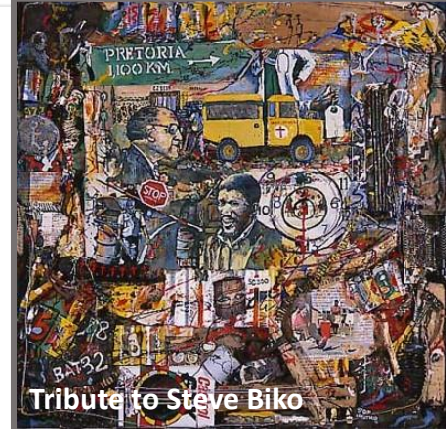


# Willie Bester

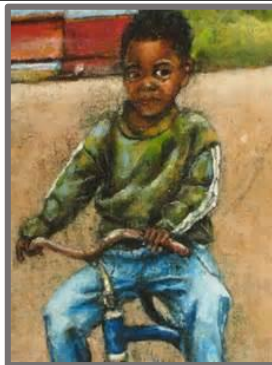
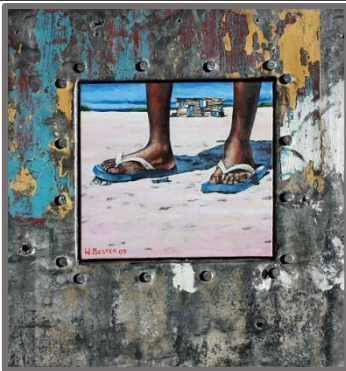


WBESTER



*'An artist needs an inspiration and a purpose for what you want to say with your art.'*

**Willie Bester  
(1956 - )**



Willie is a self taught full time professional artist and sculptor with no formal training. He was born in Montagu in the Cape in 1956.

**Willie Bester is regarded as one of South Africa's most important resistance artists.** He incorporates recycled material into his paintings, assemblages and sculpture, usually commenting on political injustices and human rights issues of the day.

His father was Xhosa and his mother was classified Coloured according to the Apartheid system of the time. Bester displayed talent early. When other boys made basic wire cars, his cars were elaborate and decorated, and he began to paint at the age of seven.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Willie\\_Bester](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Willie_Bester)

When he was 10 years old, his family was forcibly removed in accordance with the Group Areas Act. Bester soon had to leave school to help the family economically.

At the age of 30 Bester returned to the childhood interest of art. The Community Arts Project (CAP) in District Six gathered a community of socially committed artists which he began to associate with.

**He used his mixed media art to express a political conscience, and became active in the anti-apartheid movement.** In the 1980s he became gradually more successful and known nationally and internationally and turned professional in 1991.

When looking at Willie's work the viewer is often startled by what one sees. It is often shocking and harsh but never dull. It is the collaged, layered way in which he works that contributes to the richness and intrigue of his art. Bester's works are collages assembled from scraps and junk from flea markets, townships and scrap yards like shoes, bones, tins, newspaper clippings, metal pieces combined with the use of oil paints and photographs.

**Willie Bester known for his installations made of found objects.**

**His experiences of raw and naked racism and the war were important influences.**

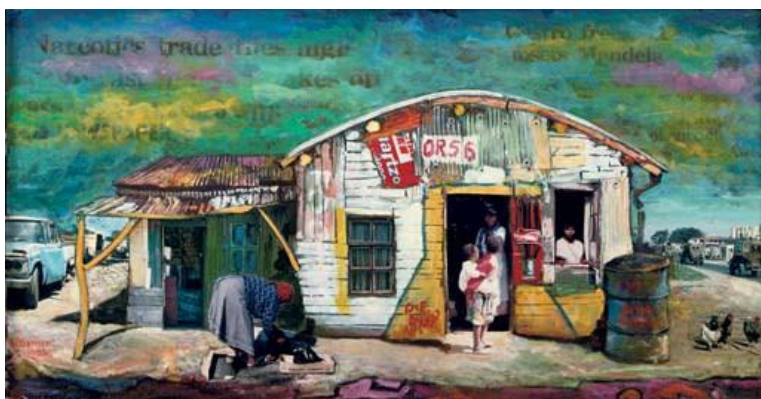
See video clip at <http://www.thejournalist.org.za/art/willie-bester-sculptor-extraordinaire>





Although a promising student, Bester dropped out of school after the ninth grade to help the family economically by making and selling shoes and crafts. However, in his late teens, Bester, like many other unemployed youth from the townships and rural areas at the time, were “drafted” to the Eersterivier Cadet Rehabilitation Centre for a year, where they were forced to do army-type of training. There however, he was introduced to painting as someone gave him art materials.

The racism he experienced in the apartheid army and the real consequences of the war he witnessed, influenced him deeply and was to have a decisive impact on his life. He was forced to confront the racial self-hatred that was engendered by being part of the apartheid army, fighting his own people.



His art works are a combinations of found objects which he gathers from the very townships he depicts. Willie sees rubbish dumps as symbols of the community in which he lives. Just as people often regard those living in the townships as rejects of society, his works in themselves symbolises the falseness of that perception.

To show people that something unexpected, something valued can come from what is regarded as rubbish, he assembles his art works from it.

**Bester’s conscious use of these materials is a homage to his past, and the many compatriots who find creative ways to house themselves and to survive.**

## Forced Removals, 1988



PHOTO BY GOSSET

In **Forced Removals**, Bester depicts a scene common to many township and squatter camp residents during the Apartheid era: the forced removal of people from their makeshift or permanent homes at the hands of the government.

The removals were usually sudden and violent, with police and soldiers entering the townships. This was often a very painful and emotional time for those families forced to leave their homes with only the possessions they could carry. Townships such as Sophiatown in Johannesburg and District Six in Cape Town are two examples of flourishing communities that were completely destroyed by the Apartheid government



Destruction of houses during forced removals in District Six  
Destruction of houses during forced removals in District Six Cape Town, South Africa, 1974

The focus of the composition is the bright yellow bulldozer in the process of destroying District Six, with callous disregard to the inhabitants' feelings. The bulldozer in itself becomes a symbol of the brutality involved in the destruction of a once thriving community. Bester used photographic cut-outs for the two people standing behind the bulldozer, which brings the reality of the situation home to the viewer. They appear to be in a state of shocked numbness. By using photographs of actual people Bester effectively brings home the message that forced removals wasn't just some distant event in history that affected anonymous people, and personalize the suffering the inhabitants experienced. To the left, a man appears to be attempting to salvage some possessions, and one gets the feeling that the bulldozers did not even wait for the people to remove their possessions.

Bester treated the rest of the painting as a realistic painting of township life and in doing so, the viewer feels even more poignantly that soon the bulldozer will destroy the colourful scene forever. The bulldozer becomes not just the focal point of the painting, but also a disturbing element in what would otherwise just be a depiction of a street scene.

At the bottom right hand corner Bester enigmatically stencilled the words **"Made in England,"** giving a visual impression that it could be part of an old packing crate found on a rubbish dump. This use of stencilling is both reflective of the reality that the scene will soon just be rubble, a rubbish dump and perhaps also a comment on the economic system itself





<http://www.williebester.co.za/>

Willie Bester's family home is situated in a quiet Cape Town suburb of Kuilsrivier and it stands as a beacon to his uncensored artistic expression. The statement it makes ( as does his art ) is that by looking past the clichés of everyday life in our country, one will discover the raw energy and inventiveness that give our land and its people their unique character.

Situated on the lower end of a cul-de-sac is a unique blue and purple building, which looks more like an art sculpture than a house. On the sidewalk a lonely parking meter stands guard to the driveway and in the garden with its colourful windmill with Ndebele design stands a huge welded sculpture of an armed canon. Other interesting sculptures decorate the rest of the garden like a birdhouse from recycled steel objects and horns. There are various taps installed around and inside the house and the water motif runs through the house, the wind mill, fountain, blue colours and mosaics. The swimming pool is built from rocks out of the surroundings and in the corner a recycled notice from the past, which clearly indicates " Whites Only ". Recycling material like this is very important to Willie ( like water that evaporates and is naturally recycled, returning as rain ) and plays an important part in his home and his art. Inside an old geyser serves as a liquor cabinet and a petrol pump is used as a hi-fi cabinet.

Carin Smuts of CS Studio Architects was asked to design the house for Willie and had to familiarize herself with the artist and his work before she decided on the approach. When looking at Willie's work the viewer is often startled by what one sees, it is often shocking and harsh but never dull. It is the collaged, layered way in which he works that contributes to the richness and intrigue of his art, and she decided that that would be the departing point.

