

Unstitching the Blue Dress: A Response

by Judith Mason

I read with great interest Mr Ainslie's careful analysis of why The Blue Dress painting is based on erroneous ideas of what happened to Phila Ndwandwe. Let me respond by describing how I came to create the painting, and how it came into the Court's art collection. While doing so I will touch on a number of errors in how the work is being explained to interested members of the public.

I first heard Phila's story on SABC newscast and then read it on the Weekly Mail. Both reports were by Antjie Krog. A perpetrator was quoted, telling of his victim's stoic refusal to talk and describing her makeshift panties. My first impulse on hearing about the plastic bag around her pelvis, was a childish one. I wanted to make her a whole dress, and then decided to act on this impulse. I often do this as a way of marshalling my thoughts. It is one of the ways in which I eventually come to make an artwork, although more often than not the models or toys I make lead to nothing. My weekly cleaner, the late Mrs Lucia Moruri, was intrigued by my collecting of plastic bags. She came up with the idea of paying children in her township 50 cents per bag. When the bags were washed and sewn and the garments were finished I hung it by a window and the wind made it move as if a person walked within it. So I decided to use the dress in a synecdochic way to celebrate Phila herself. I set her in a landscape with its sense of space and entrapment depicted by using layers of honeycomb grids, a device I had been experimenting with some time. It simply represents the matrix in which the subjects find themselves. It is not a border force. I do not work literally, I work allusively. The same applies to the use of the hyena, an animal I respect enormously for its strange beauty, its scavenging nature and its manner of rearing its young. Depicting animals which are subject to common prejudice, and persuading viewers to look again is something else I have been doing all my working life. I used the hyena as a psychopomp, a spirit guide, not as an image of a security policeman. None the less I accepted that its sinister aspect could quite legitimately lead to the interpretation. I really enjoy using images which carry different implications at one and the same time. It enriches the visual experience, which can be impoverished by accepting only the explanation which reinforces one's prejudices.

A short while after I began the Dress painting I came across the profoundly moving story of Harold Sefola and his companions, and again I was glad to read direct quotes from the perpetrator about this man's courage. By now I realised that I wanted to explore some of the Truth Commission evidence in pictorial form.

I did a couple of quasi-realistic paintings of Sefola, but decided that the treatment of his story also needed symbolic treatment. Walking through the veld near Simon's Town I found a very rusty brazier, which seemed to me to suggest the working class ordinariness of his origins. I took it home and made a painting using three brazier images, lit from within, using yellow light which is intended to suggest the fire, the light within the men themselves, and to echo the industrial yellow of the generator used in their execution.

Eventually, I showed the works in Johannesburg and Cape Town, and put the actual dress on the exhibition to demonstrate how my ideas had developed from an impulse. I had scrawled a sort of love letter to Phila on the skirt of the dress, but decided not to use it in the painting itself. Yes its naivety seemed to appeal to people and it did help viewers understand the work. The separate work showing the braziers had an explanatory note next to it. Dr Lorraine Chaskalson suggested that I invite Justice Albie Sachs to see the show, and he said that he would like a combination of the dress, painting and the brazier painting in a large work for the Court's collection. He very generously gave me out of his own funds enough to buy excellent quality canvas and materials. I added a rusty enamel mug to the brazier part of the large oil to echo the plea of another person facing death, Christ asking that the cup pass from him. Albie suggested to Nancy Gordon that she buy the original Dress painting, which she donated to the Court in memory of her husband, Gerald Gordon S.C. He also asked that the plastic dress should be hung as part of a trio celebrating the Woman Who Kept Silent and the Man Who Sang. The original Sefola painting was sold to somebody in Cape Town.

I would like to stress that the works were originally made for my own purposes, and not intended for a public collection. I was delighted when Albie asked me for the work and I did not think to amend any of my images for a space which is used by people who are not necessarily versed in the language of contemporary art. I explained the work for an SABC TV programme, and also explained the iconography when the works were shown at retrospective exhibitions at the Standard Bank in 2008 and at the Sasol Museum in 2009. So it dismays me that illusory spatial grids become border fences, and braziers become accessories to the warmth of Phila's hearth, or that in an overview of the Court's collection, Phila is said to have sung Nkosi Sikelele. It also dismays me that my use of the "house-wifely" is transcribed as "house-wifey", a patronising and infantilizing term which has been repeated in gender studies texts about the Dress etc.

In his opening remarks at the Standard Bank exhibition Justice Arthur Chaskalson took issue with my definitions of the images used, and said, "A work of art, once completed, takes on a life of its own. It has been created for others to see. What

they see may not be what the artist intended” This is so of course. At best an artist starts a conversation and has no control over how it develops, but imagery needs to be read aright in order for the conversation to develop at all.

I tend to reject some other criticisms of the painting, particularly that of Barbara Russell. I made a pretty blue dress as an intuitive response to a ghastly story. Blame my co-dependant nature, but don't assume that I therefore fixated on Phila in preference to the tragedy that befell Khubeka. I did not set out to memorialise the lost heroines of the Struggle. Phila's youth, beauty or otherwise, her young child, were not the hook upon which I pinned my story nor was I diminishing her capacity as a “trained fighter”. She would not have been held captive and killed had she not been at the forefront of the struggle in her area. The fact that she was female is as important as the fact that Sefola was male. That is, not “merely incidental” as Russell suggests, but central to their being. The hook, for me, was, quite simply, the plastic bag.

Ainslie's meticulous and beautifully described research has shown very clearly that there is a central flaw in my painting. It is based on something that is not patently but probably untrue, even though the job of some artists is to mythologise. It is what humans do. Imaginary figures can be used thus, but when one uses real people one has to stick with the facts. Had I waited until all the evidence of the Truth Commission was gathered I would have lost the impulse which drove me, as I am not a historian nor am I a researcher. I assumed that the news reports I read were correct. In one instance they were. In another they were not. I take my job very seriously, and I revere the Constitutional Court above any other place in South Africa. I never believed that I would live to see it established. To have a work in its collection was without doubt the high point of my professional life. So it grieves me to say that I don't realistically see a place for the work in the Court. Perhaps the Gerald Gordon image could be put somewhere where his colleagues can recall that admirable man. The dress must certainly go, and probably the big painting too. It is based on a misconception and is now a sentimental object, not a valid memorial.

I must commend Ainslie for his courage. Telling it like it can be difficult, and must certainly have been in this instance. My only recommendation to the Court's art curators is to get, where possible, artists' statements concerning the work that errors in tour guide interpretations don't creep in. Thank you to all concerned, for hearing me out and being so supportive. I really appreciate it.

Judges and curators were enormously kind in their response to my recommendations, reiterating Judge Chaskalson's view that an artwork eventually slips the bonds of its maker and takes on a life of its own.

Having now pondered on Mr Ainslie's findings for several months, I have tried to reconcile my need to be scrupulous about the work and my natural wish to have it remain part of the Court's public collection. I recalled why I was so personally invested in the testimony of the Truth Commission when it began its hearings. In the mid-70's I was teaching drawing and art history at Wits University. A new head of the Fine Arts Dept., Professor Fabio Barraclough, was appointed. He was recruited by Craig Williamson to spy on behalf of the Security Branch. He was moved sideways and eventually out because he was inadequate to his appointed task. But he had searching conversations with staff members, including myself. I had been active in the South African Liberal Party and was still active in protest activities of a minor sort and let my opinions be known. I also happened to rent on a farm whose owner was laundering money for Williamson, the apparent leader of NUSAS. Two security policemen lived there, Paul Assmussen and Zak Edwards, although I did not know they were so employed until Williamson disclosed he was a Security Branch operative in 1980. I did not know it while I lived there, but the farm was used by the police to gather ANC people who would be transported elsewhere and dealt with. Towards the end of my time there I was attacked and my life was threatened. I was humiliated and frightened by these events, and I eventually left. I was too confused to go to the police, which in hindsight would not have been a good idea. In the greater scheme of things all this is unimportant. But what it did do was give me some light insight into what happens to those freedom fighters who are held captive. To be naked is foreign to almost all women unless it is in the safety of intimate situations or in the privacy of their homes. Locker-room or mine compound camaraderie is a male thing. For a woman to appear before her interrogators unclothed is fraught with danger and if she brazens it out she will invite abuse from even the "nicest" policemen. Clothing her with something, with anything, is the first thought a woman would have. Not to "protect her dignity" but to remain inviolate, for as long as possible.

The other thought that persuades me that the Dress may still find its place on the Court's wall is that Phila is a recognised hero of the struggle, and it is acceptable to portray her as an echo of the Nike or Samothrace, striding into the winds of change her courage helped stir. The evidence on which I based my initial concept is as fragile as the blue plastic bag found amongst the debris in her grave, but the impulse to memorialise her is an honest one.

The Court returned the dress which I made many years ago so that I could replace it with a new version. The old dress, almost completely disintegrated, is now in a clear plastic box. I sewed another with difficulty, as plastic is much less sturdy than it was 25 years ago. Good news for environmentalists but daunting for artworkers! I attempted to paint the original lettering onto the new version but the paint eroded the plastic almost immediately and it tore badly. I then made another two dresses. One was packed into a container, as is, and the third I used as a conceptual coda to Mr Ainslie's journey, and mine. I used a magnifying glass and sunlight to burn holes in this dress as demonstration on how his scrutiny burnt holes in my original premise. I added the magnifying glass to the molten remains of this dress and packed these into a third box. Perhaps these could be stored somewhere for the amusement of interested visitors or researchers.

I have not bothered with notes as I am under a lot of pressure workwise, but could produce them at a later date if needed. Terry Bell and Dumisane Ntsebeza's book. "Unfinished Business". In the chapter on Daisy Farm etc. gives an idea of what happened on the property where I rented a cottage in the 70's.