



Community Arts Project and the Making of Black Biography in South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

During the apartheid period in South Africa, formal art training was inaccessible to many South Africans. Art training up to the polytechnic and university levels was a privileged and elitist enterprise. Community Arts Project (CAP) emerged as a community arts based initiative under apartheid to provide the disadvantaged groups with the art training they were deprived of by the apartheid regime. CAP engaged in alternative art education that merged creativity with socio-political agitation. In this article I examine few works that were produced under the auspices of CAP during and after the apartheid period. The works I examine were the CAP artworks purchased by the Center for Humanities Research at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa and housed at the Mayibuye archives at UWC. I was part of the team that archived some of these works during my graduate years at the University of the Western Cape. In this article, therefore, I show that through some of these works, one observes that the disinherited group of artists that produced the artworks were mainly blacks. I argue that this was a way for these blacks to forge their own biography outside the instrumental narratives of the apartheid state.

Brief history of Community Art Project

Community Art Project (CAP) opened in Mowbray, Cape Town, South Africa in August 1977. Initially CAP was housed at 17 Main Road, Mowbray, Cape Town, just opposite the Police Station. It later moved to the Old St.

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Philips School in Chapel Street, District Six. Although CAP seemed to have opened its doors to members from across the apartheid divide and from various social layers, its original mission was to serve as a community art centre aiming to accommodate the disenfranchised group of South Africans during apartheid. It also aimed to develop the cultural voice of Cape Town's oppressed communities. By the 1980s CAP was located in Woodstock, Cape Town until its demise in 2008. Its main reason for closure was lack of funds. Although it propagated all aspects of the arts, major materials that have been published on CAP deal extensively with the poster production. This is surprising especially given the fact that the CAP poster workshop was introduced by the end of the 1980s. CAP posters enjoyed privileged publicity because the production of the posters were a collaboration between CAP and various media organizations linked to the liberation movement in the 1980s. This is in line with the nature of posters as instrument of political campaign. This might have benefited the African National Congress (ANC) which elicited great sympathy from most CAP artists.

CAP other collections consists of other bodies of work including paintings, drawings, sculptures and prints. CAP printmaking workshop, now labelled The CAP Media Project became increasingly independent and moved its premises from the Woodstock building to Community House in Salt River. By 1985, The Media Project separated from CAP completely and was reconstituted as independent organization known as Mediaworks. The 1970s was a period of increasing political unrest in South Africa. The Africa National Congress (ANC) was already agitating for greater political freedom and social emancipation for all South Africans especially the black populace who have suffered decades of marginalization under the apartheid regime. By 1977, the struggle for freedom had almost permeated all aspects of daily life including the arts. At every level there was mobilization and consultation on how to approach the increasing clampdown by the apartheid regime. This consultation did not elude the arts and in August 1977 the culmination of a series of consultations among various representatives, artists and academics resulted in the formation of CAP.

By March 1978 CAP had imbibed an ideology of a school engaged in informal art tutelage. It offered a range of workshops that encapsulates a wide area of creative activities including painting, printmaking, weaving, sculpture, photography, silk screening, drawing, video, and animation. These activities were borne out of the creative concerns and orientations of individual members and staff of CAP (De Wet et al, 2001). CAP provided teachers and their students with a space for mutual artistic engagement articulated within the tenets of social and political mobilization. De Wet et al (2001) observes that the principle of 'learning by doing' and 'each one teach one' informed the character of these activities, and represent the first formulation of one of CAP's enduring concerns: the development of learning processes rooted in participatory democracy. The significance of the above statement reflects the overall creative output of CAP in which the wounded

psyche of the disinherited youths saw ready panacea in the collective political agitation through art.

According to van Robbroeck (2004:45) CAP embodies a new style of arts movement that called for open democratization of culture, independent of the hegemony and dominant ideology of the white ruling class. CAP newsletter aptly captures this sentiment through an open declaration that “it is time to begin controlling our own creativity” (Van Robbroeck 2004:47). While CAP was outstanding in its task of educating the marginalized, van Robbroeck (2004:45), notes that most other art centres during apartheid also engaged in similar task of “redressing educational and cultural imbalances wrought by decades of systematic neglect and marginalization under the system of apartheid”. According to van Robbroeck (2004:46) the politicization of art centres intensified in the 1980s as culture became a site of “the struggle and South African art became increasingly polarized between a democratic people’s culture on the one hand, and a dominant apartheid culture on the other.”¹ Art centres democratized art by allowing, “equality in access to the means of cultural production and distribution” (Van Robbroeck 1991:18). As such they facilitated communication between artists, causing a cross-fertilization of ideas and shared experience, thus acting as an empowering force and producing a locally relevant aesthetic which did not necessarily conform to the mainstream (Van Robbroeck 2004:50).

In the 1980s CAP initiated a working relationship with the Ruth Prowse School of Art which accepted CAP students for further training. This training continued in spite of the educational inadequacies of the students some of whom did not attain matriculation. This training stopped abruptly when foreign sponsorship ceased in 1991. This caused Ruth Prowse to retrench their entire staff body. This financial crisis was also witnessed in many other community art centres in South Africa. One reason I suggest for this financial crisis among community art centres in South Africa in the wake of the independence optimism that greeted the 1990s is that the ANC already saw these art centres as potential avenues for ideological shifts ahead of independence in 1994 (see Hagg, 2004: 54). In other words, ANC indicated interest in taking over funding from foreign donors ahead of the 1994 independence. However, CAP was not included in the government funding.

By 1994, despite the growing political tension that greeted post-independent South Africa, CAP managed to sustain itself with little or no sponsorship from the ANC led government. Money was virtually lacking for any meaningful project and most of the artists were becoming increasingly disillusioned. This led to the discontinuation of the CAP evening classes that accommodated mainly the youths. CAP faced an urgent need for internal re-evaluation and thus by the year 2000 it redefined its role. This redefinition is based on the assumption that formal art education would now be provided by the independent South Africa under the ANC led government. CAP policy change targeted the unemployed in order to train people in income-generating skills. This was one of the survival moves CAP desperately deployed since the criteria for funding demands that CAP would

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train individuals in market-oriented skills. As such CAP registered with the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and developed course materials that lend their certificates a recognizable merit. Despite these moves CAP was never to survive beyond 2008 when it formally closed its doors for good.

CAP collections of the Centre for Humanities Research (CHR), University of the Western Cape, (UWC), South Africa

In 2009, a year after CAP closed, the Centre for Humanities Research of the University of the Western Cape, South Africa acquired all the CAP artworks. This move was in keeping with the centre's commitment towards exploring the relationship between aesthetics, politics and society thereby contributing to a post-apartheid sensibility. This gesture by CHR aims to further educate the post-apartheid public on the enduring spirit of the impoverished during apartheid and how they (the poor) realized their humanity through art. This, of course, has a historical significance in the politics of aesthetics. The CHR purchased all the 5,000 CAP collection that included paintings, prints, sculptures, posters, among others. They were housed at the Mayibuye archives of the Robben Island Museum and the University of the Western Cape. In June 2011, I was contracted by Professor Premesh Lalu, the director of CHR to assist in the archiving and accessioning of the artworks under the inspection of Emily Maurice, one of the CAP artists of the 1980s.

During my job, I realized that many of the artworks focus on apartheid struggle, and people's experiences and living conditions in the townships of the Cape Flats. A good number of the artworks also deal with the theme of rural life, workers' struggles, colonialism, music, children's welfare, Cape Town's city life, religion, animal rights, gender issues, HIV/AIDS, education, landscapes, portraits, and tributes to historical figures, among many others. What is remarkably visible in most of the artworks are commemorations of important events that have shaped the course of South African history and politics such as the Sharpeville massacre, the Soweto uprising and the destruction of District Six. Collectively, the artworks reflect a shift away from the resistance art of the pre-1994 era towards a broader, more open-ended narrative about human experience and imagination in the Western Cape Province in the democratic era.

CAP print-portraits and the forging of Black biography

As one of those involved in the archiving of the CAP Art Collection, I was particularly struck by the sheer creativity of the artists in the works associated with portraiture. The artists transcend certain 'artificiality' inherent in more 'idealised' notions of the commissioned portrait. By 'idealised' I mean that commissioned portraits often exaggerate the attributes and presence of the sitter.

Under apartheid, commissioned portraits were mainly of white high society figures, or those holding high political office. Rather, some of the artists interpret themselves as actors in a role: a role of contestation and self-emancipation.—The CAP artists here contest this received practice of portraiture, which inscribes the power of the sitter and his/her status in society. Also important about these portraits is that, whereas many artists of the 1980s and early 1990s were focusing on political liberation, most of these artists were dealing with concepts of the ‘self’, which would suggest a grappling with the idea of black biography at a time when the focus was so strongly on political iconography.

Henry de Leeuw’s untitled portrait (Figure 1) of a young person achieves a visual asymmetry through a play of dark and shade. In his linocut, rendered in red, yellow and white, De Leeuw employs pointillism to achieve a deftness that draws the viewer’s eyes to the most salient aspects of the face, particularly the facial contours, pronounced by the yellow highlight. The graveness of the character’s expression is rendered in his unwavering and serious gaze and in the solitary mood, emphasized through the use of light and shade.

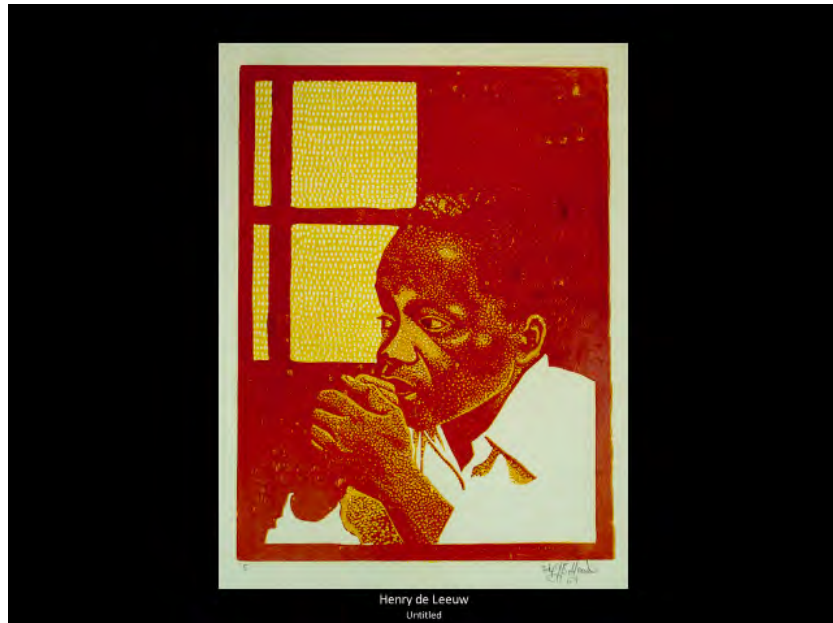


Figure 1: Henry de Leeuw, untitled, c. 1989. Linocut. 40 x 30.7 cm.
(Courtesy of the Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape).

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David Hlongwane's *Think and Look and Decide* (Figure 2), probably a self-portrait, depicts a bespectacled face in the context of a story about conflict and confrontation between the apartheid police and township residents in the 1980s. Just below the face, we see the image of a policeman's boots besides an activist who has been killed in an encounter with the police. Other scenes of the township in a state of disruption are cleverly reflected in the sunglasses worn by the figure portrayed. The title of the work, *Think and Look and Decide*, reflects the need for calm, for self-restraint and careful appraisal in the midst of a volatile and dangerous situation.

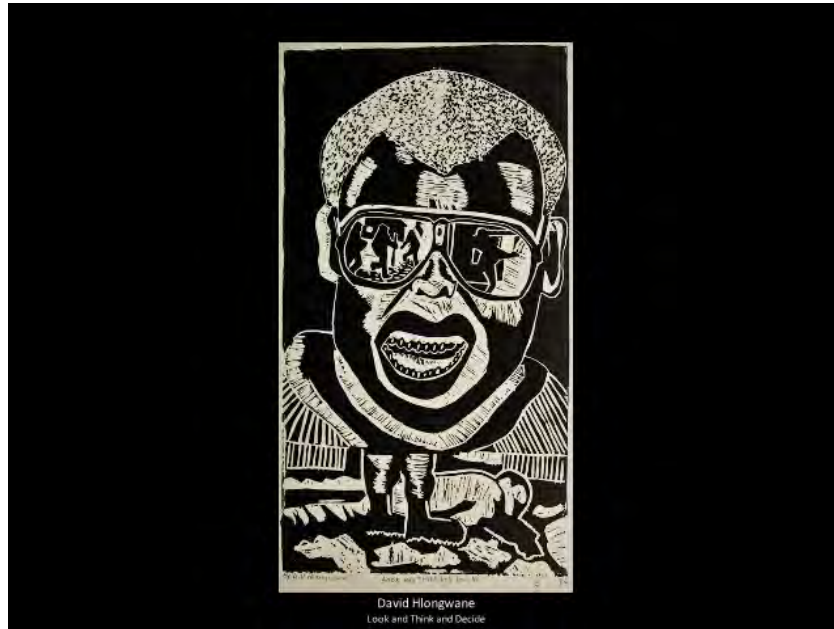


Figure 2: David Hlongwane, *Look and think and decide*, 1986. Linocut. 42.6 x 23.5 cm.

(Courtesy of the Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape).

As with Hlongwane, Andile Mafu (Figure 3) also depicts a figure, probably himself, embroiled in the political turbulence of the 1980s, as distinct from the orthodox portrait, which seeks to render only the appearance and personality of the sitter. Mafu's *Warried Somebody* (sic) (1990) shows a face in frontal gaze, set against a scene of strife in a township or 'informal' settlement. Behind the worried face a helicopter fires bullets at fleeing figures. While the silhouetted, miniaturised fleeing figures seem unclothed, the 'worried somebody' is stylishly clothed in bow hat, shirt and jacket. The

'worried somebody' presents an image of calculated, cool, and determined mood in the midst of brutality.



Figure 3: Andile Mafu, *Warried Somebody (sic)*, 1990. Linocut. 39.7 x 29.5 cm. (Courtesy of the Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape).

The faces represented in Ricky Variawa's *Untitled Portrait* (Figure 4) and Jeremy Acton's *Self Portrait* (Figure 5) are stern looking, as is the case with many of the portraits in the CAP Print Collection. The face in Variawa's portrait has an agitated physiognomy. This physiognomy is marked by seemingly 'chaotic' design configurations, although less intricate than those seen in the head and particularly the background. The figure's forehead is wrinkled to some extent and the artist has curved the lips slightly to achieve the powerful effect of anger.



Figure 4: Ricky Variawa, untitled, 1990. Linocut. 37.8 x 29.5 cm.
(Courtesy of the Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape).



Figure 5: Jeremy Acton, *Self Portrait*, 1997. Linocut. 29.2 x 18.9 cm.
(Courtesy of the Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape).

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Rather than the 'chaotic' abstract shapes in the background of Variawa's piece, Acton sets himself against a tranquil scene showing Table Mountain, the sea and the sky and uses scratchy effects and cross-hatching to build up the face and shirt. This tranquil backdrop is in sharp contrast to the political turbulence seen in Hlongwane and Mafu's works, so reflecting the demise of resistance art after 1994.

In all the portraits, it seems it is Manebuwa Mfono's untitled face (Figure 6) that abhors the frenzy of activities that punctuate the plain backgrounds. Mfono applies a positive-to-negative rendition of linocutting to emphasize the facial highlight, thereby lessening the wandering effect of the eyes from other formal elements. Much like de Leeuw and, perhaps, Hlongwane, Mfono does not wish to detract from the seriousness of the facial gaze. By de-emphasizing uncalled-for formalism in his background composition, he seems to weave his own subjectivity into the discourse, adding critical insight as to the emotional and visceral impact that an image can have.



Figure 6: Manebuwa Mfono, untitled, undated. Linocut. 41.9 x 30 cm.
(Courtesy of the Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape).

In portraying themselves, the artists depict reflections of selfhood and the making of transparent emotion. The depictions represent works of characterisation, as well as of 'soul' and body. In the case of Hlongwane and

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Mafu, the conception of the self is that of a politically aware being. Moreover, through the use of linocutting, as distinct from the traditional painted portrait in oils – a distinguishing feature of high art portraiture – these artists challenge the conventional practices of portraiture as a tool to celebrate white authority. Most of them ask us to think about black people, not so much in relation to collective categories, such as ‘the oppressed’, but rather as individuals with complex identities. As such, they require us to think about black liberation in more complicated terms than the emancipatory language of political struggle would suggest. Liberation is configured in terms that remind us of the Black Consciousness call for black intellectuals, writers, artists and cultural workers to re-frame, re-present and reclaim individuality and identity on their own terms.

CAP print portraits are part of a “larger dialogue on black representation, one that challenges a monolithic perspective and insists on acknowledging the multivalent selfhood that historically, black subjects have been denied” (Mooney 2010: 371). CAP portraitists inserted the black image into the survey of everyday life making their contribution a timely intervention to both South African art and political struggles. Powell argues that “what constitute a portrait are investigating representations of persons regardless of mediums” (cited in Mooney, 2010:371). In view of this, CAP portraitists defied the privileged and prospective benefits of commissioned portraits and queried the social capital of black representation under apartheid. This query, in my mind, is deeply indebted to theories of spectatorship and the phenomenology of the lived black experience. Their multivalent readings privilege the very contingencies upon which modern selfhood are constructed. CAP linocuts cut into the historic denial of black subjectivity and illuminate the ways that these black figures socially and historically constructed selves that could only be understood – and could understand themselves – in relation to others.

CONCLUSION

The CAP artists’ deployment of prints in the depiction of their self portraits encourages a fruitful “reconsideration of media” as well as “presenting a nuanced explanation of how artistic choices promote the respective political and social positioning of their subjects” (Levesque 2010:616). While one can argue that portraits convey complex social structures and values and that they supply the means by which individuals, the social fabric, and political relations may be understood, the CAP print portraits underscore even more complex social identities that evoke the desire to push idiosyncratic works above the banality of apartheid divisiveness and suppression. The CAP prints might have achieved a more acceptable cultural biography for the black subject.

Note

1. State art was seen to cater for the needs of the elite and was beyond the control of, and inaccessible to, the majority of the population. 'Community art' however was seen to cater to the needs of 'the people'. As an example Rushdy Siers (1990:63) writes that a number of black student, left the Michaelis School of Art, because they found the environment to be "Eurocentric in its approach and insensitive to the cultural heritage of Africa and its people".

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