

PANEL 10, PAPER 1

Cutting Anti-Apartheid Images: Bongiwe Dhlomo's Activist Linocut Prints

Abstract

This paper discusses political content in a series of linocut prints created by a female Zulu artist, Bongiwe (commonly known as Bongji) Dhlomo (b. 1956) in 1982 during late apartheid in South Africa. Deeply influenced by the 1976 Soweto uprising, Dhlomo decided to study art at Rorke's Drift (The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Southern Africa's Art and Craft Centre) and, on graduating, created images with political content. I explore her visual portrayal of the spatial politics resulting from apartheid ideology, and the policy of separate development. In order to establish 'homelands' for different ethnic groups, the Nationalist government undertook forced removals and relocated people, taking them from established communities to 'historic' places of origin. Focussing on Dhlomo's 'Removals' series (1982) I consider her images as a spatial narrative about black South African experience and discuss the iconography of the seven 'Removals' prints, and the appropriateness of linocut as a process for personal commentary on the disruptive migrations experienced by millions of black South Africans. I argue that Dhlomo's empathetic, representational rendering of the diasporic condition offers a record of historic events, avoids the didactic tone and stylistic mannerisms of much 'protest art' and 'struggle politics', and expresses deeply felt responses to South African life under apartheid.

Introduction

On June 16th 1976, black schoolchildren in Soweto, South Africa, organised a march to protest against the use of Afrikaans (dubbed 'the language of the oppressor') as a medium of instruction in their schools. The police ordered the crowd to disperse. It did not obey. So the police released teargas. Some of the students threw stones. Then the shooting began.

The official, but disputed number of deaths that day was twenty-three, and many others were injured. What is not contested is that the June 16th protest march became a full-scale riot, and it was bloody. The iconic image by Sam Nzima of *The World* newspaper, distributed worldwide, shows the lifeless body of twelve year-old Hector Pieterse, carried by Mbuyisa Makhubu, accompanied by Antoinette Pieterse (fig. 1).

Interviewed in 2004, a decade after the demise of the apartheid regime, Bongiwe Dhlomo-Mautloa (b. 1956), recalled the importance of June 16th for her politicisation, telling Michael Godby (2004: 62),

On Sunday, June 20, 1976, I bought the *Sunday Times* newspaper as I had done many Sundays before. On this day I bought the newspaper specifically to catch up on the news of the unfolding students' upheavals in Soweto, Johannesburg. As I opened the newspaper I

remember very vividly the shock I experienced from the images spread over more than four pages--all the images were black and white and very graphic in their depiction of what had happened on the 16th of June and the three days thereafter.

Not only did Dhlomo, a twenty-year old, Christian, Zulu woman living far away from Soweto, become viscerally aware of the brutal effects of apartheid ideology, but she acknowledged the dissatisfaction she was experiencing in an unchallenging job as a typist/clerk at Tongaat, north of Durban. The realisation that life might offer something more fulfilling than a routine office job led her to apply to Rorke's Drift, the common usage name of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Southern Africa's Art and Craft Centre, despite the fact that she actually had little knowledge of art or experience of art practice. (For a detailed account of Rorke's Drift see Hobbs and Rankin 2003.)

Dhlomo studied Fine Art at Rorke's Drift during 1978 -1979. She was a student while the internal resistance movement gained momentum in South Africa, fuelled by the death in police custody in 1977 of Steve Biko, the charismatic leader of the Black Consciousness movement. Her political consciousness developed as she engaged in discussions with her fellow students, many of whom had lived in Soweto or its environs in 1976. Although the students at Rorke's Drift in the late 1970s learnt technical skills and developed their powers of observation they also became increasingly aware that images offered the means to comment on contemporary life, the liberation struggle and what Dhlomo called the 'politics of space' (Godby, 2004: 67).

This paper explores spatial politics, particularly the shifting geopolitical space of South Africa which was designed when the apartheid government implemented its Bantustan legislation to separate different ethnic groups into their own 'homelands'. This was done to establish the spurious objective that South Africans could be 'separate but equal'. Focussing on Dhlomo's 'Removals' linocut series, created as a spatial narrative about black South African experience, I discuss the subject of forced removals, and the appropriateness of linocut as process for personal commentary on the disruptive migrations experienced by millions of black South Africans.

Political prints

After graduating from Rorke's Drift, Dhlomo selected more overtly political subjects than she had pictorialised as a student. She created the seven images of her 'Removals' series in 1982 and in March 1983 the series was shown at the African Art Centre, Durban, where she was working as a part-time assistant. She chose to render her theme in human terms and not from the perspective of explicit 'struggle politics', the concept being embraced by other black artists such as Thami Mnyele (1948-1985). Mnyele, who studied at Rorke's Drift in 1973, went into exile in Botswana in 1979 and, as a committed member of the African National Congress (ANC) and a leading member of the MEDU Arts Ensemble, saw himself as a cultural worker and urged artists to make art to serve the resistance struggle. He helped to

organise the Culture and Resistance festival in Gaborone, Botswana, in 1982, and wrote, 'the role of an artist is to learn; the role of an artist is to teach others; the role of an artist is to ceaselessly search for the ways and means of achieving freedom. Art cannot overthrow a government but it can inspire change' (*Images of Defiance* 1991:10). Amongst the artists who exhibited at the Festival on 'Art Towards Social Development. An Exhibition of South African Art', was Dhlomo whose work documented the realities of South African life in flux.

In order to grasp the significance of Dhlomo's 'Removals', it is necessary to summarise the history of forced removals in South Africa. Apartheid (separateness) was developed by the Afrikaner Nationalist Government, which was elected by white voters in 1948. As the regime consolidated its power, it developed the ideology that different ethnic communities could co-exist within South Africa by occupying different geographical regions. To implement segregation, promulgated in the Group Areas Act of 1950, many black communities had to be relocated to 'historic' homelands which, fortuitously, lay beyond productive agricultural areas or developing urban conurbations. The result of the forced removals policy was an African diaspora. This term has not generally been used with reference to the removals but, accepting that diaspora means dispersal, dispossession of land and home, a loss of agency, and spatial displacement, the forced removals conducted by the apartheid government constitute a South African diaspora. From 1960 to 1983, the apartheid government forcibly moved 3.5 million black South Africans, a mass redistribution of people that is one of the largest in 20th-Century history.

My emphasis in this paper is on Dhlomo's visualisation of the human experience of relocation. I define this state of being as 'the diasporic condition' (Arnold: forthcoming 2012). It is a literal and psychological experience of space and identity, characterised by being 'in-between' or 'here and there', of being aware of past and present, the familiar and the unfamiliar, the heritage of culture and the reality of place. It makes one conscious of hybridity and it is transformational in terms of personal and social existence.

Urban removals, especially the destruction of District Six in Cape Town, Sophiatown in Johannesburg and Cato Manor near Durban, are well documented but the concept of resettling urban and rural people in rural areas was pivotal to the government's plan of creating 'independent' homelands. As part of the strategy of moving people to their so-called historic homelands, land occupied by black people in 'white' areas was identified. Using terminology impregnated with a terrible sense of irony, these lands were designated 'Blackspots'. They had been bought legally before apartheid legislation made such purchases by groups or individuals illegal. Two hundred and fifty Blackspots were in Natal (now KwaZulu-Natal). The people living in Blackspots were informed that they had to move; they were relocated to undeveloped areas far from towns where there was no infrastructure - no work, schools, shops or transport. This is the background to Dhlomo's 'Removals' prints. Their subject was familiar to all black South Africans but Dhlomo had firsthand knowledge of removals in Natal and Zululand.

In his article, 'Thoughts on Bongiwe and the Role of Revolutionary Art' (published posthumously in 1986) Thami Mnyele acknowledged that Dhlomo was 'a committed artist' but he rebuked her for being an individualist rather than a worker in a collective enterprise. He then commented, 'I must point out though that her pictures need more concentrated working, they deal with serious issues that affect our lives, but this is done somewhat half-heartedly ... There's no feeling of corrugated iron, no wetness, no stench. The work seems extremely hurried and can easily degenerate into the realm of trite and defeatist "township art" ' (Mnyele 1986: 24-28). Mnyele, like most zealots, had his own agenda and offers a critique through the lens of expectation and not from thoughtful perusal of the images before him. While he sought social realism; what he was offered were compassionate comments on life turned into expressively powerful black and white prints. Dhlomo's records of history render commentary on racial injustice and its social repercussions, and explore the relationship between press reportage (textual and photographic) and interpretation in tonal printmaking.

The 'Removals' prints

Although Dhlomo created seven Removals prints (figs 2-8), they are a series of independent but related images and do not read as a logical sequence of illustrations feeding off a written text. Indeed the narrative is postmodern, being laced with ambiguities, and moving freely through time and space. There is an absence of spatial consistency and pictorial rather than perspectival space determines the activation of the format and shape relationships suggesting that disrupted lives cannot be represented through a harmonious aesthetic.

The articulation of Dhlomo's ideas is dependent on image *and* text, as well as photojournalism. It is significant that Dhlomo responded particularly to black and white documentary photography. Speaking to Brenda Atkinson (1999:118) about her response to the 1976 Soweto uprisings she observed, 'The power of the black-and-white photographs that covered the front pages of the newspapers left deep-etched impressions on my mind'. It is worth noting that television was only introduced into South Africa in 1976 and so still photography had the responsibility for documenting political events. Dhlomo's titles function as texts evoking ideas, referring to actions and incidents, asking questions, and suggesting states of consciousness. They function as dialogue, but do not 'explain' the visual representations. The 'Removals' titles are numbered from 1-7: *The past... the future? Bulldoze the blackspot, Resettlement, Against our will, From here where to? Aftermath, People are living here.*

Dhlomo's 'Removals' have been cited as evidence of her political commitment (Hobbs and Rankin 2003: 204-5, where no.VII is reproduced but identified incorrectly as no. III). There is, however, no published analytical discussion of her images as *prints* created from drawings, materials (linoleum blocks), tools (sharp blades), action (cutting, incising, gouging the surface), substance (black ink) and hands-on engagement with the print process.

Although Dhlomo learnt the relief, intaglio and planographic print processes available at Rorke's Drift she brings a distinctive vision to her student works such as *Adam and Eve* (1978), and *Tower of Babel* (1978) produced as relief prints. She elected to create most of her 1980s work as linocut prints. This was the simplest print process to use outside of a professional studio but it also enabled her to work with flat planes of black and white tone, rhythmic linear silhouettes, energised line, and pattern. In apartheid South Africa, the appropriateness of stark black and white to express the graphic reality of forced removals is obvious.

Both relief and intaglio prints are made by the paradoxical process of acting upon a block or plate surface in order to transform it into something new. Relief prints require the use of tools to enter the block and excavate material and form images. With linocuts this is a very tactile process – hands guiding sharp blades and holding the block. Discussing the role of the body in cutting prints Ann Westley (2001: 34) observes, 'The knife advances towards the body, the gouge recedes. We breathe in to make the cut and breathe out when the tool is released. If the breath is staccato, so is the cut'. The cutting process also has an ironic edge in the South African context; what is to read as white is cut away while surface substance is affirmed by blackness or colour. In cutting linoleum the instantaneous interaction between mind-eye-hand allows the transmission of feeling; expression is direct rather than mediated and one can see the image emerging beneath the hands. Dhlomo felt deeply about the injustice being done to black South Africans and she cut her blocks without taming impulsiveness and passion into controlled, decorative niceties.

The first print in the series, No. I *The past the future?* (1982) (fig. 2) is a stark image. The man, presented frontally, poses a question about his life. He is in a rural scene and cattle and signs of wealth, loom large in a landscape setting. The background signifies the past – an established and secure way of life – but because the present is obliterated (it is eliminated from the title), he cannot determine the future and his *knobkerrie* (short wooden club) offers scant assurance that he can act to prevent relocation and loss. No. II *Bulldoze the blackspot* (1982) (fig. 3) moves the emphasis from the individual to the group. All the figures are rendered as anonymous black silhouettes. Home is on the left where the bulldozer is crumpling dwellings while women and children on the right pack and carry possessions. The scene is characterised by spatial illogicality and disruption.

Temporary dwellings – tents – feature strongly in No III *Resettlement* (1982) (fig. 4) but there is no landscape. Familiar spatial markers have vanished and the new space offers shelters but not homes. No IV *Against our will* (1982) (fig. 5) summarises the preceding images. It unites the perpetrators of resettlement - angular, unarmed police seen in profile, several of them accompanied by dogs, and machines flattening buildings – with people gathering possessions. Powerlessness meets authority and disorder prevails. No. V *From here Where to?* (1982) (fig. 6), like no. 1 in the series, reverts to depicting a state of consciousness. A man muses amidst ruins. The battered walls are reiterated in the contained space of a doorframe. This

surviving geometric structure, encapsulating destruction, functions as a *punctum*, Barthes' term in *Camera Lucida* (1980) for the eloquent, wounding detail. No VI *Aftermath* (1982) (fig. 7) extends personal experience. The figures, having witnessed the demolition of their homes, are embarking on diaspora. They are already in-between 'here', where they stand with salvaged belongings, and 'there', the past no longer recognisable as home and community. The third space (discussed by Homi Bhaba in Rutherford 1990) is rendered literally as a dark, lateral passage pierced by human forms.

No VII *People are living there* (1982) (fig. 8) brings the series to a numerical end without the clarity of closure. The image does not, I suggest, depict the aftermath of relocation but portrays existence before the enforced removal. It makes the claim that people are '*living*' there. They are people, living in simple homes, not statistics occupying what white nationalists called a blackspot. This is one of the most structured images in the series, featuring a collection of dwellings where people can conduct meaningful lives, work the land and have access to public amenities such as dry cleaning facilities. By ending the series with the representation of a place called home the horror of what was destroyed by State power is rendered tangible.

There is a postscript to the 'Removals' series, a linocut concerned not only with relocation and upheaval but with Bongiwe Dhlomo's own experience as a Zulu woman. When *Cemetery Unrest - Premature Resurrection* (1983) (Fig. 9) was exhibited at The Art Centre, Durban in 1983 the print bore the caption: 'dedicated to the artist's late father, who up to his death in 1979 was against people being uprooted in the Bergville area. The cemetery that was uprooted in 1981 is in an area where he was Minister – most of the people were buried by him'. Paying tribute to her father, who had presided over Christian burials, Dhlomo comments on the exhumation of graves to facilitate the construction of a dam. An irregularly shaped format symbolises the damage to social structure; resurrection is not a spiritual possibility but a surreal South African reality enacted by white soldiers in camouflage holding weapons, whose activities are witnessed ineffectually by the living.

Conclusion

The 1976 Soweto uprising made an indelible impression on Bongiwe Dhlomo. It raised her political consciousness and contributed to a life changing decision to study art. Unsurprisingly she made a print encapsulating the violence of this watershed event. In *Education Unrest: 1976 Uprisings* (1983) (Fig. 10) she cut an anti-apartheid image that deals with violence, and interprets the removal of Hector Pieterse's body, based on Sam Nzima's photograph. This – like her other linocuts - is political reportage but it is also a graphic black and white relief print bearing the decisions of the hand and eye as well as the consciousness of a black artist creating truly cutting images while working in an unjust society.

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Fig. 1. Soweto, June 16 1976: the lifeless body of Hector Pieteron. Photo: Sam Nzima.



Fig. 2. Bongiwe Dhlomo, No. I *The past the future?* (1982) 22.2 x 22.1 cm. Coll: Durban Art Gallery.



Fig. 3. Bongiwe Dhlomo, No. II *Bulldoze the blackspot* (1982) 19.2 x 25 cm. Coll: Durban Art Gallery.

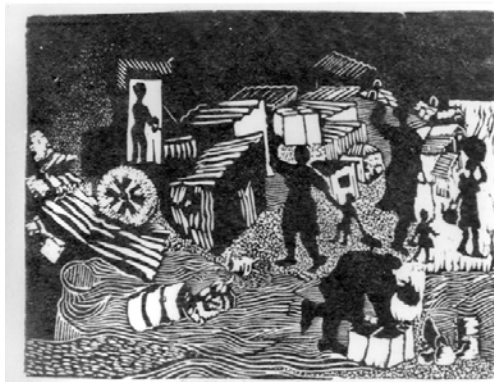


Fig. 4. Bongiwe Dhlomo, No III *Resettlement* (1982) 19.4 x 25 cm. Coll: Durban Art Gallery.

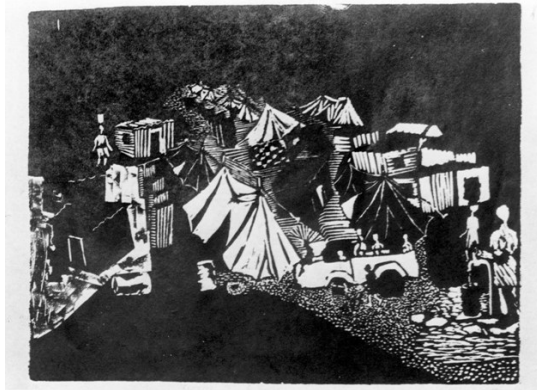


Fig. 5. Bongiwe Dhlomo, No IV *Against our will* (1982) 21.6 x 25.5 cm. Coll: Durban Art Gallery.

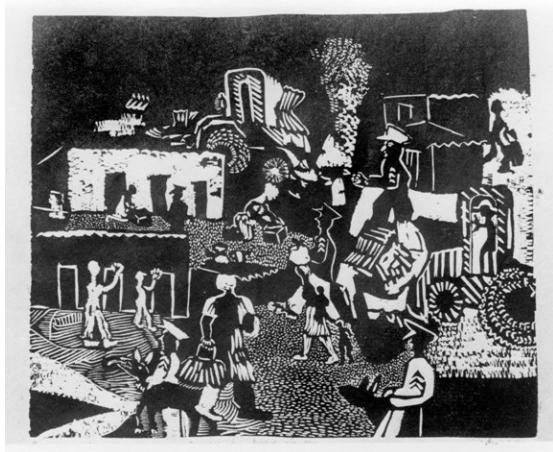


Fig. 6. Bongiwe Dhlomo, No. V *From here Where to?* (1982) 19.4 x 25.4 cm. Coll: Durban Art Gallery.



Fig. 7. Bongiwe Dhlomo, *No VI Aftermath* (1982) 19.4 x 25.7 cm. Coll: Durban Art Gallery.

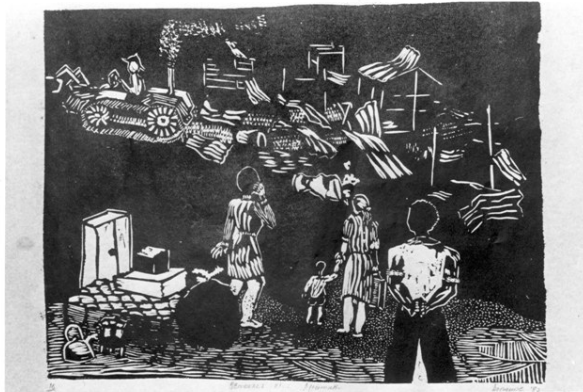


Fig. 8. Bongiwe Dhlomo, *No VII People are living there* (1982) 21.7 x 27.6 cm. Coll: Durban Art Gallery.

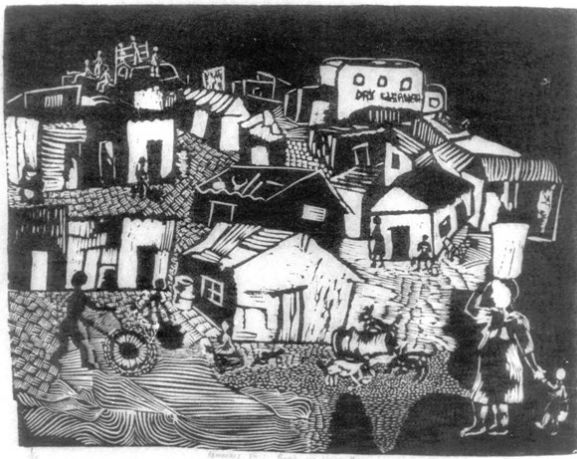


Fig. 9. Bongiwe Dhlomo, *Cemetery Unrest - Premature Resurrection* (1983). Dimensions unknown.



Fig. 10. Bongiwe Dhlomo, *Education Unrest: 1976 Uprisings* (1983).
Dimensions unknown

