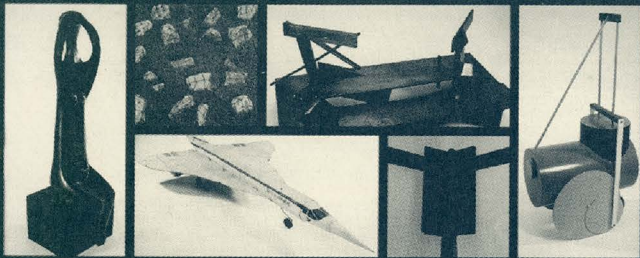


IMAGES OF METAL



Images of Metal: Post-war Sculptures and Assemblages in South Africa

by Elizabeth Rankin.

1994. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 206 pp., soft cover, illustrated, R77.

Reviewed by Herlo van Rensburg

South Africa never had the facilities for producing sculpture in bronze before World War II, so works were cast abroad for the few commissions that existed. Vignali's artistic foundry, established in Pretoria in the 1930s, was the first attempt to establish bronze casting in South African sculpture, but it was disrupted by the inevitable slump in art interest during and immediately following the war years. The establishment of art schools and informal art centres, the availability of new bronze foundries, and the introduction of new techniques such as welding and assemblage, stimulated developments. Nationalism, with its need for appropriate monuments, the economic boom and the development of corporate patronage, all supported sculptural production.

Coinciding with these developments, an art collection was established at the University of the Witwatersrand by

Heather Martienssen and John Fassler. Since the early 1960s the University Art Galleries have consistently built a collection of traditional and contemporary South African art. The contemporary section houses a representative collection of modern sculpture in bronze, steel and other metals. This collection formed the core of the exhibition *Images of Metal* premiered at the 1994 Standard Bank National Arts Festival in Grahamstown. Sculptures borrowed from other collections and from individual artists extended the Wits Collection for this exhibition, to which the present book was published as the official catalogue.

The point of departure for both exhibition and publication is 1935, the birth date of Sidney Kumalo, the first black sculptor to achieve recognition in South Africa. Twenty-two sculptors are considered in the publication, starting with Kumalo, and including among others Ezrom Legae, Willie Bester, Andries Botha, David Brown, Guy du Toit, Marc Edwards, Ian Redelinghuys and Gavin Younge. Wire sculptures by rural artists and art centre productions which were included in the exhibition are discussed and briefly related to tendencies in recent sculpture. The selection reflects an interesting perspective on the state and development of contemporary South African sculpture in metal.

The publication goes beyond the simple listing of the data, customary in exhibition catalogues. A valuable introductory section offering a context for the artists and works precedes short essays on each of the 22 artists. The essays explore each artist's works and place them within the artist's oeuvre. They include discussions of works and reproductions beyond the range of the particular exhibition and chosen medium. Rankin interviewed all these artists with the exception of Kumalo. She also interviewed or contacted some eighty other sculptors, collectors and dealers. A number of essays contain the most significant information on particular artists to date, and all the essays contribute to an understanding of the artists' work.

Rankin acknowledges the arbitrary choice of artists determined by the *Images of Metal* exhibition and the University collection. The artists represented by individual essays - with obvious exceptions - are predominantly from, or working within, the Gauteng-area. However, the range of the document is not limited to this context, but provides a relevant overview of contemporary metal sculpture in South Africa. Rankin chooses the process of metal sculpture as a unifying theme for her research, and addresses context and content accordingly.

She attempts to address some limitations, such as the lack of detailed documentation and writing on South African sculpture. To inaugurate research in this area she provides an overview of the production of metal sculpture, of training, techniques, and the effect of commissions and competitions on South African sculpture. This extends the range of the publication beyond the confines of the particular exhibition to include perspectives and contexts on older established artists and also offer views on, and reproductions of the works of some younger artists currently entering the arena of South African exhibitions and art competitions.

The result is a thorough and neatly presented document on South African sculpture that will survive the immediate memories of a particular exhibition. The reproductions in the richly illustrated text are, unfortunately, all in black and white, with the exception of a few small images on the outside cover. Despite this, the book presents a visual selection of reproductions that will be of general informative interest. Based on extensive research in primary archives and public collections, the publication, albeit on a focused area, is a resource document that serves to redress a gap in the documentation of South African sculpture. It compiles a referential context that will be of use to the South African art world and makes a valuable contribution to South African Art History. *Images of Metal* remains sufficiently accessible to warrant a wider audience than the student of art or those professionally involved in the art world.