



Samson Mnisi's prescience was on display until the end

The artist, who is known around the world for his remarkable abstract paintings, seemed to have foretold his death by naming his final exhibition *Man of the Hour*. He died the day after its opening



By Bongo Mei

Samson Mnisi, who died on 7 October, was born in 1971 in Lesotho and studied fine art and photography at the Fuba Academy of Arts in Johannesburg. By the time of his passing, he was based in the city and his work had been exhibited locally and internationally.

Categorically, he was a postwar abstract expressionist, practising both painting and poetry but mostly recognised for his fine art endeavours. As a child, he was exposed to indigenous meditative and healing rituals that later influenced his lifestyle, art themes and technique.

Spiritual perception is usually seen as crude by the secular world. Artistically, this type of perspective can be recognised as abstract. Mnisi also attested to this with a statement describing his creative process: "My art is a symbolic language of an abstract thought. I use patterns, lines, symbols and colour to find a contemporary South African expression. I see myself as part of the timeless tradition of celebrating the human godliness, from the first rock painting to the present time and beyond. I am interested in using art as another element of alchemy, where through it, you can evoke and even heal certain emotions."

Mnisi was gifted the same way as a poet; he interpreted the soul of an environment with words that seemed figurative but on deeper inspection were as abstract as his visual displays. His death, the day after the opening of his final solo exhibition, *Man of the Hour*, was a peaceful transition of conscious decision. He left our earthly realm to exist in a timeless hour.

Artist, explorer, experimenter

Mnisi is a pioneer of an African art language intensely influenced by metaphysical experimentation and exploration. He is a reminder of the Korean abstract expressionist movement, *Dansaekhwa*, which began in the 1960s and developed into the 1970s.

The Korean artists' primary purpose was not to make sense of or relate to industrial logic; it was about expression through undiscovered technique.

Mnisi initially subscribed to identifying his work with his African heritage. Later he swayed from familiarity, emphasised by his unlabelled artworks or titles that simply described them, like *Blue and Red with White Circle* (2016).

He detached from accepted logic and holistically embraced the concept of abstraction. As a professional, he never ceased to create, conceptually and vocationally. There is a neglected enquiry about why advanced artists of his nature are not truly appreciated for their intelligence and merit locally.

African art has no history of development as one would find in the West, from the Renaissance period to pop art. Contrarily, Africans have participated in all art movements all over the world because they are everywhere, just like the rest of humankind.

African art is also authenticated by the regurgitation of primitive culture, but artists such as Mnisi, Fikile Magadla and Ernest Mancoba were practising on a developed level, like that which is considered to be "First World".

Man of the Hour was mounted at Keyes Art Mile in Rosebank, Johannesburg, and comprised two-dimensional abstract works applied in mixed media on a variety of scales.

Mnisi's mark-making technique is signatory, conspicuous of well-studied implement, conversely implying precarious gestures of paint drips,



Above: Some of the artworks that were on display at Samson Mnisi's final solo exhibition, which opened in Rosebank, Johannesburg, on the day before his death; Below: Samson Mnisi Photos: Asisebenze Art Atelier



The late Samson Mnisi at work on one of his abstract paintings using his signature mark-making technique.



mark-making and smudges. The application method is diverse, separating each piece on its individual stand and expression, mastering the skill of abstract composition. Lines are portrayed as drips, colours translated as magnetic opposites in lines, dots, shapes and marks.

Asisebenze Art Atelier curated the exhibition with Ashraf Jamal, Nolan Stevens and the artist's son, Refiloe Mnisi, who had been accompanying his father while creating the work.

"Collecting a Samson Mnisi is owning an African experience, contoured by spiritual enlightenment," said Stevens.

"From his apolitical narrative to his circle symbols reminiscing the cycle of life, the triangle of family structure, mother, father and child, his work is truly an archival artefact of our time and continent."

Stevens also revealed Mnisi's plan with the collective. "The proceeds from his exhibition will be managed and given to the family... His studio is now inherited by his son Refiloe.

"Also, he had aspirations of a museum exhibition in Cape Town and Pretoria, [and] we hope to fulfil his wishes."

Mnisi was an individual of revolutionary ethic as a humanist, artist and man of integrity.

He leaves behind a family of great potential and a baton cloaked with compassion, courage and wisdom.

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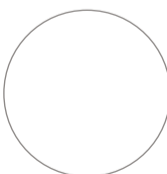
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MAVERICK LIFE



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