Author: Delinda Collier

**Ngwenya, Malangatana**

Malangatana Ngwenya was born in 1936 in Matalana, in what was then the Portuguese colony of Mozambique and died in Matosinhos, Portugal in 2011. He is Mozambique’s most important artist and one of the best-known African “modernists.” Malangatana was committed to two elements of subject matter that are characteristic of African modernism: the present state of Africans under and after colonialism and representations of pre-colonial African tradition—not as a “clash of cultures” or primordial connection to roots, but as a strategic choice. His work is markedly two-dimensional, with depthless figures and lines flat against the field of vision, eliminating any notion of his pictures as illusionistically “African.” These techniques of flattening translated into many murals that he executed in Mozambique and elsewhere. Malangatana worked with mural artists from Chile, Mexico, South Africa, and the United States; their styles and techniques are visibly influenced by one another. Global modernism was, in large part, a networking of artists whose work and selves travelled and expanded media, technique, and subject matter. Malangatana actively sought out his contemporaries and consistently worked with artists from under-represented social groups.

Malangatana became interested in art in his teens after moving to Laurenço Marques (now Maputo) and had his first solo show at age twenty-five in 1959. Until then he was largely self-taught. In fact, much was made of his auto-didacticism in the beginning of his career; the first major essays on his work by Ulli Beier in *Contemporary Art in Africa* (1968) stated that “Malangatana might be the first African artist to find the short cut- to become a sophisticated artist while bypassing education”. To be discussed by Beier that early was significant, and shows the degree to which Malangatana was, from the beginning, in touch with artists from Nigeria and the Sudan. His work was featured in a little-known exhibition in London in 1963 with Ibrahim El-Salahi called “Two Painters from Africa” and he exhibited at the famous and influential Mbari gallery in Ibadan, Nigeria in 1962.

Malangatana was active in the anti-colonial resistance, having joined the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique [Frelimo]. He met Frelimo leader Eduardo Mondlane in the 1960s, who advised him to stay in Mozambique and connect with the people. In 1965, the Portuguese secret police (PIDE) jailed Malangatana with his comrades for their links to Frelimo, a typical roundup of radical intellectuals. In the Central Jail of Machava, he met more activists and constantly drew, creating what is now known as the Prison Drawings. When released from prison in 1968, he returned to Matalana and in 1970 was awarded a prestigious Gulbenkian Foundation award to study printmaking in Lisbon. This was an unusual honour by a Portuguese foundation at the height of Portugal’s war with Mozambique.

Malangatana was a dedicated political activist. In the 1960s, after being encouraged by Mondlane to remain politically committed, he refused to send his work to the São Paulo Biennial to represent Portugal and withdrew from an exhibition in South Africa out of solidarity with the Rivona trial defendants (among them, Nelson Mandela).

Malangatana’s oeuvre is characterised by a strong graphic element, both in his drawings and in his paintings. They are carefully crafted, crowded compositions, usually figurative, with an overwhelming presence of full-frontal stylised faces (see mural in Maputo). [http://awanderingjo.blogspot.com/2011\_07\_01\_archive.html]While early analyses of his work focused on the subject matter of witchcraft and magic, more recent literature points to the relationship of his paintings to Makonde *ujamaa* sculpture. Carved out of single tree stumps, *ujamaa* (Swahili for family, or familyhood), are characterised by twists and tangles of human figures that seem to meld together into a whole. FRELIMO officials encouraged artists to engage with this subject matter, as it illustrated for them the goals of the revolution.

The prison series is the most striking of Malangatana’s drawings and, perhaps naturally, the most overtly political. They were exhibited by the Fundação Mário Soares in Lisbon in 2006. In these works, he develops his crowding of the picture plane and what would become his distinctive method of illustrating the face, with prominent eyes and lips. Not only are the human figures in one mass—illustrating “O Povo” (the People)—but the surface of the paper is filled with graphic marks that are both boldly applied and curvilinear. One of the striking exceptions to the curved and crowded compositions, *Suicídio do Prisoneiro II* (1965) [http://www.fmsoares.pt/iniciativas/ilustra\_iniciativas/2006/000545/desenhos/17\_07210.196.000.htm] illustrates an emaciated male figure sitting atop a bed in a prison cell, the floor strewn with art supplies. The emaciated figure is also an emaciated composition; they both are lacking, empty.

Malangatana was ambivalent about his work being dictated by his politics. In several interviews, he asserted that each time he approached his canvases, his politics departed and he focused on more general themes of love, loss, violence, and witchcraft—which in many works include the Christian cross, as in his *Untitled* of 1961. [http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/specials/2001/the\_short\_century/photo\_tour/12\_malangatana\_ngwenya] However, distorted human figures and violent scenes begin to wane after the 1992 ceasefire in Mozambique’s civil war. It is during this time that Malangatana increased his travel and work with youth in cities like Chicago, Boston, and Toronto. While his most popular works globally have been the mural-like compositions full of faces and distorted bodies, his drawings are perhaps the most nuanced of his work. They are characterized by simple unwavering line and are decidedly colorless. These two competing and complementing strains of line and color are perhaps the most characteristic aspect of Malangatana’s relationship to global modernism.

References and further reading:

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