

To the Point, Johannesburg (Peter Anderson), 29th October, 1976

“They are longing for Heaven”

“In a great river there lives a very big snake. This is the she-snake. Sometimes, the she-snake longs for a he-snake, but the he-snakes all live in heaven. When the she-snake, who is a queen, rises to go and meet the he-snake, she gathers around her all the dust to protect her from the eyes of the public. This is what the people call a tornado. ‘Oh, when you come up,’ the angels cry, ‘see what damage you have done!’ For when she goes, all the water from the river goes up with her, and when she stops in heaven, it falls as rain” – Lucas Sithole, sculptor.

Water, rivers, clouds, tornadoes – “I love all things that flow” wrote the great blind James Joyce. Beneath the hands of the African sculptor Lucas Sithole, a conscious shaping of the same passion takes place.

After telling the fable, Sithole smiles, muses for a moment and then adds: “That is why some of my figures are long, they are longing for heaven.”

Sithole’s fine talent is amply evident even in his smaller carvings. Like *Young Caddy*, a simple piece about the length of your forearm, where the slenderest means possible evoke the character of a young black caddie: his stance, slightly bow-legged with toes turned inward, his assumed nonchalance with the cap tilted over the nose.

At his most recent exhibition, perhaps the most beautiful sculpture was in stone, however - a fine-grained white sandstone, highly polished, and as though water-hollowed and curved, forming a large, deeply-modelled and calm head called *Thandu Xolo*, the *Peace-Lover*.

“I chopped it out of the Cape mountains,” Sithole remarks. Using his “special” long chisels, he remembers, he hacked a

chunk larger than a man’s torso out of the mountainside, and then he carried it down. It proved extremely heavy and he almost gave up. At one point, he dumped it under a tree and sat down next to it.

“No, I can’t leave you,” he thought. He even spoke to it. “I can’t leave you,” he said.

The theme of peace holds a profound and abiding appeal for this man who, when he needs to work a “peace” sculpture, leaves his house in Kwa-Thema near Springs, and goes deep in among the trees of one of the few remaining plantations of the area, to an isolated spot where he can sculpt undisturbed. Only the birds gather around him.

“They provide me with music,” he laughs.

Sithole’s sculpture is among the most powerful and poignant ever to emerge from South Africa. International recognition is growing steadily. Already his works can be found in museums and private collections all over the world, in Geneva, Rome, London, New York and Teheran.

Nor is he ignored in his own country. Two of his early sculptures form part of the permanent exhibition of the South African National Gallery in Cape Town.

Fernand Haenggi of Gallery 21 is preparing a book on him. Film-maker Richard Harvey shot a documentary on Sithole at work.

Being nothing like the alienated, cerebral artist we have come to accept as the product of our time, Sithole’s creative relationship with his work is as deeply responsive as it is original. He thinks in images, lives his mythology.

“A tree,” he says, “is like a human being with veins. The branches represent the veins.”

But, he shrugs: “Stone is just a material.”
Pause.

Then, with characteristic insight he adds: “I always try to get the inside ...”

Sithole is uneasy in the moneyed atmosphere of a gallery exhibition. He is soft-spoken, but self-protective and shrewd, yet a sweet-tempered and strong man.

His work represents many years of struggle and achievement. He has times when he is "dry", when inspiration deserts him. Then again, he may do several sculptures along a single theme, only to dispense ruthlessly with those that do not satisfy him.

"If there is something I am not satisfied about," he asserts, "it must be destroyed. I do not want to keep it. I would hate to keep it and see it one day beside the work I love."

He is continuously on the imaginative alert, on every level of consciousness. Many of the ideas for his figurative work come simply from "people he has seen" in the streets.

"Sometimes," he points out, "I read a story in the press and put myself there. I see the places in my mind, picture them. And sometimes, my ideas come from dreams."

Each Sithole sculpture ultimately embodies an emotive theme. Even his titles have impact. Like "*I was not alone*", "*Non-tiring bull*", "*We prayed for rain and it came*", "*I can't believe it*".

"There's one thing I have discovered," says Sithole. "If you are eager ..."

He gets down to work immediately, wherever the inspiration happens to seize him. A habit his wife, incidentally, does not appreciate. Sculpture makes too much dust in the house, she says. She wishes he would get another job, like a clerk in the municipal offices, and wear a white shirt and a tie.

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