

The Painted Stone Garden
of
Nukain Mabuza



Leopardstone
Private Press
2013



Photograph: JFC Clarke

The upper section of Nukain Mabuza's Stone Garden, early 1980s.

The Painted Stone Garden
of
Nukain Mabuza

JFC Clarke

Copyright © 2013 JFC Clarke

All Rights Reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means; electronic, electrostatic, magnetic tape, mechanical photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the permission in writing from the author and publisher.

Published by Leopardstone Private Press
67 Floresta Street
Lynnwood Glen
Pretoria, 0081
South Africa

Web addresses:

www.nukainmabuza.co.za

www.jfcclarke.co.za

Email address: earthart@iafrica.com

ISBN 978 0 620 56864 7

Printed by:

Jetline, Lynnwood Glen
Suite 175, Private Bag X025
Lynnwood Ridge
0040

Design and layout: JFC Clarke

Typeface: Palatino Linotype

Front cover: *A section of the 'throne boulder', Stone Garden, Revolver Creek, 1982.*

Back cover: *A partial view of the Barberton Gateways garden, 2013.*

Photographs: JFC Clarke



Contents

Acknowledgements	6
Preface	7
Nukain Mabuza: a history	9
Nukain Mabuza: Outsider artist	23
The Legacy of the Stone Garden	35
References	51



Photograph: JFC Clarke

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to many people who have assisted me over the past three decades, who have shared memories and experiences with me relating to Nukain Mabuza and who have given me information, documents and photographs. To name them all is not possible but I would like to express my deep appreciation for the interest shown in my research and the helpfulness and generosity which I have experienced in so many ways.

I would like to pay tribute to Ronald Grant, a fellow pupil at Barberton Primary School in the 1950s, who knew the Barberton - Kaapmuiden section of Route 38 intimately and assisted me with valuable advice and information when I began my research. I would also like to pay tribute to Guido Fontana who, as the land owner, gave Mabuza the support that made it possible for him to create his Stone Garden. It was through Guido that I met Selina Mashaba and Elias Mhlongo and I thank them for sharing with me their memories and understanding of Mabuza.

My special thanks to René Lion-Cachet who was one of the first passers-by to take serious cognizance of Mabuza and his art. He wrote an article on Mabuza and arranged for surplus paint from a supplier to be donated to Mabuza - an event that changed Mabuza's life. René generously shared of his experiences in two talks he gave on Mabuza and I thank him for the valuable photographs he gave me. I thank Barry Hulley, who lived outside Low's Creek, for the important information about the local community he passed on to me. Barry introduced me to Amos Ndhlovu and I thank Amos, who was a friend of Nukain Mabuza,

for sharing his reminiscences with me. I would like to thank Alison Bornman, Director of the Barberton Museum for her support, especially with regard to the exhibition held at the Barberton Museum in 2001 and I remember with gratitude the support I received from Françoise Erasmus. I would especially like to thank Astrid Christianson who, years ago, used to visit Mabuza at Revolver Creek and who has since become an indefatigable champion of his art and legacy.

The Stones Revisited exhibition was held at the Pretoria Art Museum twenty years ago. I remember with gratitude the support I received from Lydia de Waal and Magda van Staden in the planning and presentation of the exhibition. I thank Karin Skawran for the advice and support she gave me then with regard to my research article and for her contribution to the 1992 catalogue. I would like to thank Eunice Basson for her article in the same catalogue and, in particular, I would like to express my thanks for her invaluable editing and commentary which has made this publication possible.

Over the years I have been given important photographs and permission to reproduce them. In this regard I wish to thank Peter Cooper, Peter and Joey Chapman, René Lion-Cachet, Jack van der Boogaard, Gert Coetzee, Astrid Christianson, Eunice Basson and Evert van Engelenhoven.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife Jessica for her support over the years and for her valuable advice, especially with regard to the design and layout of this publication.

Preface

Three decades have passed since Nukain Mabuza's death. Revolver Creek has changed, the world has moved on and the original Stone Garden has now all but disappeared. Attempts to repaint the stones failed to do justice to the original art work and restoration of the site would now indeed be an ambitious undertaking. However, in one way or another, Mabuza's unusual artistic vision has stood the test of time.

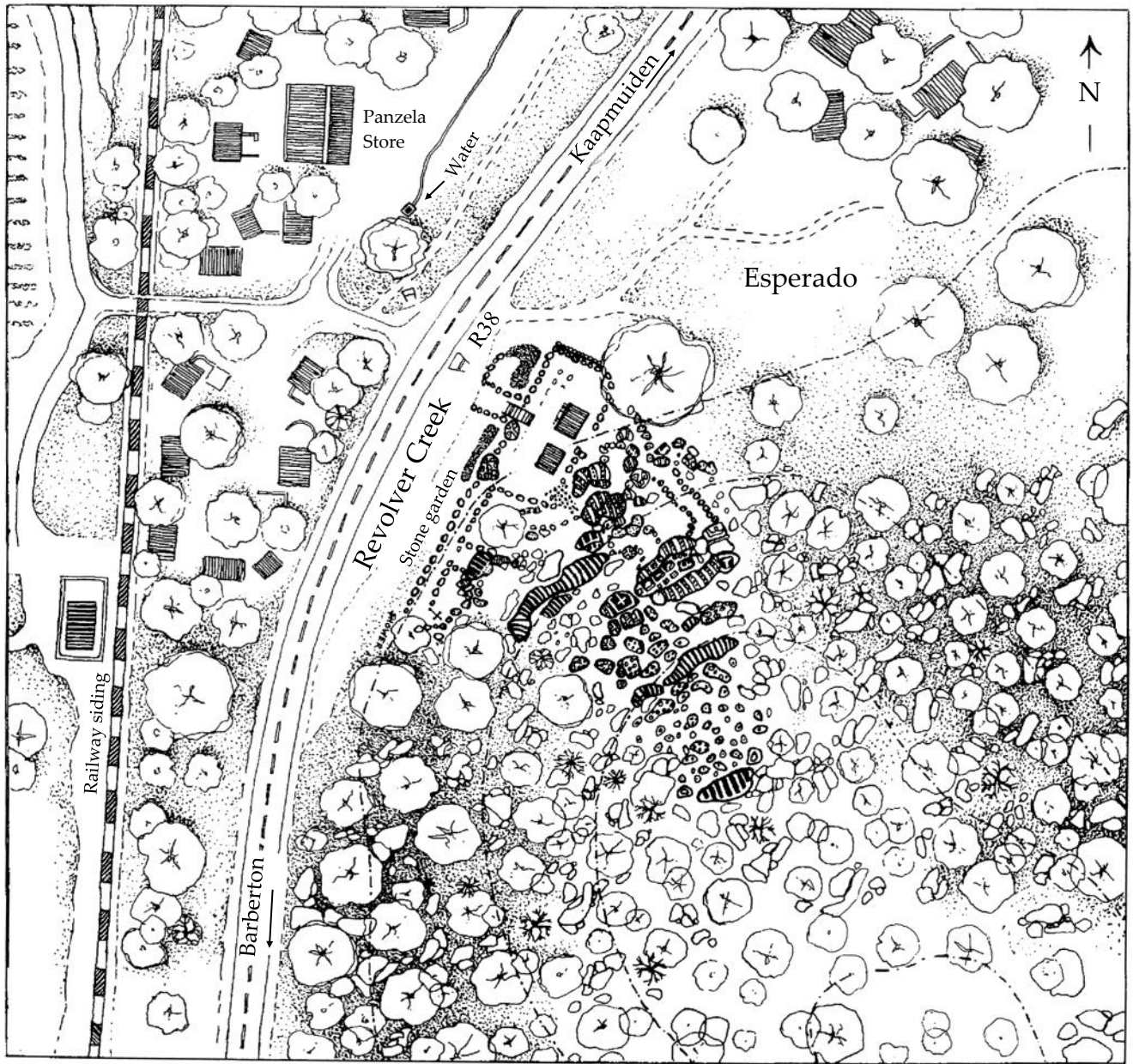
I first saw Mabuza's abandoned home in 1982. Regretfully, I never met Mabuza, but, as an artist, I responded instinctively as I walked amongst the painted stones and embedded boulders. The Stone Garden had, for me, catalytic properties. I had lived in Barberton for eight formative years of my life and repeatedly returned to the Lowveld and Swaziland seeking out, in the landscape and in cultural artifacts and structures, creative meaning and insights. In a series of artworks I paid homage to Nukain Mabuza.

Over the past thirty years I have gathered information and photographs for what has become my Mabuza archive. In the three years, 1990 - 1992, I conducted interviews in Barberton, Low's Creek, Revolver Creek and Dullstroom, mainly with people who had known Nukain Mabuza personally during the years in which he created the Stone Garden. My initial research article on Mabuza and his art was published in 1992 as part of an exhibition catalogue entitled *The Stones Revisited*. In a revised form it was published as a booklet in 2001 *The Home of Nukain Mabuza*. In 1995, the international journal of Intuitive and Visionary Art, *Raw*

Vision published my article *The Stone Garden of Nukain Mabuza* and in 1996, the Stone Garden was listed in John Maizels' book *Raw Creation: Outsider Art and Beyond*, as one of 44 environmental art works from around the world, created by Outsider artists.

In 2012, in preparation for this publication, I conducted further interviews with people who knew Mabuza and I have been fortunate to receive additional documented insights into his life as an artist, as well as photographs. In the following pages I have again presented, in a revised and updated form, the story of Mabuza's life as an Outsider artist. In addition, in the chapter *The Legacy of the Stone Garden*, I have attempted to set down the Mabuza story since 1982 - a story that is still ongoing - of the different ways in which the artist and the Stone Garden have influenced and motivated other artists as well as designers and craftsmen. Most recently, out of the Barberton Gateways project has come an innovative and visually striking environmental statement, inspired by Mabuza's art and the world famous geological formations of the Makhonjwa mountains which form a backdrop to both Barberton and the original Stone Garden at Revolver Creek.

JFC Clarke
Pretoria 2013.



Map drawn by JFC Clarke

Revolver Creek, as it was in the early 1980s, showing the home of Nukain Mabuza on the farm Esperado.

Nukain Mabuza: a history

'In many countries unusual structures, full of strangeness and individuality, have been built in gardens, forests, open spaces or hidden places. They are often the results of years of committed toil; what might have started as a modest project has become, in many instances, a lifetime's work. Such environments represent one of the most extraordinary forms of human creativity'

John Maizels¹

Nukain Mabuza lived in a small rural community at Revolver Creek between Kaapmuiden and Barberton in the Lowveld of Mpumalanga. He was an artist, but not in a conventional sense. He never sold his art work, but chose instead to make of his home environment a creative statement. He did, however, exhibit his work namely his home, to local residents, and tourists. In his lifetime it became a well-known landmark. Decades after his death, people continue to stop, look and walk through the faded remains of his Stone Garden and wonder about the man who created it and his motives.

The main road and railway route from Gauteng to the port city of Maputo in Mozambique follows the course of the Crocodile River through a gorge in the Krokodilpoort range between Nelspruit and the village of Kaapmuiden in Mpumalanga, close to the southern border of the Kruger National Park. From Kaapmuiden a branch road (Route 38) and railway link to Barberton winds up the valley of the Kaap River through subtropical farmland, past granite koppies and hills covered with dense bush and boulders. Scattered amongst the groves of mango trees and sugarcane fields are farm houses and groups of huts. Geologically, the granite

outcrops are part of the Mpangeni pluton. The road and rail routes continue towards Barberton along the edge of the Greenstone Belt, also known as the Barberton Mountain Land which contains geological formations dating back some 3500 million years with fossil evidence of the earliest forms of life on this planet.² Settlements along the route have names founded in the gold rush days of the late 19th century: Greenstone, Revolver Creek, Low's Creek, Sheba, Eureka and Joe's Luck. The use of the word 'creek' to describe a stream or rivulet (unusual in the South African context) probably indicates the presence of prospectors then, who may have come from the California and Klondike goldfields.

Eight kilometres from Kaapmuiden the road passes around the west side of a granite koppie, close to Revolver Creek railway siding, on the farm Esperado. In the late 1960s and 1970s motorists traveling between Kaapmuiden and Barberton came upon the remarkable sight of Nukain Mabuza's home, positioned low against the hill overlooking the road. It consisted of two single-roomed huts with decorated facades surrounded by brightly painted structures and stones. The larger decorated area, roughly triangular in shape, which Mabuza called his 'garden', was filled with stones and boulders painted in a variety of patterns, with a very large black and white striped boulder at the apex high on the hillside. A split pole fence, painted with stripes, formed the boundary on the lower northern side. The two huts, flanked by a marula tree and a mango tree, were situated behind and above a barbed wire fence which ran parallel to the road and formed the base of the triangle. An elaborate decorated stile straddled the fence and a flimsy wood structure, under a small tree to the far right of the huts, housed his 'shower'.



Photograph: JFC Clarke

Mabuza had removed bush and veld grass within the triangle to expose partially buried boulders. Stones had been moved to create pathways and open areas. Larger stones had been maneuvered to face the road and were propped up with smaller stones and soil. A path, bordered by painted stones, led from the road to the stile which was flanked by patches of neatly kept lawn. Behind the huts further paths, bordered by stones, led up the hillside to clusters of painted boulders.

Those travellers who stopped and wanted to examine the complex more closely would find Mabuza, if he wasn't painting stones, invariably sitting in front of his huts, ready to welcome visitors

A view of the settlement at Revolver Creek from the top of Nukain Mabuza's koppie, 1991. By this time the Stone Garden was covered by grass. The houses of workers on the opposite side of the road (Route 38) have since been demolished and Panzela store, visible amongst the trees, is now closed.

and show them around. He was a tall thin man with strong distinctive features, sprightly and in good health. He claimed to be a hundred years old, but was estimated to be in his mid-sixties in 1976.³ He spoke SiSwati and Tsonga and a smattering of English and Afrikaans. He had no formal schooling but was considered by those who knew him to be intelligent and an interesting person to talk to. He was unmarried and lived alone.

Very little is known about his life before 1965, when he was first employed on the farm Esperado to make tomato boxes and irrigate vegetables. According to those who knew him,

he was born and grew up in or near the village of Moamba in southern Mozambique, forty kilometres from the South African border. It is understood that he was a member of the Shangaan-Tsonga ethnic group, although the family name *Mabuza* is of Swazi or Zulu origin. The name Mabuza can be spelt with either an 's' or 'z'. The spelling of his name with a 'z' is now understood to be correct. According to one journalist, he was known as Mhlahla⁴ and also, within the local community, as Maphenhlana (meaning, someone who opens paths or the road), but it seems that he was not generally known by either of these two names.

It is possible that he was a member of the Ngomane clan whose territory historically straddled the border between South Africa

and Mozambique, and between the Kruger National Park and Swaziland.⁵ The history of the Ngomane clan reflects the turmoil experienced by many communities in southern Africa during the 19th century. In time, Tsonga, Zulu and Swazi languages and customs came to be shared by the Ngomane although Tsonga culture prevailed.⁶ 19th century colonial rule and the arrival of the Boers (frontier or trek farmers), from across the Vaal River had far reaching implications for many of the indigenous inhabitants of the region which in some cases led to loss of land and a state of subservience.

The discovery of diamonds in 1868 was followed by a gold rush beginning in the 1880s which had a profound impact on the old Transvaal Republic and subsequently on the whole of southern Africa. The movement of migrant workers began: from rural

areas and neighbouring states to cities, mines and farms. This trend continued well into the 20th century and was a primary issue in the 1948 general election, the harbinger of separate development and apartheid laws that would dominate the daily lives of millions of South Africans for more than forty years.

During the 1950s Nukain Mabuza moved from Mozambique across the border to what was then called the Eastern Transvaal Lowveld in search of work. He apparently followed a married sister who had joined a community of workers near Revolver Creek railway siding. It is likely that Mabuza was employed as a farm worker or domestic gardener on a farm, or farms in the area before being employed on Esperado in 1965. There is no evidence that he travelled or lived outside the Barberton district.

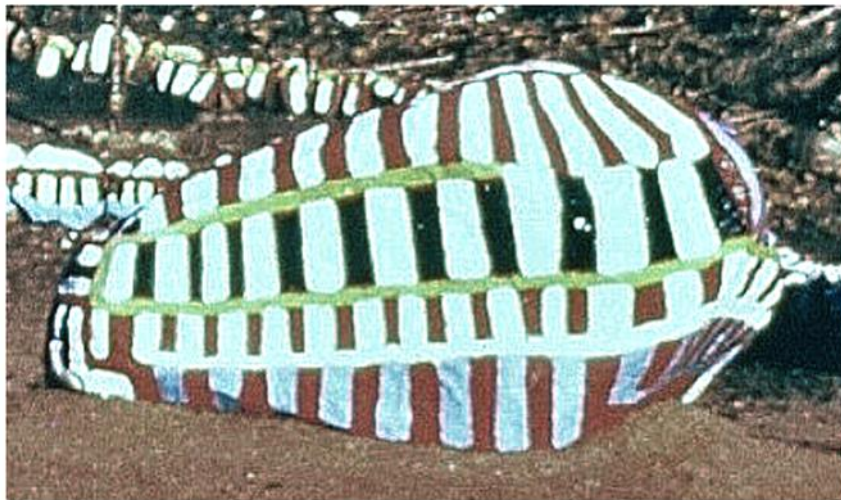
Nukain Mabuza's home in 1969. He demolished the two structures behind the huts in the early 1970s. Note the relatively simple early patterns used by Mabuza.



A composite black and white photograph by JFC Clarke based on two colour photographs by Peter & Joey Chapman

At the time when Mabuza moved into the Eastern Transvaal it was customary for farmers to allow workers to erect huts, often of a temporary nature, on unproductive sections of farms. A community may have become established, but its status depended on apartheid laws and decisions of the landowner. The area set aside for the worker community on the farm Esperado at Revolver Creek, straddled Route 38. Near a T- junction in the midst of the community there was a water source and a small general dealer, Panzela Store. Families lived here in scattered groups of huts with wood and clay walls, iron or thatched roofs, and adjacent reed enclosures. Mabuza's home overlooked the T- junction.

He initially built two simple huts against the hill, facing the main road. One of the huts had a thatched conical roof, traditionally associated with the Shangaan-Tsonga people. He then spent the next fifteen years improving and decorating his huts and other



Photograph: Peter & Joey Chapman

structures and painting his stone garden. He acquired two upright dining room chairs and proceeded to personalize them by reconstructing the backs of the chairs with the letters 'NK' and 'MZ' in wood. He decorated the chairs with dots plus dots within squares and stripes and then painted similar patterns on the interior walls of one of the huts as well as the stones outside the door.⁷ Thus began an obsession to re-order and personalize his home environment. He arranged stones in rows to demarcate paths and boundaries around his huts. He bought more paint and decorated the facades of the huts, the stones and two large boulders embedded in the earth in front of the huts.



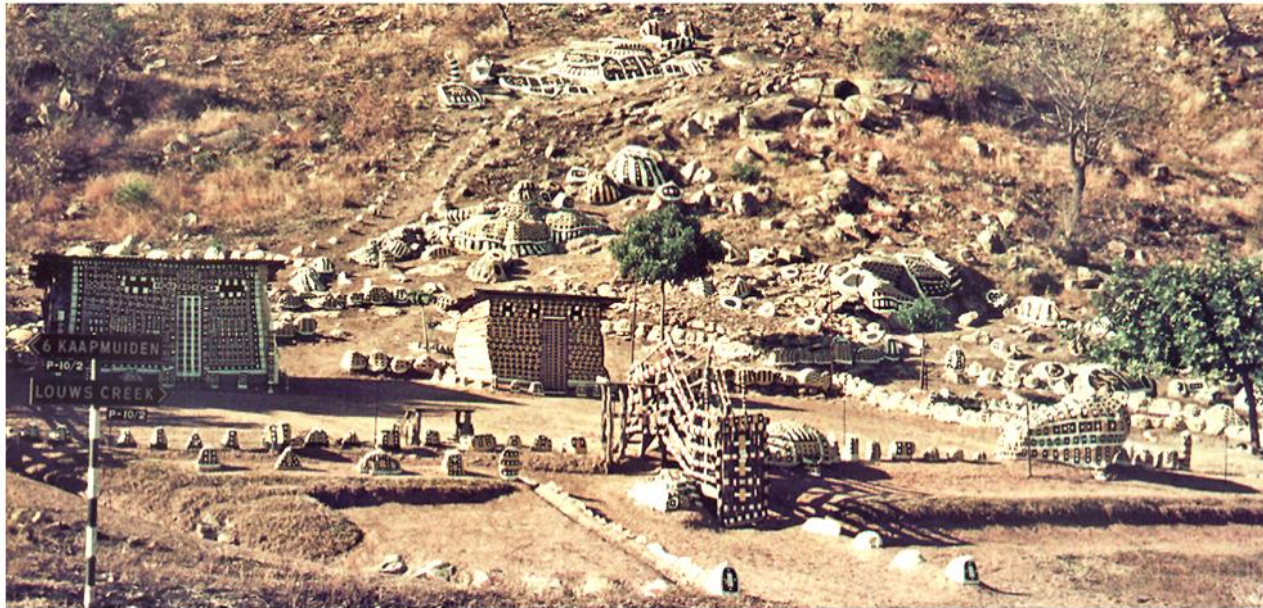
Photograph: Peter & Joey Chapman

Early photographs of his home, taken in 1969, show that the stones and boulders were rather crudely painted with black, white and red stripes and some yellow.⁸ The huts themselves at this stage had very little decoration on them except for elongated

Details from the composite photograph on page 11.

Above: *The earliest known photograph of Nukain Mabuza taken in 1969.*

Left: *The 'throne boulder' at the base of the Stone Garden in 1969.*



Photograph: Peter Cooper

Nukain Mabuza's home, 1973

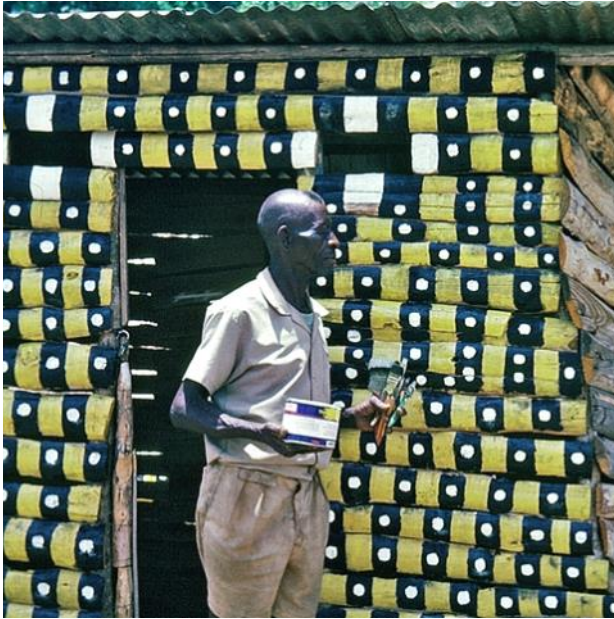
Paint was often bought for him by his employer, Guido Fontana, in either Barberton or Nelspruit. He earned very little money as a farm worker, but as he had no dependents, he could allow himself the luxury of brushes and paint. A reason he gave in 1975 for never marrying was that a wife would 'eat up all his money for paint'.⁹ It is clear from those who knew him that Mabuza did not initially intend his painted stones to have a commercial value. He appeared to order and enhance his immediate environment for his own

patterned corner strips on the larger hut. One strip was decorated with a red and white chevron pattern similar to the chevron signs normally attached to the rear of heavy motor vehicles.

Tourists and other travellers stopped to view and photograph his huts and garden and speak to Mabuza. The interest shown by strangers appears to have been a strong motivating factor in his life. His status changed: from humble farm worker he was elevated to the status of 'artist'. Mabuza responded by orientating the entire layout of the complex towards the road and also by expanding the size of his garden.

Initially Mabuza paid for his paint materials from his wages.

pleasure, and also to fulfill a need to display his home and his art to visitors who were often complete strangers. He never charged visitors a fee for entering his garden or for taking photographs, although people did respond appreciatively by giving him small amounts of money. It was suggested to him that he should try to sell small souvenir painted stones - an easy way of generating additional income on a tourist route - but he was not interested.¹⁰ There can be no doubt that, although he did not charge a fee or directly ask for money, Mabuza found that his art had the potential to generate an income. However, wages and small gifts seemed to have been enough for his basic personal needs and paint. He occasionally also received donations of odd tins of paint



Photograph: René Lion-Cachet

Nukain Mabuza outside his 'studio' hut, mid 1970s.

from local farmers and travellers such as René Lion-Cachet who regularly used the road past his home.¹¹

He painted obsessively, whenever he had an opportunity and slowly the size of his garden increased. Mabuza paid youngsters from the local community to help him clear bush and move stones.

When a staff reporter from the Nelspruit based newspaper, *Vulamehlo*, visited Mabuza in 1973, he described the garden as:

'...the most bizarre work of art in the Lowveld...This spectacle of gaily painted boulders reaching far up against the slope of the koppie dazzles



Photograph: René Lion-Cachet

Nukain Mabuza painting one of the large embedded boulders located about half way up the Stone Garden, mid 1970s.

the eye of any one passing by and tourists with a moment to spare invariably stop to gape at Mr. Mabuza's handiwork'.¹²

By 1973 Mabuza had made some important changes to his home. The clay walls of the two huts were rebuilt with split pole planks which he obtained from a nearby sawmill and the facades were covered in a pattern of stripes and dots. The thatched roof of the smaller hut was replaced with a flat corrugated iron roof similar to that of the larger hut. The latter was referred to by Gert Coetzee, who visited the complex in 1975 as Nukain Mabuza's 'studio' and the smaller hut as his 'kitchen'.¹³ Visitors were invariably invited into the studio by Mabuza to admire the

interior. The walls were covered with yellow, black and white geometric patterns, similar to those outside, as well as a mixture of wall hangings, newspaper clippings and pictures.¹⁴

The stile over the barbed wire fence had been built and decorated by 1973. It consisted of wooden steps with high railings on either side and roughly resembled a passageway or chute. There was a wooden gate on the road side of the stile which was carefully closed each night. The gate was decorated with geometric designs painted on large flat metal lids. Visitors were required to negotiate the stile, although its purpose seemed to be more decorative and symbolic than practical.

In the early 1970s Mabuza evolved a simple policy on colour for his huts and stones. Inside the fence he used only black, white and yellow paint. When he received a donation of another colour, he used it on stones outside the fence, along the road or on the stile.¹⁵ Later, when he received a larger donation of old tins of paint, he widened the range of colours he used inside the fence and went as far as to repaint parts of the Stone Garden.

Mabuza chose to paint stones of all shapes and sizes that were to be found on the hillside. Large, deeply embedded boulders became focal points around which smaller stones were grouped. He would adjust his patterns according to the shape and position of these stones and also created single-patterned groups of stones and boulders. Over the whole Stone Garden his patterns varied considerably, but always in terms of stripes and dots, thus achieving an overall unity of design.

In addition to geometric patterns, Mabuza, in the early 1970s,

began decorating the stones with highly individualistic, stylized images (pictograms) of birds and mammals including a dog, flying and walking birds, a giraffe, an elephant and a lion. They were depicted with great economy of line and form in white on black backgrounds, creating an unusual interplay of positive and negative shapes. Mabuza chose to cluster these pictograms on stones and boulders in two areas of the garden which seemed to be of special importance to him. Lyon Mhlongo stated in an interview, in December 2012, that his older brother, when a young man in the 1970s, assisted Mabuza by painting some of the animal



Photograph: René Lion-Cachet

Part of the Stone Garden in the mid 1970s. During this phase of the expansion of the Stone Garden Mabuza first painted a black background area on top of which he developed the patterns and pictograms using yellow and white paint.

pictograms. When comparing photographs showing the pictograms in their early state with photographs of their final state it is clear that the original images, if they were the work of Michael Mhlongo, were reworked by Mabuza.

Mabuza also added a free-standing crucifix to his garden, made from found metal pieces which he painted in stripes and dots. It stood to the right of the huts, close to the fence. He painted another crucifix, in white on a black background, on an embedded boulder halfway up the hillside. Later he painted what appears to have been a simple self-portrait, life size, on a flat rock amongst a cluster of his animal and bird pictograms. It was his only depiction of a human figure and was one of the few images not visible from the road below. A thick partially dotted line described a standing figure holding what could be a paint brush. There was no attempt at a likeness.¹⁶ He also took to painting his clothes in patterns which matched his painted environment. Stripes and dots also adorned button badges and large spectacle frames made from tomato box wood.¹⁷



Photograph: René Lion-Cachet

Left: An early state of four pictograms, mid 1970s.

Right: Three of the pictograms in the early 1980s after Nukain Mabuza's death.

By 1975 the bush had been cleared, and stones, reaching up to a large boulder high on the hill, had been decorated. Despite what he had accomplished, Mabuza remained ambitious. He told Gert Coetzee in 1975 that his painting was only half finished. In 1976 he told René Lion-Cachet:

'I have the most beautiful garden in the world. If I had enough paint I would paint the whole mountain'.¹⁸

Undoubtedly, Mabuza created a 'garden' by ingenious means. He had no dependable water supply, no property rights and very little money. He used what was available: stones, industrial waste and enamel paint to create a type of garden that required no water and remained a colourful spectacle, regardless of the season. Despite handicaps, he was realizing a vision and he was justly proud of his creation.

By the mid-1970s his home and surrounding garden had become an important landmark and tourist attraction. It became the topic of several newspaper articles and a short television documentary.



Photograph: JFC Clarke

Tourist busses on their way to the Kruger National Park regularly stopped at the site.¹⁹ It was during this time that René Lion-Cachet, who had visited Mabuza on a number of occasions and had written an article about him, approached a paint shop in Nelspruit and arranged that Mabuza receive a donation of surplus paint. Mabuza was given a quantity of enamel paint in a variety of colours. The donation changed his life as he was now able to live off income derived from donations alone. The owners of Esperado had no objection to Mabuza remaining on the farm. They had encouraged him from the beginning to create his unique environment. From 1976 until the end of the decade, Mabuza worked as a full-time artist.

He did not extend his garden as he originally envisaged. Instead, he concentrated on repainting and touching up parts of it. In some areas he completely repainted boulders or groups of stones and used the donated colours skillfully to enhance his designs and enrich colour combinations and patterns. Specific colours and designs were deliberately used on groups of boulders and stones which were arranged to enhance their garden-like appearance. By adding layers of paint to surfaces, Mabuza built up interesting textures and colour relationships, usually associated with paint on canvas.

His combined home looked its best in the late 1970s in its altered and, as it transpired, final state. Claire Robertson described the Stone Garden:



The apex boulder.

Photograph: JFC Clarke

The rocks and boulders that spill down the koppie have been transformed from drab brown by dots and stripes in every colour. But there is no random splashing of paint on rocks. The huge triangle of colour follows a strict pattern.

Mhlahla (Nukain Mabuza) decorated the rocks at the base of the triangle with red, blue, gold and green, and placed them in circles, like miniature kraals.

Above this group - which looks like a scattering of giant sweets - there is a grouping of three boulders. The black and white stripes on these three create the illusion of the huge rump of a resting zebra when seen from below. The next series of rocks is covered with earth colours – red and



Photograph: JFC Clarke



Reconstructed image by JFC Clarke from photograph in *The Pretoria News*, 29 June 1982.



Photograph: JFC Clarke

*ochre with simplistic animal drawings in black and white, smeared over with animal dung.*²⁰

The 'animal dung' was, in fact, brown or olive green paint which had been used in a way that resembled smeared cow dung. Information concerning the brown paint smeared over the pictograms has recently come to light. According to Lyon Mhlongo the brown paint was applied by Mabuza at the time when he left Revolver Creek, but Mhlongo was clear that the paint was not applied as a traditional or ritualistic act. René Lion-Cachet has stated that just prior to committing suicide Mabuza defaced his own work with brown paint.²¹

Left: A portion of the life size depiction of a figure that could be a self portrait of Nukain Mabuza painting.

Centre: A reconstructed image of the whole figure.

Right: A large pictogram on a flat rock on the left side of the main group of images half way up the Stone Garden. The brown or olive green paint that Mabuza smeared over the pictograms is evident.

In 1979 or 1980, while Mabuza was thought to still be in good health, and estimated to be in his late sixties or early seventies, he announced that he has become tired of life and that he intended to dig his grave next to his huts.²² This announcement was not well received by the worker community on the farm, as this meant transgressing generally accepted customs. During the ensuing debate over the issue, which included landowners, it was agreed that Mabuza should be buried at an existing burial site.²³ Deeply

offended, Mabuza abandoned his home altogether. He partly dismantled his huts, took his painted chairs and other belongings and moved to another farm in the valley. For a year or more, as a worker, he moved from one farm to another in the area, finally accepting a job at Greenstone, a few kilometers from Revolver Creek.²⁴ There he committed suicide in October, 1981. He was buried in the Barberton Emjindini cemetery in an unmarked grave.²⁵

Notes

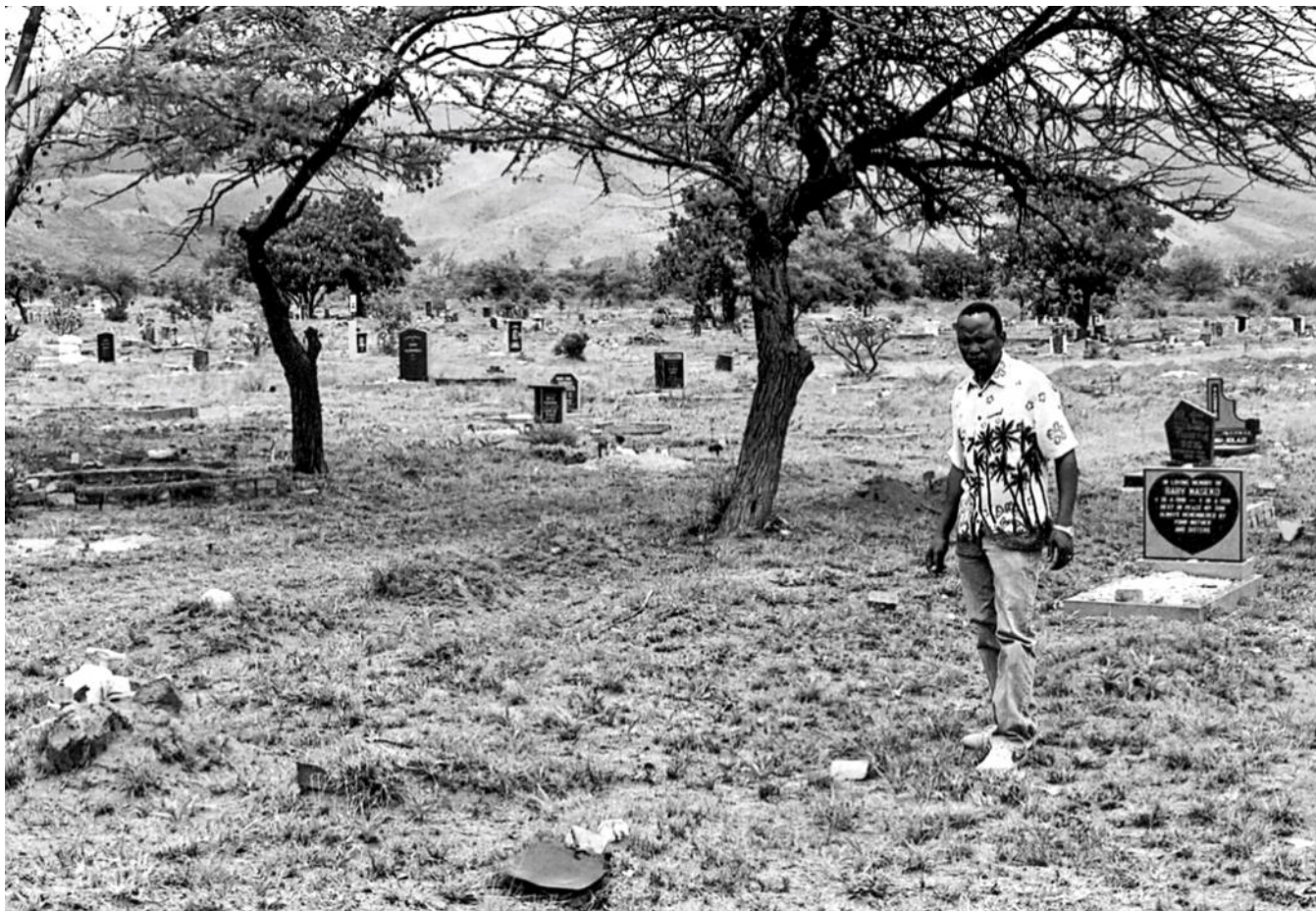
- ¹ John Maizels 1996:158.
- ² Viljoen, MJ. & Reimold, WU. 1999:92.
- ³ Lion-Cachet, R. 1976. *Farmer's Weekly*, 29 December: 64-65.
- ⁴ Robertson, C. 1982. *The Pretoria News*, 29 June: 17.
According to Guido Fontana the name 'Maphendlana' was given to Mabuza by the local community.
- ⁵ Myburgh, AC. 1949:105.
- ⁶ Myburgh, AC. 1949:108, 112.
- ⁷ Coetzee, G. 1975. *Die Vaderland*: 3; Lion-Cachet 1976:65.
- ⁸ Photographs by Peter and Joey Chapman, 1969.
- ⁹ Coetzee, G. 1975: 3.
- ¹⁰ Interview with Guido Fontana, Revolver Creek: November, 1990.
- ¹¹ Interview with Barry Hulley, Low's Creek: June, 1991.
- ¹² Staff Reporter, 1973. *Vulamehlo*, 6 December, vol. 1, no. 25, 3-4.
- ¹³ Coetzee 1975: 3.
- ¹⁴ Coetzee 1975: 3.
- ¹⁵ Coetzee 1975: 3.
- ¹⁶ Interview with Lyon Mhlongo (December 2012). Mhlongo stated that the 'self portrait' in the Stone Garden was the work of Mabuza alone, although his brother Michael had helped Mabuza with some of the pictograms. According to Lyon the object held by the painted figure is not a traditional or ritualistic object and could well be a depiction of paint brush.

- ¹⁷ Interview with Guido Fontana, Revolver Creek: November, 1990.
- ¹⁸ Lion-Cachet, R. 1976: 64-65.
- ¹⁹ Interviews with Guido Fontana, Revolver Creek, Yvonne Caetano, White River and Theo Vogt, Dullstroom: November 1990.
- ²⁰ Robertson, C. 1982: 17.
- ²¹ Transcription by Hazel Cuthbertson made in 2013 from a recording made by René Lion-Cachet in 2012 of his personal recollections of Nukain Mabuza.
- ²² Interviews with: Guido Fontana, Revolver Creek, September 1990, Barry Hulley, Low's Creek, June 1991, Hans Bornman, Barberton, February 1996.
- ²³ In the late 19th century Italian farmers settled in the area around Low' Creek. The farm Esperado was owned by the Dominietto, Fontana and Van den Boogaard families. Mabuza was employed by Guido Fontana, but his huts and stone garden were on property belonging to the Dominietto family. According to Lyon Mhlongo (December 2012), it was this landowner who also objected to Nukain Mabuza's wish to be buried next to his huts. However, the worker community and the landowner had no objection to Mabuza being buried at a traditional burial site to the east of the R38 near Revolver Creek.
- ²⁴ Interviews with: Theo Vogt, Dullstroom and Elias Mhlongo, Revolver Creek, November 1990.
- ²⁵ Information relating to the death of Nukain Mabusu obtained with the assistance of Detective Frans Shabangu of the South African Police Services, Barberton and Vic Neelson, owner of the Diggers Retreat Hotel, Noordkaap, February, 1996.



Photograph: René Lion-Cachet

The 'throne boulder' at the base of the Stone Garden, to the right (western side) of the two huts. Visitors were invited to sit in the recessed stone seat, defined by the patterning, and view the hillside and Stone Garden in its entirety.



Photograph: JFC Clarke

In 2005, the then owner of the Diggers Retreat, Vic Neelson, with the assistance of Detective Frans Shabangu of the South African Police Services in Barberton established the exact place where Nukain Mabuza hanged himself at Greenstone, between Revolver Creek and Kaapmuiden. Detective Shabangu was also able to confirm Mabuza's grave number in the Barberton Emjindini cemetery where he was buried on 26th October 1981.

Left: Abinar Nzolo, from the Barberton Museum, standing at the approximate site of the unmarked grave of Nukain Mabuza, Barberton Emjindini cemetery, November 2005.



The 'altar' boulder situated in the lower part of the Stone Garden near the huts.

Photograph: JFC Clarke

Nukain Mabuza: Outsider artist

These intrepid souls may build cement towers embedded with thousands of found objects where ordinary folks would install a common birdbath; they may construct vast landscapes out of society's detritus in the name of religion or a personal vision; they may cover their houses with beer cans, hubcaps or embalming fluid jars while their neighbours and passersby look on with delight or horror, and nearly always with fascination...The works of these (generally) untrained artists challenge all of our long-cherished notions of what art is and what art can be.

Manley & Sloan¹

Articles written about Nukain Mabuza during his lifetime, and information obtained from those who knew him, have helped to clarify certain aspects of his life and art. Much about Mabuza will, however, remain open to speculation. A reporter from a local publication *Vulamehlo* wrote in 1973 on Mabuza's 'monumental task':

'... for it not only provides Mr. Mabuza (who is a lonely man) with something creative to do, but many tourists who stop to behold the spectacle also give Mr. Mabuza a tip'. In the same article the reporter noted that Mabuza's life ambition was 'to decorate and beautify the dwelling where he lives...' ² René Lion-Cachet, after visiting Mabuza in 1976, wrote: '...his enthusiasm grew until he realized he had discovered the one thing he most wanted to do - paint. The artist in Nukain had come out'.³

It can be assumed that at some point Mabuza committed himself to the idea of dedicating time, energy and whatever money he had

to being an artist. He clearly wanted the public to see his art and it appears that the positive response his work received from passersby was important to him. Creative or artistic isolation did not seem to have impeded his vision and his 'will to form'. Mabuza appears to have been compelled to create his environment as a result of a particular and independent state of mind. The highly unusual nature of his work, when compared to local indigenous, traditional art forms, the materials used, and his apparent influences, has meant that his art cannot readily be categorized in terms of Tourist, Township, Ethnic or Transitional art – names used to describe art work emanating from South Africa in the twentieth century, which was neither pre-colonial, traditional nor Western by nature.⁴ Instead, Mabuza, the artist and his work, reveal specifically 'Outsider' characteristics.

Internationally, during the latter part of the 20th century, there was an increasing awareness of artists such as Nukain Mabuza. In 1945 the French artist Jean Dubuffet recognized that remarkable art work was being created outside the mainstream of Western art. He named this art form 'Art Brut'. The term 'Outsider Art' was first used by the British scholar Roger Cardinal in 1972.

The visionary environment is one manifestation or category of Outsider art. The artist, his or her home, and the art, created within and around it, are all inextricably bound together. Waste materials as well as conventional building materials are often combined to create unconventional, intensely personal, visually striking structures. A tendency to build castle-like defensive structures is not uncommon and these often become homes for reclusive individuals. Schuyt and Elffers have observed:

Often these builders were retired people without any architectural

training, naives who expressed or showed themselves by creating a proof of their being, an expression of their thinking, a symbol of their innermost selves. They are eccentrics to their neighbours and sometimes become hermits because in many cases the surrounding world could not accept them, thus resulting in aggression or total ignorance.⁵

Gardens often form an integral part of a visionary environment. According to Collins: 'The design of a garden, while not strictly speaking architecture actually represents in clearest, often sculptural, form the aspirations of the phantasts...'⁶ The word garden is used here in its broadest sense, to include environments filled with three dimensional forms, often figures, and little or no plant life (a sculpture garden), to environments and sculpture created by vegetation itself (topiary). There are examples of gardens of artificial flowers created from scrap material. Some gardens have names such as *Garden of Eden* and *Garden of Paradise*.⁷



Automobile Association of South Africa
Road Atlas and Touring Guide of Southern Africa, 1974

Left: Examples of early road signs used in southern Africa.

Right: Nukain Mabuza, striking a typical pose on top of his stile. The photograph was taken at the height of his yellow black and white period in the mid 1970s.

There can be little doubt that Nukain Mabuza falls within the category of Outsider artist. His apparent motives, social behaviour plus fifteen years of dedicated work and the characteristics of the artistic statement he created, testify to this. The best known example of this art form in South Africa is the Owl House created by Helen Martins in the village of Nieu Bethesda near Graaff-Reinet in the Karoo. Although different in character, *New Jerusalem* built in Limpopo Province by Jackson Hlungwane who, like Mabuza, was also of Tsonga origins, is another example.⁸



Photograph: Jack van der Boogaard

The top section of the Stone Garden photographed in the early 1980s.

Outsider artists, despite their isolation within communities, are often deeply rooted in local culture and have 'an ear close to the ground'. According to Elias Mhlongo, who worked with Mabuza on the farm Esperado, Mabuza was very aware of the world around him and would select and absorb what he required visually from his environment and daily living and working experience.⁹ Black, white and yellow, the colours he preferred until the mid 1970s, echo the colours found on road signs and road markings. During the 1950s some road information signs in South Africa were still in black and yellow and the danger warning sign was a red and white triangle. Some of Mabuza's pictograms may have been directly inspired by the patterns and symbols used for road traffic signs. According to Dave Falconer, a local resident, there was at one stage a pictogram of a horned cow, which Mabuza later painted over, that may have been directly inspired by a commonly seen road sign.¹⁰

If he was aware of Southern Ndebele wall decorations found in communities on the Mpumalanga Highveld or of San paintings, found in rock shelters across southern Africa, there is no evidence to suggest that he was specifically influenced or inspired by these art forms. Some of the visual material he collected to decorate the interior of his 'studio hut' may have been valued for ideas or inspiration. In 1973 the reporter from *Vulamehlo* described the interior:

'Step inside Mr. Mabuza's shack, an array of colour strikes one.



Photograph: JFC Clarke

Cherubs and the Premier Mr. John Vorster stand shoulder to shoulder with King George VI and his royal family, General Smuts and Captain Devil while several brightly coloured wall-hangings pose grave questions such as what a house without a mother would be worth'.¹¹

A photograph taken of Mabuza inside the studio hut in 1975 includes a section of background wall.¹² What appears to be an illustrated brochure of the kind available to tourists, listing fauna and flora found in game reserves, can be seen pinned against the wall. Tourists travelling to and from the Kruger National Park, passing his home, could have supplied him with odd magazines and brochures. A detail of the same photograph shows what appears to be a piece of patterned paper or textile attached to the wall. The pattern is similar to one of the basic patterns used by Mabuza. It is unfortunate that no additional photographs or descriptions of the interior of this hut have come to light.

It is not known when Mabuza first began referring to the painted stones as a garden or exactly what he may have meant by the word. Neither in Tsonga nor Swazi cultures in southern Mozambique, Swaziland or South Africa were huts or their environments decorated in ways comparable to the way in which Mabuza decorated his home. There is also no apparent tradition of making decorative domestic gardens. People who were interviewed were clear that the Stone Garden was unique. Mabuza appeared to have been largely immune to the influences

Nukain Mabuza in his 'studio hut', 1975. Behind Mabuza are the two ball and claw chairs which he altered and decorated. On the wall of the hut, behind the chairs, can be seen what appears to be illustrated pages from magazines, newspapers or brochures and a fragment of patterned paper.



Photograph: Gert Coetzee, Die Vaderland, 10 June, 1975

of his traditional cultural context although he did clear and sweep around his huts, along paths and around the groups of painted stones and boulders. It seems unlikely that he was not influenced in some way or other by Tsonga and Swazi traditional decorative patterns, but the connection, if any, remains unclear. Other worker homes at Revolver Creek are devoid of any decoration except for occasional examples of simple patterns created with the reeds used to build enclosures next to the huts.

As noted earlier, in 1976, Mabuza claimed to have 'the *most beautiful garden in the whole world*'. It is likely that Mabuza used the word *garden* in a metaphoric sense, by creating his garden-like environment out of mainly non-organic materials. He could have been influenced or inspired by the domestic gardens of landowners in the district. A rockery is often included in a garden layout. The two patches of lawn in the front of his huts and the mango tree he planted appeared to indicate an awareness of more conventional gardens. Instead of trying to imitate what he observed, he evoked the idea of a garden by creating a home surrounded by a decorative, partially man-made environment, resembling a rockery with winding pathways. The geometric designs and groups of patterns represented the colour and variety associated with flowers and included the stylized images of birds and mammals. Photographs taken of the Stone Garden in the mid-1970s show that, in addition to painted stones, Mabuza created patterned areas of closely packed up-turned, half buried paint tins.¹³ In time the tins rusted away and were replaced with painted stones.

The garden and structures may also have had symbolic significance. The reporter from *Vulamehlo* described Mabuza as 'The king of his castle... [who] ...proudly surveys his domain'.¹⁴

Mabuza enjoyed being photographed, surveying his surroundings from an elevated position on top of his stile. He insisted that visitors enter his domain via this impressive, decorated structure. A large boulder next to the stile, in front of the huts, has a natural hollow in it on the side facing the hill. Using his geometric patterns Mabuza was able to give the boulder a throne-like appearance. It was the ideal place for him, or visitors, to sit and view the stone garden stretching up the hillside. By making his presence so evident at Revolver Creek, Mabuza may have been, in part, reacting to the fact that as an immigrant tenant worker he had no legal right to own the land where he lived. He certainly could not afford to buy land. Mabuza might have enjoyed the idea of his own territory; to be surrounded by material evidence of ownership, visually distinctly his own. Boundary fences, the elaborate stile entrance way, the facades of his huts facing the road, and the garden as a whole, all reinforce the notion of ownership. If the single painted figure high on the hillside could be interpreted as a self-portrait, it symbolized his presence in the garden day and night.

The religious beliefs of Outsider artists are often a fundamental source of inspiration for their art. This is reflected in the names given to environments as well as to sculpture, murals, and structures associated with religious rites which are sometimes incorporated into the artist's home, other structures or gardens. In choosing to use natural rocks and boulders to create his garden, Mabuza was working with material and forms which have been associated with religion, ritual and myth since the earliest days of humanity. Stones have been used by many cultures to demarcate spiritual localities and almost every religion has its sacred stones or boulders.¹⁵ Mabuza's hillside did have a compelling

atmosphere which may be described as ritualistic or spiritual, emphasized by the way parts of his garden were deliberately arranged.

Unfortunately very little is known about what appears to be the religious or spiritual content of his work. None of those who wrote about Mabuza in the 1970s mentioned the two crucifixes visible in prominent positions in his garden. Likewise, none of those interviewed remember Mabuza as a devout Christian. He did not attend services at any of the local churches, although it is very likely that he came into contact with Christian teaching in his youth in Mozambique.¹⁶ An evident source of inspiration for the

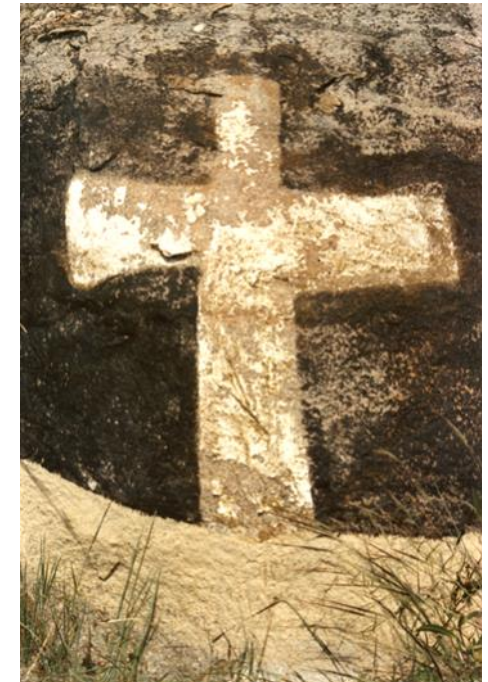
crucifixes, verified by Selina Mashaba, who lived near Mabuza, and possibly the initial source of inspiration for the idea of a painted hillside, was the presence of a very large crucifix constructed of white painted stones, about eight kilometers away near Kaapmuiden.¹⁷ It was built against a hillside above buildings belonging to a Christian institution.

Mabuza also chose to treat two large boulders in a special way. One, already mentioned, is situated at the apex of his garden, the other at the base of the hillside to the right of the huts. When viewed from the road both boulders are roughly symmetrical in shape and both give the appearance of growing out of the earth.



Photograph: JFC Clarke

Left: The large crucifix, made from painted white stones, as seen from the road (Route 38) near Kaapmuiden. It is about eight kilometers from the Stone Garden.



Photograph: JFC Clarke

Right: Mabuza's depiction of a crucifix in the Stone Garden.

This photograph, taken in the early 1980s, of the middle section of the Stone Garden, includes many of the pictograms and the painted crucifix. The so-called self portrait, painted on a flat rock, is also in this section, but cannot be seen from the road below.



Photograph: JFC Clarke

He used designs of dots, stripes, animal pictograms and additional stones, which he arranged in such a way as to emphasize the symmetry and draw attention to these boulders. In addition, halfway up the hillside Mabuza chose a long section of partly embedded stone, a hump-like protuberance, that offered gently curved surfaces for his painting. It evolved as a significant focal area for a set of pictograms including a crucifix clustered around a dotted, simple outline of a human form, the possible self-portrait. There seems little doubt that these three zones within his stone garden could have had a special spiritual significance for the artist, but no specific information in this regard has been forthcoming from the people who were interviewed.

As an aside it is noted that, within an entirely different artistic context in Western art in the 1960s and 1970s, the use of gallery and museum exhibiting space was, in part, being challenged by

Land Artists. Artists such as Christo (b.1935), Robert Smithson (1938 -73) and Walter de Maria (b. 1935), chose to respond to, and use open outside environments and found natural materials and forms.¹⁸ The art work became an integral part of an exterior space. In a broad comparison it could be said that Christo wrapped objects and even large sections of the landscape itself in fabric, focusing attention on the potent power of an object concealed, but, at the same time, revealing hidden form. Mabuza, too, chose an exterior environment and 'wrapped' rocks and boulders in a skin of patterned paint. In particular the large painted boulders, some partly hidden in the earth, their contours and massiveness revealed through patterning, have a compelling mysterious quality.

The donation of paint in 1975 proved very important. Mabuza entered his final creative phase motivated by the variety of new

colours at his disposal. What occurred may best be described as 'the blooming of his garden'. It is clear that over a period of some 15 years of painting and repainting, Mabuza evolved a sophisticated and highly personalized repertoire of patterns and colour combinations. At the same time he developed his painting skills. It is apparent, especially when comparing his original painting to later, lesser skilled attempts to 'restore' parts of the garden, that Mabuza was clearly aware of how visually enhanced his patterns became through the deft, clear painting of the edges of shapes. This would have required hours of focused application of paint. In the repainting of patterns in the later years, he appears to have become aware of the textural appeal of layers of paint and of the subtle visual enhancement of a shape attained by leaving thin outlines of a darker under layer visible around the edges when applying a new colour. The selection of new colours, added to the original yellow, black and white patterns was constrained, sophisticated and enhancing. Ultimately, his vision and his resolution of formal and aesthetic visual problems created a unique garden, a visionary environmental art work.

Outsider Art is likely to remain a relatively rare phenomenon in South Africa and worldwide. Outsider artists and their art are today more readily recognized and appreciated than in the past and therefore the impression given, is of an art form that has expanded in recent years. It is likely that there has always been a proportion of individual artists, often choosing isolation, always obsessive, who have, and will persist with this art form and continue to generate wonder and exert influence through their fresh, unfettered, and highly imaginative visions. But, there is a danger that recognition, acceptance and especially publicity

focused on a living Outsider artist, could destroy instead of protect and encourage a creative process. In this regard, the publicity accorded Jackson Hlungwane and the decision to remove and exhibit his sculpture away from the context of his visionary *New Jerusalem*, remains controversial.¹⁹

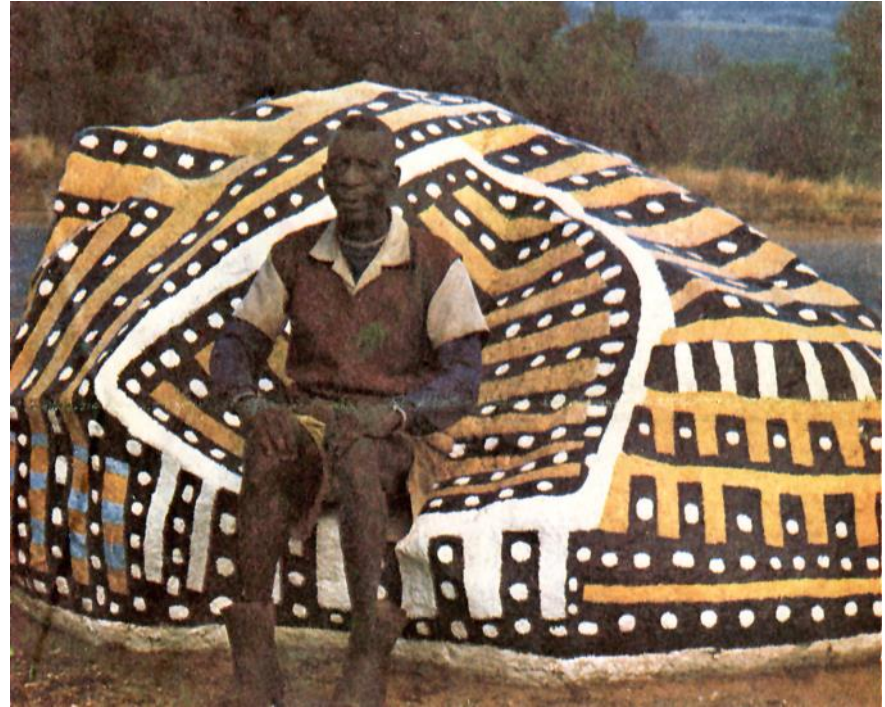
Notes

- ¹ Manley, R & Sloan, M. 1997: 2.
- ² Staff Reporter, 1973. *Vulamehlo*, 6 December, vol. 1 no. 25: 3-4.
- ³ Lion-Cachet R. 1976. *Farmers Weekly*, 29 December: 64-65.
- ⁴ Nettelton, A & Hammond-Tooke, D. 1989:12-13.
- ⁵ Schuyt, M. 1980: 6.
- ⁶ Schuyt, M 1980: 27.
- ⁷ Schuyt, M 1980: 230, 236.
- ⁸ Imrie Ross, S. 1997: 281-222.
- ⁹ Interview with Elias Mhlongo. 1990, Revolver Creek.
- ¹⁰ Interviewed by telephone: Dave Falconer, 1991, White River.
- ¹¹ Staff Reporter, 1973. *Vulamehlo*, 6 December, vol. 1, no. 25: 3-4.
- ¹² Photograph by Gert Coetzee, first published in *Die Vaderland*, 10 June, 1975.
- ¹³ Source: photograph mid 1970s, given to the author by René Lion-Cachet.
- ¹⁴ Staff Reporter, 1973. *Vulamehlo*, 6 December, vol. 1, no. 25: 3-4.
- ¹⁵ Jobes, G. 1961:1495.
- ¹⁶ Interviews with Selina Mashaba, Guido Fontana, Barry Hulley, Elias Mhlongo, Amos Nhlovu, Theo Vogt. Guido Fontana and Elias Mhlongo both mentioned that he may have once had connections to a Swedish missionary organization. According to Myburgh (1949:113), since 1919 the Swedish Holiness Zulu Mission worked in the territory of the Ngomane clan.
- ¹⁷ The stone crucifix can still be seen, although now partially obscured by overgrowth.

¹⁸ Geczy, A. 2008:56.

¹⁹ Susan Imrie Ross devotes a chapter of her book *This is My World, The life of Helen Martins, creator of the Owl House* to Outsider art environments worldwide and South African examples, other than the Owl House, including Nukain Mabuza's Stone Garden.

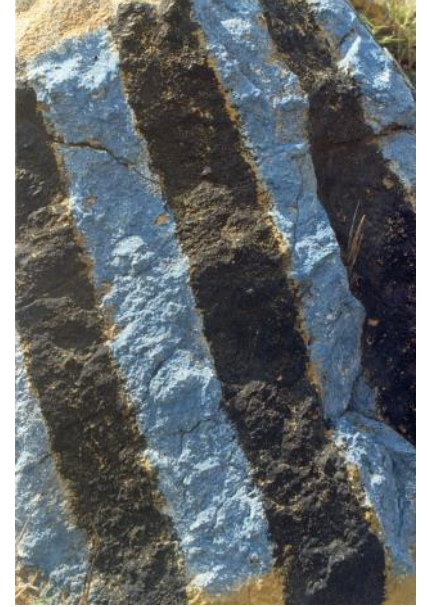
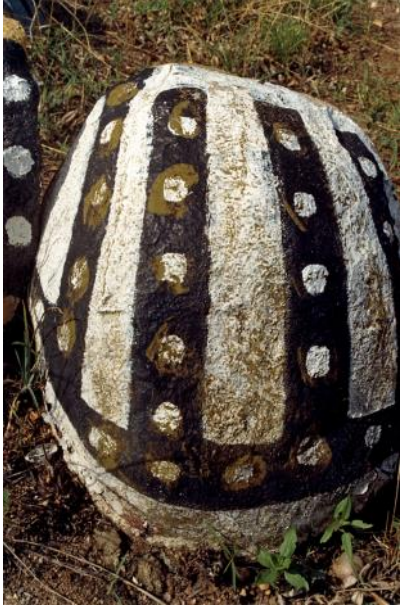
²⁰ Clarke, JFC. 1992: 40.

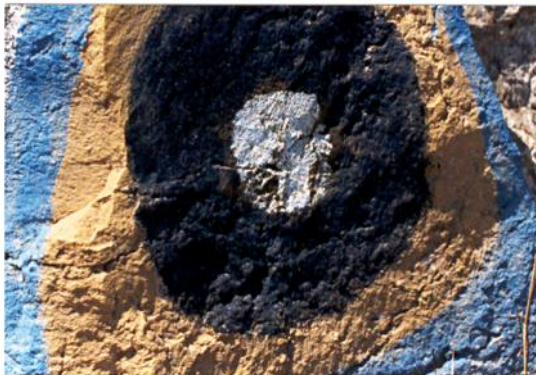
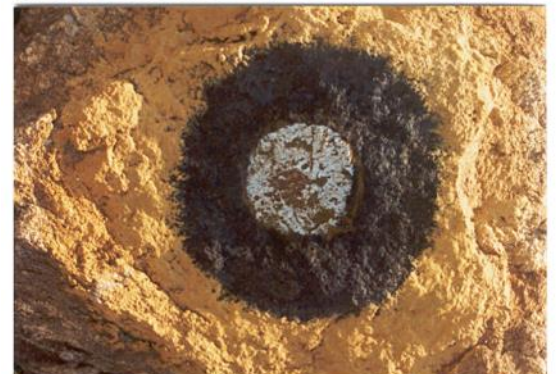


Photograph: Gert Coetzee, *Die Vaderland*, 10 June, 1975

Nukain Mabuza sitting on the 'throne boulder', 1975.

'What can be gleaned from the past about Mabuza and his art hopefully has value now and in the future. In the present uncertain cultural climate in South Africa, any art form, which reflects the indomitable spirit of the individual, that is inventive, unconventional and poetic, should be recognized as having a potential creative and cultural value and be absorbed into the cultural fabric of the community and the country.' Clarke, 1992 .²⁰





Images from Mabuza's original 'garden of flowers'

Photographs: JFC Clarke



Photograph: JFC Clarke

A section of the 'throne boulder' with a view towards Low's Creek, up the valley of the Kaap River.

The Legacy of the Stone Garden

The derelict garden has remained a landmark for many years, but exposure to the elements has taken its toll. The paint has faded and peeled off the stone surfaces, and veld grass now covers the paths and cleared areas. Winter fires regularly sweep across the hillside. Revolver Creek is not the community centre it was thirty or forty years ago. The railway line is seldom used and the station buildings have been demolished. Most of the workers and their families who lived in the immediate vicinity of Panzela Store have moved on and the shop is closed.



Mabuza and his art still generate considerable interest and curiosity and his life story and work have remained inspirational and influential long after his death. An attempt has been made, below, to describe and list most, if not all responses to the stone garden. Articles and photographs have been published in newspapers, magazines and books. Photographs of the Stone Garden have been included in a number of exhibitions and artists have been influenced and inspired by his work.

After Mabuza left his home, his huts, the stile and the wooden fence were dismantled, or they simply disintegrated.¹ By the end of 1982, all that remained were the painted stones. In 1982 an art work entitled *Homage to Mhlahla* by JFC Clarke was accepted for the Cape Town Triennial exhibition. It was a work inspired by the unique character and visual power of the stone garden and the courage and dedication of Mabuza, who had recently died.



Above: JFC Clarke *Pot*, Etching and aquatint, 1982.

Left: JFC Clarke *Acropolis* Etching and aquatint, 1982.

Above right: JFC Clarke *Drive-In Series XVII*, Pastel, 1984, Pelmama Collection, Pretoria Art Museum.

Right: Guido Fontana, owner of a portion of Esperado at Revolver Creek and employer of Nukain Mabusa with Elias Mhlongo and Deborah Clarke, 1990.

Clarke’s childhood experience of the Lowveld in the 1950s, while living in Barberton, and his later experience as an artist prepared him for his response to the abandoned Stone Garden. For a number of years during the 1980s, Clarke continued working with an inspirational link to the Stone Garden.

In 1992 an exhibition entitled *The Stones Revisited* was held at the Pretoria Art Museum. It consisted of the work of JFC Clarke as well as a comprehensive set of photographs, with maps, of Mabusa’s home environment. The catalogue included articles by



Photograph: JFC Clarke

Eunice Basson and JFC Clarke.² Karin Skawran wrote in the Introduction:

*When Clarke created his Leopardstone Series in 1980, he was as yet unaware of Nukain Mabusa, who had created his own ‘cultural landscape’ in the vicinity of Nelspruit. Using stones from his immediate environment he decorated them with strange designs and, like Clarke, incorporated in his work elements from both his own African tradition and Western culture. Mabusa’s work was for a time a prime source on inspiration to John Clarke. In this exhibition, which is dedicated to Mabusa, Clarke not only acknowledges the profound influence the artist had on his work, but also pays tribute to Nukain Mabusa as an artist in his own right.*³

In 1995 photographs of the Stone Garden were included in an



Two pages from *Opening Paths ...A Story about Nukain Mabusa*, created and drawn by Sally Clark for the Right to Hope Trust.



Photograph: JFC Clarke



Photograph: JFC Clarke

exhibition at the Johannesburg Art Gallery entitled *The Right to Hope: Five South African Artists*. Linked to the exhibition was the design and drawing of a picture story *Opening Paths...A Story about Nukain Mabusa* by Sally Clark. This innovative interpretation of Mabusa's life was never published. In the same year photographs of the stone garden were included in the exhibition *Panoramas of Passage: Changing Landscapes of South Africa*, exhibited at the University of the Witwatersrand and in Washington, USA.

Before his untimely death, Guido Fontana, the owner of a portion of the original farm Esperado, considered plans for the

Repainting part of the Stone Garden in 1992.

Above left: *Lucky Mamba from Revolver Creek.*

Above right: *Ivan van den Boogaard who grew up on a farm close to the Stone Garden.*

Right: *Kirsty Hall, Lynne Abbot and Lucky Mamba at work.*



Photograph: JFC Clarke

restoration of the site. An attempt had been made to repaint the stones in 1992 by a group of art students from the Johannesburg Technikon. It proved to be a formidable task as the students could not match Mabuza's patience and dexterity with a brush. Less than half the stones were repainted and the project was abandoned.⁴

In 1998 a group of rural women assisted by Tamar Mason (one of the principle designers and a technical skills trainer) were commissioned to make embroidered panels for the new Mpumalanga Provincial Legislature at Riverside Park, Nelspruit. The panels tell the story of the history of Mpumalanga. Reference

was made to Mabuza's Stone Garden in the decorative stitched 'framing' around self portraits the women created.⁵

In 2000 a group of young people from the Matsulu area, between Nelspruit and Kaapmuiden, was recruited by the Mpumalanga Department of Sport, Recreation, Arts and Culture to undertake a project to commemorate Nukain Mabuza and his art. The Silulu group was given the task of designing and constructing a monument inspired by the original Stone Garden and using ceramic material as an important component. A great deal of creative thinking and research resulted in a final design for the monument and construction began. The project was never



Homage to Nukain



The Shrine



The Rock

Three colour chine-collé lithographs by Thami Jali, printed by The Artists' Press, White River, in 2004.



Photograph: JFC Clarke

The inside of the perimeter wall of the Old Rock Café, de Villiers Street, Barberton. In 2002, Astrid Christianson, who knew Mabuza, was asked to redesign and decorate three redundant garages belonging to the Impala Hotel. They were transformed into the Old Rock Café and included in the decoration were murals inspired by the Stone Garden and painted by Thami Jali, assisted by Jop Kunneke. These murals were later destroyed when the restaurant closed.

completed and the unfinished structure still stands in the gardens of the Mpumalanga Provincial Legislature. Artists from the Matsulu area, inspired by Nukain Mabuza, were also encouraged to display their work at the Silulu Art and Craft Centre at Matsulu.

The artist Thami Jali, who had studied at the Rorke's Drift Art Centre and the Natal Technikon, and who was involved in the Matsulu project, was commissioned in 2002 to paint a series of murals on the walls of a restaurant in Barberton.⁶ In 2004, Jali

created a series of lithographs inspired by Mabuza's Stone Garden which were printed and published by the Artists Press, White River.

In 2001 an exhibition entitled *Nukain Mabuza - Road Painter Artist* was held at the Barberton Museum. It was organised by Alison Bornman, Director of the Barberton Museum and Francois Erasmus of the Barberton branch of the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA). A collection of art work reflecting the responses of various artists to the Stone Garden formed part of



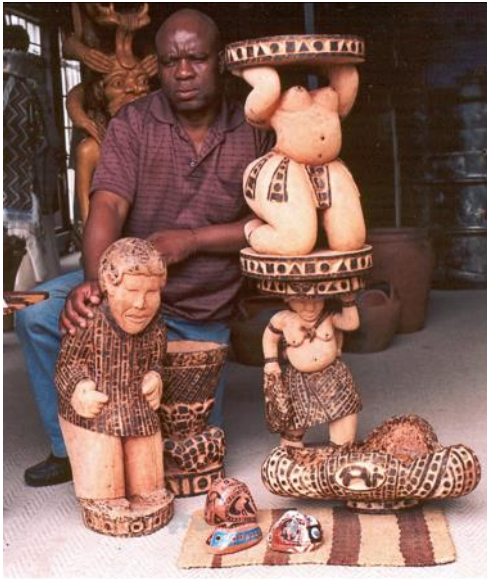
Photograph: JFC Clarke

Altered Landscape, 1985

Wall-hanging, handspun mohair

Design: JFC Clarke, Weaver: Del Petty

Del Petty in her weaving studio. Del lived with her family at Jwala Ranch in the Tuli Block, Botswana, during the 1980s where the wall-hanging was made. Del also dyed and spun the mohair used for the wall-hanging.



Photograph: JFC Clarke

Aaron Mmako, manager of the Silulu Art and Craft Centre, Matsulu with the work of Nelson Mathonsi who created patterns on his wood sculptures derived from the Stone Garden.



Photograph: JFC Clarke

A workshop held in 2001 at the Barberton Museum. The children, after seeing photographs of the Stone Garden, painted their own stones.

At the opening of the exhibition: Nukain Mabusa: Road Painter Artist, Barberton Museum, 2001. Left to right: René Lion-Cachet, unknown artist from Matsulu, JFC Clarke, Tami Jali, and Francois Erasmus



Photograph: JFC Clarke



Reproduced with permission from Jennifer Schormann

Above: The final design for the mosaic at the Mbombela stadium, in part inspired by the Mabuza Stone Garden

Two artists, Pippa Moolman and later Hanna Styne, were asked by the manager of the Mbombela mosaics project, Jennifer Schormann, to each submit two designs - the first was to be inspired by and reflect Mpumalanga's natural landscape and the second was to focus on Sports, Arts and Culture. It was suggested that the two artists also draw inspiration from the work and style of Nukain Mabusa. As Pippa Moolman was not available to adapt her submission and supervise the actual making of the mosaics the responsibility passed to Hanna Styne whose designs were in due course used for the mosaics. About 200 pupils of different ages and backgrounds from local schools in the area assisted in the actual making of the murals. The mosaics were unveiled on National Youth Day, 16th June, 2010.



Photograph: JFC Clarke



Photograph: JFC Clarke



Photograph: JFC Clarke

Above: Two photographs of the partially completed Nukain Mabuza memorial in front of the Mpumalanga Provincial Legislature at Riverside Park, Nelspruit.

Right: A section of the incomplete memorial. It was intended that surfaces of the memorial, including the stones, would be covered by a mosaic of ceramic tesserae made by members of the Silulu group.



Photograph: JFC Clarke

The Silulu group in 2000 at the Stone Garden with artist Thami Jali (dark glasses, front row), John-Antony Boerma and Laurette van Zyl (to the left of the group) from the Mpumalanga Department of Sport, Recreation, Arts and Culture.



Photograph: JFC Clarke



Above: The logo of Barberton Community Tourism, designed by Herman Kruger and Jakes Stapelberg, Concept Café Design Studio.

Left: A part of the exhibition of photographs, *Two Worlds Outside: Nukain Mabusa and Joshua Samuel*, held at Winthrop University Galleries, Rock Hill, South Carolina, USA, in 2006.

the exhibition at which René Lion-Cachet and JFC Clarke gave talks. A workshop for children was also organized. After viewing the exhibition the children were given the opportunity to paint stones with their own designs

In 2004, the South Africa Heritage Resources Agency undertook an assessment of the Stone Garden with the intention of possibly initiating a preservation or restoration project, but no formal decision was made. Five years later the Stone Garden was cleared of encroaching bush as part of an initiative supported by local residents in anticipation of increased tourist interest in Barberton and its surroundings, ahead of the 2010 FIFA World Cup. The

possibility of restoring the Stone Garden was considered, but the cost of such an undertaking was found to be prohibitive.

As the paint has faded in the original garden, so the photographic record has become increasingly valuable. In 2006 a comparative exhibition of photographs entitled *Two Worlds Outside: Nukain Mabusa and Joshua Samuel* was held at the Winthrop University Galleries in South Carolina, USA. The exhibition was part of a larger multifaceted presentation entitled *South By South Africa-Crafting Cultural Understanding*. Joshua Samuel (1898-1984) was an African American Outsider artist who created a garden-like environment known as Can City in South Carolina. Tom Stanley,



KRUGER LOWVELD
TOURISM
it's in our nature

Above: The logo of Kruger Lowveld Tourism designed by Marianne Liebenberg.

Right: Entrance to the William Humphreys Art Gallery, Kimberley, 2010.
Below: Stones painted by pupils from St Cyprians Private School, Kimberley.



Photograph: JFC Clarke



Photograph: JFC Clarke



Photograph: Eunice Basson



Photograph: Eunice Basson



Photograph: Eunice Basson



Photograph: JFC Clarke

Above: Embroidered cushions made by women from the Kosikona Group led by Emma Mnguni and assisted by Tamar Mason.

artist and head of the Department of Fine Arts at Winthrop University and Roger Manley, an eminent authority on Outsider art, both contributed articles to the exhibition catalogue.

According to Roger Manley:

In the case of both artists, the intentionality conveyed by their extraordinarily simple approaches was enough for their work to accomplish what they needed it to do. Both men sought some way to face issues far bigger than themselves - to deal with poverty, seek fairness in their unfair political and racial settings, to find or create order in what seemed like increasingly chaotic times, but above all to face what often seems like a randomly apportioned world - and they did it by using the most straightforward approaches with the most minimal materials in order to do something they already knew how to do: make a garden. In doing so they performed one of the most elemental of all creative acts.⁶



Photograph: Evert van Engelenhoven

Right: Rings, made of sterling silver and hardened lacquer, designed by Evert van Engelenhoven and manufactured by the Umjindi Jewellery Project, Barberton.

In 2006, a local organisation, *Barberton Community Tourism*, chose a design for their logo inspired by the Mabuza pictograms and patterns. The smaller icon in the logo is derived directly from the Mabuza elephant pictogram and the larger icon is based on the Barberton daisy. Kruger Lowveld Chamber of Business and Tourism, based in Nelspruit, also adopted a logo in 2011 for Kruger Lowveld Tourism designed in the Mabuza style with an image of a giraffe derived from one of his pictograms.

Toni Pretorius, the art teacher at St Cyprians Private School, in Kimberley, Northern Cape Province, devised a project for her pupils in 2009 based on Mabuza's Stone Garden. The resultant

painted stones were positioned at the entrance to the William Humphreys Art Gallery in Kimberley.

In 2010 a televised documentary series *A Country Imagined*, presented by Johnny Clegg, was launched on SABC 2. Images of the stone garden of Nukain Mabuza, linked to etchings by JFC Clarke, were included in Episode 12: *Mpumalanga – Coming Home*.

The Umjindi Jewellery Project, established in Barberton in 2002, has created a range of jewelry designed by Evert van Engelenhoven and inspired by the art of Mabuza. Rings and other jewelry pieces, hand painted and hand finished, are made of sterling silver and hardened lacquer.

In 2012 the Barberton Gateways Project, an integral part of the Barberton Tourism and Biodiversity Corridor (BATOBIC) was completed. The landscaped entrances on Barberton's two access intersections includes rows of stones laid out to create a ground

Centre: *Ronel Reynecke, the artist who created the decorative designs for the Gateway Project.*

Members of the team who assisted Ronel with the painting:

Left: *Sibusiso Khumola. Right: Emmah Silombo and Tracy Ngomane.*



Photograph: Astrid Christianson



Photograph: JFC Clarke



Photograph: Astrid Christianson

pattern based on the double helix of DNA, a reference to ancient fossil life forms found in the rock formations of the Makhonjwa Mountains behind Barberton. Additional large stones and boulders are positioned within this ground pattern. Barberton artist Ronel Reynecke was assigned the task of creating an array of patterns evoking the Stone Garden which she and a team of assistants painted onto selected boulders. Indigenous trees and local plant species have been incorporated to create these unusual gardens which introduce visitors to Barberton and the Makhonjwa mountains.

It took 15 years, courage and obsessive dedication on the part of Mabuza to achieve his goal. The community of labourer families at Revolver Creek amongst whom he lived, regarded him as eccentric but let him be as he created his art - understanding that he preferred his alone state. He had much to overcome at a time when Apartheid laws dominated South African society. In 2006 Tom Stanley wrote as follows on Nukain Mabuza and Joshua Samuel in the catalogue of the *Two Worlds Outside* exhibition:

I would contend...that Mabuza's Stone Garden and Samuel's Can City are at the very heart of understanding our most fundamental goals and human aspirations no matter what our position within a community... In many respects, the re-creations of their respective environments were expressions of the personal freedom absent in many of their day-to-day social interactions. The reproduced images in this exhibition only act as reminders of their struggles to create a free space...⁷

It is noteworthy, considering his lowly status as a farm labourer, in the context of rural South Africa at that time - and despite his idiosyncratic behaviour, that Mabuza received support, as a

struggling artist, from people from all walks of life. His courage to dream and 'think big', his dedication to the task at hand and his artistic sensibility were recognised and appreciated. Since Mabuza's death 30 years ago the Stone Garden has taken on increasing symbolic as well as metaphoric significance. The legacy his art now enjoys is one that Mabuza could surely not have dreamt of and it is hoped that in the future his art will inspire creative endeavours in ways yet to be imagined.

Notes

¹ Interview with Theo Vogt, Dullstroom, November 1990.

² The article by Clarke entitled: *The Home Art of Nukain Mabuza* was in part based on interviews conducted between 1989 and 1992 in Barberton, Low's Creek, Revolver Creek and Dullstroom.

³ Skawran, K. 1992: 8.

⁴ The group of art students included Ivan van den Boogaard, Kirsty Hall and Lynne Abbot from the Johannesburg Technikon and Lucky Mamba from Revolver Creek.

⁵ Reference: website: www.artprintsa.com/tamar-mason. Additional information: Tamar Mason, 2013.

⁶ Manley, R. 2006. *South by South Africa. Two Worlds Outside: Nukain Mabuza & Joshua Samuel*.

⁷ Stanley, T. 2006. *South by South Africa. Journey to the Cradle of Humankind*.



Photographs: JFC Clarke

Views of the painted stone garden, part of the Barberton Gateways project, inspired by Nukain Mabuza's original Stone Garden, 2013.



Photograph: JFC Clarke

A section of the Barberton Gateway garden at the intersection of Sheba Road and Route 40 to Bulembu, 2013.

References

Please note the original spelling of Mabuza's name in earlier references, publications and quotations.

Books

- Cardinal, R. 1972. *Outsider art*. London: Studio Vista.
- Clarke JFC. 2001. *The Home of Nukain Mabusa*. Pretoria: Leopardstone Private Press.
- Geczy, A. 2008. *Art: Histories, Theories and Exceptions*. Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers.
- Jobs, G. 1961. *Dictionary of mythology, folklore and symbols*. New York: Scarecrow Press.
- Myburgh, AC. 1949. *The tribes of the Barberton District*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Nettelton, A & Hammond-Tooke, D (ed). 1989. *African art in Southern Africa*. Johannesburg: Ad. Donker.
- Road Atlas and Touring Guide of Southern Africa*. 1974. Johannesburg: Automobile Association of South Africa.
- Ross, S. Imrie. 1997. *This Is My World. The life of Helen Martins, creator of the Owl House*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- Schuyt, M, Elffers, J & Collins, GR (eds). 1980. *Fantastic architecture: personal and eccentric visions*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Wampler, J. 1977. *All Their Own: People and the Places They Build*. New York: Schenkman Publishing Company.

Exhibition catalogues

- Basson, EL, Clarke, JFC & Skawran, KM. 1992. *The Stones Revisited*. Pretoria Art Museum. Pretoria: Leopardstone Private Press.
- Manley, R & Stanley, T. 2006. *South by South Africa. Two Worlds Outside: Nukain Mabusa & Joshua Samuel*. Rock Hill S.C: Winthrop University Galleries.

Periodicals and newspapers articles

- Coetzee, G. 1975. Ou Swazi se bont klippe op die kyk-kassie. *Die Vaderland*, 10 Junie: 3.
- Cotter, H. 1991. Under African eyes. *Art in America*, October: 104-110.
- Lion-Cachet, R. 1976. Rock Art. *Farmers Weekly*, 29 December: 64-65.
- Robertson, C. 1982. Oupa leaves his flowers. *The Pretoria News*, 29 June: 17.
- Staff Reporter. 1973. The Rock Artist of Revolver Creek. *Vulamehlo*, vol 1, no 25, 6 December: 3-4.
- Townsend, T. 1983. The Mhlahla Stones. *PAM Bulletin*, vol 17, no 2, April: 24-35.

Research interviews

- September 1990: Ronald Grant, Kaapmuiden; Guido Fontana, Revolver Creek; Selina Mashaba, Revolver Creek; Japie van Niekerk, Barberton.
- November 1990: Guido Fontana, Revolver Creek; Elias Mhlongo, Revolver Creek; Theo Vogt, Dullstroom; Yvonne Caetano, White River.
- June 1991: Barry Hulley, Low's Creek; Amos Nhlovu, Revolver Creek.
- June 2012: Astrid Christianson, Barberton.
- November 2012: Lyon and Elias Mhlongo, Revolver Creek.

Interviews conducted by telephone, 1990-92

- René Lion-Cachet, Johannesburg; Dave Falconer, White River; Jack van den Boogaard, Revolver Creek.

Audio recording

René Lion-Cachet: audio recording made in 2012, transcribed by Hazel Cuthbertson in 2013.

Photographic acknowledgements

The following persons gave permission for their photographs to be reproduced:

Peter Cooper, Peter and Joey Chapman, René Lion-Cachet, Gert Coetzee, Jack van den Boogaard, Astrid Christianson, Eunice Basson, Evert van Engelenhoven.

Exhibitions which have included photographic images of Nukain Mabuza's Stone Garden

The Stones Revisited, 1992, Pretoria Art Museum.

The Right to Hope: Five South African Artists, 1995, Johannesburg Art Gallery.

Panoramas of Passage: Changing Landscapes of South Africa, 1995/6, Meridian International Centre, Washington D.C., USA; University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

Nukain Mabuza: Road Painter Artist, 2001, Barberton Museum, Mpumalanga.

Two Worlds Outside: Nukain Mabuza & Joshua Samuel, 2006, Winthrop University Galleries, Rockhill, South Carolina, USA.

Publications which have included photographs, articles or information on Nukain Mabuza and his art

Clarke, JFC. 1999. A boulder vision, in *The World of Interiors*, May, edited by Min Hogg, London.

Clarke, JFC. 1994/5. The stone garden of Nukain Mabuza. *Raw Vision: International Journal of Intuitive and Visionary Art*, no 10, Winter.

Clarke, JFC. 1992. *The Stones Revisited-Nukain Mabuza*. Pretoria: Leopardstone Private Press.

Huntley, M. 1992. *Art in Outline. An introduction to South African art*, 1. Johannesburg: Oxford University Press.

Imrie Ross, S. 1997. *This is my world. The life and times of Helen Martins, creator of the Owl House*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

Lion-Cachet, R. 1976. Rock Art. *Farmers Weekly*, 29 December.

Maizels, J & Von Schaewen. 1999. *Fantasy worlds*. New York: Taschen.

Maizels, J. 1996. *Raw creation. Outsider art and beyond*. New York: Phaidon Press.

Manley, R. 2005. *South by South Africa: Two worlds outside: Nukain Mabuza & Joshua Samuel*, exhibition catalogue. Winthrop University Galleries, Rockhill, S.C., USA.

Oberholzer, O. 1989. *Southern Circle. Another pictorial journey*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers.

Townsend, T. 1983. The Mhlahla Stones. *PAM Bulletin*, vol 17, no 2, April.

Television: documentary productions which have featured Nukain Mabuza and the Stone Garden

SABC documentary film made for television which specifically focused on Nukain Mabuza. Broadcast in mid 1970s, present status unknown.

Television Series: SABC 2 TV *A Country Imagined*, 2010, presented by Johnny Clegg. Episode 12: *Mpumalanga - Coming Home*.



Photograph: JFC Clarke

This large pictogram, possibly a representation of a lion, is grouped with the 'self portrait', the painted crucifix and other animal pictograms in the middle section of the Stone Garden (see page 29).



Photograph: JFC Clarke