



Sandile Zulu

INFLAMMATORY INTENT

By Miranthe Staden Garbett

Like many clichés, the one about playing with fire, is spot on. Getting burned, though, for some, is just the beginning. For the phoenix that rises from the ashes, getting burned is a prerequisite for transformation, for liberation. This ancient symbol has not lost its relevance, and is as true for here and now as it ever was. The alchemical masters understood the metaphor well, and judging by his body of work, so does Sandile Zulu. Reviving the perennial powers of fire, earth, water and air, his is an alchemical art.

Sandile Zulu's passion for the earth—his home, his heart—is one we may learn much from. Any number of other labels may describe aspects of his work: minimal, formal, conceptual, resistance, traditional, spiritual: but its sum exceeds its parts. His integration of personal, political and universal is masterfully achieved through the leitmotif and medium of fire. Through his art practice he honours his ancestors, his family, his history, his land, and the mysteries of the cosmos.

By drawing on the properties of fire, Zulu affiliates himself with a long lineage of shamans, smiths, scientists and mystics. Fire is the spark of life. It is the first technology. This apparent simplicity of means and process is deceptive. Zulu's work can be appreciated on various levels. On a purely formal level these are works of aesthetic value in which process, pattern, and texture combine to form explosive and hypnotic surfaces that resonate, whether we realise it or not, on micro and macro levels. His dynamic abstract patterns are atoms, cells, corpuscles, scorched earth and swirling galaxies. In this light, it has much in common with high modernism, which saw elemental, intuitive form as an expression of spirit. However, unlike them, his resolute groundedness in the world of matter, of heritage and history, is political.

His dogged use of natural materials takes guts in a world that still punts progress at all costs. Straw and beads, the odd pod, for instance, have marginal appeal for a sensation hungry global village, appearing in cameo roles as exotic tokens of primitivism. In this regard, Zulu ignores popular trends, risks being pigeon-holed, and even, famously, dissed and dismissed. Unperturbed, Zulu's alchemy is a continual rebellion, but it is not anarchy. For all

his inflammatory intent, Zulu wields a cool control, a Zen like restraint. It is the integrity that informs his use of found materials and primal process that transcends surface, and proves not everyone is adrift in the hyperreal.

Neither, however, is Zulu's work a return to some idyllic Eden. Nature, like God, works in wonderful and terrible ways. She weaves exquisitely perfect patterns with a red hot needle and an often heavy hand. For Zulu, nature is neither commodity nor fantasy, she is a force, violent, indifferent, magnificent, benevolent, to be reckoned with. He never loses sight of life's difficult paradoxes, the chaos and beauty. We need more artists with Zulu's ecological integrity and sensitivity.

Urban man has been estranged, with as yet unknowable consequences, from elemental life. He seems unable to perceive his connection to it. This 'denaturalisation' is insidious, nature's technologies are cunningly disguised as man's: water, why water comes from a tap, and fire is a wire that leads to a switch, earth is dirt, and air, hell, we're too busy to breath. Seduced by the sex appeal of the inorganic, held in its thrall, people find solace in artificial spaces, and make believe places. Zulu's insis-

tence on working with elemental processes nudge them into consciousness, his and ours, lest we forget that we are forged and sustained by them. Perhaps they may elicit in us other, long dormant affiliations and solidarities: we, the earth people, fire people, the water people, the breathing people.

Fire, earth, air, water, seed, reed, bone: for Sandile Zulu, they are the medium and the message. Languages before and beyond words, they are encoded deep in our collective memory, in our very makeup. From our electric conception, to the watery womb and our first gasp of air, to the thud of our body being put in the ground, or bursting into flames, Zulu reminds us of who we are, where we come from, where we are going.

These tapestries of fire have a similar function to the mandala, they reveal a bigger picture, in all its spiralling splendour. On every level, life is a turbulent miracle, none walk off into the sunset unscathed. Wounds and scars are inevitable, our skin, psyche and soul are, like Zulu's art, riddled with them. They are signs that say we have survived, that we are still alive.

Map - South Africa

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Artist: Sandile Zulu

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Image: ROYAL COURT ART II, 2005

Medium: Fire, water, earth and air on halved 100mm PVC pipes

Dimensions: 610cm x 130cm

