



Durant Sihlali

'Sihlali worked liked a photographer, only in watercolours.'



**Durant Sihlali
(1935 - 2004)**



Durant Sihlali was born in Germiston, South Africa, in 1935. He worked in a wide range of media, including painting, sculpture, printmaking and 'pulp paintings' where paper and pigments are the primary mediums. He painted murals, designed jewellery and crafted curios.

Sihlali showed an interest in art from an early age, inspired, in part, by his father, whose hobby was drawing and modelling. In 1947, Sihlali won an Art competition for learners from Queenstown and surrounding districts. In 1948 his family moved to Soweto, Johannesburg, and Sihlali studied at the Chiawelo Art Centre under Alphius Kubeka.

From 1965 until 1970 Sihlali designed jewellery and curios to earn a living but from 1970 onwards, was able to paint full-time. In 1978 he began teaching in the FUBA Outreach Programmes and was appointed Head of Fine Arts at FUBA in 1983. In 1985 Sihlali was awarded a French Government Travel Scholarship that enabled him to study at the Villa Arson Art School in Nice. Sihlali was also a gifted sculptor and during the early 1980s produced a series of sculptures of workers in the coal mines of the Witwatersrand. He was a master of watercolour and from the 1970s onwards he produced watercolours of shanty town subjects which reflected his sympathy for the plight of people suffering under apartheid.

Sihlali was christened Durant by a French Presbyterian priest, while his grandmother gave him the second name of Basi. She believed this boy was going to be master of his destiny. And so it proved, for Durant was a deeply committed artist and fiercely independent in every way.

His work in the 1970s was derogatively called *'Township art,'* while in truth it documented historical realities which had little to do with the romantic and racist paternalism of the term.

Pimville Rent offices on Fire (1976)



Pimville rent offices on fire was painted in 1976 and captures the events when Soweto erupted into violence on 16 June 1976. Public protests were held in support of black pupils who had boycotted classes in response to the compulsory use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction. Again the watercolour shows Sihlali's mastery of the medium, particularly the classic technique of transparent washes juxtaposed with focused areas of more solid painting.

In this work, and in others in the collection, it is notable how Sihlali has used light to model the figures. It is his use of light which in fact permeates the entire painting.

Street Vendors, Kliptown (1980)

His mastery of watercolour painting is evident in the works in the Campbell Smith Collection. From the 1970s onwards he produced watercolours of shanty-town subjects which reflected his sympathy for the plight of people suffering under apartheid.

These include a series on forced removals where the attractive quality of his technique seems almost at odds with his harsh subject matter.



His watercolour of 1980, *Street vendors, Kliptown*, is an excellent example of his watercolour technique and his approach to his subject matter. **Although rendered beautifully in the watercolour medium, the painting is, nevertheless, an accurate and factual rendition of a slice of township life.**



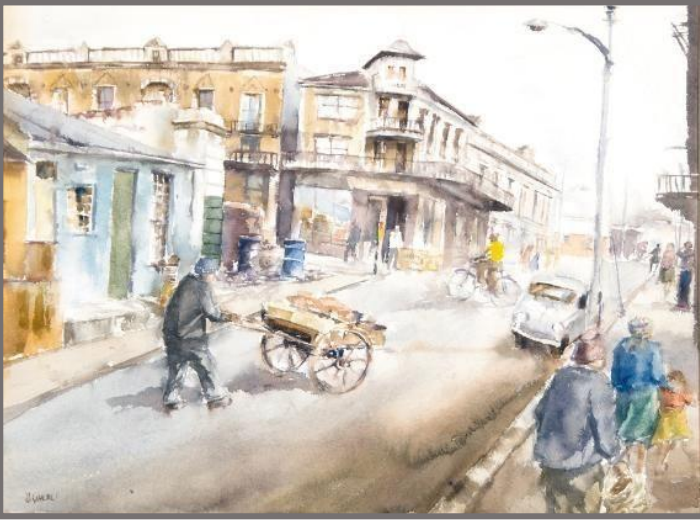
At the well



At the station (1964)



Construction workers,
Timber yard,
Old Soweto (1973)



District Six



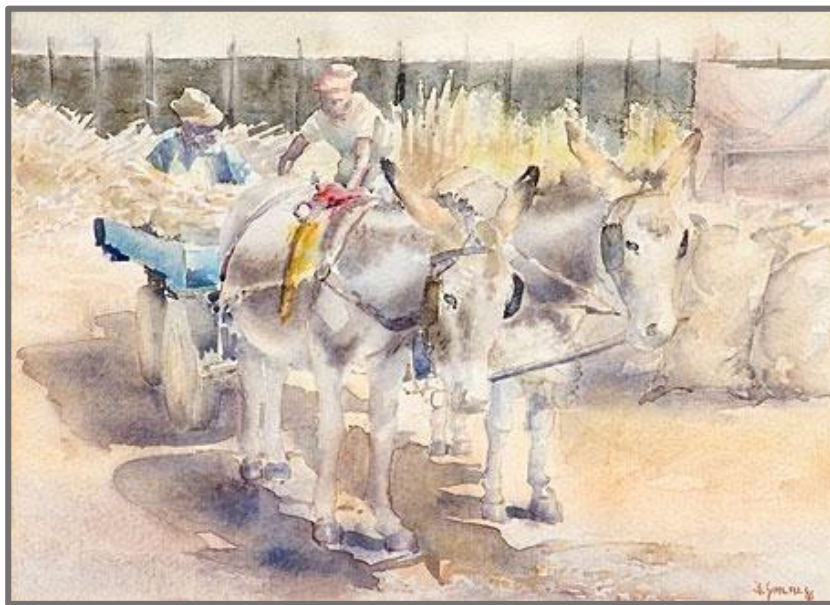
Kiosk (1964)



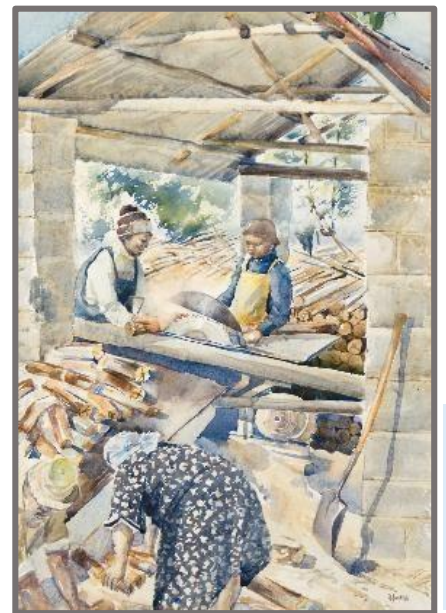
Kitchen Duty



Dube Station (1964)



Oupa's donkeys



Sawmill

'He had this obsession to record these unusual things happening around him, what was happening to his people, and he had the technical skill to do it. He could watch a bulldozer knock down a house and paint it in real time.'



Seated Lady (1966)



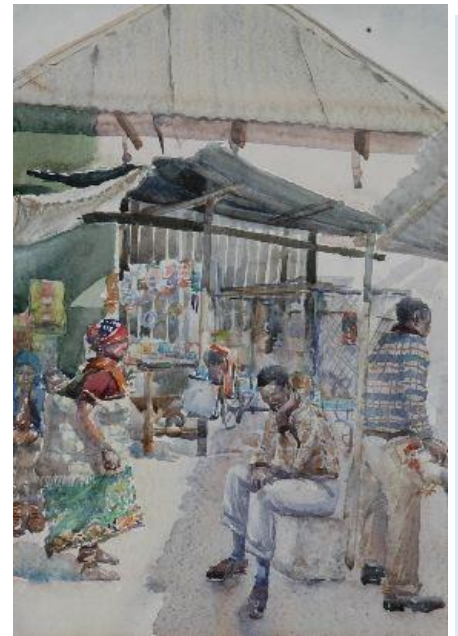
The Couple



The Market Place



The Evening Meal



Chicken Market, Kliptown (1974)



Township Scene

'If there was something that disturbed him that day, you could see it in his paintings that day,' said his daughter Iris, who worked closely with her father in his later years. 'He was a quiet person and you couldn't tell from talking to him, but you could see through his work when he wasn't okay.'

There is also, at times, a tinge of rebellion in his work, which those who lovingly remember him as a stubborn, principled man, see more clearly than most.

He was *‘a deeply committed artist and fiercely independent in every way’*, wrote artist and art historian, Colin Richards, in an obituary, and that virtue went beyond his painting and sculpture.

‘He told this story about when he worked in the curio business,’ said Siebrits. One day he had a disagreement with the white owner and he said to the man: *‘My jacket is not too heavy and the door is not too small’*, and he picked up his jacket and he walked out.

Yet Sihlali, heavily influenced by it as he was, did not let himself be defined by apartheid. Instead, says American art scholar John Pepper, his work, *‘in a sense encompassed and surpasses the era of apartheid.’*

In 1958 he married Anna, his childhood sweetheart, in community of property. Sihlali was also exposed to the work of Gerard Sekoto for the first time and recognised similarities with his own style.

<http://mg.co.za/article/2012-07-12-artist-who-transcended-apartheid>



Anna Sihlali, Durant Sihlali’s widow, in her house in Jabulani, Soweto.



Just about every available space holds Durant’s artwork.

Durant Sihlali spent much of his life preparing for a museum of his work. Though he produced many artworks, he sold reluctantly, grudgingly. He wanted the next generation to learn about him and his work.

Sadly, since his death in 2004, there is still no museum of his work, no any knowledge of what has become of 3/4 of his work. There is some concern that some of his work is being sold off at bargain prices. It is suspected that Mafika Sihlali, a close family friend and executor of Durant Sihlali’s estate, is selling off the artwork after being given to him for safekeeping.

A large number of Sihlali’s works started to appear on the market, which the family believes came from the collection Mafiki had in his possession.

Mafiki is facing criminal charges.

Some of his work that is in storage is estimated to be worth R15 million.

