



SABELA MAHLANGU

Master Printmaker

Sabela Mahlangu – Master Printmaker

“...his perfected multi-colour techniques created an
interest among collectors and institutions.”

Sipho Mdanda, University of Johannesburg

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Sabela Mahlangu © 2024

Reaching across the colour line.

■ LLOYD JEANS AT THE OPENING OF SABELA MAHLANGU'S EXHIBITION AT NUMBER 8 THE EMPORIUM, FOREST GATE, LONDON.

Sabela was born in 1951 in Brakpan, a small mining town near Johannesburg in South Africa, just as the ruling Afrikaans National Party government was beginning to institutionalise its white supremacist Apartheid system of racial segregation.

As a toddler he and his family were among the 3.5 million black Africans forced from their homes into often distant segregated neighbourhoods, and stripped of virtually all the meagre rights they had previously enjoyed. He found himself growing up in the Kwa-Thema township in Springs in the Gauteng province. His parents enrolled him at the Kwa-Phakama High School in 1963, and it was during his early art lessons that he first discovered what would become a life-long love of the creative arts. This retrospective exhibition illustrates his struggle since that time to overcome all barriers and tell his tale through his art, where his images form a common language of strength, resilience, courage and imagination. After matriculating from school, he spent every available hour poring over any art book he could lay his hands on.

His breakthrough came in 1973 when he managed to gain a place at the world-famous Rorke's Drift Art Centre. This school originated as a mission of the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Church with the stated main aims: "To nurture the unique artistic heritage of Africa. To extend this heritage with new influences so that it will find its rightful place in an evolving and changing society. To ensure that ... its arts and crafts will find increasingly profitable

outlets." In an article on the Centre, Professor Walter Battriss has defined it as "the result of a unique and successful venture in cross-cultural art and craft production – a delicate combination of Swedish technical assistance and traditional design and skill." Sabela describes its approach to teaching as a detailed training in ways and means while allowing students to discover and refine their own individual methods, styles and bodies of work. Sabela soon discovered his path while experimenting with etching and print-making, and by the time he graduated with a Diploma in Fine Arts he was already well on the way towards establishing an exciting reputation in the emergent South African art world.

His reputation was underlined with two honourable mentions by the judges of the 'South Africa Today' biennial exhibitions of 1973 and 1975. In an academic article, Siphso Mdanda of the University of Johannesburg calls him "this introverted genius" whose mastery of printmaking has "benefitted artists across the colour line in spite of stringent apartheid laws" and popularised him with collectors and institutions throughout South Africa and further afield. For example, he has sold works to practically every university in South Africa, the United Nations permanent collection in New York and the British Museum.

His prints have been included in exhibitions in Germany, Israel and USA, as well as throughout his home country. He was the first black African to be

Limited edition drypoint etchings, clockwise from top left: **Couple II, Glamour Girl II, The Bride, The Lady Who's There** (all 2023).



his wife Judith to Forest Gate, where they have contributed to the area's community and cultural life.

Sabela has worked assiduously on improving his highly complex and time-consuming multi-colour plate etching technique, where each plate is drawn, etched, coloured and printed separately before being meticulously fused to produce the finished piece. Recently he has produced monochrome prints which also feature in this exhibition. He has exhibited throughout East London and remains ever popular with collectors.

Sabela Mahlangu is a master etcher – please enjoy his wonderful work.

invited to lecture at Natal Technikon, now Durban University, and he has worked with many leading lights of the new wave of African printmakers whose work now forms an important part of South Africa's cultural heritage, including Lucas Sithole and Vuminkosi Zulu.

But despite these successes, opportunities in the country of his birth remained severely restricted. Motivated by what Siphso Mdanda calls "his pressing desire for freedom to pursue experimental work outside the syndrome of white-help" and in his never-ending search of new avenues through which to perfect his work, in 1995 he made the momentous decision to move to the United Kingdom. He established himself at the Art Hub Studios in North Woolwich, and moved with

Sabela Mahlangu – Master Printmaker whose perfected multi-colour techniques created an interest among collectors and institutions.

■ BY SIPHO MDANDA, UNIVERSITY OF JOHANNESBURG

Growing up in Kwa-Thema Township near Springs, South Africa, Sabela Mahlangu began his schooling and completed matric in 1969 at KwaPhakama High School. It was during his schooling that Mahlangu experienced his first lessons in art. Not much is known of this introverted genius until he enrolled at Rorkes' Drift Art Centre in 1973-74, exiting with a Diploma in Fine Arts and spent time at the Art Foundation in Johannesburg.

Just like all Rorkes' Drift students, Mahlangu credits Otto Lundbohm, Carol Surname, Gabriele Surname and Jules Van Vuuren's approach to teaching, whose emphasis was on intense technique training and allowing the students to discover and improve individual oeuvres on their own. This method was endorsed by Thami Mnyele who abandoned his studies only after first year as he did not see the reason for continuing with further study when he had grasped the essential tools of the trade.

Mnyele argued that creativity is not taught but inborn. Most students disagreed with Mnyele's view, noting the invaluable knowledge and experience attained through class crits and feedback by both staff and peers alike. Highlights of such benefit were the development of vocabulary and confidence to articulate one's work to staff and peers.

Mahlangu began experimenting with multi-coloured block printmaking early in his studies. As an introvert and dedicated student, he spent most of his time experimenting and discovering endless

possible techniques, which, even after Rorke's Drift, he continue perfecting including new multi-colour techniques that popularize him to art collectors and institutions interested in his prints.

Against complaints expressed by his contemporaries about the lack of studio facilities in the township, Mahlangu built his own working space at home in Kwa-Thema, where he often worked with Vuminkosi Zulu. Such initiative was informed by his pressing desire for freedom to pursue experimental work outside the syndrome of white-help, which robbed many black artists of independence and self-reliance, based on white-tutoring and patronising charity notwithstanding operating within the limitations associated with using white artists' studios.

Importantly, many graduates of Rorke's Drift cultivated a culture of independence and self-reliance noting a trended initiative of establishing their own studios. This trend was started by Cyprian Shilakoe who set up a studio at his home in Dennilton, Mpumalanga Province. When Shilakoe untimely died in tragic car accident in 1972, another Rorke's Drift graduate, Dumisani Mabaso acquired the press to continue producing prints and training learners from Soweto township to work with the rare art-making techniques of etching.

Mahlangu's training at Rorke's Drift armed him with rare skills and determination to make his mark on the South African art scene.



Limited edition **Open Field after Football Game**, drypoint etching (2023).

graduates impart their skills to whomever they came across, something that comes naturally to most artists.

Working from his own studio and receiving support of dedicated collectors, Mahlangu could afford to concentrate fully on his craft and quest. Such was a privilege most of his black contemporaries could only dream of, as they had to juggle two to three jobs to survive. Mahlangu to therefore able to take residencies in places such as Soweto and Marianhill where he trained many artists and students in his special technique of multi-colour plate etching.

In 1979, when visiting Charles Nkosi who was curator-in-residence for the collections of St Frances College at Marianhill, Mahlangu met Hugh Dent, then Head of Fine Arts at Natal Technikon, now Durban University of Technology. The meeting saw Mahlangu invited to conduct two weeks printmaking workshops for staff and students. One of the beneficiaries of these empowering workshops was Jan Jordaan who in turn conducted a number of workshops at Rhodes University where young printmaker Dominic Thorburn was an undergraduate in the Fine Art department benefited extremely.

Mahlangu's mastery of this technique benefitted artists across the colour line in spite of stringent apartheid laws that segregated all forms of life. The spirit of sharing ideas engendered at Rorkes' Drift by visiting international and local lecturers ensured

The same principle exemplifies the drive with which Mahlangu pushed himself in perfecting the multi-colour plate etching technique, where each plate is drawn, etched, coloured and printed separately with the end result being a fusion of colours. To achieve the perfect harmony, the printing and registration of each colour has to be meticulous or the colour will bleed into areas not intended.

In his print 'Mielie Seller' (1978), Mahlangu chose a subject matter that had been explored by many an urban or township artists. These artists commented on the industriousness of township entrepreneurs who invented ways and means of subverting apartheid laws that prohibited them from participating in the formal economy in the land of their birth. This was also another way of bringing in women who brought with them seasonal fresh produce (like mielies) from rural to urban areas. Not only these women were able to interact with their families but were also subjected to innovative ways of creating and establishing self-employment to make ends meet, as the city could not provide jobs for all its citizens. Arguably, (rural) women who tended and looked after their >>gardens and families defied >> the apartheid laws by selling their produce in townships, thus also earning much needed currency to bolster their life styles both in the urban and back in rural >>

Detail of **Jazz Musicians**,
mixed media (2013).



>> homes, especially when the season is over. In Mielie Seller Mahlangu brings this reality to life, as we observe an interaction between an elderly man buying maize mielie from a woman seated on a bench in front of burning brazier. Mielies are shown amidst a huge flame that shoots through the top of the composition, thus dividing the image into two halves. In the background there are human figures going about their daily business in a vast township with monotonous though beautifully rendered houses encoered by wonderful distant hills. Very few artists dignify squalor as Mahlangu has done in this print.

Mahlangu blends dry-point and etching techniques with great success in attaining strong and softer lines to create contrast between the foreground imagery and the distant houses and hills. The people in the distance are also treated subtly with soft outlines as they recede into the background, thus in this visual rendition the protagonists are brought into the fore and sharp focus of the picture plane. Use of aquatint technique strengthens the tonal values of light and dark areas with ease, as such giving visually balanced image.

To attain harmony across the range of imagery, whether people's clothes, brazier and background landscape, Mahlangu uses primary colours in ways that demonstrate an astute understanding of colour theory. He pays particular attention to the subjects' details as evinced in the tie, knobkerrie, bicycle spokes and the discarded oil drum that acts as a

brazier. Articulation of these details shows Mahlangu's impeccable eye and mastery of this very difficult print technique.

Mahlangu is one example of the success story of the teaching methodology used by teachers at Rorkes' Drift, where they encouraged their students to explore their own depths as innovative artists than imitators. Though Mahlangu learned multi-colour block printing at Rorkes' Drift, it was his tenacity for innovation that lead him to experiment with multi-coloured etching plates on his own. On perfecting this technique, he took it to other institutions where he was able to share with others.

Sipho Mdanda is a Research Associate at University of Johannesburg.

“The British King in South Africa.”

■ THE STORY BEHIND THE PURCHASE OF SABELA MAHLANGU'S PAINTING OF AN EVENT THAT MAY NEVER HAPPEN.

The South African artist Sabela Mahlangu had studied with the famous Namibian artist John Muafangejo at Rorke's Drift. Seated in the British Museum's South Africa landscape this summer, Mahlangu showed me his preliminary drawing for a painting planned for a time when Prince Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall visit South Africa as British King and queen. I was intrigued by the idea of a commemorative image of an event which may never happen, certainly not in the way that the artist has imagined it: a miraculously young Charles dressed as a Zulu king, with leopard skin cape, eagle's talon necklace and headband with blue crane feather; Camilla clasping a Dove of Peace while the 'Big Seven' animals give their blessing to the

couple. In the top right-hand corner Mahlangu drew a Ndaba tree which he described thus: “When people are holding a meeting with a king they meet under the tree which is called 'Ndaba' where laws are passed for the Nation or tribe. It is also called the Tree of Life.”

Chris Spring

Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas, The British Museum.

‘The British King in South Africa’ (2010)

by Sabela Mahlangu – mixed media on paper, purchased by the British Museum for its Africa, Oceania and the Americas' collection.



Past work, exhibitions and work in collections.

Commissions and acquisitions

British Museum Magazine No. 68, Winter 2010.

Design of a family album (portrait) for Vernon-James, Wembley, UK.

Cover design *The Plain Truth*, Pro Veritate magazine; The South African Institute of Race Relations.

Design of the annual calendar for the South African Institute of Race Relations.

Design of a Ciskein Coat of Arms for ERAB (formerly East Rand Administration Board-Germiston), South Africa.

Exhibitions

2024 Stratford Library, London, UK *If you are Black, you're not simply an artist*

2024 The Melrose Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa *30 years of Wishful Thinking* curated by Siphso Mdanda

2024 The Africa Centre, London

2023 The Gate Library Exhibition, *Retrospectives*, Forest Gate, UK

2023 SU Gallery, Stratford, UK

2023 *Number 8 Forestgate* 8A Severt Road, UK

2022 *Number 8 Forestgate* 8A Severt Road, *It's OK to Dream*, UK

2016 *Forest Gate Art Trail* at Artherton Leisure Centre, UK

2015 Three man Exhibition at Compotes Bakery, UK

2014 *Forest Gate Art Trail* at Dunning Hall; UK

2013 *Wanstead Art Trail* at Find, Wanstead, UK

2012 *Wanstead Art Trail* at Find and Art Shop of High Street, Wanstead, UK

2011 One Man Exhibition at Blackall Studios in Shoreditch for a South African Charity Organisation (NTATAISE – growing a child), UK

2011 *Wanstead Art Trail* at the George; Wanstead, UK

2011 *Wanstead Art Trail* at St. Gabriel's Church, Aldersbrook, UK

2010 British Museum Celebrating Mandela Day, London, UK

2010 *Wanstead Art Trail* at the Olive Tree and at the George, UK

2006 Havering Annual Fair, Romford, Essex, UK

1989 Tatham Art Gallery, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa

1984 Fuba Academy of Art, Newtown, Johannesburg, South Africa

1983 Christie's Contemporary Art Show; Pretoria, South Africa

1982 *Seventh British International Print Biennial*, London, UK

1981 Jabulani Standard Bank, Soweto, Johannesburg, South Africa

1985 SABC Artists Group Exhibition, Johannesburg Gallery, South Africa

1979 First One Man Exhibition, Lidchi Art Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa

– *Artists' 79 Group Exhibition*; New York, USA

– Natal Touring Exhibition in South Africa and South West Africa, Namibia

– Joint Exhibition with V Zulu at Klaus

Wasserthal, Pretoria, South Africa



Party's Over (2023)

Limited edition drypoint etching

See page 12.

1979 Second One Man Exhibition, South African Institute of Race Relations Durban, South Africa

1977 Nuremberg Group Exhibition, West Germany

– Tel-Aviv Art Fair, Israel

– Three Man Exhibition with Caiphus Nxumalo and V Zulu, Barclay Shopping Centre, Pretoria, South Africa

– Group Exhibition, Bonn, West Germany

1976 Black South African Contemporary Artists (*The Neglected Traditions*) at the United Nations Building: New York, USA

– One Man Exhibition at the French Embassy in Parktown, Johannesburg, South Africa

1975 *Art South Africa Today*, singled out by Professor Clement Greenberg (American Art Critic) in Durban, South Africa

1974 Durban City Hall: Rorkes Drift Exhibition, South Africa

1973 *Art South Africa Today*, Biennial Exhibition – selected by Professor Esme Bermann

Collections

• Jim Valentine, UK

• Lloyd Jean, UK

• Paul Romane, UK

• Hazel Goldman (guest house), UK

• Henry Moor (artist), UK

• Silver Vernon Mark James, UK

• British Museum, UK

• United Nations Public Library, Permanent Collection, New York, USA

• Prof Clement Greenberg, USA

• Rhodes University, RSA

• Prof Esme Bermann, RSA

• Cape Town University, RSA

• Ernest de Jongh, RSA

• Mike Wright, RSA

• Dr Isaac Mahlangu, RSA

• Durban Art Museum, RSA

• University of Natal, Campbell Collection, RSA

• University of South Africa (Unisa), RSA

• Rand Afrikaans University (RAU), RSA

• University of Witwatersrand (Wits), RSA

• South African Airways (SAA), RSA

• University of Fort Hare, RSA

• ABSA Bank of South Africa, RSA

• Standard Bank of South Africa, RSA

• Ntataise Charity Organisation, RSA

• WWF of South Africa, RSA

• Peter Erfteimeijer, UK

Current work.

■ SABELA MAHLANGU HAS BEEN WORKING ON A SERIES OF MONO AND POLYCHROMATIC DRYPOINT ETCHINGS, AS SHOWN ON THIS AND THE FOLLOWING PAGES.

Gossipers: Girls Club (below) describes encounter in lifestyle's journey. Old heads are vocally wounded whilst the younger successors are gaining ground. Nobody is free from criticism: Critics are like crackers.



Facing page top left: **Couple I** (2021)
Limited edition drypoint and aquatint etching in colour.
Signed, numbered and dated in pencil
Image Size: 8x10cm
10/10 prints available
£200



Facing page top right: **Couple II** (2023)
Limited edition dry point etching
Signed, numbered and dated in pencil
Image size: 11x10cm
47/50 prints available
£ 150

Facing page, bottom: **Gossipers: Girls Club** (2021)
Limited edition original colour etching.
Signed, numbered and dated in pencil
Image size: 21x30cm
20/50 prints available
£ 300

Couple II's interpretation comes from *Couple I* (facing page), whereby love has not been lost and neglected as was portrayed in cubic style of Picasso.

This page: above: **Open field after football game** (2023)
Limited edition drypoint etching
Signed, numbered and dated in pencil
Image size: 10x15cm
75/75 prints available
£150

The Lady Who's There (above) shows a nice, eloquent scintillating looking lady (shebeen queen) who is not looking for trouble from some nasty private policeman. She's wearing smart clothing welcomes customers with her bewitching smile and calm response that would initiate one to come back again on invitation. A shebeen in every street in the township, the best place to recuperate and relax is where you hear the loud music and singing of Aretha Franklin, Jimmy Smith, Shirley Scott etc.

This page, above left: **The Lady Who's There** (2023)
Limited edition drypoint etching
Signed, numbered and dated in pencil
Image size: 10x10cm
10/25 prints available
£150

In *The Bride* (right) adorned in fashion with bridal hairstyle, headgear, facial provocative and a dress that befits the modern day era. She's dress to kill.

Glamour Girls I and II (below): Life and nature are fascinating. We adorn ourselves with a lot of goodies to stand up tall above everyone else. Pretty and beauty are poles apart.



Left: **The Bride** (2023)
Limited edition drypoint etching
Signed, numbered and dated in pencil
Image size: 7x8cm
£00, 20/25 prints available
£150



Centre far left: **Glamour Girl I** (2023)
Limited edition drypoint etching
Signed, numbered and dated in pencil
Image size: 8x10cm
20/25 prints available
£150

Centre, left: **Glamour Girl II** (2023)
Limited edition drypoint etching
Signed, numbered and dated in pencil
Image size: 8x10cm
£00, 46/50 prints available
£150



Below left: **Party's Over** (2023)
Limited edition drypoint etching
Signed numbered and dated in pencil
Image size: 25 x 30cm
20/75 prints available
£200

Facing page: **Gamblers** (2013)
Limited edition woodcut in colour
Signed, numbered and dated in pencil
Image size: 32x39cm
10/10 prints available
£300

Party's Over (bottom of facing page) "A typical party has been portrayed in my opinion. It is like a roller coaster ride event where guests would be hilariously, joyfully and harmoniously introduced to each other. Very, very good indeed they would smile in appreciation. As minutes and hours dragged by the real situation takes over. No one can remember his/her name and intoxication will catapult every weak hearted. The ship sinks. Lights out."

The Gamblers (below) depicts one of the many secret underground venues in township backyards in the 50s and early 60s where we lived. These were the only places for illegal gambling. Friday night to Sundays, weekly wages and robbers' loot were well spent and won here.





Unknown Singer (left) is one of the sketches for a series of etchings at a township backyard car mechanics garage. Usually, they have different musicians to entertain viewers and car owners at break. It is an informal event.

Jimmy Hendrix (below) was the norm of the annual festivities when growing up in the townships where I lived. I never thought I would encounter him at The Uppercut 1966-1967 here in Forest Gate, London.



Right: **Ruth and Boaz**
Ruth 2:1-23 (2023)
 Limited edition drypoint
 mono etching
 Signed, numbered and dated
 in pencil
 25cmx30cm
 £200



Right: **Ruth and Boaz**
Ruth 2:1-23 (2013)
 Woodcut in colour
 Signed and dated in pencil
 Image size: 49x34cm
 £300

Facing page, top:
Unknown Singer (2017)
 Limited edition colour etching
 Signed, numbered and dated
 in pencil
 Image size: 8x10cm
 46/50 prints available
 £200

Facing page, bottom:
Jimi Hendrix (2021)
 Limited edition drypoint and
 aquatint etching in colour
 Signed numbered and dated
 in pencil
 Image Size: 11x13cm
 45/75 prints available
 £200



Above: **Way to Calvary** *St John 10:10-24* (2023)
 Limited edition drypoint etching
 Signed, numbered and dated in pencil
 Image size: 25x30cm
 10/25 prints available, £300.00

Facing page, top left: **Baptism** (2023)
 Limited edition drypoint etching
 Signed numbered and dated in pencil
 Image size: 30x 38cm
 45/50 prints available, £200

Facing page, left: **Woman Found in Adultery** *St John 8:1 11* (2023)
 Limited edition drypoint etching
 Signed numbered and dated in pencil
 Image size: 30x40cm
 20/20 prints available, £300.00



Top right: **Wisemen** (2021)
 Limited edition drypoint and aquatint etching in colour
 Signed, numbered and dated in pencil
 Image Size: 11x13cm
 10 prints available
 £200

Centre right: **The Lost Son** *Luke 15:11-32* (2023)
 Limited edition drypoint etching
 Signed, numbered and dated in pencil
 Image size: 10x10cm
 45/50 prints available
 £150



Above right: **Wolf in Sheepskin** *Mathew 7 v. 15* (2023)
 Limited edition drypoint etching
 Signed, numbered and dated in pencil
 Image size: 8x10cm
 27/30 prints available
 £150

Right: **Sermon on the Mount**

Matthew 5,6 and 7 (2023)

Limited edition drypoint etching

Signed numbered and dated in pencil

Image size: 25x30cm

10/10 prints available

£300.00



Below: **Samson and Delilah** (2023)

Limited edition drypoint etching

Signed numbered and dated in pencil

Image size: 10x 12cm

20/50 prints available

£150

Below, right: **The Holy Family** (2023)

Limited edition drypoint etching

Signed, numbered and dated in pencil

Image size: 10x11cm

45/50 prints available

£150.00



New mixed media.

■ IN 2024, SABELA MAHLANGU STARTED WORKING ON NEW MIXED MEDIA WORKS THAT WILL FORM THE BASIS OF A NEW DIRECTION FOR HIS MULTI-COLOUR ETCHINGS.

Main Street (below) showing the buzzing midday activities of a small encampment designed by the authorities to divide and create an atmosphere of animosity. However, people of all walks of life lovingly greeted one another, taking life as it comes. The small dusty roads are places to meet, sharing ideas and loving the atmosphere. From here to the horizon, life is full of excitement, far from boring.

Below: **Main Street** (2024)

Mixed media on board

Image size: 40x40cm

£1,200.00



Forms (right) shows an expanding splatter on a zinc wall that I attributed with rays of colours in my imagination.

Card Players (facing page, top left) in one of the many secret underground venues in the backyards of the township where we lived in the 1950s and early 60s. These were the only places for illegal gambling. From Friday night to late on Sundays, weekly wages and robbers' loot were well spent here.

Africa Nova (facing page top right) women have a never-say-die spirit, competition is all you need. Hold your head high and be at your best in attitude, attire, arrogance and appearance. The prosperous guys will net the best in town!

Market Place (facing page, bottom) was inspired when I was listening to a Hugh Masekela's song by the same name. This led me to create this image, based on my best sold black and white print in 1976. This 2024 recreation in paint will act as a catalyst for my next challenge in colour etchings.

It shows African ladies dressed to kill in their colourful attires, their stock in trade for successfully selling their wares. The few men in this place are the ones bringing the goods to be sold, plus a few who are trying their luck with the ladies. But are the ladies in the mood to catch their fish?



Above: **Forms** (2024)
Mixed media
Image size: 37x53cm
£1,200.00



Facing page, top left: **Card Players** (2024)
Mixed media
Image size: 32x38cm
£1,200.00



Facing page, top right: **Africa Nova** (2024)
Mixed media
Image size: 37x54cm
£1,200.00



Facing page, bottom: **Market Place**(2024)
Mixed media
Image size: 41x25cm
£1,200.00

