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Situating Nukain Mabuza's rock garden: a study of a landscape dwelling through multiple explanatory frameworks

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ABSTRACT

In the 1960s and 1970s, farm worker Nukain Mabuza created a painted hillside rock garden on a farm between Barberton and Kaapmuiden, Mpumalanga, South Africa. He transformed his dwellings, and rearranged and painted the surrounding rocks according to a unified scheme of geometric and animal motifs with a carefully selected colour palette. This altered environment went far further aesthetically, and lasted far longer in time, than the signs and scars that might typically result from a farm worker's dwelling upon the land. His work arguably bears some of the hallmarks of an inhabited 'total work of art'.

I challenge the dominant 'outsider art' explanatory framework adopted by JFC Clarke and re-evaluate the fragmentary archive of Mabuza's life and work. Working from the likelihood that no single context will offer sufficient grounds for situating Nukain Mabuza's particular creative practice, I assess the relevance of cultural, historical and religious contexts, which might have shaped Nukain Mabuza's personal vision and contributed to the form of his expressive environment. Nukain Mabuza's altered landscape has suffered considerable damage – there is no longer any trace of the two dwellings and the stile, and the paintings on the rocks have all but disappeared. My project seeks to contribute to the scholarship on Nukain Mabuza's work by extending, analysing, interpreting and situating his inhabited painted environment within the worldview of southern African Bantu-speakers, as a unique personal creative expression, and as an expression of the artist's modernity.

Key words

Nukain Mabuza, rock garden, painted geometric motifs, altered landscape, inhabited art environment, Tsonga, Swazi, worldview, ancestor veneration, modernity.