



*Portrait of the Barman from Fourways, 1976 | Photo: Sean Wilson*

**P**emba was a pioneering artist of twentieth-century social realism alongside contemporaries, Gladys Mgudlandlu (1917 - 1979), John Koenakeefe Mohl (1903 - 1985) and Gerard Sekoto (1913 - 1993). Their artistic practices were tied together through thematic, stylistic and symbolic

# GEORGE PEMBA

*by Nkgopoleng Moloi*

overlaps, with each artist paying attention to immediate surroundings as a subject matter. Pemba's modernist aspirations are expressed through his art, his political involvement through brief contributions to ANC's political newspaper *Isizwe*, and through a keen interest in literature — having written and staged at least two plays; *The Story of Nongqawuse* and *The Xhosa Prophet Ntsikana*. His modernism is best articulated through what art historian Salah Hassan refers to as African modernism, “marked by certain experiences considered integral to the African experience for the last four centuries, such as slavery, colonialism, and the violent rupture colonialism created with tradition.”<sup>1</sup> Pemba's influences in the Eastern Cape, as well as places he travelled to, within and around the country (then Transvaal, Western Cape and Basotholand), are presented in his work. His is a faithful portrayal of history with all the fire and romance which lay dormant in our history. His contributions to modernist aesthetics and frameworks paved way for a new generation of artists through what might be referred to as a Black aesthetic— an aesthetic concerned with the ethics and creation of the self in the face of historic denial by society.

Often characterised by colour, bold composition and impasto brushstrokes, Pemba's work is accented through tonal rhythm. In his work, tone is encountered as memory and rhythm as a vector of existence. His extensive subject matter reveals his willingness to imaginatively probe beyond fixed and static boundaries

to capture the intersubjective relationships within society. His work reveals the undeniable fact that the Black experience cannot be reduced or made fully transparent — a Xhosa woman smoking a pipe (1945), a young couple at the movie theatre (*The audience*, 1960), a young nurse performing her duties (*At the clinic*, 1979), a group of women gathered around a table (*The Gossipers III*, 1990). His practice is a reminder that identity is an endless, ever-unfinished conversation.

## **“tone is encountered as memory and rhythm as a vector of existence.**

For George Pemba, born in 1912 in the Eastern Cape, painting was the vessel through which to materialise the complexities of race, identity and the fashioning of oneself during oppressive times. His work illustrates the textures and depths of Black life in South Africa. Spanning six decades, his career is expansive, coalescing watercolour and oil paintings depicting everyday life through landscape imagery, portraiture, as well as township and pastoral scenes. Pemba visually chronicled the history of South Africa — drawing attention to the real socio-political conditions of the working class as a means of critique of

<sup>1</sup> Hassan, S. 2010. 'African Modernism: Beyond Alternative Modernities Discourse', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 109: 3.

<sup>2</sup> Howell, P. 2020. 'In her own image - moulding the future from the past'. *Dispatches from the Vanguard: The Global International African Arts Movement versus Donald J. Trump*. Repeater Books. London: 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Gayle, A. 1971. 'Introduction'. *The Black Aesthetic*. Doubleday Books. United States. xv.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

apartheid-era power structures. Writing in his architectural MA thesis, Pemba's grandson and scholar Nqaba Mangcu locates Pemba's practice within that of social history, stating; "As a social historian, Pemba's art revealed processes of modernization in which a resilient black culture endured extreme oppression during apartheid."

## "the figure is a sign of life."

PAINTED WITH OIL ON BOARD, *Portrait of the Barman from Fourways* (1976) is a classic portrait — a man's face and bust fill the frame. His features are prominent; short hair, a beard and eyes looking intently at the viewer. Through a balance of colour —varying shades of green, yellow and brown— Pemba intensifies the light around his frame. The painting offers a strong feeling of form, with the eyes as a natural focal point, perhaps representing and signifying the complexities of looking and being looked at. Seemingly subtle and unprovocative, *Portrait of the Barman from Fourway* is significant when read through the context of the period within which it was made. The painting is dated 1976, a year of turmoil and terror when images of the Black body in pain, dead or dying were circulating on a global scale. Hector Pieterse. Mbuyisa Makhubo. Antoinette Sithole.

We have not yet passed the point where we should tire of figurative art. Just as we are beginning to see images of ourselves as the Black community, we are being told to think about "post-identity" and "post figure". But of course, these images play an important role in our understanding of Black life.

Works such as *Portrait of the Barman from Fourways* offer us the opportunity to reconsider and reformulate history through representation at a time when critical engagement with the Black figure is necessary or rather, continues to be necessary. In an interview, art historian Darby English notes; "...the figure is a sign of life. And in a protracted series of [the unnecessary] death [of Black people], signs of life are utterly crucial and need to be honored absolutely." He elaborates, "we need to be able to make distinctions between, say, figures of Black vitality, magical commodity figures, figures that challenge the terms of their commodification, and figures that do important representational work precisely because they're hard to "figure out," which is how we consume culture." Two decades after his death, Pemba's images of Black life continue to hold relevance and operate in the realm of figurative works that have important work to perform, as Pemba himself noted: "My objective is to interpret the feeling of my people."

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<sup>5</sup> "Identity is an endless, ever-unfinished conversation" is a concept popularised through Jamaican-British sociologist, Stuart Hall's writings.

<sup>6</sup> Mangcu, N. 2012. "The George Pemba Art Museum: how memory translates into design". *Design Research Project*. University of Cape Town.

<sup>7</sup> English, D. 'Art Historian Darby English on Why the New Black Renaissance Might Actually Represent a Step Backwards,' [Artnet](#), 26 February 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Msila, V. 2014. *A Place to Live: Red Location and its History from 1903 to 2013*. Sun Media Metro: Stellenbosch, p. 137.