

## LUCAS SITHOLE

F.F. Haenggi

*Gallery 21 and the Haenggi Foundation Museums, Johannesburg, 1980. 236 pp., 107 b/w & 5 color photos, introduction, index.*

Last year Rand Afrikaans University and subsequently the Pretoria Art Museum featured a retrospective exhibition of the work of the sculptor Lucas Sithole. It covered his achievement during the years 1958-1979. One might mention in passing that the decision of both these Afrikaaner institutions to display so extensively the work of an African artist says much for the distinguished reputation that Sithole has achieved in his country. One might also like to hope that it suggests one small piece of evidence that some degree of rationality was being generated in at least the art community of that racially divided country. The occasion of this show produced a substantial book/catalogue of some 230 pages, reviewing the work of this artist. It was written by Fernand Haenggi, who has for many years, through his Johannesburg gallery and through his foundation, done a great deal to sustain and encourage the work of the South African black artist. In particular, the author has been associated with the support and sale of the works of Lucas Sithole.

This book begins with a series of personal reminiscences, including a description by Aubrey Fielding of Sithole's first break into the market with his art. He arrived one day unannounced at Fielding's gallery, explaining that his parents had apprenticed him to learn carpentry and cabinet-making, but finding no career in this field he had been working in a soap factory until he had determined to acquire some tools so that he could begin carving, as he felt impelled to do so. "He very hesitantly opened the canvas bag he was carrying and pulled out two wood carvings. . . I offered him fifteen guineas apiece for the works which he humbly and gladly accepted." These introductory pages are followed by what, in the academic trade, is

known as a CV, it is of remarkable extent, indicating the public and international recognition this gifted artist has achieved in the last twenty years, during which he has dedicated himself totally to the craft of the artist.

This book attempted to be more than the catalogue of an exhibition. In its latter pages it attempts nothing less than to record the creation date and the ownership of all of Sithole's pieces, only a few of which could be included in the show. Haenggi regrets that for some of the earlier pieces this information was unobtainable. No doubt this present show and its attendant publicity, by indicating the distinction and importance of Sithole's work, will awaken a more extensive attention, from which will come the last details which will provide comprehensiveness. Certainly it is worth mentioning the great range of listed collectors who own Sithole's work. Understandably there are numerous collectors in Europe and America, but the preponderance of pieces have been bought by South Africans. Even making allowances for whatever degree art patronage in South Africa is associated with patronizing, the evidence surely proves the appreciative recognition that the collectors in that country can provide for the support of major artists, no matter their color.

The major part of Haenggi's book consists of 200 illustrations of Sithole's work, mostly black-and-white photographs, though there are five handsome color plates. The use of monochrome is not particularly limiting because although Sithole makes careful use of the effects of grain and deliberately employs a range of differently colored woods, his work is predominantly impressive for its forms and shapes. Many of these carefully follow the implicit line of the tree structure from which they are designed.

The most characteristic form, which I had anticipated from previous experience of Sithole's work in other South African exhibitions, was that of the snake. To oversimplify, he has a regular preoccupation with very slender, often writhing shapes. Some are slim and scrawny even to the point of emaciation, but are also suggestive of subtle rhythmic movement. *Pondo Girl*, one of the color plates, has this slender effect. Others, such as *Bondage*, his 1978 carving in Natal Nkunzibomvu wood, is even more deliberately emaciated in its form. It is significant that he employed a very similar shape in the piece he carved at the earliest period of his career, *Township Dancer* (1961). Clearly this elongation of writhing form is a continuing concern within this artist's vision. The shape is rather surprisingly repeated even when Sithole breaks into a different medium. His *Penny Whistler* (1961) in wood and liquid steel, *Penitent* (1963), made of liquid steel on wire mesh, and other liquid steel pieces (*Guitar Player*, 1966) all exhibit his familiar snake-like extension of a slender upright form. My expectation of a Sithole style had not prepared me for the additional range of styles I encountered in this book. Significantly, they were styles that did not represent any chronological development of form; al-

ternative forms coincided during his career with his creation of the elongated shapes. I discovered that he created quite realistic animal figures, such as his 1961 *Dying Warthog* in Ori ironwood and his 1973 *Drinking Piglet*. Later he was to experiment with using various types of stone for his carving. Probably because of the medium, these pieces display significant simplification in his lines. Some seem to show a link with the well-known Rhodesian Shona stone-carvers of Vukutu, but that is best explained by the nature of the stone with which he had to work and the imposition of its hard texture on technique. Sithole nevertheless handles this material with consummate skill. *Horse's Head* (1976) has that essential quality between sensed realism and simplification of form. The same tension between exactness and imagination is found in the mask-shaped extension of the human face seen in his 1977 work called *Understanding*, carved in Cape Mountain stone.

New features of Sithole's latest work seem to be on the one hand its wit and on the other his unwillingness to impose design on the material. *Old Friend* (1979), for example, seems on the surface to be little more than a polishing and refining of the natural form of a complex knotty jointure in the tree branch. *Searching for Friends* displays a splendidly knock-kneed infant, half giraffe, half ostrich (or four-legged ostrich or beak-mouthed giraffe), setting out with spastic dignity on the road of life. Another carving is of a spoonbill, beak lifted high, pleading for *Just a Few Drops*.

These changes suggest that Sithole is still exploring media and enjoying playing with them. Such qualities indicate clearly that there has been no drying up of his inventive-ness. There has been no casual repetition of earlier styles. This book confirms that Sithole has achieved that remarkable artistic ability that comes with the most able. One can never be in doubt that a piece has the definable quality that matches the Sithole signature. Yet one can never find any simple common identity in his work that establishes a personal style merely by obvious duplication.

Fernand Haenggi must be congratulated on this extensive and impressive decision to bring to the attention of the wider world audience of art lovers outside South Africa the achievement of this distinguished local artist.

John Povey