



MESHU
MOKITIMI

MOUNTAIN KINGDOM ARTIST

by Eileen O'Leary

Meshu Mokitimi lives and works in Maseru the capital city of Lesotho; at 82 years of age he still spends each day in his studio dedicated to producing images that represent the culture of his country. 'I was a peripatetic scholar and learned as I was trotting around the world. My work was influenced by the African Expressionists; people have said that we have a distortionist approach but for us it is reality and how we see ourselves. I have arrived at a point where I can express my feelings through the depiction of the human figure.'

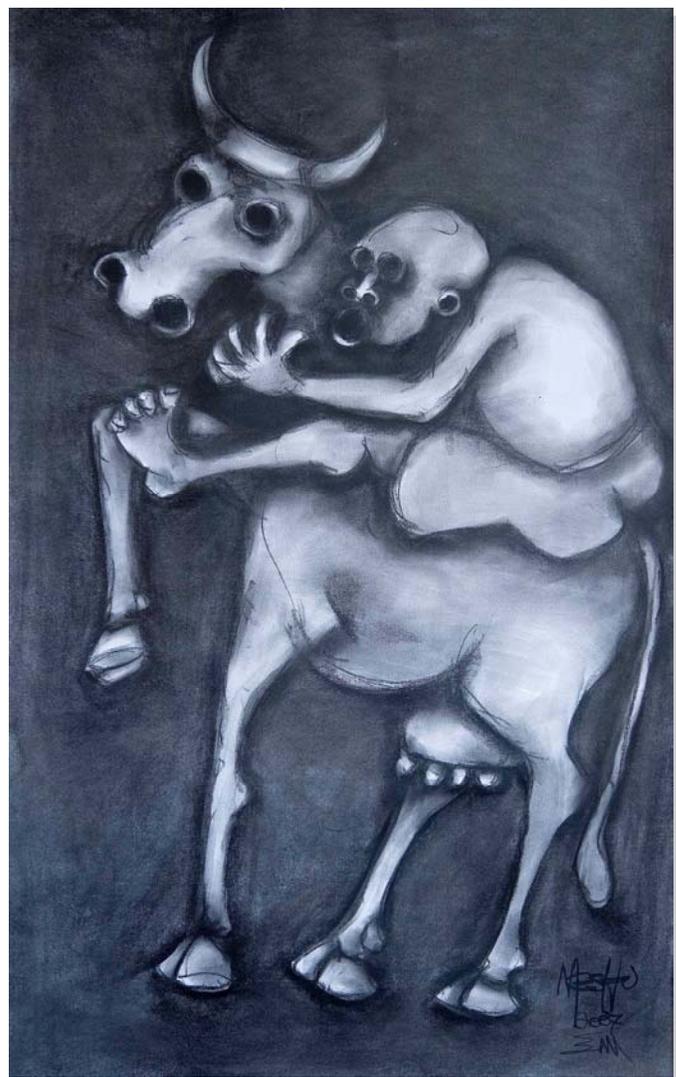
Meshu, Lesotho's most prominent artist was born in the mountain village of Qeme. 'The people where I grew up were very traditional; the medicine man may hunt for snakes and the herd boys look after the cattle; you watch the tall grass and if it shakes continuously you know that the snake is there, it shakes in a pattern. That information has always lived with me.'

Children in the villages modelled small animals in clay; Meshu modelled images of the village chief. 'Clay modelling was always something intriguing to me as a young man – manipulating clay in forming the human figure influenced the way I drew my figures as if they have clay inside.' But he too has had a love of animals all his life. As a young man 'cattle herding became nasty to me.'



Self portrait with left hand protecting the right hand after working. 2011

Self Portrait Left Hand Protecting the Right after Working



Boy Riding Cow

I started a campaign fighting against the culture of herd boys. It was the first move in my political consciousness, not fighting for humanity but fighting for animals. I rebelled against the culture of hitting cattle and the abstraction of hide has always been in my paintings. Later on being sensitive to things around me resulted in me being politically conscious. Formal learning makes you see things differently.'

Meshu Mokitimi's career as an internationally renowned painter spans over fifty years. He spent eleven years of his life incarcerated for his political beliefs, when he and other political activists were fighting against the 'colour bar' in Lesotho. 'There is nothing as devastating as incarceration without cause.' When in prison he spent his time drawing



Miner Figure

Experience in the South African mines has featured in his work; the mining culture and the resultant breakdown of the traditional family unit has been a concern for the artist who now sees disenfranchised men in the city and the villages who are unemployed and aimless. 'These men are depressed and need employment to give them self esteem and a role in the family.'

'I went to the mines to try to get cash. Whilst I was there I was lucky the management of the mines promoted me to clerk. It was an experience I started questioning. We went to the depths of the earth, it was traumatic. The first two weeks my sleep was different. They gave us good food, things we did not have in the village. I found myself at odds with the mining culture even though it was enhancing my life; it was a conflict of interest. Ultimately I started rejecting the mining culture and tried to politicise against the dehumanising, deculturalising effects. The culture of the mines is destructive and an enslavement.

Lesotho is ranked amongst the fifty world's poorest countries. The proportion of households defined as poor accounts for 68% of the population and the most affected households are headed by women. Currently there are 200,000 children who have been orphaned as a result of the HIV and AIDS pandemic which has affected 30% of the population. Meshu feels that he and his friends have been in 'denial' as to the realities of the AIDS pandemic.

Unemployment forced Meshu into a life as a miner, circus worker, jockey and boxer eventually he returned to Lesotho and the hand to mouth life of an artist. Most of his contemporaries left their home country to paint in South Africa, London and New York but Meshu has remained in the Mountain Kingdom. 'I am a Masotho artist; my isolation



Christmas Journey

was by choice; I could not give myself up to be a South African artist. Those that did prostituted themselves intellectually and were trying to write an untruth. If a thing is real it has to be recorded as it is.'



Boys With Football



Ready for Ireland

Meshu's interaction with artists such as; Prince Twins Seven Seven, Fr. Frans Claerhout, Hargreaves Ntukwana, Muafangejo and Malangatana have influenced both his work and his philosophy. Meshu has travelled extensively exhibiting in America, Europe, South America, China and most recently Ireland.

Meshu executes his work in charcoal and pastels. His work has been collected by Bill Clinton, President Mary McAleese and hangs in embassies and government buildings throughout Europe and America. On the 40th anniversary of Independence, His Majesty King Letsie III awarded Meshu the Most Loyal Order of Ramatseatsana.

*'Conversations with Meshu' by Eileen O'Leary will be published in book form in 2010
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