

# ... a Goya of the townships?



At the beginning of this year, Gallery 101 showed his work for the first time. Since then, Mslaba Zwelidumile Mxgasi – better known as simply Dumile – has become the fastest-rising name on the South African art scene.

He has been given a one-man showing by the Durban Art Gallery, and been bought by them. He has been bought by the S.A. National Gallery which, last month, acquired another of his drawings. No less than five of his works (three drawings, two terra-cottas) were selected for showing on the S.A. Breweries Art Prize exhibition, which opens in the Civic Theatre, Johannesburg, on the 30th of this month. He has been shown on group exhibitions in the U.S.A. And he is being collected by M. Achille Savoy, one of Belgium's biggest private collectors.

Dumile, a Xhosa, is completely untrained as an artist. He has also had practically no academic education. And in his short life of about 23 years – he does not himself know how old he is – he has lived the knockabout, often hazardous, life of an orphan in the townships of Johannesburg.

He was for most of his life without identification papers, he bears the scars of many beatings-up and stabbings by tsotsis, and once he lay for a day on a mortuary slab, officially taken for dead.

And three years ago he went into the Santa tuberculosis hospital in Johannesburg, his lungs infected.

It was here that his gift for drawing was discovered. The sympathetic Matron procured materials for him, and he ended up by painting large, impressive murals. When he was released from hospital after three months' treatment, he was given his first help and encouragement by Mme Fernande Haenggli, director of Gallery 101 – encouragement which extended as far as, with Gordon Vorster's large-hearted support, that he go and live in the artist's home out in the peace and quiet of the country.

Dumile accepted. He stayed for one night.

Then he confessed that he had better return to town. He was afraid, he said, of the crocodile which would crawl out of the river and eat him.

Perhaps it is this undercurrent of the primitive, grafted on the worldly-wisdom of a one-time townships kid, that gives Dumile's work its undeniable potency.

Look at 'I Am Not a Donkey' (left) bought by the Durban Gallery. Is it funny? Is it tragic? One must decide for oneself.

But one thing there's no denying. It is, like all Dumile's work, unique.