

# The Spirit of Soweto in the City

**THAMI TSHABALALA**

The place that houses weird and wonderful pictures of anguish, prayer, jubilation, gossip and all manner of African life, is known as the Soweto Art Gallery.

On the second level of 34 Victory House, corner of Commissioner and Harrison Streets, it is six years old and it is the only town-based gallery run by a black man, Peter Sibeko, who is himself an artist, catering exclusively to township or black-oriented art done by black artists.

It is one level below another gallery, the upper crust Gallery 21 owned by F Haenggi whose only nod to African art is periodic exhibitions of sculptural works by the reclusive Lucas Sithole.

Haenggi commented that he used to feature "most of the big African names" in his gallery before Sibeko arrived in the building. Since then, he had thought it "unwise to compete for business with him at the same level".

Sibeko, meanwhile, has a problem.

"Because Gallery 21 already has an advertisement sign at

street level, and although the genre and style and execution of the works on display in my gallery and Haenggi's gallery are different, I have found it next to impossible to put up a sign about the Soweto Art Gallery. Haenggi just won't hear about it," Sibeko said when recounting the problems he's encountered while trying to keep his gallery afloat.

Haenggi agreed that he had objected to Sibeko putting up a sign. He also said he paid extra to the owner of the building for the use of the sign.

"There are regulations governing the putting up of signs — like the regulation height, for instance. And it would not be seemly for a city like Johannesburg to have a clutter of signs as in, say, Bombay," he said.

Sibeko has also not been able to put up a sign at foot level, which means that the stand with the gallery's name on it lies useless in Sibeko's office.

"At one point we had to call in the owner of the building as mediator," Sibeko said. "After listening to our case, he said that whoever was dissatisfied could leave. Mr Haenggi did not leave. And I

did not leave."

Born on July 7, 1940, in Orlando East in a family numbering seven children, he has had to make his own way in the world, which has seen him spending time in one of Soweto's (in)famous shack communities, the Mshenguville squatter camp.

He is largely self-taught and holds no prestigious certificates from illustrious institutions of fine art, but his quiet determination and a God-given gift for drawing, which he has been doing since the age of 12, has seen his work exhibited in England, the USA and Australia alongside that of such accomplished exponents as Paul Sekeke, David Mbele and Durant Sihlali. He is also a member of Artists Under the Sun.

The most recent overseas exhibition in which Peter Sibeko took part was in 1990 in Melbourne, Australia.

Sibeko's aims, as an artist and humanitarian, are that black art should not die; that black artists should manage their own exhibitions; that the black artist should be able to live a dignified life no different from people of other professions.

"When an artist presents me

with his work, I try to offer him a price commensurate with the quality of the work. It is common knowledge that a lot of galleries rip off black artists," Sibeko said. "But should I however, not be able to buy, we discuss the worth of the painting with the artist and from the sale of that work, I take a commission. But art being what it is, a client will at times offer less than the stipulated amount, in which case I forfeit my commission." He shrugs.

The by-laws governing the hours of business in the city are no help.

"We survive primarily from art collectors and tourists," Peter said. "Not being able to do business on Sundays or on holidays or having to shut shop at a certain hour does not help. But who knows, perhaps the city fathers will come to realise the folly of such legislation."

But perhaps above all Peter Sibeko's legacy to South Africa's art generations, present and the future, is the historical. His slogan — if one can call it that — during the Melbourne exhibition was: Tell the people who see my paintings that this is how I live.



Peter Sibeko . . . owner of the Soweto Art Gallery.