

The still life in wartime

p.43

THE WEEKLY MAIL & GUARDIAN
January 28 to February 3 1994

Like Albie Sachs, Mozambican painter Malangatana Ngwenya doesn't see art as a weapon of the struggle. Politics is just one of many aspects of life to be represented, he told **Justin Pearce**

WHEN Malangatana Ngwenya walks through the streets of Maputo, people keep stopping him, wanting to talk to him. He is one of Mozambique's most renowned painters in a country where artists are more popular than soccer stars.

During the war it was easier to buy a painting than a frame. This accounts for the lack of frames — and the multiplicity of artworks — on exhibition at the Arts Association of Bellville gallery. The collection was accumulated by Albie Sachs during his 11 years of exile in Mozambique, and Ngwenya — who paints under the name of Malangatana — was in the Cape last week to open the exhibition.

He was brought here by the Mayibuye Centre as part of a drive to restore cultural links between South Africa and its neighbours. Amid the cheese, wine and suits at the show's opening at the weekend in the Bellville art gallery, he provided one-man proof of how culture differs between South Africa and Mozambique.

Though his English is near-fluent he chose to make his opening speech in Portuguese through an interpreter because "the emotion was too strong" for him to express himself in English. At the end of the address he burst into song.

During our interview the next day, he spouted off-the-cuff metaphors and words like "humanity". Imprisoned by the colonial regime for his Frelimo connections, after independence he was elected to parliament (although he keeps a low political profile). Samora Machel's entire cabinet attended the exhibition that marked his 50th birthday.

As Sachs points out, the dichotomy between art as a private endeavour and politics as a public one has no place in Mozambique. For Malangatana, political struggles were just another thing to paint about.

"I opposed colonialism; to express myself against that I became political, but I don't want to create a wall by working only within politics," he explains. "Above all I'm a human being with a sensibility, with a heart. I do what I feel like — I paint still lifes, I paint things about life."

His *Arson by Night* doesn't show the oppressors; the canvas is jammed with people whose tangled limbs and terrified eyes convey the total disruption of people's lives by the war in Mozambique — or anywhere else, for that matter. It's hard not to draw comparisons with Picasso's *Guernica*.

But he has no hang-ups about drawing on the influence of a worldwide, not just African, artistic tradition. Words like "Afrocentric" and "Eurocentric", the staple diet of so much cultural debate in South Africa, are rarely uttered where he comes from.

His first drawings were done in the soil of his home village of Makalama near Maputo. Later, while working as a waiter in a city club, he met architect Pancho Guedes, who gave him the space to experiment. Guedes provided him with board



Mozambique-centric: Malangatana's paintings challenge the dichotomy between Africa and Europe

and lodging, art materials and a garage to work in — but, deliberately, no education in art history.

"At first Guedes banned me from his library and his art collection — he didn't want me just copying. I began to study when I had the capability to analyse art, not just copy it."

By the time he visited Europe for the first time in 1971, he was a well-established painter and could allow what he saw to make an impact on his style without overwhelming it. "There I saw not only classic art but also modern painters in Spain and France, and started to drink some of their milk."

The number of expatriate Portuguese artists working in Mozambique before independence, many of them mixing with the Frelimo-aligned intellectuals of the underground, meant he was not alone in his exposure to European traditions.

"This is not Afrocentric or Eurocentric art. It's Mozambique-centric art," Sachs comments, surveying the work of a variety of artists at the exhibition. "It doesn't borrow European trends. It represents an African reworking of international trends. If someone plays the saxophone or uses oil paint, do they cease to be African?"

Sachs believes the artificial Euro-Afro dichotomy has helped to prevent visual art from becoming an established part of South African popular culture. Similar to it is the conceptual split between high and low art which has kept this country's best talents off the streets and in the galleries and

art schools.

Malangatana may be known in London and New York, but the artist started off by drawing in the sand. He's cleared a patch of ground outside his home where he gives children coloured sand and supervises them in making pictures.

"It is especially important to give children the possibility of doing anything that they feel for. And who must do this? The artists themselves. They don't need to say: 'I want to forget' or 'I want to remember what happened under apartheid'. They must say: 'I'm an artist, or a musician, or a theatre player, so let me paint or let me play or let me sing.'"

Sachs, meanwhile, is not despairing about South Africa's chances of pulling itself out of the quagmire of cultural politics.

"My five-year ban on saying 'art is a weapon of struggle' is almost up. And I don't think it will be necessary to renew the ban. The debate has moved on from there.

"Better make that my tongue-in-cheek ban," he adds quickly. "I got into a lot of trouble for saying that. South Africans have always been bad at keeping their tongues in their cheeks."

■ Mozambique Art: The Albie Sachs Collection is on show at the Arts Association of Bellville Gallery (in the library complex, Carel van Aswegen Street) until February 4.