

LUCAS SITHOLE

by

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Lucas SITHOLE was born in Kwa-Thema near Springs, Transvaal, on the 15th November, 1931. His father was Zulu and a lay priest in a Zion Church; his mother was Swazi and a washerwoman. His Swazi grandmother was of royal blood and famous for her pottery. She told the young Lucas stories and legends and encouraged him to make clay animals and pots. SITHOLE lived, married and fathered seven children, in Kwa-Thema, moving to Pongola in Zululand in 1981.

He studied at St. Louis Catholic School and obtained a scholarship to the Vlaktefontein Technical College where he learnt carpentry, cabinet making, chiseling, welding and building. SITHOLE spent one year at the Polly Street Art Centre in Johannesburg (1959-1960) studying painting, but he then turned to sculpture. He experimented with stone, hardwoods, liquid steel and bronze, but his medium was to become wood; for him, stone remains "just a material", clay breaks too easily, and metal lacks the warmth of wood. In a tree, in broken trunks and branches he sees analogies with life and with humanity. He once asked a blacksmith friend to provide him with special tools; now he makes his own.

Although SITHOLE shows a preference for wood, he has created some interesting images in a combination of materials. There is a similarity in the surface texture of some early works, whether they are in liquid steel (Lazarus III., 1961), Rhodesian teak (Lost Shepherd, 1962), liquid steel on wire mesh (The Penitent, 1963), copper beaten on wood (Head, 1965) or Ironwood (Rain God, 1966).

During the period 1958-74 the antediluvian creatures and humans rendered in textured directional carving are interspersed with heads which are smoothly polished, almost like metal. Some are fecund or frightening (Hamba, ironwood, 1973), others are thin and attenuated. As he develops, the mythologies which guide him, his concepts of universal humanity, his beliefs and emotions, are increasingly expressed in distorted, complex forms, forms which SITHOLE finds in and releases from the wood.

Pitted surfaces appear to intensify dream images, and he moves from the monolith towards a more abstract open sculpture (Message to the Ancestors, Zulu indigenous wood, 1974). Between 1975 and 1979 the surface pitting in the wood becomes more subtle. He executes a number of superb works in Cape mountain stone (Horse's head, 1976; Eagle's head, 1976; Understanding, 1977). When he chooses, SITHOLE is equally at home in stone.

A series of dancing figures alternate with those which are lost, dejected and in bondage. A number of mother and child compositions emerge, but it is in the creation of animals - real and mythological - that the sculptor continues to attain greater confidence, particularly in the articulation of space through form:

Mamlambo (The undiscovered reptile), hardekool, 1977; **Waterbird**, hardekool, 1978; **Just a few drops**, Msimbiti wood, 1979; **Searching for friends**, Zulu indigenous wood, 1979.

In 1981 Lucas SITHOLE leaves Kwa-Thema and settles near Pongola in Zululand, to be closer to life and death, and to nature. His most varied and prolific period begins. He reconsiders and expands and the barriers between humans, animals and dreams become less and less distinct. He exhibits at Gallery 21, Johannesburg, in October 1981: **Dancing Mantis**, tamboutie, 1981, which draws a defensive, taut arch through the air; an emaciated but spiritually inseparable mother and child, an old warthog which has resigned himself to his fate, a donkey which has collapsed from exhaustion, a bird figure involved in a fight for survival.

By now the artist had developed a technical virtuosity through the carving of different kinds of wood, varying from expressionistic surfaces (reserved almost exclusively for the human figure) to the smooth and refined volumes of **Please don't drown!** (msimbiti, 1981). The contrast between polished surface and distorted form, between optimistic titles and the reality of suffering deepened the meaning of the works on exhibition.

SITHOLE's exhibition at Gallery 21 during October and November 1985 confirmed a sustained vitality and growth, tempered - like the wood - by nature and his own maturity. His iconography continues to merge with his method of sensed realism, his concentration on surface manipulation and the play of light and shadow over the figures. Each piece had its own expressive texture: polished to smoothness by his own hand (**Dancing by the Riverside**, Ngwavuma wood, 1985), full of pockmarks to intensify the drama (**Dancing to the Waves**, Zulu indigenous wood, 1981), the softness of feathers which can be found in the grain of the wood (**Liphi Zembe?**, Ngwavuma wood, 1985). In the great **Manzi Phelile** (There is no more water, Zulu Mkonto wood, 1983), the spirit of the 1966 Ironwood **Rain God** endures.

SITHOLE remains concerned with the meaningful articulation of space, including "negative" spaces underneath and inside the forms. He explores concavities and convexities, volumes that flow together; he conceives the third dimension in a manner as palpable as his love for his medium. Solid on the outside, hollow inside, the **Witchdoctor** (Msimbiti, 1982) has a smooth dark face and hair in which the "natural" organic form and colour of the wood are retained.

All these formal considerations are ultimately, however, in the service of concept and content, of myth and metamorphosis, of feeling and inspiration. And through his consummate command of his art, he is capable of speaking directly to the spectator. For Lucas SITHOLE is in harmony with Africa, with its spirits and its secrets. In the process of capturing the soul of the men and beasts of the continent, he creates sculpture that is forceful, independent and individual.

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