

SOPHIE PETERS

Born Johannesburg, 1968. Lives and works in Cape Town.

Selected solo exhibitions: 1995, *Cry from the Heart*, Bellville Association for the Arts, Cape Town.

Selected group exhibitions: 2003, *Dreams of Our Daughters*, Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees, Oudtshoorn; 1998, *Siwela Ngahesheya (Crossing the Waters)*, Robben Island, Cape Town; 1998, *Hard Ground Printmakers Exhibition*, Paarl, Cape Town; 1998, *Dis Nag – The Cape's Hidden Roots in Slavery*, Cultural History Museum, Cape Town; 1997, *Sicula Sixhentsa Xa Sisonke* (travelling exhibition), USA; 1996, *Human Rights Exhibition*, Cultural History Museum and South African National Gallery, Cape Town; 1996, *Art Against Apartheid*, South African Parliament, Cape Town; 1995, *Creative Images*, Castle of Good Hope, Cape Town; 1995, *Peace for Africa*, Geneva, Switzerland; 1987, *Invited Artists' Exhibition*, Johannesburg Art Foundation, Johannesburg.

Selected publications: 2000, G Warren-Brown, 'Leadership' in *New American Publishing Magazine*, March; 1999, R Christian, *The Hourglass Project – A Women's Vision*, catalogue (Fulton County Arts Council, Atlanta); 1992, Andries Oliphant, 'Culture and Empowerment: Debates, Workshops, Art and Photography from the Zabalaza Festival' in *Staffrider*, Vol 10, No 3.

That economics affects the production of art on many different levels in South Africa is an issue that has only become clearer in the last 10 years. The economic hardship that was many South Africans' experience during the apartheid era still continues to haunt many individuals today. Economics is a determining factor that has played a huge role in the life and work of Sophie Peters. A muralist, painter and sculptor as well, it is Peters' prints that continue to haunt me, years after I first saw them.

Peters' work is a visual recounting of her personal history, detailing all that has happened to her and all the people who've come and gone down the years. Peters' life has been punctuated by hard times: she received little formal education, spent some time as a shack dweller, and her mother lost her life through an act of betrayal. On top of this, Peters has always struggled to make money for basic necessities, let alone art materials.

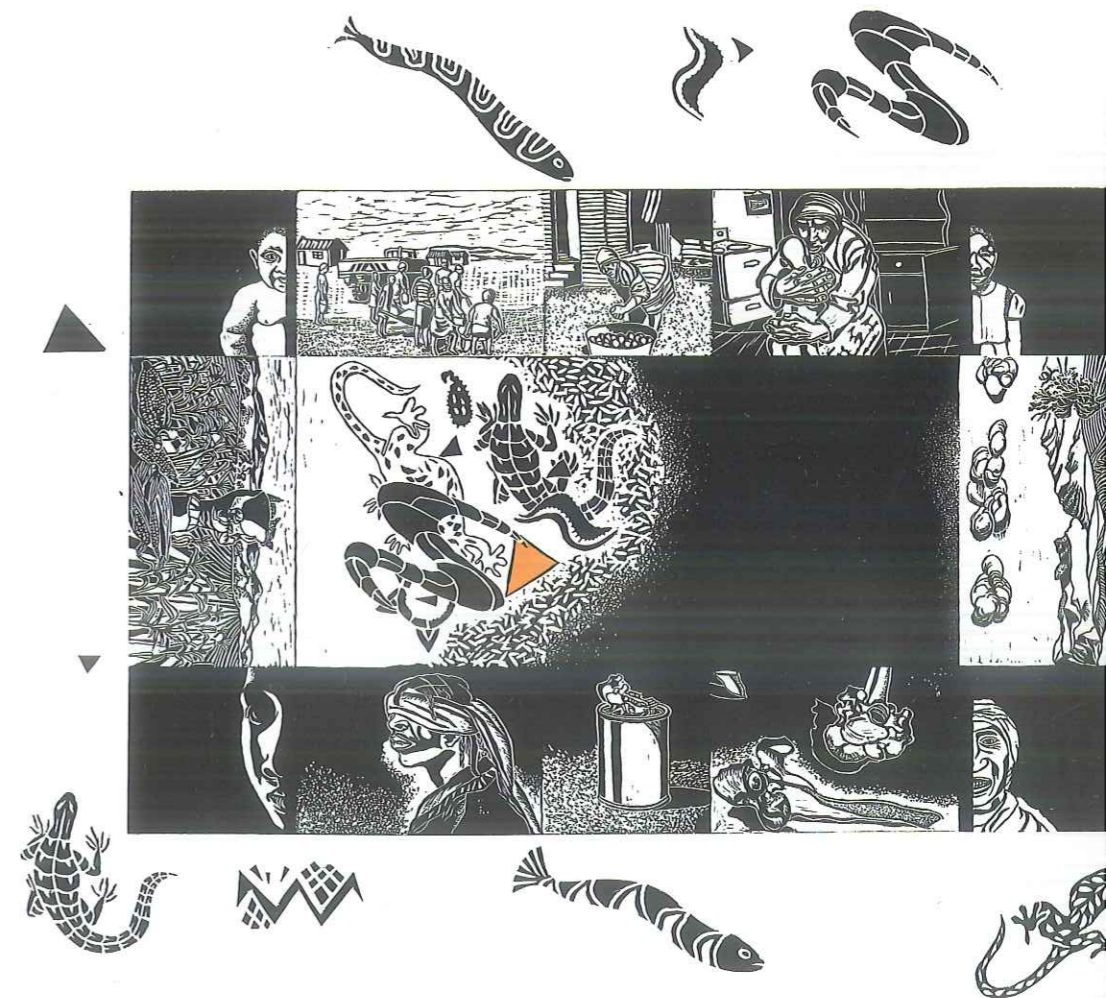
However, her work is not merely a portrayal of despair, poverty or hopelessness. While her work certainly alludes to the socio-economic realities spawned by the history of this country – people dispossessed of their land in *Times from My Past* (1994) and Nelson Mandela's emancipation from prison in *Release* (1997) – her work also deals with the triumph of the human spirit in such circumstances. Peters has long fought her own struggle between creating commissioned works and those she feels an internal urge to create, although sometimes the line between the two becomes blurred.

In her personal, heartfelt accounts, Peters affords us a glimpse of a reality experienced by many South Africans of all races, most of which many of us would prefer to overlook because of our own sense of helplessness. She depicts a little boy named Punch, curled up asleep on a bench, and presents us with a portrait of Mafia – a street kid gang leader. She relates her own trials and tribulations fetching water from a pump and shows us street boys relishing the morning sun. In another work, a pensioner finds friendship in a dog, caring for it with what little means she has. She also shows us a *madala* (old man) advising Mafia to leave the streets. Peters takes delight in the ability of children to improvise games with whatever comes to hand. She seems to say that those who have so little still manage to care and help those with even less. Peters explains that her realistic depictions of these scenes are a way of internal healing. She believes she has the ability to find and express beauty in even the most painful experience, and she renders this with stark black and white prints that convey a sense of harshness, but also of strength and beauty in their lines.

Her work *Times from My Past* is a visual autobiography. Different memories and experiences from Peters' past are seen in this collection of images. We learn of the time her grandmother held her as an eight-year old when she came in from a street fight. We learn of the bones her family would trade for vegetables because they had no money. We are also told how her grandparents lost their land because they lacked the necessary documentation. Portraits of Peters at different stages of her life are found in images at the corners of the work. The Peters of today smiles at the mercy God has now shown her. The whole work is given a sense of playfulness by lizards that dart around the format, making reference to the animals she played with in the fields of her childhood.

According to Peters, "every piece tells a story ... when I paint I speak about pain, love and disappointment but also about the goodness and grace of God". Her Christian beliefs fuel her belief in her life, her message and her art. They have fused and given her a sense of purpose and destiny. Perhaps this destiny is to be an artist and to tell the stories of herself and others like her, through her simple stark renditions of harsh circumstances. Certainly this is a destiny worth striving for, an art worth making, a voice worth listening to.

/ SHARLENE KHAN



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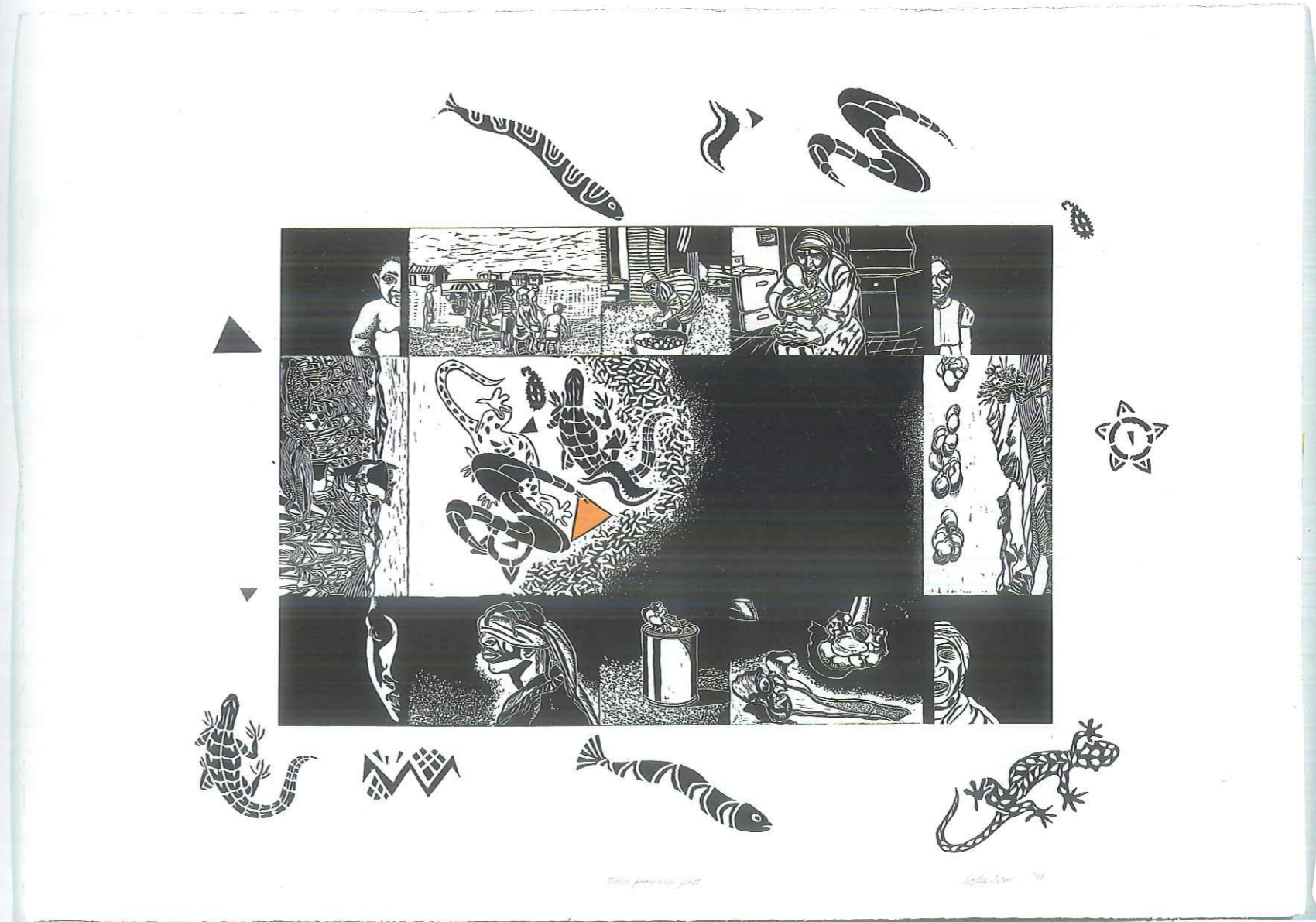
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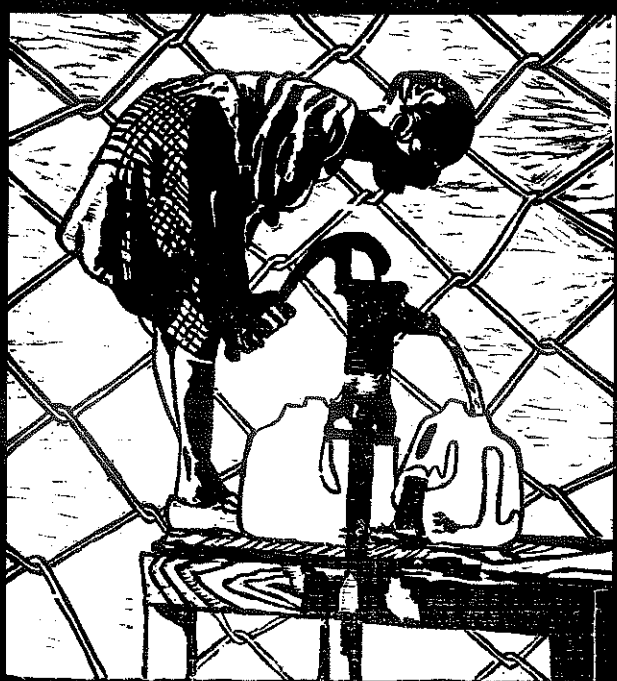
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This page, left *Loneliness*, 1996, linocut on paper, 41.5 x 30.5cm; right top *Circumstances*, 1994, linocut on paper, 32.5 x 33.5cm; right bottom *The Old Days*, 1991, linocut on paper, 42.5cm x 33.5cm
Facing page, top *Sleeping in the Park*, 1994, linocut on paper, 25.5 x 28cm; bottom *Madala and Mafia in the Park*, 1994, linocut on paper, 26.5 x 39cm



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