lot of people dismiss your work precisely because of that disjunction. They see it as being essentially decorative with the cerebral element just kind of tacked on at the end.

MP: It's in the nature of the work to provoke that kind of response. But the visual component is important. The difficulty of wrestling with colours and surfaces, of disestablishing colour relationships that you've learnt — these are serious questions. I'm not just creating a veil of visual excitement.

But anyway I can't follow this distinction that says if a thing is pretty on the one hand, it can't be serious on the other hand. It doesn't make sense. If you look at a Goya, you get seduced by the paint quality. But it doesn't stop there. The paint transports you into the realm of content.

IP: I agree with what you're saying ... but in relation to your own work?

MP: Well, for example in the gorilla piece, I wanted to represent the notion of coals being formed into a shape, into a living being. So I used red and black forms which make patterns. But the intention is not just to excite you visually, but to excite your visual memory — your memory of having looked into fires. You might not recognise the shapes as coals, but there will be some form of recognition, something

that is psychologically and emotionally specific. That's the level that I want to work on.

This kind of decorativeness is a kind of beat. It relates to the beat that you can hear in Amampondo or Nigerian tribal music. It's a pulse that comes out in the relationships of shapes to one another. It's the way people make marks in this part of the world, a kind of percussion. There's a ritual involved, a ritualised sense of being.

IP: It's interesting to me that music should play such an important role in mediating between the different kinds of cultural experience in this country ... that it's things like Juluka and Amampondo that black and white people have in common.

MP: It's difficult to know how to talk about an African experience. It always sounds so contrived, so laid on. But there are ways of getting hold of it.

An extreme way of using colour might be right. Maybe flat, dark, heavy colours are wrong. Those aren't the colours of Africa. Maybe those are the colours of, you know...Albania. Have you ever looked at the colour of a cycad seed when it bursts open? Or the green of a rain forest? Are you not allowed to use that green or the black and red on the back of a grasshopper? For me, at least, the colour of Africa is brilliant.