

Malangatana: "I can't get away from what I see and hear"



Home is Where the Art is

In a poor neighbourhood on the outskirts of Maputo, the Mozambique capital, a crowd of around 100 children of all ages sat on the ground sketching pictures in the sand using different coloured earths, old cans and other bits of rubbish.

Every so often the children would call to a middle-aged Mozambican man, dressed in bright shorts and sandals, to give them tips on their art work, which brightened up a large mass of barren land.

He gave the tips enthusiastically, despite the many hours they were spending under the blazing sun on one Sunday morning. And that advice was mostly heeded to, and

rightly so, because it came from Malangatana Valente Ngweyna one of Mozambique's internationally renowned artists.

The neighbourhood where these "lessons" take place every Sunday, "Bairro de Aeroporto", is also where Malangatana chooses to live.

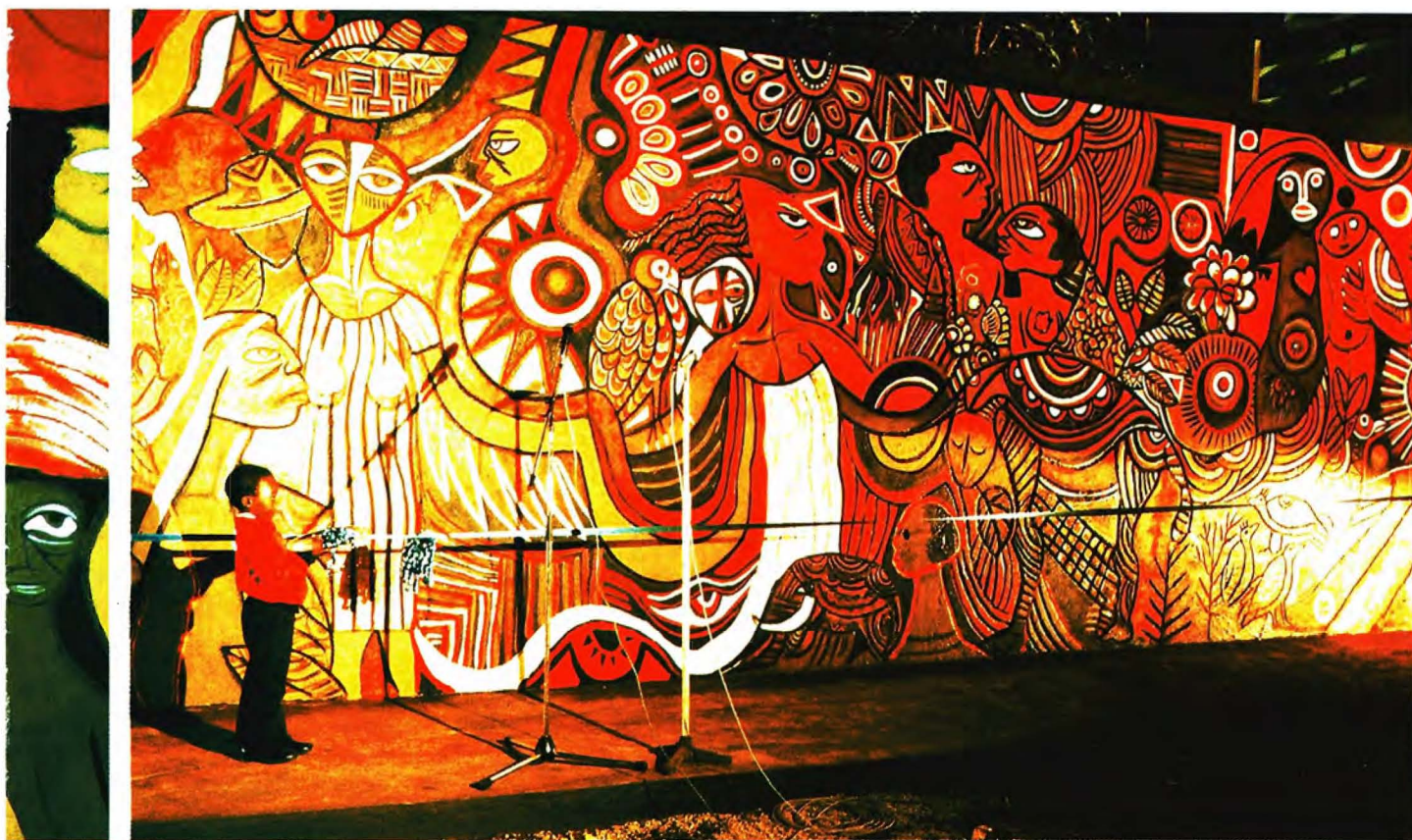
"I would not be happy living out of Mozambique, away from this country and these children," said Malangatana. Yet, his paintings have brought many invitations to mount exhibitions in other African countries, Europe and the US.

His fame was possibly sparked by the haunting style of his art. Many of his

paintings are gruesome, using bright colours to depict suffering, pain, and cruelty.

"What can I do if my eyes, my ears are looking and hearing what is happening?" asks Malangatana. "I can't get away from what I see and hear. Not only for history's sake, but because it's a reality. I'm not doing sad things because I like to."

Malangatana has lived half of his 54 years through two wars - first against Portuguese colonialism, then, today, the 15-year old war waged by the rebels of the Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO) against the FRELIMO government. The conflict has cost the lives indirectly and directly of almost one



million people, driven another one million to neighbouring countries, and left one quarter of the nation's 15 million people dependent on international food aid for their survival.

Malangatana spent two years in prison for his part in the struggle for independence, which was achieved in 1975. "Some of my friends that went to prison, never came back," he said. "They died there."

But this current war has been just as painful. "My heart and a lot of the militants who did a lot to free this country are very frustrated and very sad when we see that we have a new war that is destroying even more than in the colonial times," he said. "RENAMO is killing

children, killing old people, destroying factories. It is too sad for us. I'm not a person who doesn't want to see things changing. I want to see changes, but not in brutal ways. I'm not someone who stays in one place and only sees things in a very narrow way. I criticise FRELIMO also for the mistakes that we do - I won't say that 'they' do but rather 'we'. But we can right these mistakes without violence, and what I see is so bad."

Attempts are being made now to right "the mistakes" and to try to reach an agreement with the rebels, who once only had a reputation for terror and for their backing from neighbouring South Africa. Today, with the direct talks

between high-level Mozambican government and RENAMO delegations in Rome, people are beginning to plan for peace.

"I hope I can soon start painting about peace," said Malangatana. "I am tired of painting what I'm doing now. I'm not a person who likes violence and bloodshed. I also have another kind of painting that reflects the beauty of this country, the future of this country."

Malangatana sees the children as an important part of his life. He has led workshops and painted murals with children in Burako, Mali, and Chicago.

In Mozambique, it was the children who asked

Malangatana to join them, ten years ago. "I felt very honoured when I started to do the art with the children," he said. "They are doing amazing things with different kinds of sand, rubbish - things that people throw away like tins of Coca Cola, etc. They can *o something out of anything. These children are our future."

Malangatana is also planning for the future of art collections in Mozambique, by putting together an archive of his work and life.

"I'm not doing this just for myself or my family, but also for this Mozambique country that I love so much." ●

Ruth Ayisi