

By

ANGELA van SCHALKWYK

WE ALL have notions of what a sculptor should be like. We expect flamboyance, eccentricity or some visible sign that the person is terribly talented.

Buyisiwe Mkhabela (30), whose first sculpture exhibition opens today, has none of these exaggerated qualities. She is quiet, self-possessed and has a natural warmth.

I talked to her in the home of her patron, Helen de Leeuw, the well-known buyer of beautiful things for her shop in Hyde Park.

Buyisiwe has been working in Mrs de Leeuw's studio for almost a year. The house in Orchards with its quaint structure, large wooden-framed windows which look out onto a tranquil garden, and objets d'art which are scattered carelessly in all the rooms, must have been a strange environment at first for Buyisiwe, used to the rural life of a small village in KwaZulu.

In a studio

Back home, Buyisiwe would dig in the veld near her village for the clay from which she would make her beautiful pots and animals. Now she is supplied with the cool yellow clay and works in a charming, wooden-floored studio which is light and airy.

Her English is limited because she has seldom spent any prolonged time in cities. The struggle to exist in KwaZulu (her husband was ill and she has three children) drove her to Johannesburg. She had a certificate for weaving and

had heard that at the Katlehong Art Centre she could perhaps find work. But they were short of looms, and so she filled in time making clay pots and animals like those she had made in the village.

It was at the centre that Mrs de Leeuw saw an elephant made by Buyisiwe. It reminded her of a clay pig she had bought 15 years previously and which had been destroyed in a fire. After she bought the pig, she made numerous inquiries about its maker, but had drawn no leads. Now on a hunch, Mrs de Leeuw commissioned Buyisiwe to make a pig.

"I did not know why Mrs de Leeuw wanted me to do so. But because we are so poor, I was happy, for it meant I would be paid for making it," recalls Buyisiwe.

The pig was almost exactly like the one Mrs de Leeuw had lost. Inquiries revealed that Buyisiwe had been taught her craft by her mother, who in turn had been taught by her mother. The original pig was, in fact, made by Buyisiwe's mother.

True sculptor

"Mrs de Leeuw wrote to my mother. She told her that she had loved that pig and she was happy to find the daughter of the woman who had made it. She asked my mother if I could come and work for her."



The discerning eye of Mrs de Leeuw has marked Buyisiwe out as a "true sculptor." Although she follows the tradition of her grandmother and mother in her choice of animal subjects, Buyisiwe has brought her own individual talent to bear on what she makes.

She still produces, pigs, elephants, rhinos and goats, but has also introduced lions, swans and ducks into the collection. She and Mrs de Leeuw visit the zoo from time to time so that Buyisiwe can make the acquaintance of other animals which may inspire her with their shapes.

Buyisiwe's animals are happy creatures, all touched by her own form of gentle humour, which can be seen in facial expressions or the exaggerated shape of the body.

It is soothing to watch Buyisiwe in action. She is an orderly worker and her mobile fingers press

BUYISIWE MKHABELA seen at work on a new clay animal.

Photograph: HETTY ZANTMAN

and mould the clay with quiet confidence. To make one animal can take many days. First, she moulds the clay into a hollow cylinder-like shape which forms the body of the animal.

The making of the legs and ears follows next. She waits for a few hours before joining the legs to the body. Decorations, if required, are then carved on the body. The finish is achieved by burnishing the clay for hours or even days with a small black stone.

When the clay is bone dry, it is fired for the first time and comes out a terracotta colour. Now, in the smooth polished look of the terracotta clay, one can see the value of her painstaking rusing with the black stone. If she wants to give it a dark tone,

the piece is blackened in a dung fire, where it is smoked.

20 works

There will be 20 works by Buyisiwe on the exhibition at The Carriage House Gallery and Mrs de Leeuw is excited about launching her protégé into the commercial world of art. "I have nurtured many craftsmen but feel particularly excited about Buyisiwe's work. She is innovative and has great talent," says Mrs de Leeuw while Buyisiwe, in her unassuming way, continues to work the clay for an elephant she is making.

Back home, her family and the village people must talk with wonder about the good fortune that has come to Buyisiwe, who used to make clay pots for them. If Buyisiwe is nervous about her first exhibition, she does not show it. But she does radiate the contentment which comes from doing what she loves best.