

MFA STUDENT, SCULPTURE, SOUTH AFRICA

On the facade of the neoclassically designed South African National Gallery in Cape Town, there are two large architectural niches on either side of the front entrance. The niches are empty (a typical architectural conceit) but are painted in geometrically configured bold primary colors. They are painted in the traditional manner of the Ndebele, a group native to South Africa. Artist Isa Kabini was invited to intervene in this way by the National Gallery for an exhibition of Ndebele art in 1994. What occurs is a provocative blending of two disparate traditions; a South African indigenous custom used to decorate traditional adobe homes and that of an imposing, neoclassically inspired civic architecture. Not only are the paintings visually stunning, but their creation suggests a new attitude towards celebrating visual culture. What interests me about Kabini's gesture is its conversation across cultural boundaries, enlivening the post-colonial debate.

I am seeking support from the Fulbright Grant Commission to spend ten months in Cape Town, South Africa, immersed in a rich visual culture while continuing to produce my own sculpture. The research I plan to undertake will be the study of examples of material culture, from both colonial and indigenous traditions, housed in the national museums of South Africa. I became fascinated by this dynamic mix of cultures while on a month long artist-led tour of Cape Town in December and January of 1997-1998. What makes the country so stimulating for me is the urgency of which it seeks to define itself and embrace its cultural diversity in the critical gaze of the whole world.

Architecture and decorative culture inherently reveal the value systems of their makers. The very process of production, whether by hand or tool, reflects a reality that can be read thematically. My own sculptural work currently draws from interior architecture and decoration in an attempt to understand the cultural implications of labor via accumulation and repetition. At a time when technology can accomplish anything technically, what are the implications of making something by hand? Since I do not rely on power tools in the production of my own studio work, I am interested in historical and contemporary objects which are laboriously hand created.

Cape Town embodies the many aspects of South Africa's visual culture. The architecture, indigenous ritual arts, imported colonial decorative arts and the tourist craft market exist simultaneously in the context of this city. I am particularly interested in examples of visual culture wherein different cultures and sensibilities fuse. Cape Town is the earliest point of contact between Southern African and European cultures. Consequently, it is the ideal place for this type of inquiry. The proximity of the skilled craft tradition of South Africa and a colonial tradition in architecture lends itself to inspiring new visual connections and possibilities for my own studio work. I plan to produce a body of sculptural work that reflects my ongoing concerns for understanding the decorative impulse in architecture and objects of status. Rather than creating work specifically about South African life and politics, however, I seek to express broader questions about the meanings of decorative traditions and settings.

I am drawn to richly decorated surfaces, and examples abound in both indigenous and colonial objects and culture. Both exist side by side in the national collections and in many homes of the artists of South Africa. I am particularly interested the tradition of bead work practiced by the Ndebele and the Zulu of South Africa. This potent art form has great sculptural possibilities, as it requires activation by the armature of the body. The hundreds of hours required to make Ndebele beaded work results in beautiful forms that transform the body; sometimes accentuating it and at other times obliterating it.

Classical architecture relies upon the proportions of the human body to inspire ideal built forms and there are interesting connections to be made between buildings and the body. Neoclassical architecture can be read as an assertion of the colonial tradition, and by extension the colonial presence. I propose to develop images and objects which combine the varied traditions in European and South African cultures, using these opposing traditions to create original forms.

One of the first exhibitions of the South African National Gallery (SANG) of the post-apartheid era, a show about South African bead work entitled *Ezakwantu*, revolutionized the way in which exhibitions could affirmatively and respectfully represent indigenous art forms. The exhibition analyzed body decoration, elevating it to a study of complex social relations. It charted cross-cultural influences without making a value judgment, as many anthropological displays arguably do. All of the objects from this exhibition are in the collection of SANG and are accessible to scholars.

The Executive Director of SANG, Marilyn Martin, has graciously offered to assist me in accessing all of the major museum collections in Cape Town for the period of this proposal. Ms. Martin will facilitate introductions to curators and conservators at the SANG, the Museum of South African Culture and the Anthropology Museum. These institutions are within a few blocks of one another and are collectively administrated under the *Flagship*, an amalgamation of government funded museums in Cape Town.

Returning to South Africa for a prolonged period of time in order to take in fully its cultural treasures remains my greatest wish. The opportunity to create my work in the context of Cape Town would be an invaluable experience in shaping the direction of my sculpture. My hope is to begin working in a studio in Cape Town starting September 2000 for a period of ten months. I envision the first four months of residency devoted to museum research and extensive sketching. This period would also include the gathering of materials in the studio and developing ideas of specific sculptural works. The next period would be devoted to the production of a body of work for eventual exhibition in South Africa and the United States upon return.