

A Tribute to the Artist Thami Mnye 1948 - 1985

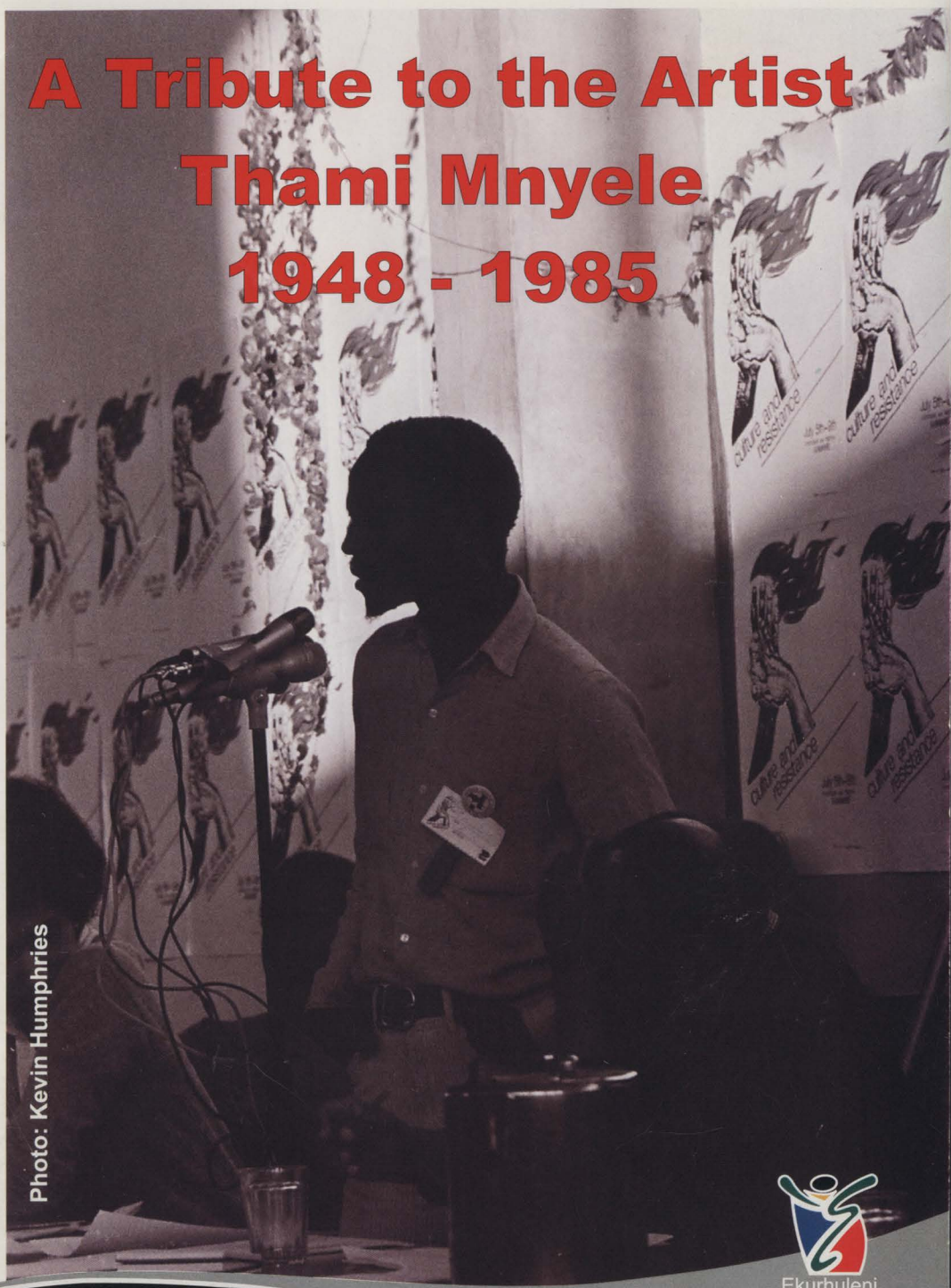


Photo: Kevin Humphries



Ekurhuleni
METROPOLITAN MUNICIPALITY

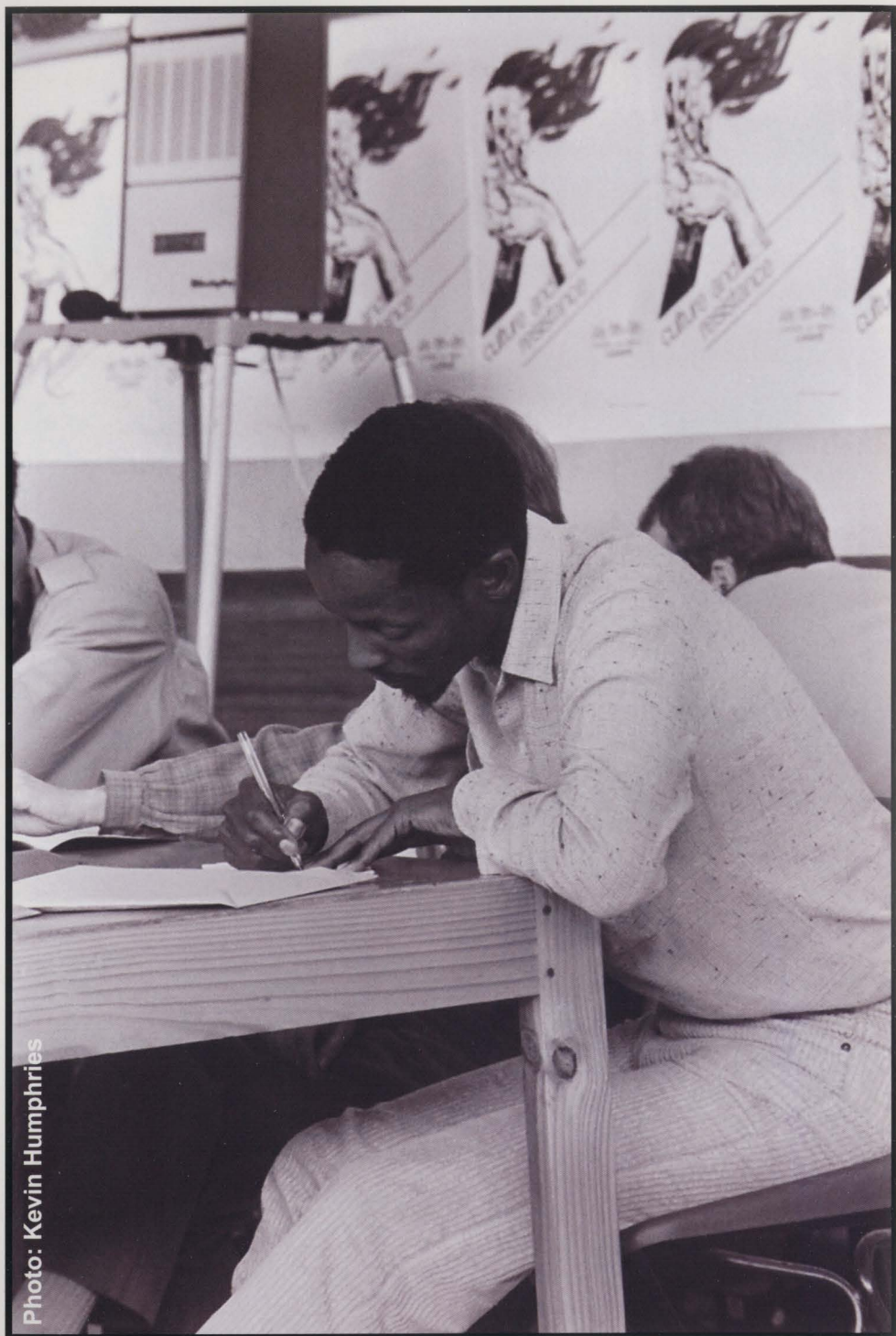


Photo: Kevin Humphries

THAMI MNYELE

"For me as craftsman, the act of creating art should complement the act of creating shelter for my family or liberating the country for me people.

This is culture."

Thami Mnyele (Unpublished autobiography, 1984)

Thamsanqa kaMnyele was born on the 10th of September 1948 in Alexandra Township, Johannesburg. Thamsanqa kaMnyele (Thami) was the fourth of nine children. His father was a priest and his mother a domestic worker. In the 1960's his mother and father separated. His mother worked as a domestic worker in the white suburbs. During this period Thami lived with his brother and later with his uncle. Thami was 9 years old at the time of the 1956 Alexandra bus boycott and 12 at the time of Sharpville Massacre.

By the late 1960's, his mother send him to a boarding school in Pretoria. There were no art classes, but there were pens, pencils and paper. He began to draw when he was fourteen years old. In his matric year, his mother could not afford the school fees. Thami had to leave school.

Seidman, J. *"Red on Black - The Story of the south African Poster Movement"* STE Publishers, Johannesburg, 2007

"I had dropped out of school and with a chronic feeling of FAILURE, failure; I spent my days searching for employment in the surrounding industrial complex that bordered my township. This financial source of income would secure me in the meantime for my dream of becoming a good artist, I thought."

Mnyele T. *"Observations on the state of the contemporary visual art in South Africa"*, Article, Unpublished, 1982/1985.

Thami the Cultural Worker and Artist

Mnyele was described as a soft spoken talented man, with a great sense of humor. He loved music, especially jazz and traditional Mbaqanga. He also played the guitar, saxophone, drums and trumpet. All these qualities were portrayed in Thami's art work. Thami often met with fellow artists, writers and musicians in Alexandra. In 1971, he joined the Mhloti Black Theatre. They often performed at schools and churches. He loved literature and even acted at times. Thami Mnyele describes his experiences at Mhloti:

"Today walls are furiously burning, blown up. Our people are cleansing themselves of the culture of silence, wherein to exist is only to live: thinking is difficult, speaking the word forbidden. Tomorrow, when our people rebuild those walls, our understanding, our history, our victory will be part of that reconstruction."

Thami Mnyele and J. Siedman
(Medu Newsletter No. 6 1984) 3

"Mhloti was composed of writers, musicians, painters, actors and a few members of the community, i.e. Intellectuals, church people, etc. Our main theatrical piece was based on the thoughts of Malcolm X. It was in this play where I tried myself on stage. Suddenly I was experiencing a surge of internal satisfaction The actual engagement of the physical, standing there and towering over the little crowd of people of my township, seated, silent but nodding their heads occasionally, when I made another good point, it was just great. The act of theoretical performance is more immediate than making pictures, I thought. Here one is surrounded by the community, alive, blood and sweat and flesh... Set free from the loneliness and aloneness of paintings and confinement".

Mnyele T. "Observations on the state of the contemporary visual art in South Africa", Article, Unpublished, 1982/1985.

In 1972 Thami decided his personal direction lays with the visual arts. He secured a grant to the ELC Art Centre in Rorke's Drift, Natal, where he received only one year of formal training. After a year he had to leave; as the family breadwinner, he had to be employed in Alexandra if his mother was to keep his house there.

Seidman, J. "Red on Black - The Story of the south African Poster Movement" STE Publishers, Johannesburg, 2007

"Symbols used in posters came from international socialist symbols from banners from other revolutions: the flag, banner, the wake-up call, people marching. I got gatvol of clenched fists. These images needed defiance, both to print, and also for people who wore them."

Lionel Davis



Graphic from *The Night Keeps Winking*, drawn by Thami Mnyele, 1982, Gaborone, Botswana

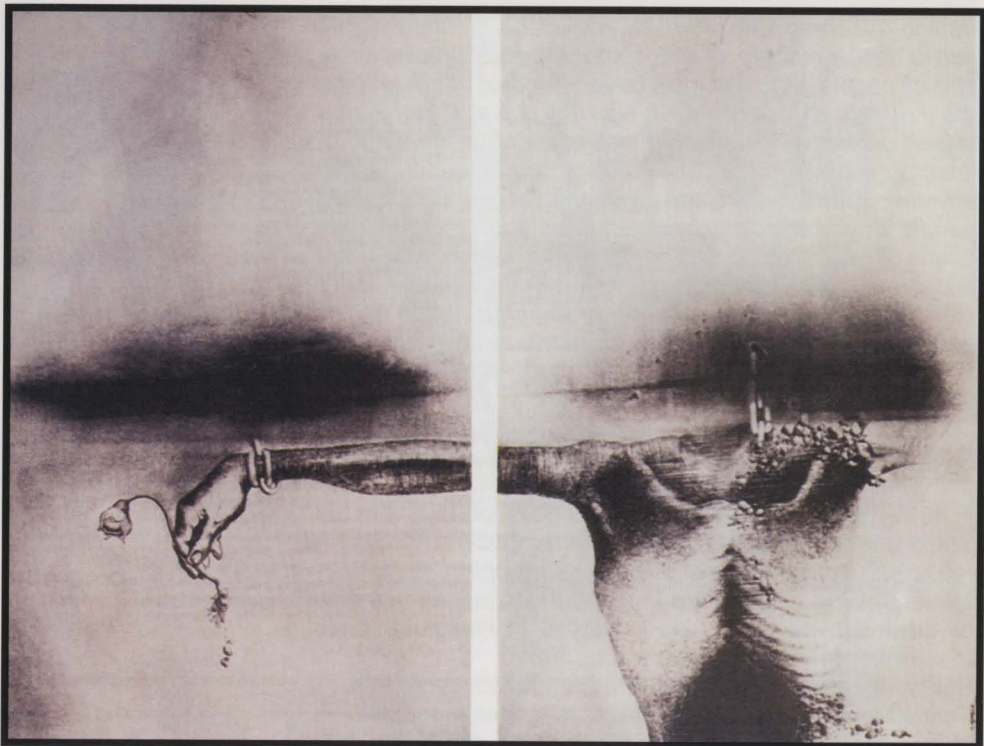
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Untitled graphic by Thami Mnyele, pen and ink, Gaborone, 1984 (intended as a backdrop for Amandla Cultural Ensemble). A coloured version of this picture, jointly completed with J. Seidman, was in portfolio taken by security police after Gaborone raid in 1985.



Graphic by Thami Mnyele, original pen and ink; printed Medu Newsletter 1985; central figure is sax player Kippie Moeketsi



Above: Untitled, Thami Mnyele 1976, drawing from exhibition "A New Day", published with review in Staffrider, April 1980

"But I had to terminate my studies in order to secure my family's right to live in Alexandra. As a breadwinner I had to be there and employed. At this point again I had become immersed in student politics, trying to understand my role as an artist in the struggle. The role of an artist in the processes of political struggle seemed an obscure area for the student movement to waste time in. It would sound unnecessarily farfetched to raise the question of Art to students whose preoccupation were graduation ceremonies, the white man and his colleagues. The evening when a "gumba" was being organised in the Wentworth campus, I took a long walk to the Durban Station and departed on a lonely journey back home to Alexandra township, Johannesburg"

Mnyele T. "Observations on the state of the contemporary visual art in South Africa", Article, Unpublished, 1982/1985.

During 1972 certain families living in Alexandra such as the Mnyele family was reallocated to Tembisa, a township in the old East Rand today known as Ekurhuleni. Thami got a job as an illustrator for SACHED Trust, where he worked for the next seven years.

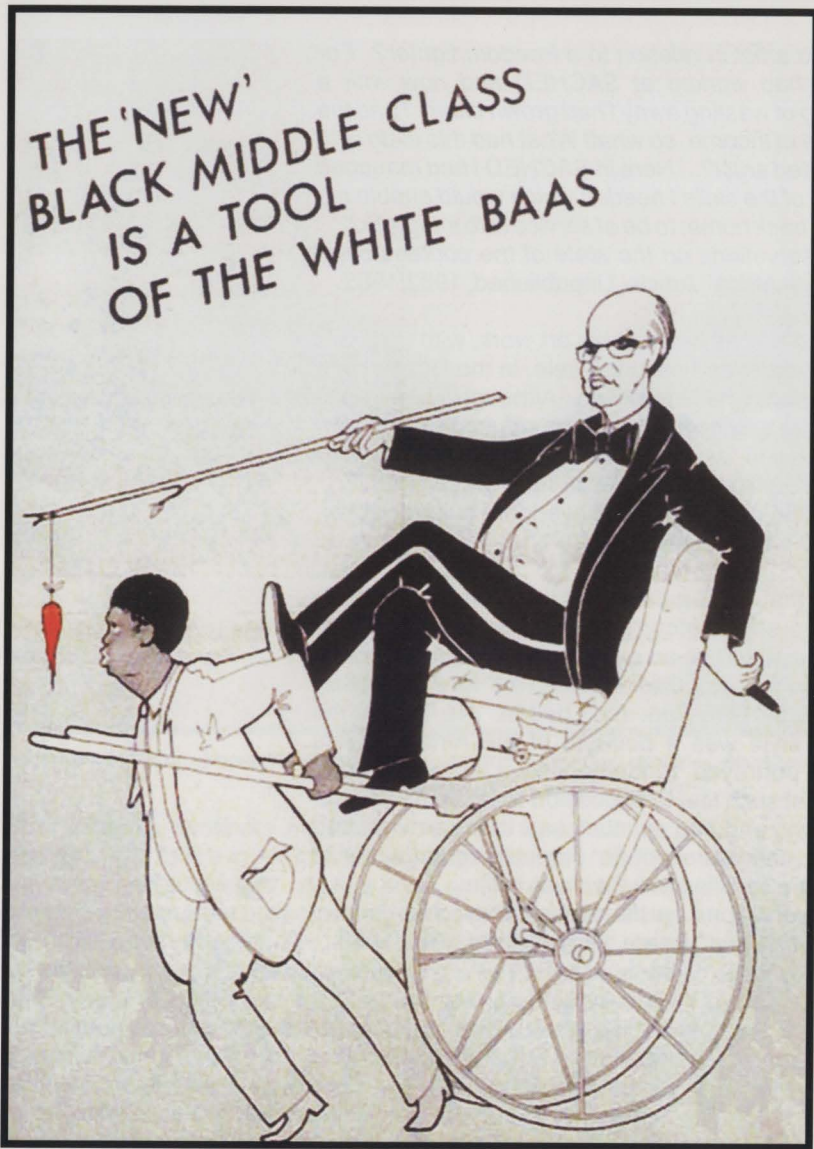
"What is a good artist in relation to a freedom fighter? For seven years I had worked at SACHED and now with a creeping feeling of wasting away I had grown bitter. I had the financial source of income, so what! What had this to do with being a committed artist?... Here in SACHED I had managed to pick up most of the skills I needed which would enable me to be of service back home: to be of service is to integrate."

Mnye T. *"Observations on the state of the contemporary visual art in South Africa"*, Article, Unpublished, 1982/1985.

In 1976, he held an exhibition of his art work, with sculpture Ben Arnold and painter Fikele, in the Dube YWCA, a community hall in Soweto. Although Thami was a talented painter and graphic artist he refused to exhibit his work at so-called "white" art galleries; but rather he felt that his work should be accessible to his own community. His art was for the people. He believed that cultural work and politics could not be separated.

Mnye T. stated that most galleries at that time (in the early 1970s) put pressure on African painters to produce what was called "township art". The art galleries in Johannesburg, he argued, acted as the "outposts of African art" for their mother institutions in Paris, New York and London. He felt that the "township art" style was a betrayal of the African artists whose artwork portrayed "fundamentally a tormented flood of revolt" against such life, in opposition to "such a system". These artists who endured so much saw their pain reduced to sentimental caricatures of "a primitive community of people" who were satisfied with their way of life.

Mnye T. *"Observations on the state of the contemporary visual art in South Africa"*, Article, Unpublished, 1982/1985.



The new black Middle class, Thami Mnyele with Albio Gonzales, litho, Gaborone, 1980. No. 2424

His life in exile

In 1977 a group of artists fled into exile to Gaborone, Botswana. Molefe Pheto from Mhloti Black Theatre was one of the people who fled to Botswana. In 1979, Thami was forced in to exile in Botswana, to become a leading figure within the Medu Art Ensemble and a committed ANC cadre. This group of artists or cultural workers as they preferred to call themselves formed the Medu Art Ensemble. Medu is a Pedi word that translates loosely to the word "roots". For the next eight years music, theatre writing, photography and visual art found a home in Medu. Most artists were exiled from South Africa. People like Hugh Masekela, Jonas Gwangwa, Dennis Mpale, Thele Morema, Stave Dyer, Mongane Wally Serote, Miles Pelo, Keorapetse Kgositsile and others were part of this group.



We salute the workers, 1984, designed by Thami Mnyele, printed by SACTU, Lusaka, offset litho.

"Our Art must become a process - a living, growing thing that people can relate to, identify with, be part of understand; not a mysterious world a universe apart from them.

As politics must teach people the ways and give them the means to take control over their own lives, art must teach people, in the most vivid and imaginative ways possible, how to take control over their own experience and observations, how to link these with the struggle for liberation and a just society free of race, class and exploitation."

Thami Mnyele

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Thami vehemently rejected any separation between his art and the demands of the South African Resistance. He quoted Sekou Toure:

"To take part in the African Revolution, it is not enough to write revolutionary songs; you must fashion the revolution with the people. And if you fashion it with the people, the songs will come by themselves and of themselves."

In the years in Botswana, Thami made and exhibited graphics, drawings, and fine arts, and organized cultural workers through Medu Arts Ensemble. In those years he also participated fully in Mkhonto we Sizwe, the ANC's military wing.

Seidman, J. *"Red on Black - The Story of the south African Poster Movement"* STE Publishers, Johannesburg, 2007

Medu did not suffer the same censorship as art groups within South Africa. From 1979 Thami started producing political posters in silk-screen. Over the next 6 years the Medu Graphics Unit produced over 50 posters. These posters were at times transported to South Africa where they would be posted on walls over night just to be ripped off by the security police in the morning.

Thami Message of Liberation through Art

Thami Mnyeale discussed the role of the artist and cultural worker at the Medu Art Ensemble in his unpublished article on Observations of the State of the Contemporary Visual Arts in South Africa. Mnyeale declared the following:

"It is in Medu Art Ensemble where the role of an artist concretized itself; the role of an artist is to learn; the role of the artist is to teach others; the role of the artist is to ceaselessly search for the ways and means of achieving freedom. Art cannot overthrow a government, but it can inspire change. In Medu Art Ensemble we explore the possibilities of our art forms in the context of our time ... In Medu we do not deal with principles but needs. We make posters to help popularise those events that people hold dear.

"... Revolution is a conscious act. It permits the unthinkable to be thought, the inconceivable to be imagined, and the unspoken to be shouted out loud..."

Sachs, A. "Images of a Revolution, Mural Art in Mozambique," Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1983.



"let us arm ourselves with the fearlessness of Shaka; the vision and endurance of Moshoeshoe; the dedication and farsightedness of Sol Plaatjie; the military initiative and guerilla tactics of Maqoma..."

**DECEMBER 16
HEROES-DAY**

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We make postcards, calendars and we also organized gatherings to help explain the content of some dates of commemorations to those who would like to know. Most of our visuals are done with simple but clear style and methods Secondly our intention is to communicate as immediately as possible and with more people all the time."

Mnye T. "Observations on the state of the contemporary visual art in South Africa", Article, Unpublished, 1982/1985.



Untitled (commander briefing troops, drawing by Thami Mnye, pen and ink, in the Night Keeps Winking (Medu, Gaborone, 1982)

The posters communicated ANC symbols of liberation. In 1984 Thami as part of a collective workgroup, designed the ANC logo which is still being used today: hand, shield, spear and wheel. The three female heads of the ANC Women's League was designed by Mnye. True to his nature the art and posters he produced reflected and informed the struggle of the human condition in an oppressed political society. Mnye rang true to the conscious deliberation that the artist is a product of society and his greatest attribute is to mirror society and enlighten the children of Southern Africa to prompt change. His posters formed part of a visual tongue and was never intended to hang in museums and galleries where the people would never see them.

Images, symbols, designs and slogans grew from discourse, discussions and collective creativity amongst the group.

Thami said: "The act of creating art is not different from the act of building a bridge - it is the work of many hands".

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ART TOWARD SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

AN EXHIBITION OF SOUTH AFRICAN ART
JUNE 10 — AUGUST 10, 1982

CULTURE AND RESISTANCE

A SYMPOSIUM/FESTIVAL OF SOUTH AFRICAN ART PHOTOGRAPHY FILM LITERATURE THEATRE MUSIC DANCE

JULY 5 — JULY 9



NATIONAL MUSEUM & ART GALLERY GABORONE BOTSWANA

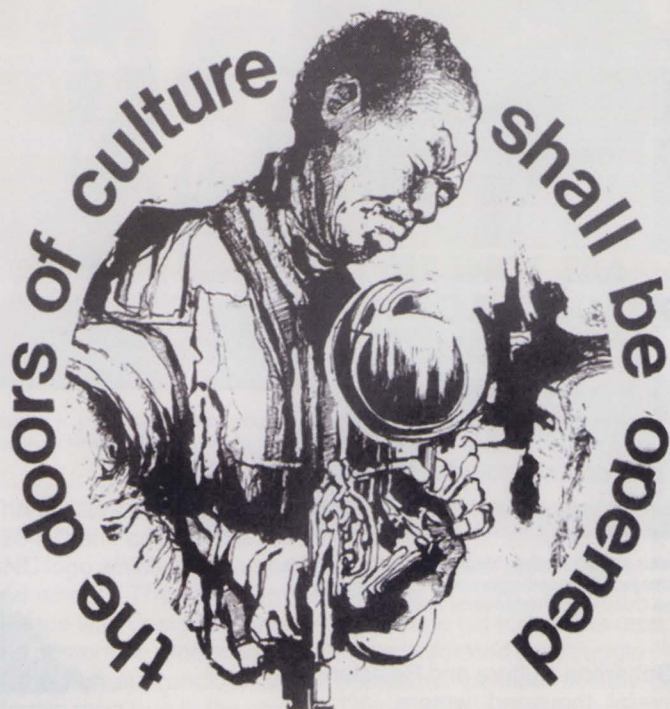
The artist walks a tightrope between the struggling black community and the white suburbs. *Art for Social Development* designed collectively by Thami Mnyeale and Gordon Mets, for the Gaborone Culture and Resistance Festival and Art for Social Development exhibition No. 2825

In 1982 Medu hosted the Gaborone Culture and Resistance Festival, which drew several thousand writers, actors, musicians and visual artists to Gaborone to debate the state of their art and display their works. Thami Mnyeale was the chair and leading organizer. These artists returned to South Africa inspired and committed to make their art into a voice of the people - a weapon of struggle for a free and democratic South Africa, against the oppression of apartheid.

During this period the South African Defense Force (SADF) started raiding Lesotho, Mozambique and Swaziland. The Botswana Government was sympathetic but urged the group to keep a low profile.

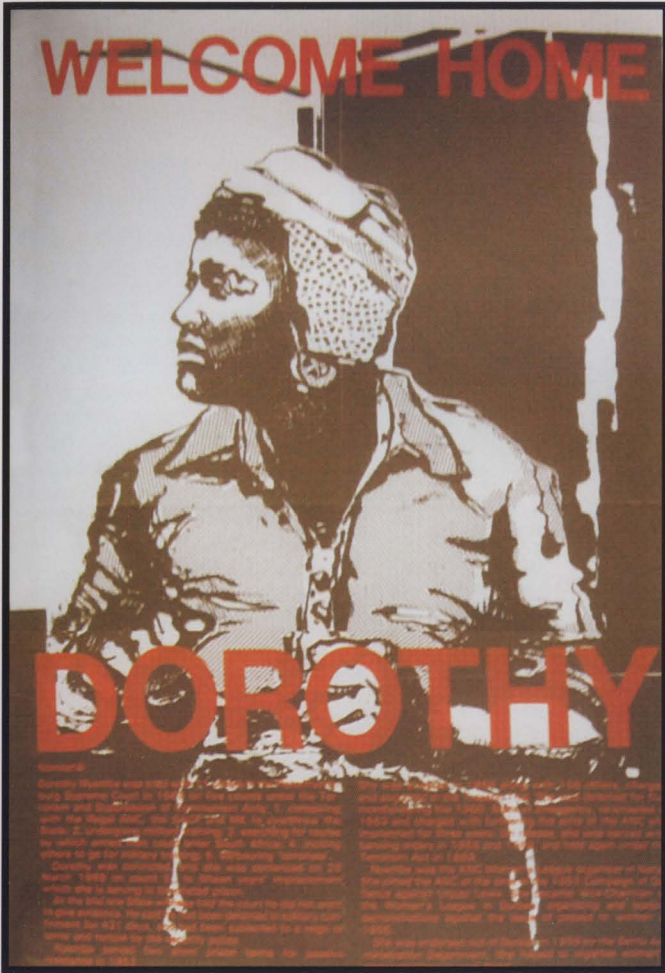
On 14 June 1985 the SADF raided Gabarone and killed twelve people. Thami was one of them. His wife Rhona and his child mercifully were not home at the time and escaped death. Mnyeale was buried in Botswana with others who died in the raid. Busses of mourners from South Africa came to his funeral, wearing t-shirts reading "Thamsanqa Mnyeale: The Struggle is my Life, Culture and Resistance, Victory is Certain."

As Thami Mnyeale is a son of South Africa and Ekurhuleni his remains were exhumed in Botswana and re-buried in the Illiliba Cemetery, Tembisa on 24 September 2004.



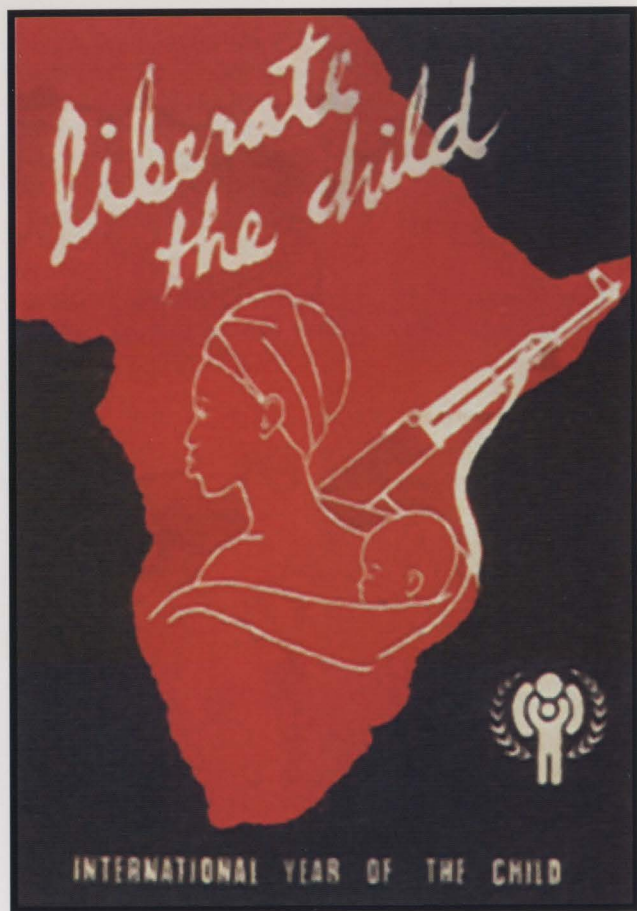
Detail: Graphic by Thami Mnyeale, original pen and ink; printed Medu Newsletter 1985; central figure is sax player Kippie Moeketsi

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Welcome Home Dorothy Nyembe, artist Thmi Mnyele for MEDU, 1984, No. 457

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Liberate the Child, Thami Mnyele with Albio Gonzoles, Medu, silkscreen, Gaborone, 1979

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... to organise our womenfolk into a powerful, united and active force for revolutionary change. This task falls on men and women alike – all of us as comrades.

FORWARD WITH THE YEAR OF THE WOMEN!

Above shows photograph of blind trade union leader Violet Hashe addressing a crowd in Fordsburg's Red Square in Johannesburg, at the start of the 1951 Defiance Campaign; picture from *Drum Magazine*. Poster made by Thami Mnyele for the ANC in Lusaka, offset Litho, 1984, No. 4397

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Photo: Mike Kahns, 1982



T-shirt worn by mourners from South Africa at
Thami Mnyele's funeral in Botswana

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REBURIAL OF REVOLUTIONARY CADRE



Umkhonto we Sizwe



10/12/1948 - 14/06/1985



Thamsanqa "THAMI" Harry Mnyele IN LIBERATION AND CULTURE

"For me as a crafts-man, the act of creating art should compliment the act of creating shelter for my family or liberating the country for my people, this is a culture"

venue • Tembisa (Mehlareng Stadium)
date • 24 September 2004
time • 9h00

For more information contact:

Tshilidzi Munyai 072 2061 558

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Poster used for the re-burial at Illiliba Cemetary, Tembisa



Portrait of Thami Mnyele by Mzwakhe Nhlabatsi, printed in Staffrider, 1985

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