

The exhibition foyer at the Bag Factory Art commune has a sedate reverential feel about it lately. Visiting the current exhibition there (which opened on - April 6, 2002) one would be excused for mistaking it for a shrine. Upon entering you become - in spite of yourself - transformed into a supplicant come to seek some kind benediction. You emerge rewarded, immersed in comforting pleasure.

On show is the work by three visiting artists: Sharlene Kahn, Aeusibius Nawa and Edward Mbao Mumba respectively from Durban, Bloemfontein and Lusaka. Here is work - very rare at the Bag Factory - where the artists, whether by design or accident, have collectively eschewed the symbolic and abstract for what is essentially a communal celebratory art.

Consequently, we have on display work that is truly dignified as well as it is beautiful - especially where the subjects concerned are miners and the women who eke a living in the streets of Jo`burg's CBD.

Sharlene Kahn's paintings depict a veritable women driven "survival" economy. She presents it as them - mothers driven by maternal instinct and altruism - variously dozing off, chatting - away in customary female vigour or deep in thought contemplating the middle-distance; as Madonnas in a splendour of colour: adorned in brilliant frocks and doeks, in primary reds, oranges and azure blues - colours of optimism - selling all manner of "siyazama" merchandise: from fruit and vegetables, herbs, ciggies, skullcaps, toothbrushes, bangles, necklaces, recycled paper to Africa's old faithful "mvimba`ndiala", the ever dependable mielies.

If empathy defines our humanity in Sharlene it combines with her quirky youthful petulance. So that, while she is clearly respectful of her subjects, she cannot resist poking irreverent fun at them. Viewers pondering the three bulky bums sat on discarded cardboard fruit boxes found it hard suppressing embarrassed giggles.

Then as if to provide a counter weight to her seeming irreverence she confronts you with an image - the serene expression on the woman under a headscarf - which leaves you in no doubt about the artist's own religious devotion.

Kahn's empathy and celebration resonates in Aesibius Nawa's honesty in work of the miners theme. Without succumbing to caricature or betraying their innate calm demeanour, the effect of detailed treatment of his subject - drawn in charcoal on paper - is to evoke their perilous working conditions in cramped mine shafts - down the blackened dungeons in the belly of the earth.

These otherwise dignified and devout people are celebrated - in their real lives, away from work - in Mumba's delightful sculpture. His is as near a minimalist technique an artist can contrive to carve pieces of sculpture resembling - refreshingly - recognisable beings with familiar joie vivre human spirit. Delicately clean lines shape and form and smooth wood into animated lustrous sculpture imbued - in Mumba's words - with "the resonant sounds of echoing voices from the familiar and the unknown".

In their publicity blurb Mumba regrets his short sojourn in Johannesburg which has been “like peering into the depths of a deep and dark well the surface of the water is barely visible”. Yet, despite this time constraint, he has managed to carve sculptural pieces of exquisite beauty - using local wood and metal.

To our eternal gratitude, Mumba was able to “spend time at the raw materials, trying to communicate with what is inside the materials and within myself ” and having seen the “many objects inside the wood ... ” he’s carved an array of delectable objects d’art: such as, for example, the reposed couple entwined in flagrante in blissful romance; the trio of disconsolate looking “masks” drooping Dali-esque on the wall - as if in mock mimicry of the other serious looking people with whom they are forced to keep unwelcome company. There’s the comical couple of “the whisper”: madame’s gossipy lips straining earnest for monsieur’s disapproving ear; the triumphant “victory” that salutes athletic prowess; elegant composure of “the elder and walking stick”. Mumba, himself a musician of note, finds time too to pay tribute to fellow griots in “the trumpet player” and “the drummer”

moji mokone ; 082 686 2883

#23 a, 8th avenue

melville, jhb. 2092