

CCAC Interview with Sipho Ndlovu via phone and email between 04/16/2020 and 29/06/2020 - transcript

Last updated: 9 September 2020

Project Name: ImagesofSouthAfricanHistory

Date of interview: Between 14 February 2020 and 29 June 2020

Location of interview: Over the phone and via email

Language/s of interview: English

Length of interview: N/a

Interviewer name (and acronym): Francois Lion-Cachet (FLC)

Interviewee name (and acronym): Sipho Ndlovu (SN)

Name of translator, if applicable: N/a

Name of transcriber: N/a

Notes on access and use, if applicable: On request of the artist, no audio recording of his interview was to be made; no photograph of him is to be published.

Mode of interview: Phone call and email

Number of recordings: N/a

Audio file name(s) of interview: N/a

List of acronyms: N/a

START OF INTERVIEW

FLC: Please tell us a bit about where you grew up and how you became an artist?

SN: I was born in the township Alexandra, in a family house. I grew up in the suburb Gallo Manor where my mother was working as a domestic worker, around Woodmead. I always loved to do art, my mother's employers saw me doing art, they were impressed and said I should do it as a career. I first started out by selling artworks on the street in front of the Johannesburg Sun Hotel on the corner of Jeppe. This was around 1987, 1988. I was discovered by Brigitte Read, wife of Mark Read, whilst selling to tourists on this busy street. She was from the Sanderling Art Gallery, a branch of the Everard Read Gallery. After that I showed my work there.

I then met Ian Gillespie, I met him at the small business development offices in Parktown. He was a consultant there for when you applied for funds. It was next to Wits University. I didn't qualify for

a small business loan to buy art materials, something I heard after weeks of waiting. However, he [lan] helped fund me out of his own pocket. I own that man a lot. You see, some people are racist, but others are there to help. He helped me with small business development. I didn't consider my art as a business, but he helped with the application. He helped me with funding for many years. He gave me money to buy art material. He told me that I have talent.

My first solo exhibition was at the Shell Art Gallery, at the Shell building, the building that is now the ANC headquarters, Chief Albert Luthuli House. The gallery was on the ground floor of the building. Velaphi Mzimba had his first solo exhibition there. I used to sell artworks on the street with Velaphi Mzimba.

I later moved to Cape Town because the people my mother worked for ended up staying in Cape Town. I got a room in the underground service staff quarters.

What inspired me to become an artist was seeing Gerard Sekoto's art in 1989 at Johannesburg Art Gallery, I was inspired by that show, *The Neglected Tradition*, to become a full-time painter. Brigitte Reed told me about these exiled artists: George Pemba and Gerard Sekoto. Their technique and subject matter, the free flow of movement, inspired me very much. There is also John Singer, one of the great contemporary painters of the 1800s.

FLC: Can you tell us more about how, when and why *Images of South African History* were made? To which historical and current day themes would you say this artwork series speaks to?

SN: You know, stories were normally told in books. I wanted to tell my own story through art. I realised there are stages in South African life: the armed struggle, resistance to colonialism and apartheid. I thought to let myself try to document the stages of life generally, of the lives of normal people. Right now, people are struggling with sewage blockages, people are blocking roads and burning tyres to force the government to do the right thing. I see what I see. The artwork was made so that people could see what was happening, there must be a reason for why people are doing what they are doing.

Images are not like writing, a picture tells more than a thousand words. There are images of people toyi-toying for water today, due to a lack of service delivery. There is no water and electricity. There is no schooling for kids, they attend school under a tree, there are pit toilets in schools and kids are falling into them. That is why people burn tyres and protest.

FLC: Could you tell us the story of when and why this artwork was donated to the Constitutional Court Trust?

SN: I was staying in Cape Town. I struggled to produce these artworks; they were huge. I tried to get funding from the NAC, the Department of Arts & Culture and Thabo Mbeki's offices. Nobody saw my vision. This is happening to a lot of people today. Everything costs money. I ended up writing a letter to the USA, to Kodak. I told them I wanted to tell people that cannot read what was happening. They referred me to Kodak in South Africa – they ended up donating R200 and a small camera. Kodak later withdrew themselves from South Africa due to apartheid.

I tried to sell the paintings. I tried to sell them to Iziko. The artwork is like a good educational television programme – people who cannot read can recognise the images. They [Iziko] weren't interested. Marilyn Martin showed the images to Albie Sachs. These Iziko people say they don't have money, but I don't know if they have money or not. Albie gave me a call. I was staying in domestic servant quarters in Gardens, in the Cape Town suburbs. I showed him the pictures and he was interested. He purchased them from me. I cannot disclose the amount.

Albie visited me and asked to adjust some of the images: a guy was being necklaced and the k-word was used, which I took out.

You know, there was a call-up? When you were a young white male, after matric. Some people went into exile because they didn't want to serve in the army. People didn't understand the meaning of this, white people went into exile because it was punishable for you not to heed the call-up.

There were sanctions against South Africa. Zolu Budd was a white female running during the armed struggle, she is depicted in the painting. She ended up being a citizen of Britain and wearing a British uniform. She represents many others who were in similar situations. Whites also suffered under apartheid.

The majority of people thought apartheid only affected black people. There were many white guys killed in John Vorster square, Neil Aggett for example. Whites and blacks were treated terribly under apartheid, families got separated. The same for Beyers Naudé, a white Afrikaner who was a member of the Dutch Reformed Church, who fought apartheid.

FLC: The artworks speak to distinctive periods in South Africa's history – would you consider making an additional work as a fifth instalment of South Africa between the years of 2000 and 2020?

SN: Definitely, I am looking forward to that one. I wish I was a prophet - I would predict what would happen in another painting. The democracy we are celebrating is full of, and heading to, big corruption and oppression. Black people are being oppressed to the bone, so they appreciate the smallest basic thing like a toilet because they have been oppressed to the core while politicians are driving fancy cars like Ferraris. 25 years later people are still fighting for the land – we need to give people title deeds, this is the painting I would like to do.

I wouldn't like my portrait to be seen, that would be scary and dangerous because I am telling the truth. People are making a living oppressing others. It is shocking. There is only being cared for the middle class. There is a struggle for airplanes to fly to Cape Town and Europe, while others struggle for water. They would rather spend billions to sustain the flying around than to get people access to water. The allocation of the budget is only for the middle class, the poor are just given t-shirts. A picture of Jeff Radebe should be included here.



Note: This image was supplied by the artist via WhatsApp and requested that it be included with his answers. He received the image from somebody else via WhatsApp. The photographer is unknown.

These are the things I would like to put on the fifth one. Pit toilets are falling in while billions of Rands are spent on airplanes and luxury lifestyles.

We are living in abnormal conditions, people are forced to normalise the abnormal. There is a sensitising of people to make them appreciate the smallest of things. People are also being given land so that the politicians can remain in power. Look at Robert Mugabe, he realised he had no other way to stay in power, even though he wasn't doing a good job. They are using the black person's mind. This is what I want to show in the painting. I want to show that this is what will happen to you if you don't use your brain. I want to educate people.

Nobody goes and repairs RDP houses and roads, the same for the railway network and the sewerage department. There used to be these departments. They used to fix it. They [the sewerage department] no longer have the white powder to pour on the sewerage that kills germs. Now they are calling the army to do their job. The army was fighting people and was at war with black people in the past, but now they are working on basic tasks that should be done by the sewerage department. We know the army should be there to protect the country, not to fix the sewerage system. These are the images I would like to put in [the fifth panel].

FLC: How do you feel about having your work part of the Constitutional Court Art Collection (CCAC) today? Additionally, what does the CCAC represent to you?

SN: It was always a dream of mine to see the artworks displayed. People are too busy to read. You know, Ambassadors of other countries write letters to me thanking me for the artworks. It is a great honour for me, but unfortunately my vision was not seen by the Department of Arts & Culture.

Albie told me it was going to the Constitutional Court and that people will see the history of South Africa in stages. I was so excited. I saw it in the building when I was staying in a townhouse in Pretoria. I couldn't believe it was me that made those images. They are very striking. I am happy they are seeing the light.

FLC: Do you have any recommendations on the preservation and presentation of the artwork?

SN: The presentation of the works... They are seen all over the world. I am very happy. I was approached by a student in the USA. There was a researcher for books, from Canada. I can't believe how these paintings attract people. I don't have the time to speak to everyone. I can't fill in all the forms, I am too busy. My heart and soul is in Africa.

On the preservation of the works – it is fantastic. It is about the teaching of kids about the history of South Africa. Kids should learn about the images to see the past of oppression, and of people being denied the window of learning. It is about knowing right from wrong.

In the long term you won't enjoy your success as the oppressor. If you have a big mansion glass house, you will need burglar bars. That's what happens when you oppress people so that they don't live on the same standard as you. That is why it is as it is right now.

I can't celebrate basic things as the middle class because they are basic. I wish and hope these things for everyone. It is a substandard way of living. The minority of white kids, they receive a good education. The new government had 25 years to redress the balance, but they can't.

I chose my own destiny by being curious. I learned a lot for myself. I learned to read and write.

School kids should see these images, they must see there is a way of expressing anger rather than burning schools and throwing stones.

The community asks for speed humps so that your kids aren't killed. People ask the council, but nothing happens. That is why they burn tires and buildings. This is not normal. Through my experience I learned that a powerless person's only way to be heard is to burn tires. It is so when your voice is not heard by people you are trying to tell something about, and you don't have money for lawyers. Rich people have money for lawyers and can make the government listen to them and even to pay them money. As a poor person you reach a hopeless state and turn to the last resort to burn tires and buildings.

END OF INTERVIEW