

He rose from dead to become a genius

THE NAME'S DUMILE

Staff Reporter

OUT of the shanties of Johannesburg's Sophiatown and Newclare have come boiling some of the most dynamic and evocative artistic inspirations of our generation.

This week-end and for the next few weeks, Durban has a chance to view one of the most graphic examples of the cultural revolution of the African people which began in those townships.

It is the work of a brilliant young artist with the almost unpronounceable name of Mslaba Zwelidumile Mxasi — better known simply as Dumile — which is now on show at the Durban Art Gallery.

Completely untrained as an artist and with virtually no academic education, Dumile is without a doubt the brightest rising star in the entire South African world of art.

In the words of Madam Z. Wisznicka-Kleczynska, curator of Durban Art Gallery: "As an artist there is absolutely nothing we can teach him."

MODEST

Dumile himself is modest about his technical ability as a painter and as a sculptor, but he has learned almost everything.

It is this knowledge of many nuances of life that his work streets above that of his contemporaries.

He has been criticised for trying to seek sympathy because of his things and the people I portray," Dumile told me.

"But it is not so. My subjects are Africans because they are my people, but my message, the idea I am trying to put across, is nothing to do with racialism — I am not interested in politics. "My situations are human ones, that is all."

In the short space of about 23 years — not even Dumile himself knows exactly how old he is — he has lived through many tragic situations.

Without identification papers, he remained for many years in constant fear of arrest. He has been beaten up by thugs and tsotsis and today his body bears the scars of several stabbings and coshings.

"You would not believe it, but for a whole day once I lay on a mortuary slab. They thought I was dead," he told me.

In 1962 came the final blow when he went into the National Tuberculosis Association hospital in Johannesburg. His lungs were infected, as were those of countless others in the townships.

But out of this came his first public recognition. In his three months at the hospital, he was encouraged to paint. He was supplied with materials and ended up by decorating vast areas of the building with impressive murals.

Released from hospital after three months' treatment, he was taken under the wing of Johannesburg art gallery owner, Mrs. F. F. Haengi, who encouraged him to prepare for his first exhibition.

Exhibited at Gallery 101 earlier this year, his work took Johannesburg by storm. Now, through the efforts of Madame Wisznicka-Kleczynska, Durban has become the venue of his second exhibition.

FELLOWSHIP

A brief look at his work — charcoal on paper — conjure up a thousand memories of masters such as Daumier, Goya, Bosch, even perhaps Breughel.

Yet they are all convincingly Dumile. It is only the thought that is the same when one comes to closer examination.

Critics have described his work as bitter, but there is more humour, open laughter and warmth in every work than there is bitterness or pain.

An early example of his work, "Policeman's Bottle," is perhaps the warmest commentary, I have ever seen upon the fellow-

ship of the people of the townships.

An hysterical woman is slumped at the feet of an African policeman, who offers his index finger to her to suck in an effort to give comfort.

The anomaly of the situation is emphasised by the worry lines on the woman's face — no child this, despite the foetal position of her limbs and childlike expression.

One can understand how Dumile has earned the label of a cynic when one looks at his "I Am Not a Donkey."

A barefooted man in tattered clothes gestures emphatically and perhaps hopelessly with three fingers of his left hand. But his head is twisted into the features of a donkey.

This exhibition will make you laugh and it will make you cry. But above all it will take you into the mind of a young boy from the townships of Johannesburg.