



Working Life in South Africa

Gerard Sekoto and Lena Hugo

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CURATED BY

Wilhelm van Rensburg


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Gerard Sekoto is recognised as a pioneer of Black South African modernism. Born in the Lutheran Mission Station of Botshabelo in 1913, Sekoto's early life was shaped by South Africa's segregationist policies. He studied at Grace Dieu, an Anglican training college for Black schoolteachers, and taught until 1939, when he moved to Johannesburg to pursue a career as an artist. Settling in Sophiatown, a vibrant multiracial township, Sekoto captured the essence of urban life through his art, portraying the struggles and resilience of Black South Africans with sensitivity and dignity. His work during this period, including dynamic scenes of everyday life, exemplified his empathy and rejection of the exoticisation of Black subjects.

In 1947, Sekoto moved to Paris in self-imposed exile, where he continued to paint and perform as a jazz musician until his death in 1993. While his time in Paris was challenging, he gradually established himself on the international art scene and would leave a legacy in France, shortly before his death he was awarded the Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres from the French government. Additionally, he posthumously received the Order of Ikhamanga for achievement in the arts from the South African government.

In 1940, one of Sekoto's paintings became the first by a Black artist to be acquired by the Johannesburg Art Gallery, which would later host his first Retrospective Exhibition in 1989. Throughout his career, Sekoto participated in numerous shows, including the 1948 *South African Art Exhibition* at the Tate, where he was the only Black artist selected. His work continues to be featured in important exhibitions, such as the 2013 Retrospective *Song for Sekoto* at Wits Art Museum and *Paris Noir: Artistic circulations and anti-colonial resistance, 1950–2000*, currently on view at the Centre Pompidou in Paris.

LENA HUGO (1975–)

Lena Hugo, born in 1975 in Roodepoort, South Africa, is an artist celebrated for her detailed, realist portraits of South African and migrant workers. She holds a Bachelor of Art in Fine Arts from the University of Pretoria, graduating in 1996. For over two decades, Hugo has focused on portraying the often-overlooked lives of labourers, elevating their status through her art to challenge societal perceptions and highlight their essential economic contributions. Her work explores themes of labour, human dignity, and the universal human condition, including the cycle of birth, death, and resurrection. Recently, she has examined the fear of insignificance and its potential manifestation in destructive behaviour. Hugo works in a variety of mediums, including pastels, oils, charcoal, pencil, fibre arts (often using reappropriated clothing worn by labourers), relief printing, and occasionally photography.

Hugo's art has been exhibited extensively in South Africa as well as in several places internationally. She has received numerous accolades, including being a finalist for the BP Portrait Award, London (2005). Her work is held in public collections such as the University of Johannesburg, University of South Africa, and the Pretoria Art Museum, in addition to private collections worldwide.



Introduction

Legendary early Black Modernist artist, Gerard Sekoto predominantly depicted the new way of life which workers created for themselves in the towns after the advent of mass migration affected by the mining industry in South Africa. Before the discovery of minerals in the 19th century, the vast majority of people in South Africa were dependent on the land for a living. The large industries of diamonds and gold mining, however, changed the very nature of work. Millions flocked to the cities in search of work on the mines, and millions more, living in the rural areas, depending on the wages of migrant workers to survive.

The forces that shaped the new industrial society in the early mining days influenced working life in the towns, attracting working people of all kinds – hawkers, traders, tailors, market gardeners, flower sellers, washermen and women, brewers – largely, the preferred subject matter in Sekoto’s oeuvre before he went into self-imposed exile in 1947 – as well as rural newcomers from the platteland, peasants from Europe and other parts of Africa and Asia.

Soon, in the early 20th century, a manufacturing industry grew up alongside the mines and towns on the Rand. There was work for Black men – on the mines, in the kitchens and gardens of the white suburbs, in shops and small factories, in brick and timber plants, and metal works. But for Black women, options were limited. Domestic work was the norm, with only a handful of Black professional teachers and nurses. Many women turned to brewing beer illicitly. The development of a textile industry, however, provided a welcome alternative for many Black women.

In the factories, the most powerful wage-earners in the early years were white skilled workers, but the nature and composition of the workers began to change – from

skilled to semi-skilled workers, from men to women, from white to black.

The third and fourth industrial revolutions (large-scale use of computers in the 1960s, and mechanised services and production in the 21st century, respectively) have radically changed the nature of work and working life globally, and have impacted in a profound way the South African workforce. These changes are the subject matter of the phenomenal hyper-realistic pastel drawings of workers, done by Lena Hugo.

The aim of the exhibition is to present, by means of selected paintings by Gerard Sekoto (nannies, washerwomen, brickmakers, coal merchants, miners, barbers, shopkeepers, street photographers, water drawers), the nature of work and the world workers created for themselves in the first half of the 20th century, and to juxtapose those with depictions of workers by Lena Hugo (mainly of heavy machinery operators), in the working life of the 21st century. Apart from the strong synergy between the work of these two artists, the show provides a visual, art historical tenet, augmenting socio-cultural and politico-economic research, on working life in South Africa.

Working Life in South Africa: Gerard Sekoto and Lena Hugo constitutes the seventh annual legacy exhibition mounted by Strauss & Co in which prominent artists are paired to highlight important issues raised in and through their work (Louis Maqhubela and Douglas Portway in 2019; Gladys Mgudlandlu and Maggie Laubser in 2020; George Pemba and Robert Hodgins in 2021; Mary Sibande and Dorothy Kay in 2022; Sydney Kumalo and Ezrom Legae in 2023, and Alfred Thoba in 2024).

Wilhelm van Rensburg

SENIOR ART SPECIALIST AND HEAD CURATOR



Lena Hugo
Seeking Work
2010
pastel on board
79 by 59 cm
PRIVATE COLLECTION



Mapping Material Conditions through the Image of Labour Gerard Sekoto and Lena Hugo

For centuries, artmaking and work have been inextricably linked. Whether it is artists who engaged worker's struggles through championing labour movements or those engaging working class politics as content, work is and always has been central to art. Perhaps this has something to do with how the idea of work – what we might call labour, toil or productive capacity – is tied to dignity and self-determination. Alongside education, work stands as a firm pillar that enables people to cross the poverty line.

The longstanding artistic engagement with labour is deeply embedded in art history, with the figure of the worker as a central motif. These links are reflected as observations by art curator and educator Corina Apostol, who notes ‘... a substantial amount of historical examples when artists came to work together in unions, communes, associations, guilds, syndicates or collectives. Many of these started in the mid-19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. What is also important is that these artists were not just seeking better pay, legal rights, and life securities, but also aligned themselves with workers’ movements that challenged the dominant status quo. ... This lineage of self-reflection and resistance can be traced through international avant-garde movements that followed.’¹

The ongoing entanglement between artists and labour has led some creators to reject the label of ‘artist’ altogether, instead identifying as ‘art workers’ to blur the distinction between the ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ of the global economy. For them, the role of the worker is fundamental—not just as a subject of art but as a way of understanding art itself. In this instance, to think of art is to think of

work, which in turn is to think of a global network of interconnected events.

This perspective on the relationship between art and work finds resonance in the practices of individual artists who have explored these themes within specific historical and social contexts. Two such artists are Gerard Sekoto and Lena Hugo, whose depictions of workers in mid-20th and 21st-century South Africa reflect both the struggles and dignity of labour.

In 1938, Sekoto left teaching to become a full-time artist. His experiences shaped his fascination with capturing life as it unfolded around him, from scenes of labour and daily routines to moments of unrest and resistance. His best-known depiction of labouring bodies, *Song of the Pick* (1946), based on a 1930s photograph by cinematographer Andrew Goldie, is a rhythmic portrayal of working men with axes raised high, watched by a foreman smoking his pipe, hands in his pockets. Writing about this image, scholar Ruth Ramsden-Karelse notes; ‘Sekoto typically captured subjects engaged in activity, always moving; here, he glances back into the darkness, as his body turns towards the light, evoking the bright future to which powerfully reimagined workers progress in his celebrated and contemporaneous painting *Song of the Pick*: “I am looking into the future of our country with much anxiety, yet fully determined to live this life as everybody does.”’

Sekoto frequently portrayed the lives of workers, from miners to street vendors and other urban workers, whose movement and toil reverberated in his cityscapes. In these images, women are at work too, as seen in the painting, *African Harvesters*. His work not only documented the conditions of labour and social realities in South Africa

1. Corina L. Apostol. *Art Workers Between Precarity and Resistance: A Genealogy*. ArtLeaks Gazette. 2015



but also revealed work as an important means of survival.

Through exhibition-making too, artists have long engaged with workers' struggles. Take *Tucumán Arde* (*Tucumán is Burning*),² a 1968 project and well-studied exhibition, led by anarchists and disillusioned sugar cane industry workers in Argentina. Using photography, moving images, posters, and murals, they exposed Tucumán's social and economic crisis. This movement marked a rupture between artists and the elitism of artistic institutions, pushing the boundaries of artistic language in pursuit of more collaborative ways of engaging. I can't help but connect this moment of the sugar cane industry crisis in Argentina to the sugar cane industry in South Africa captured so aptly by Hugo in her 2015 series *Grass People*, in which she documented the lives of sugar cane workers through portraiture, continuing a tradition of bearing witness through art. Throughout her career, Hugo focused on workers, including through her exhibitions *KZN@Work* at KZNSA Gallery in KwaZulu-Natal and *SA@Work* at the University of Johannesburg Art Gallery, honouring those whose labour often goes unseen.

In the works of both Hugo and Sekoto, labour materializes politically. Yet, it is also phenomenological – deeply tied to the politics of the body, particularly the classed, racialized, and gendered working body. Other artists, too, have engaged with labour, not as a mere preoccupation but, as painter Alice Neel would argue, as a fundamental condition of life. For instance, Mary Sibande's *Cry Havoc* (2014) is a sculptural work made from fiberglass, polyester, cotton and resin that reflects on domestic work through the historical roles assigned to Black women in South Africa. Similarly, Michael Goldberg's *Hostel Monument for the Migrant Worker* (1978), a mixed-media installation, is a critique of the migrant labour system. On the other hand, Olu Oguibe's *Sex Work Is Honest Work* (2022), a series of 20 framed acrylic panels on handmade paper, broadens the conversation of what we view as 'respectable

2. Veronika Miralles. *Argentina Arde: Art as a Tool For Social Struggle*. BA, Simon Fraser University, 2001

work,' calling for the recognition of and the protection of sex workers' rights. Diego Rivera's *Detroit Industry* (1932), a series of 27 fresco panels completed between 1932 and 1933, highlighted industrial labour and the dignity of Detroit's manufacturing worker base, while Glenn Ligon's *Untitled (I Am a Man)* draws from the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers' strike, where African American workers carried signs declaring their humanity in the face of racial oppression. These remind us how the figure of the worker appears in art, both directly and abstractly, where labour is not just an economic act but also a site of resistance and renegotiation.

Writing in *Speculation as a Mode of Production*, Marina Vishmidt offers a way to think through the instability embedded in labour. She proposes that labour ensures the creativity of speculation as a social form and practice – what she calls the 'labour of the negative'. Rather than fixing labour in rigid definitions, she reads it as a kind of productive negation. This idea resonates with artists who positioned their practice within broader labour struggle but also to the dematerialization of labour, where immateriality is reflected both in conceptual and performance-based art and in the shifting conditions of post-Fordist work, captured through what we now know as the gig economy – ever shifting, with increasing levels of precarity and no real social benefits or sense of security.

Sekoto and Hugo's practices, in their own ways, make visible the social structures that shape labour, revealing how bodies are organized within them. Read together, they complicate the idea of work and highlight the ways in which workers are portrayed but also how their experiences are understood and remembered. In this sense, they offer a form of social realism that insists on the visibility of labour and the dignity of those who perform it.

Nkgopoleng Moloji





Gerard Sekoto
Washday, Sophiatown
circa 1942
oil on canvas laid down on board
30 by 50 cm
PRIVATE COLLECTION



Gerard Sekoto's colourful and animated *Washday, Sophiatown* – recorded as having been painted in 1942 – is a lively and empathetic representation of the lives of those he observed and lived amongst. He portrays his subjects with dignity and humanity, despite their extreme adversity. 'His insight of his fellow human beings within their social environment is profound. His paintings are subtle commentary on the social, political and economic circumstance.'¹

Washday, Sophiatown is dominated on the right-hand side of the picture plane by a large somewhat stark well that is straddled by a tall wooden triangular support required for the lowering and hoisting of a water bucket. To the left, another more loosely formulated triangular composition shows an energetic hive of human activity, the maternal figure carrying a baby on her back is vigorously going about her task while the young girl equally energetically strides with her load from the door of the house. They are surrounded by bright white laundry and other related paraphernalia.

Sekoto beautifully counters the many hues of dusty pinks and burnt orange with the bright blue sky, the red speckled blue length of fabric and head scarf, as well as the blue dress of the young girl. The picture is theatrically presented alongside the burnt orange fence, similarly shaded door mat and hat of the young man who emerges from the house.

After four years as a teacher near Pietersburg, now Polokwane, Sekoto took a first step towards expanding his horizons in 1939 when he moved to Johannesburg and found accommodation with cousins on Gerty Street, Sophiatown. Sokoto recalls, 'To me it was already a great excitement to have arrived at this longed-for destination of Johannesburg'. Strolling through the suburb or looking through the window of his room he witnessed the rich, varied and colourful lives of the community.

1. Barbara Lindop (1988) *Gerard Sekoto*, Randburg: dictum, page 18.



Gerard Sekoto
The Mother on the Road
circa 1945–47
oil on canvas board
45 by 34,5 cm
PRIVATE COLLECTION

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Division of labour along gender lines emerges as one of Sekoto's core themes, especially in his work of the 1930s. Women who engage in their daily chores while carrying children on their backs was a favourite image of his, not merely for the sake of satisfying the art market, but because this is what he observed when he was staying in Johannesburg's Sophiatown, District Six in Cape Town and Eastwood in Pretoria. Generally speaking South African women occupied a position of subservience, and Sekoto expresses gender-defined activities in his work. His primary concern is the human element, which cannot be divorced from the socioeconomic, racial and gender inequalities plaguing South African society. Layers of meaning and further engagement with this notion have been taken to a deeper level in these art works. Professor Herbert Vilakazi, commenting on one of the fundamental causes of this situation, contends: 'Africans became the primary labourers, and this vast sector is poor, with the worst facilities and infrastructure.' Speaking from the post-1994 perspective, Vilakazi understands that poverty is no longer based merely on race; it is also based on class differences that transcend racial and gender-based boundaries.

Mzuzile Mdudzi Xakaza, 2013



Gerard Sekoto

Untitled (Nanny Pushing a Pram)

1974

ballpoint pen and crayon on paper

26 by 22 cm

THE SOWETAN COLLECTION OF SEKOTO
DRAWINGS HOUSED AT THE UNIVERSITY
OF THE WITWATERSRAND



In the parks, in the cafés and small bars I would make sketches while avoiding being noticed. I would also make quick drawings in the streets with the hope of accomplishing some sort of conference of expression, but that always remained too complex. As a result, I kept on painting from memories of the past, while waiting for time to ripen so I could get more acquainted with the daily life which I could paint with my African eye.

Gerard Sekoto

Gerard Sekoto's drawings – pencil, charcoal, pen and ink – may be seen as margin notes on human nature. The use of form in his drawings of people in parks or on pavements are not manifestations of startling craftsmanship, but rather tranquil, reflective notes on the individuality of human beings. Here lies the value of these drawings. Next to William Kentridge's *General of Derby Road*, this is an unforgettable documentary of the humiliation and dehumanization suffered by many in South Africa daily. Time and again one stands in awe of the quality of painting when confronted with South African works of Sekoto's early period. In each of them it is the dignity of human beings which is expressed in artistic terms.

Chabani Manganyi (2004)



Gerard Sekoto

The Nanny

1974

oil on paper

19,5 by 30 cm

PRIVATE COLLECTION





Gerard Sekoto
Horse and Cart Sophiatown
circa 1939–40
oil on canvas board
47 by 67 cm
PRIVATE COLLECTION

Horse and Cart, Sophiatown, with spatial depth and clear sense of linear perspective, has reference to the commonplace black urban life, which was subtly marked by economic inequalities. This is one of the first paintings produced by Sekoto after six weeks' training by Judith Gluckman who introduced him to oil painting techniques in 1939. He had learnt to create three dimensional illusion on a two dimensional surface – one of the basic pillars of realistic drawing and painting – and the road in *Horse and Cart, Sophiatown* facilitates the recession of the viewer's eye into the background. The hive of activity in this urban environment marks the artist's focus on the human element in his work, simultaneously referring to subtle separation of labour along gender lines

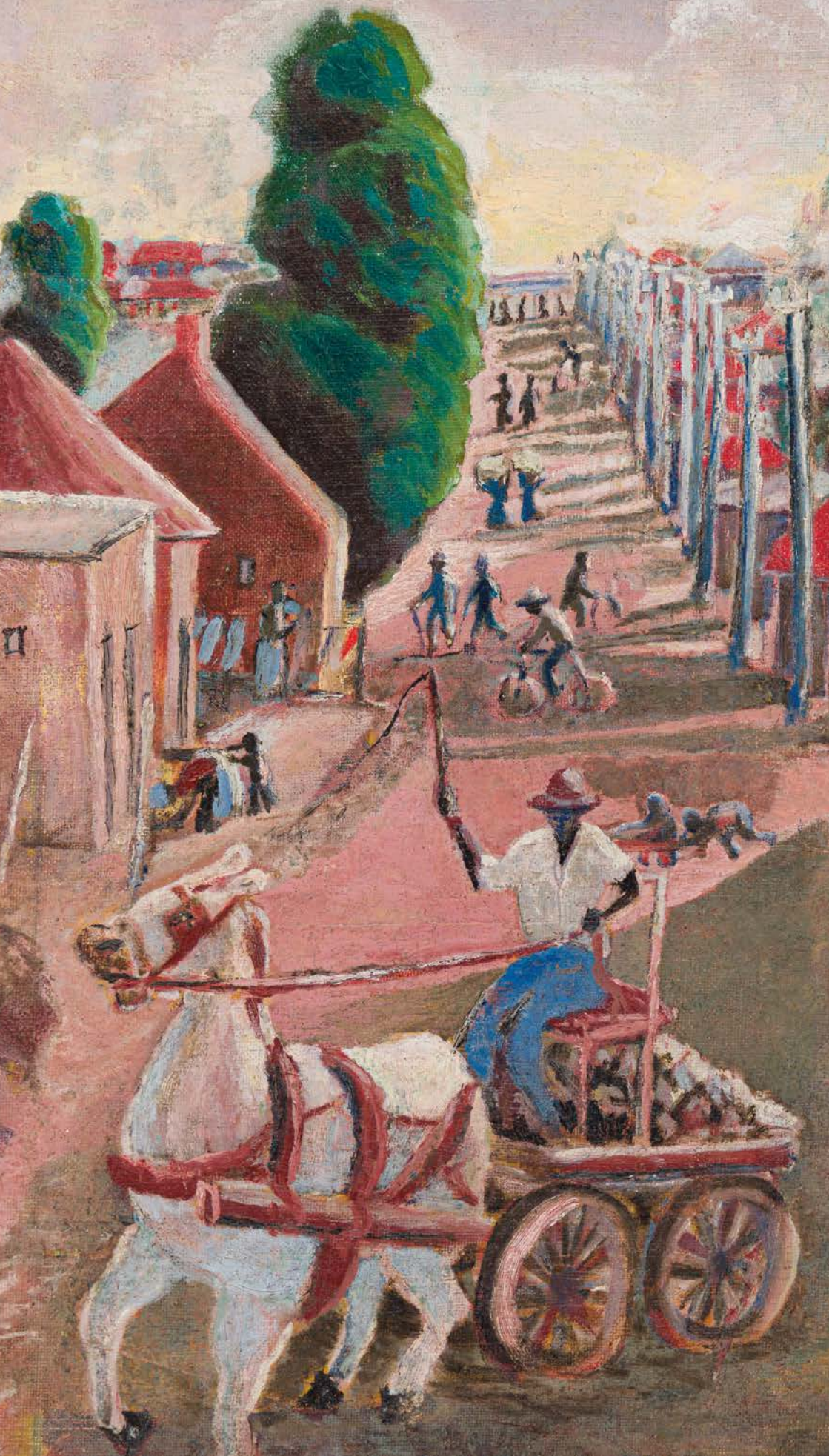
This work is a visual reference to a specific

place, not just a space of human existence and activity; the road depicted in the painting is in fact identifiable today. *Horse and Cart, Sophiatown* is the artist's reflection of his personal experience of the place, which may suggest his identification with the daily realities of the people of Sophiatown. The foreground, with a figure of a woman carrying a burden on her head and a man on a horse-drawn cart, introduces the viewer to the township scene. The painting itself serves as a microcosmic reflection of the inevitable consequences of the metropole-colonial relationship stemming from various aspects of human inequality. What is noticeable in Sekoto's compositions that feature his South African experiences is the prevalence of black people.

Mzuzile Mdudzi Xakaza, 2013



Sophiatown, circa 1950.





Gerard Sekoto
The Donkey Cart
circa 1939
gouache on card
29,5 by 38 cm

PROF NIMROD NDEBELE COLLECTION AT
UNIVERSITY OF JOHANNESBURG GALLERY



Once I had the poster colours, I was less interested in searching for a job, but I would look around the area, more especially in Gerty Street. Men were seen less often during weekdays as they went to work, while those few who remained were often engaged in such occupations as one could not always fathom. Some women were doing illicit beer brewing and men were engaged for digging holes and hiding it and also to give the alert in case of police raids.

Barbara Lindop



Gerard Sekoto
Labourers in Sophiatown
1939
oil on canvasboard
29,5 by 44,5 cm

PROF NIMROD NDEBELE COLLECTION AT
UNIVERSITY OF JOHANNESBURG GALLERY



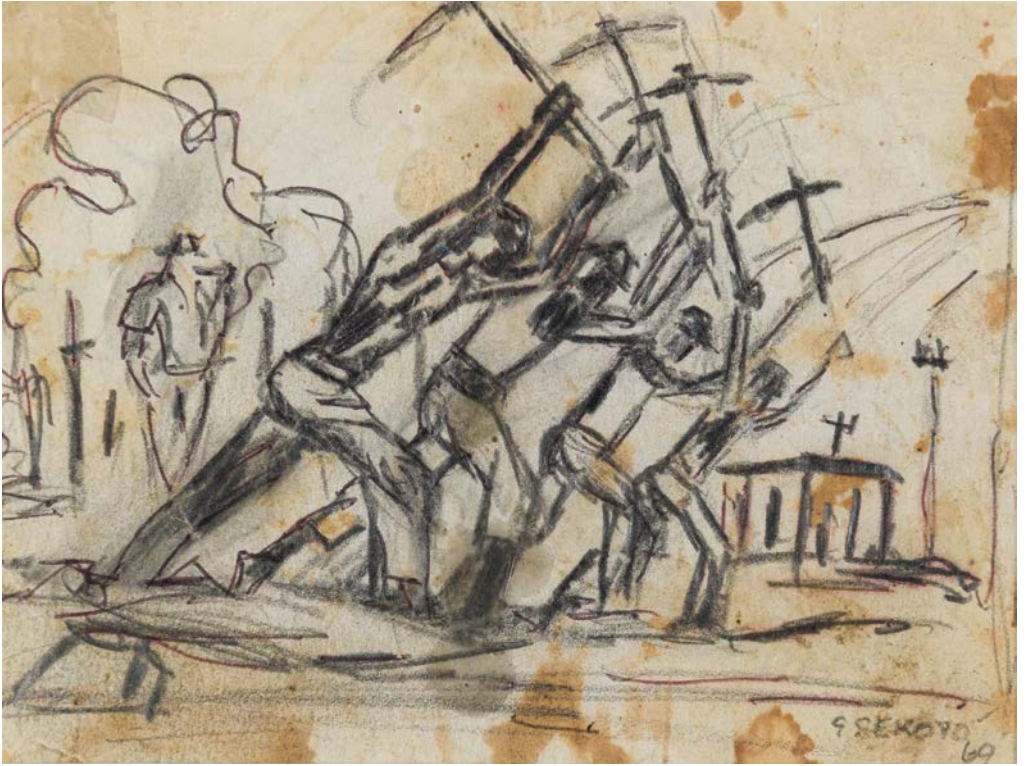


Gerard Sekoto
Song of the Pick
1960
ballpoint pen on envelope
10 by 11,5 cm

THE SOWETAN COLLECTION OF SEKOTO
DRAWINGS HOUSED AT THE UNIVERSITY
OF THE WITWATERSRAND



Song of the Pick. Photo by Andrew Goldie,
undated, IZIKO SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL
GALLERY.



Gerard Sekoto
Study for Song of the Pick no 2

1969

pencil on paper

9,5 by 12,5 cm

THE SOWETAN COLLECTION OF SEKOTO
DRAWINGS HOUSED AT THE UNIVERSITY
OF THE WITWATERSRAND



Gerard Sekoto
Song of the Pick

1978
oil on canvas
99 by 99 cm

IZIKO SOUTH AFRICAN
NATIONAL GALLERY



That Sekoto's landscapes refer to questions of domination is evident in one of his overtly political compositions, *Song of the Pick*, which interrogates white male domination over black male workers. In sharp contrast with the gender differences and subtle black male privilege cited above, Sekoto tackles the question of back-breaking labour as experienced by black men in *Song of the Pick*. Although painted in 1942, little has changed since the ushering in of the democratic order; labourers who obtain employment are still predominantly black, as are those who fight and die for their labour rights. The idea of the male being the provider of a family is still etched in many people's minds and most employed family men endeavour to provide for their wives and children in unbearable working conditions. A case in point is the 2012 Lonmin-Marikana incident, where thirty-four people were butchered by the police while taking violent unauthorised strike action.

In robust colour Sekoto executed *Song of the Pick*, a classic example of his artistic exploration of the relationship between the economically powerful and the vulnerable. He achieved this using a direct, concrete approach based on what countless people had either experienced or witnessed. It is a reality that can be squarely related to the visible and the tangible; there is very little left to the imagination. The viewer is not required to engage intellectually with the work by asking moral questions about the treatment of workers or about how humans in general treat their environment: Sekoto does not ask his audiences to engage with his work at a deeply intellectual level.

Song of the Pick is a reconstruction of Andrew Goldie's black-and-white

photographic image of workers being supervised from behind by a white boss. In Goldie's version the workers look weak and are cumberingly draped; they appear overwhelmed by the moment of toil. The white boss is in total control of his workers and no rhythmic movement of the picks or limbs of the toiling workers is conveyed. The scene marks clear divisions between the strong and the weak, the dominant and the dominated. By contrast, in Sekoto's version the white boss stands in front of the workers, who engage in their task nobly. They are all endowed with athletic bodies and appear strong and unfazed by the task at hand. Unlike in Goldie's photograph, the white boss who stands in front of the workers seems threatened by the advancing pick-wielding men. He also looks weaker and shorter than the workers, who have been arranged in a perfect pattern and are in rhythm with each other, thus rendering them compositionally dominant, even though they are social and economic underdogs.

The beauty of design and pattern in *Song of the Pick* highlights the artist's eye for aesthetics, and Sekoto's wit and humour emerge when one considers that the boss will have to step backwards as the workers move forward. This invokes thoughts of a reversed power hierarchy in which the economically disempowered are ennobled and dignified beyond imagination. The physical strength, robustness and courage of these workers evoke notions of heroism in the face of hardship, an idea reinforced by the artistic device of hiding the workers' faces.

Mzuzile Mdudzi Xakaza, (2013)



The question of being in Sophiatown, an area reserved for blacks, had not troubled me in the least; on the contrary, the vitality of the area was a great stimulus. It was a theatrical scene seeing all these various types of people: women with baskets of shopping, some carrying baggage either on their heads or shoulders. Men of various styles of walking and clothing, some bicycle-riding or driving cars, although in those days car owners were rare in Sophiatown. There were also many children of varied appearance in attire and expression.

Chabani Manganyi

Gerard Sekoto

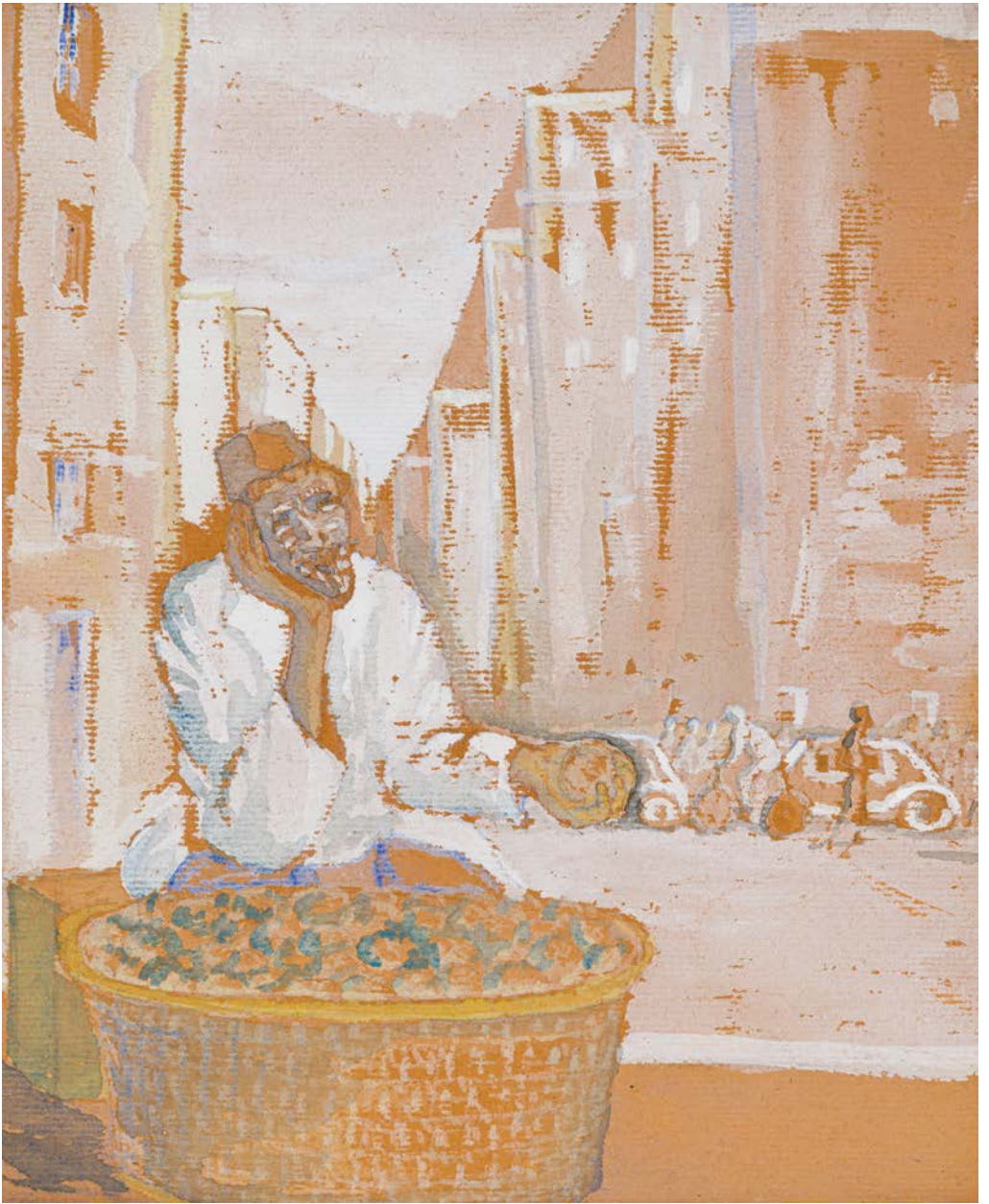
Seated Figure

oil on canvas

39 by 49 cm

PRIVATE COLLECTION





Gerard Sekoto
Poverty in the Midst of Plenty
circa 1939
poster paint on brown paper
34,5 by 29,5 cm

PROF NIMROD NDEBELE COLLECTION AT
UNIVERSITY OF JOHANNESBURG GALLERY

Sekoto's *Poverty in the Midst of Plenty*, 1939, which has a chalky appearance owing to subdued poster paints on brown paper, is noteworthy for the artist's focus on experimentation with this medium before his transition to oils. The painting focuses on the weight of poverty in an industrialising city. The human suffering resulting from the majority people's economic marginalisation is reinforced by the pensive mood of the foreground figure who facing the viewer. The background is occupied by buildings which form part of a mundane urban scene. There is an interesting, subtle conflict here, in that the city buildings dominate the composition while the dwarfed human figure seems to serve as the human face of poverty that the artist wanted to expose. This early work arguably epitomises Sekoto's desire to raise consciousness in his own people of the horrible conditions in which they lived. He believed that such an awakening would fill his people with ambition to fight for better economic conditions. Despite the compositional dominance of the buildings, landscape is pushed to the background thematically as the artist accentuates the loneliness and helplessness of the foreground figure.

This basic visual approach to social commentary dominated Gerard Sekoto's artistic career. Although occasional variations between impressionistic and expressionistic approaches are visible in his work, a realistic style prevails. What seems common perhaps across Sekoto's entire *oeuvre*, is the prominent representation of the socially and economically powerless, the downtrodden. However, this powerlessness is not overtly accompanied by depictions of the dominant racial group in Sekoto's compositions. Where a figure representing the politically and economically dominant group is depicted, the marginalised dominate the picture format. *Poverty in the Midst of Plenty* inserts the visible human element in a scene that alludes to the economy of a colonial outpost without showing the conflict that often attends such problematic relationships. Landscape serves as a backdrop. A possible rationale for this subtlety in expressing social and economic inequalities can be found in Christian teachings of humanity ('Ubuntu'), which advocate the turning of the other cheek with a hope of gaining harmony at the end of a given conflict situation.

Mzuzile Mdudzi Xakaza, 2013



Growing up in Roodepoort on the West Rand of Gauteng during the 1970s and 80s, Lena Hugo became familiar with an industrial, mine-heaped landscape as a backdrop to a politically charged atmosphere. From an early age, she witnessed the realities of riots, oppression and chaos – workers required by the apartheid government to carry passes and school lectures warning about communism, commonly referred to as the ‘Rooi Gevaar’ (red danger).

Too young to fully understand and powerless to act, Hugo vividly remembers another more compelling memory originating from those years: her special relationship with Ngoanang William Matseba, a man who worked as the family gardener. William was a protective, father figure who would reward her with ‘Chappies’ bubblegum for garden chores well done. Although he was treated well by her family, she nevertheless still remembers, with sadness, his plate and cup, stored in a cupboard under the kitchen sink, separated from the rest of the family’s crockery. William would later become a central figure in her portraits and the most often depicted worker in her portfolio. His final depiction was in 2021 – a posthumous portrait honouring his life after he passed away at the age of 71.

Hugo began her journey as a full-time artist, following her graduation from the University of Pretoria in 1996. For nearly a decade, she focused on painting the human figure in oil until her former drawing lecturer, renowned South African artist Diane Victor, encouraged her to return to pencil and charcoal. Around the same time, her interest in South African and migrant workers began to take shape. In 2005, she was shortlisted for the BP Portrait Awards in London for a portrait of an employee hired by Lena’s landlady.

In 2008, she was invited to exhibit her first major exhibition focusing on the subject of workers, titled *KZN@Work* at KZNSA gallery in Kwazulu Natal, with the assistance of a small gallery, The Art Shop, in Umhlanga Rocks in Durban. The exhibition showcased a series of portraits depicting men and women in their occupational environments, highlighting the often-overlooked individuals who play a vital role in society. Through her paintings and drawings, Hugo sought to bring attention to these workers, capturing them in moments of labour as a way to honour their contributions.

She became known for her depictions of workers and transitioned entirely from oil paint to pastels using industrial Masonite, which proved to be the perfect surface – durable, acid-free and smooth after hand-sanding. Around the same time, she began experimenting with newspapers. Though fragile, the newspaper became surprisingly stable when mounted on board and provided a soft, receptive base for chalk pastels. The use of newspaper as a background had the effect of creating a sense of timelessness – it grounded the figure in the present moment while also preserving a snapshot of history. Over time, the printed texts would act as markers of time, revealing events that unfolded when the work was made, offering an added layer of historical context.

Although a true realist, Hugo’s work is never simply a replica, she aims to move beyond ‘the skin’ of her subjects, revealing their character while staying true to her original concept. She combines and adapts photographic references to create unique portrayals of her subjects within their environments – often their workplace – resulting in scenes that feel real and rich with presence. As writer Peter Machen observes, ‘Hugo’s accuracy transcends conventional notions of realism not so



much because her technical ability is so astounding, but because her paintings and drawings of people somehow capture the essence of each particular subject and the very essence of what it is to be human.’

A key theme in Hugo’s work is highlighting the fundamental significance of having a job – not only as a means of survival but also for its impact on psychological well-being and a sense of belonging. Through her interactions with hundreds of workers and job seekers, her respect for their dignity and the value of their contributions deepened. By portraying individuals who are often overlooked, with care and reverence, her work reaffirms their dignity, highlighting their essential role and contribution to society and the economy.

In exploring the connection between identity and vocation, she approaches her workers with admiration, recognising the unique skills and strength each job requires. She believes that capturing a person in a moment of deep concentration or intense effort reveals something significant, particularly when these instances occur during moments of flow amidst a strenuous, complex or meditative task – the worker becomes completely absorbed and the environment fades into non-existence.

In 2010, Hugo presented a major body of work at the University of Johannesburg Art Gallery, *SA@Work*. Following this, she was invited as the 2011 festival artist for the Klein Karoo National Arts Festival, where she presented her exhibition *Portre* – a series of portraits of South Africans. These exhibitions solidified her reputation for capturing the essence of working people in South Africa. Building on her ongoing exploration of labour and identity, a significant moment in her career came in 2016 with her solo exhibition, *Grass People*, staged at the Gerard Sekoto Gallery, Alliance Française in Johannesburg. The

show later travelled to the Absa Gallery in Johannesburg in 2017. In *Grass People* Hugo presented life-sized drawings of migrant sugarcane workers alongside large fibre artworks made from reused clothing once worn by these very same labourers – garments still imbued with traces of sweat, sugarcane sap, and soot. By assembling fragments of worn clothing, shaped by the workers' movements and daily toil, she created an intimate and tactile representation that, when exhibited alongside the drawings, became a form of tribute to their lives and labour.

For over thirty years, Lena Hugo has portrayed ordinary people and workers, exhibiting widely in group and solo exhibitions both locally and abroad. Her work highlights the dignity and resilience of her subjects and serves as a visual archive of labour and identity in South Africa.





Lena Hugo
Seamstress
2008
pastel on paper
175 by 81,5 cm
PRIVATE COLLECTION



Lena Hugo

Padwerker

2011

pastel on board

167 by 119,5 cm

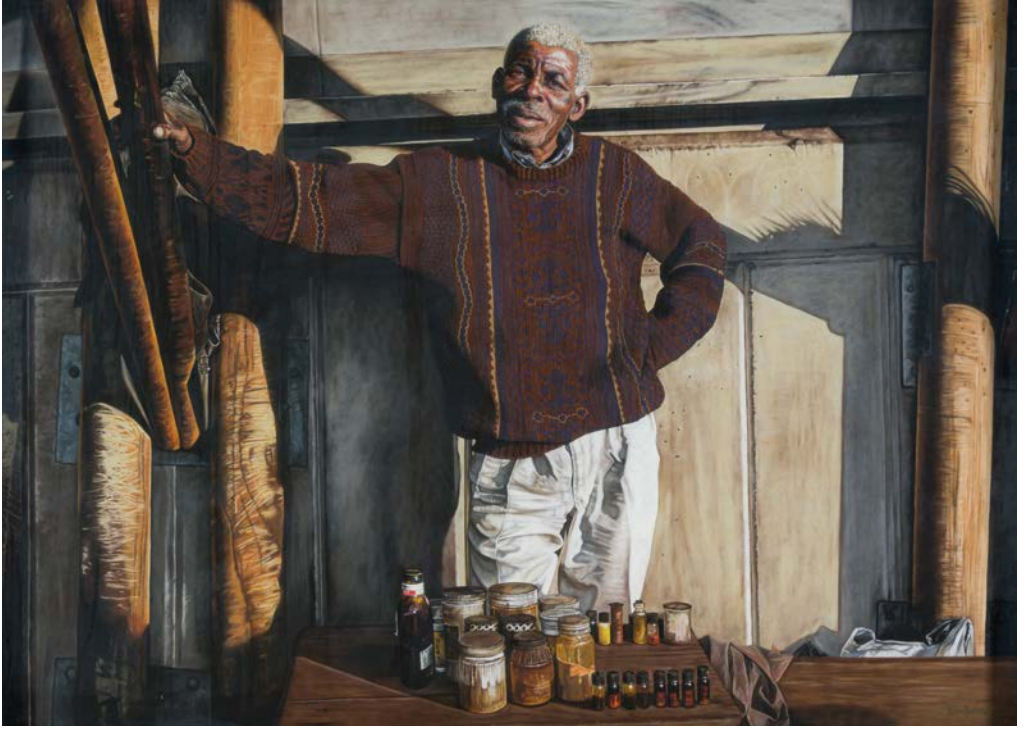
PRIVATE COLLECTION



In recent months I have become accustomed to the growling of bulldozers and front-end loaders, to pneumatic drills and wheeled monsters that leave a strip of tar behind them. In the street that runs past the office in Auckland Park where I sit and work, faceless people are busy rebuilding Kingsway. Every day I hear these sounds – the sounds of South Africa at work – but I barely notice the people who control these machines and the workers who earn their daily bread with spade in hand. In their overalls all the workers look alike. And when I enter, a short walk down the street, the gallery of the University of Johannesburg, the sounds of their working still linger, but one is confronted by workers whom you so easily overlook – not only road-workers, but also miners, and fruit-packers, sugarcane-cutters and gardeners, mechanics and workers in workshops. Workers who do manual labour; the type of work that is too easily regarded as inferior.

Helena Hugo portrays these people against the background of their immediate circumstances, but also of their dreams and expectations. In her pastel portraits (enchantingly exact renditions that surpass photorealism by far), the bond between person and machine is consistently given preference. Whether it be person and bulldozer or person and sugar-cane field, the firm connection between worker and work is so intimately portrayed that the identification is quite clear. One can almost imagine that the workers assume the traits of their implements. The fact that Hugo reflects the work in the titles she chose for her portraits, strengthens these thoughts all the more.

Johan Myburg (2010)



More often than not I am endlessly fascinated by skin texture and wrinkles around the eyes, almost like a roadmap.' In her smaller works she sometimes concentrates on the eyes only, and however close-up you view the work, the detail will dumbfound you. 'I think I am a little obsessed with detail.

Anna-Retha Boucher (2011)

Lena Hugo
Above Board
2014
pastel on board
120 by 168 cm
PRIVATE COLLECTION

To be featured in our May Live Auction
Estimate R250 000 – 350 000





Lena Hugo

Moving out the Trucks at Dawn I

2008

pastel on newspaper laid down on board

197 by 119 cm

UNISA ART GALLERY



Lena Hugo

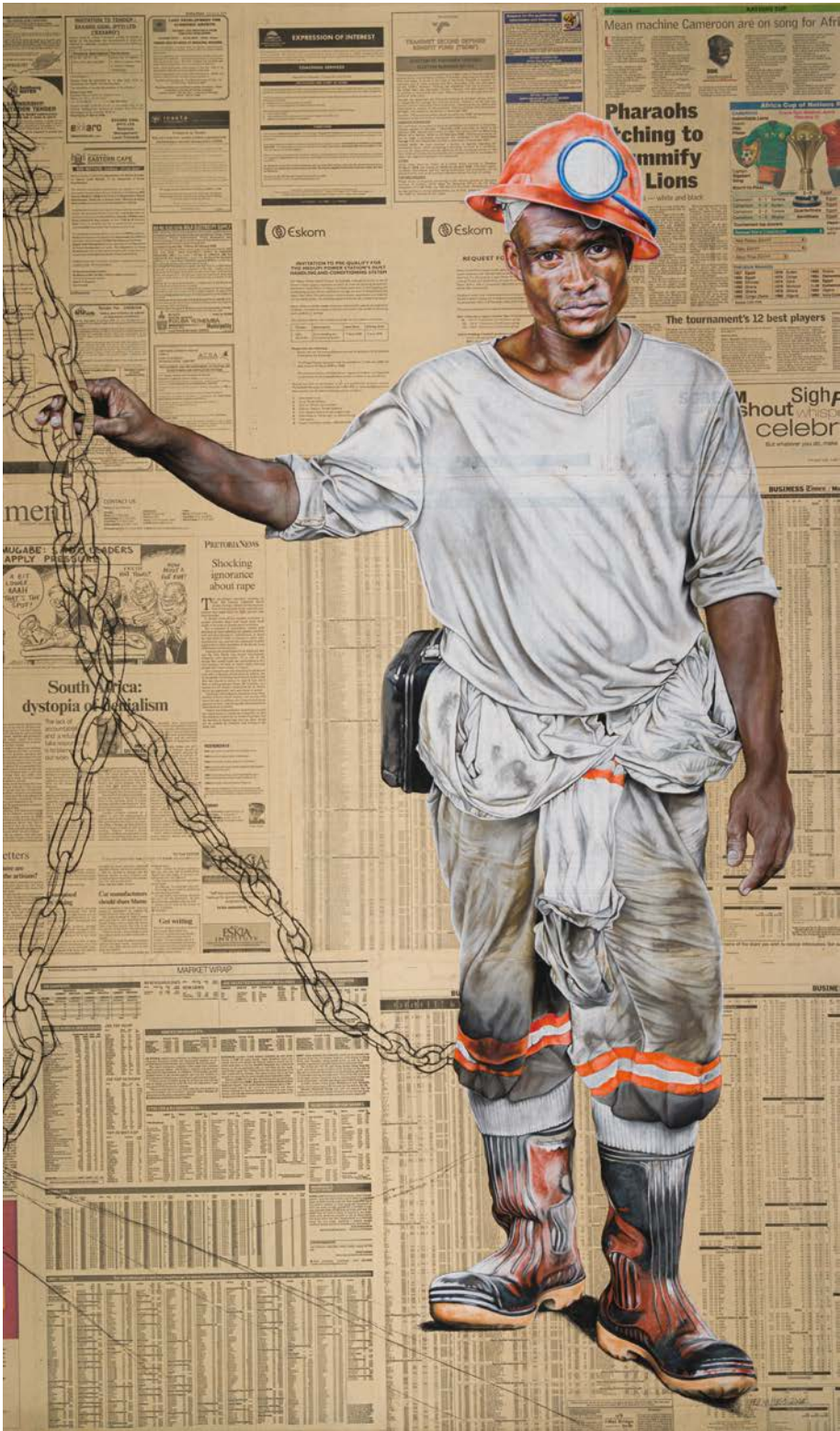
Moving out the Trucks at Dawn II

2008

pastel on newspaper laid down on board

197 by 119 cm

UNISA ART GALLERY



Lena Hugo

Miner I

2008

pastel on newspaper laid

down on board

168 by 98 cm

UKWAZI MINING INDUSTRY



The first drawing I ever made on newspaper was to make a bit of a statement. It was a drawing of a homeless man who was a self-employed newspaper gatherer, which he would then sell for a little money to paper recycle companies. The significance was that the newspaper gatherer featured on his own precious newspaper. The background newspaper was strewn with articles on corruption and poverty. Funny enough I didn't even really chose the specific articles for the background, but the news were littered with corruption articles at that time anyway. I think that combining a drawing with newspaper makes the drawing relevant. One can put the drawing in context immediately. I chose finance pages and pages taken from the career section or job mail. The finance pages were actually only chosen for their neutral quality (visually speaking), the career pages were chosen intentionally. There is also an article on the fact that there is still a great need for job creation and another on workers rights ... so, with that I tried to also keep the newspaper articles in line with the theme of the exhibition. Newspaper is a lovely medium to work on. Newspaper is obviously a very fragile medium, so I use it more like a primer on wood by pasting it down flat. Once that is done properly I do not really have any other difficulties and it almost becomes more forgiving than paper.

Lena Hugo (2008)



Lena Hugo

Miner II

2008

pastel on newspaper laid

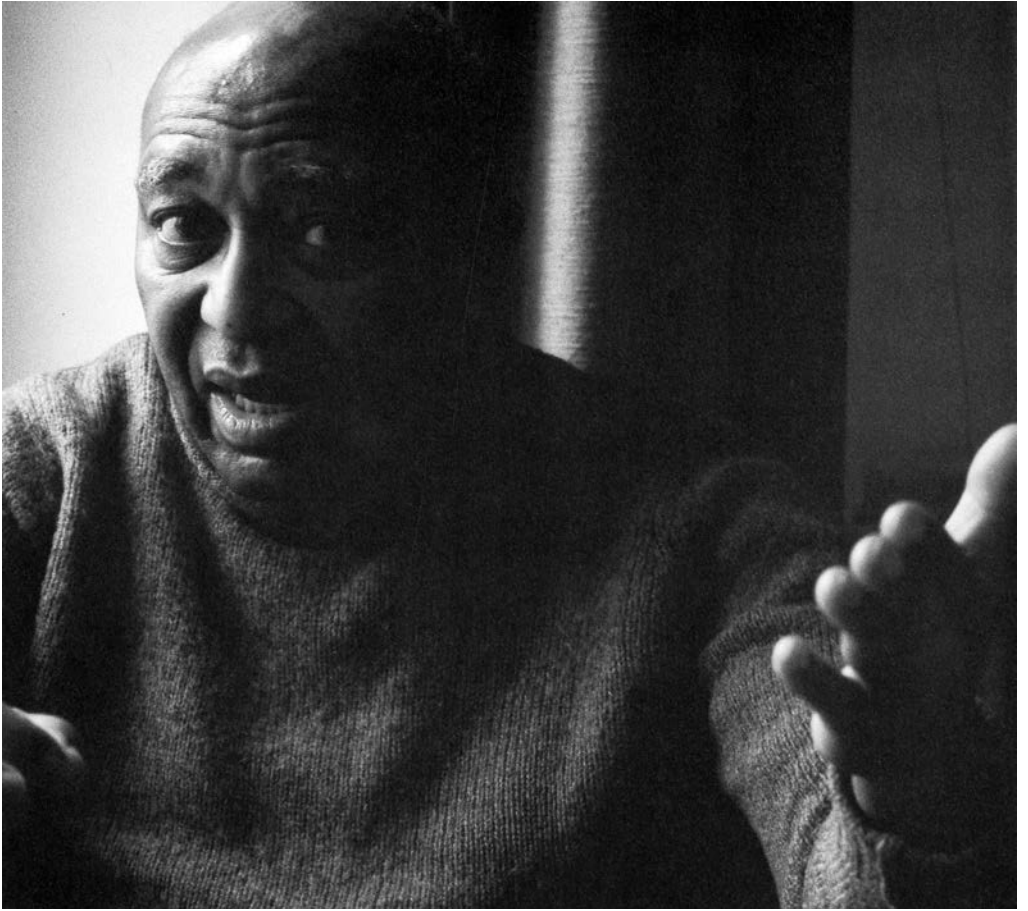
down on board

168 by 98 cm

UKWAZI MINING INDUSTRY







Gerard Sekoto's work is occupied entirely with pictorial problems, problems new to Black South African modernist art. He is preoccupied with the detribalised South African Black, the Black of the towns and mines, practically ignoring the Black in the rural areas. Sekoto is primarily concerned with these townsmen, with the impact of the so-called civilization upon them, with the Black workers of the streets and factories, with the labourers, servants, lorry drivers and location. Sekoto, unlike Alexis Preller and Irma Stern, is more at home as a painter in Sophiatown, in Langa, than in a Mapoga village.

Lippy Lipschitz (1953)



Clothes spattered with oil paint. Face besmirched with chalk dust and charcoal. Fingertips stained with newspaper ink. These are the trademarks of an artist working to deadline, on a production line of inspired portraits. Not just any portraits, Not the kind we're conditioned to expect – faces from the upper echelons of society. These are portraits of men and woman who constitute the backbone of our economy: the blue-collar cogs of this country, manual labourers, often overlooked and taken for granted.

Jenna Mervis (2008)

Acknowledgements

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KEYES ART MILE 2.0

CULTIVATING URBAN DIALOGUE BETWEEN ART AND ARCHITECTURE



A notable transformation is underway in Johannesburg's north-eastern suburbs. The Keyes Art Mile – established as a significant contemporary African art venue – is evolving into an expanded urban precinct that aims to create new relationships between art, architecture, commerce, and community in this part of Johannesburg. The Keyes Art Mile 2.0 expansion extends the existing cultural corridor through both eastern and western developments, integrating built form and natural landscape that contributes to Johannesburg's urban character.

The Cultural Artery of Rosebank

Situated at the Jellicoe and Jan Smuts Avenues nexus, the Keyes Art Mile is a gateway into the pedestrian-focused “Rosebank Box” urban precinct. Its strategic location on Johannesburg’s golden corridor between Sandton and CBD is particularly valuable, with Jellicoe Avenue creating the shortest link between Oxford and Jan Smuts. This positioning – surrounded by vibrant suburbs and well-serviced by public transport – combines accessibility with character.

Since the opening of the 19 Keyes (Trumpet building), the Mile has developed an ecosystem where art galleries, design showrooms, and gastronomic ventures converge to create a distinctive experience.

This ethos extends to the expansion encompassing Keyes East and West developments – projects that aim to enhance the precinct’s vision while maintaining its commitment to artistic integrity and urban innovation. The expansion is oriented along Keyes Avenue, with Keyes East (the Botanic Sanctuary) extending the mile to the east of the existing 19 Keyes development, while Keyes West creates a complementary development on the western end near Jan Smuts Avenue. Together, these developments bookend and enhance the cultural corridor that has established itself as a notable art destination in Johannesburg.

“The confines of a traditional urban grid system don’t give us the luxury of open spaces, so we are going upwards instead to create a vertical field that uses plants specific to the very same biome that originally thrived in Rosebank,” says Anton Taljaard from Tomorrow Co, the development company behind Keyes Art Mile.

“It’s a living, growing, breathing development that engages with the inherent tension between the built environment and natural systems – a dialogue that has always been central to the artistic discourse in South Africa.”

Keyes East: A Botanic Sanctuary in the Urban Landscape

The eastern development represents a synthesis of architecture and nature – a vertical reinterpretation of the highveld landscape that once characterised the area. Anchored by a public sculpture park referred to as the Botanic Sanctuary, the podium level of Keyes East transforms concrete infrastructure into a green space for both inhabitants and visitors.

The architectural concept draws inspiration from nature's inherent sculptures, with trees echoed in upright columns and rock formations transmuted into structural elements. This dialogue between the organic and the linear establishes the development's sculptural identity, creating spaces that complement the surrounding landscape.

The pavilions that punctuate the Botanic Sanctuary are designed to house various retail and hospitality functions, such as exhibition spaces, restaurants, and coffee shops. These structures – characterised by thin concrete columns, tapered edges, and green roofs – appear to emerge from the landscape, with intentionally blurred boundaries between interior and exterior spaces. The pavilion's design, with its reflective pools and timber canopies, creates contemplative spaces amidst the urban setting – areas where art, architecture, and nature converge.

The restaurant spaces, nestled within the landscape, offer interior refinement while providing exterior terraces that float above water features. These spaces demonstrate the project's approach to blending built form with natural elements, creating dining environments that engage different senses and promise a distinctive experience for patrons.

Keyes East functions as a green corridor extending throughout the precinct. Its sidewalks, featuring indigenous vegetation and interspersed with sculptures, serve multiple purposes: as buffer zones, walkways, spill-out spaces, and resting areas. The terracing of the landscape creates natural viewing areas, establishing a flow of movement through the space that encourages exploration and discovery.



Keyes West: Urban Sophistication with Historical Context

The western development complements its eastern counterpart by creating vibrant street frontage along both Keyes and Jan Smuts Avenues. The multi-level structure balances retail offerings at street level with integrated hotel accommodation above, establishing a commercial presence that activates the urban edge and creates opportunities for continuous pedestrian engagement.

The design of Keyes West acknowledges Johannesburg's architectural heritage while embracing contemporary approaches. The façade combines exposed concrete, dark metal framing, and expansive glazing to create a visual language that reflects its context. The building's horizontal concrete planes appear to float above the transparent ground floor, creating a sense of lightness despite the substantial structure above.

During evening hours, the building's interior illumination reveals the activity within and contributes to the streetscape, enhancing both the sense of safety and visual interest for visitors. The upper-level restaurant and terrace spaces offer views across Johannesburg's urban landscape, connecting diners to the broader context of the city.

A selection of retail tenants, including a food market, restaurants, health services, and speciality boutiques, will occupy the ground and first floors. These spaces open onto terraces and the street, fostering an indoor-outdoor relationship characteristic of successful urban environments in Johannesburg. Using indigenous planting around the building perimeter softens the architectural expression and creates microclimates.



A Different Approach for Urban Development

What distinguishes the Keyes Art Mile expansion is its approach to conventional retail models in favour of an integrated cultural experience. Rather than a mall with art as decoration, it aims to be a cultural district where commerce functions as one component of a larger social ecosystem.

The urban master plan, developed by Fieldworks Design Group in collaboration with various specialist architects, emphasises permeability, walkability, and connectivity – principles that invert Johannesburg’s predominantly car-centric development patterns.

Circulation between the various components has been carefully considered through pedestrian ramps, escalators, lifts, and staircases creating a network that encourages exploration. Parking is tucked below grade and accessed via entry points that aim to minimise disruption to the pedestrian experience, prioritising the quality of the people-centric experience throughout the precinct.



The Cultural Continuum

The expansion of Keyes Art Mile builds upon an existing artistic foundation. Established galleries such as Everard Read, Circa and BKhz, alongside exciting fledging spaces like Origin Art anchor the precinct with their regular programming of contemporary African art, while 19 Keyes houses rotating exhibitions and cultural events that draw regular visitors.

The new developments will add exhibition spaces designed for both art display and cultural programming. The Pavilion in Keyes East, for example, is conceived as a multi-purpose exhibition space that can accommodate various types of artwork while also functioning as a venue for cultural events.

What sets Keyes Art Mile apart is its dual identity: it functions simultaneously as a sought-after destination with cultural significance and as a warm, convenient high street neighbourhood. The balance creates a place where extraordinary cultural experiences coexist with the everyday pleasures of urban life.

Sustainability Considerations

Environmental considerations are incorporated into the Keyes Art Mile expansion. Green roofs, rainwater gardens, and indigenous planting aim to promote biodiversity, conserve water, and mitigate the urban heat island effect.

Taljaard elaborates on this approach:
“What makes this development unique is our commitment to environmental thinking not as an afterthought, but as a fundamental design principle. Each tree, each planting bed, each water feature serves multiple functions – aesthetic, ecological, and social. The integration of nature isn’t merely decorative; it’s substantive and transformative.”

The use of trees throughout both developments creates natural shading on building facades, reducing solar heat gain while enhancing visual comfort. The selection of indigenous grasses and shrubs aims to ensure minimal water requirements while creating habitats for birds, insects, and small urban wildlife. Water features are designed as both aesthetic elements and functional stormwater management systems.

The emphasis on natural systems extends to the building services, with passive climate control strategies complemented by mechanical systems where necessary. The development aims to respect its environmental context while contributing to sustainable urban design approaches in Johannesburg.

A Social Space within Johannesburg

The expanded Keyes Art Mile offers Johannesburg an additional walkable, liveable, and social space. Its retail offering is conceived not merely as a collection of shops but as a series of spaces where community interaction and cultural exchange can occur.

As Taljaard notes, the development is “social to its soul”, providing opportunities for Johannesburg’s creative community through exhibitions, curated cultural programmes, and dining experiences. This social dimension distinguishes Keyes Art Mile from conventional retail developments and positions it as a component of Johannesburg’s cultural infrastructure, primarily serving those who can access its offerings.

The Art of Place-Making

The Keyes Art Mile expansion represents a vision of urban development that recognises the role of culture in creating meaningful places accessible to a broad spectrum of Johannesburg’s residents and visitors. By integrating art, retail, hospitality, and nature into a cohesive whole, it establishes an approach for how urban spaces can evolve to meet contemporary expectations while democratising cultural experiences. This commitment to creating significant public spaces – coupled with programming of consistent artistic and cultural credibility – opens the precinct to diverse audiences, allowing life to become part of art, and vice versa.

“What we are creating is not just a place to view art, but a place where art is lived and experienced in multiple dimensions,” reflects Taljaard.

“The boundaries between gallery, restaurant, retail, and landscape blur intentionally, creating a continuous cultural experience that changes with the seasons, the time of day, and the programming of events.”

The glass facades of both developments serve as more than architectural elements – they function as frames that capture the changing light of Johannesburg’s sunsets, turning the buildings themselves into canvases that register the passage of time. The arrangement of interior and exterior spaces creates a processional experience through the precinct, with moments of discovery choreographed through architectural means.

The result is not merely a development but a destination that offers contemporary urban living with a Johannesburg character. As the Keyes Art Mile 2.0 takes shape, it aims to enhance the precinct’s position as an African art and design destination while expanding its influence within the urban context.

In doing so, it demonstrates that art can be a meaningful force in shaping urban environments. This contribution to Johannesburg’s urban landscape is a reminder that development can engage not only with commerce but with human creativity and expression, creating spaces where the aesthetic, the functional, and the natural interact in thoughtful ways for those who participate in the experience.



KEYES ART MILE 2.0



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