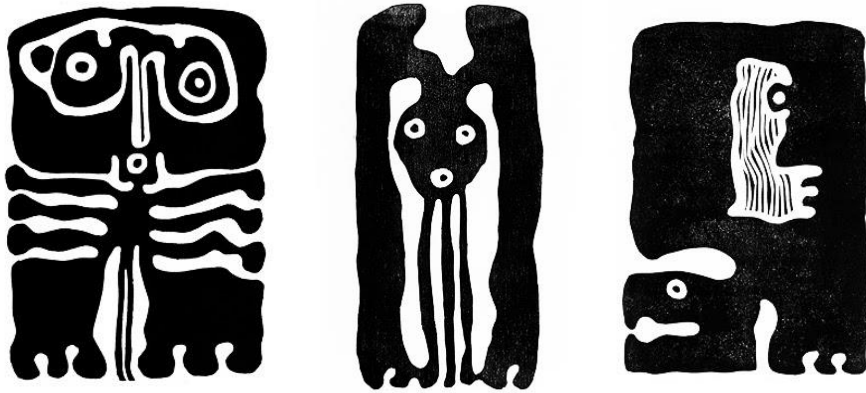


## Wopko Jensma

July 2015

### *Wopko Jensma and the Halcyon Days of 1972*

Everybody has their good and bad years, their up's and down's and their fair share of disappointments and regrets. Life can be hard at times and one does one's best to overcome the difficulties and challenges which befall each of us.



*Wail for the Beast i*, linocut on paper, proof, 30 x 22 cm, 1972

*Wail for the Beast ii*, linocut on paper, proof, 33,5 x 17 cm, 1972

*Wail for the Beast iii*, linocut on paper, proof, 30 x 19 cm, 1972

The artist, due to the nature of their chosen profession, is in an especially difficult and vulnerable position. They expose themselves emotionally and intellectually in the act of creativity and as a result are often misunderstood. Even worse than this are the all too frequent cases of artists who were once feted and famous, only for there to be an often inexplicable fall from grace. When this happens an artist is often left creatively and financially stranded with no way back to the halcyon days of yesteryear when they produced their best work. One way of explaining this phenomenon is the invisible shift in consciousness which is a gradual and ongoing process, diminishing the sphere of influence of an older generation of artists and collectors, who are slowly replaced with a younger generation who inevitably come with a different emphasis. Bearing this process in mind one is always challenged, not only by the perplexing question of what makes for good and bad art, but also the exact period that an artist's best works were produced. This is heady stuff and the answers can often only be seen with the luxury of hindsight, making this largely the domain of the art historian and museum curator.



*Wail for the Beast iv*, linocut on paper, 3/10, 32 x 15 cm, 1972

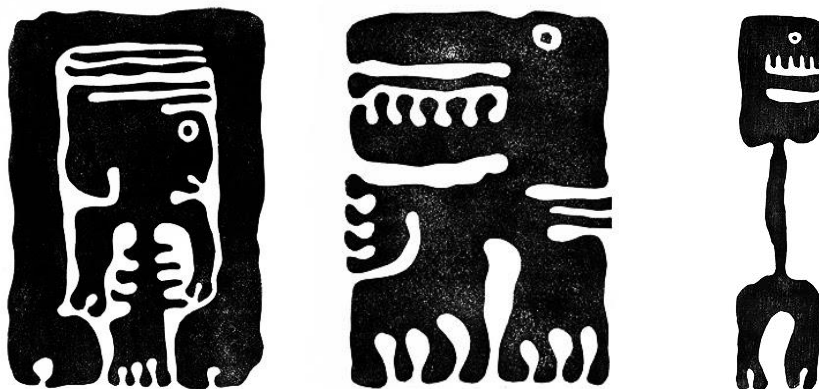
*Wail for the Beast v*, linocut on paper, proof, 29,5 x 19 cm, 1972

*Wail for the Beast vi*, linocut on paper, 9/15, 23 x 22 cm, 1972

I held my first exhibition of works by Wopko Jensma in July 1996 from a small display window in Rosebank, Johannesburg. I have continued to take a deep interest in the work of Wopko Jensma as both a poet and artist and am more convinced than ever that he is one of the most underrated and misunderstood artists of his generation. Another man who thought this almost forty-five years ago was Walter Battiss who wrote the following testimonial in support of Wopko Jensma saying:

*It gives me pleasure to testify to the art talent of WOPKO JENSMA whom I have known as a sincere and very talented artist. When I first saw his work I was attracted by his originality and purchased one of his works to hang in the University. His graphic work has both simplicity and power and is quite different from any other work being created here. Wopko Jensma is an artist I expect much from in the future.*

*(Professor) Walter Battiss F.R.S.A.F.I.A.L. Head, Department of Fine Arts, University of South Africa, 18 December 1970.*



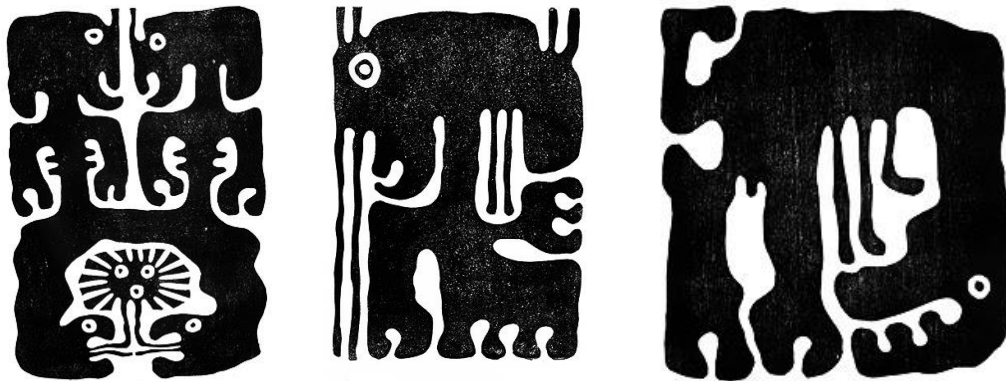
*Wail for the Beast vii*, linocut on paper, 1/10, 33 x 21 cm, 1972

*Wail for the Beast viii*, linocut on paper, 1/10, 29 x 19,5 cm, 1972

*Wail for the Beast ix*, linocut on paper, 7/10, 35 x 18 cm, 1972

The proof that Battiss was correct came in 1972 when Wopko Jensma created an astonishing series of small linocuts which were first exhibited at Gallery Y in Hillbrow under the title *Wail for the Beast*. The exhibition opened on Sunday 28 May 1972. A great number of his finest poems were also written between 1971 and 1972. Ophir/Ravan selected what they considered to be his best twelve linocuts from the series *Wail for the Beast* to illustrate his finest sixty-five poems which were published the following year in his debut volume of poetry titled *Sing for My Execution* (1973). The publication of *Sing for My Execution* is still considered to be one of the great events and milestones in the history of South African poetry. Lionel Abrahams summed things up well writing for the Rand Daily Mail on 7 June 1973 saying:

*At a time when people are more than ever aware of their colour, even in the arts, Wopko Jensma is the only South African artist in any medium who has transcended the barriers. His work is neither English nor Afrikaans, Black nor White.*



*Wail for the Beast x*, linocut on paper, 1/10, 25 x 18 cm, 1972

*Wail for the Beast xi*, linocut on paper, 1/10, 31 x 20 cm, 1972

*Wail for the Beast xii*, linocut on paper, proof, 21 x 19 cm, 1972

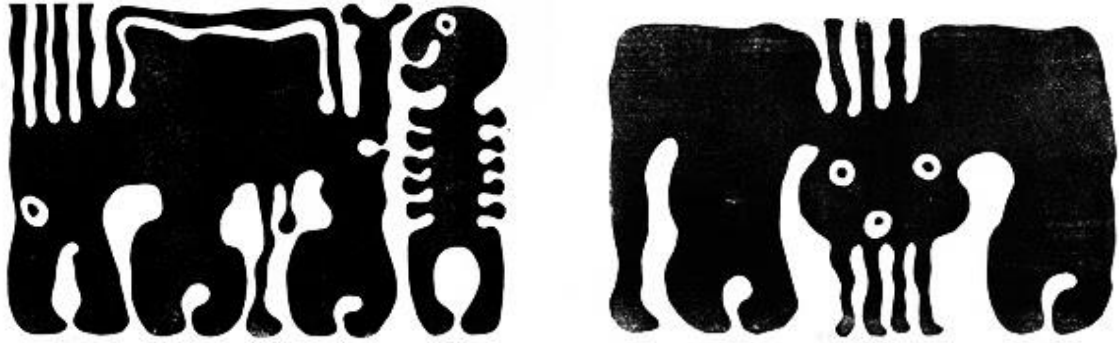
Although Wopko was on a roll things were starting to unravel. His second volume of poetry *Where White is the Colour Where Black is the Number* (1974) was banned, causing Wopko enormous financial hardship and loss, due to the fact that this title could not be sold in the public domain. He also had severe personal problems as his estranged wife Lydia was trying to extract money from him for the support of their four children. He also received devastating and shocking news from the Department of Interior. In a letter written by the Secretary of Internal Affairs, a Mr R van Niekerk on 20 August 1977 he stated on behalf of the South African Government:

*Mnr W P Jensma*

*Met verwysing na u skrywe van 1977-06-20, wens ek met u deel dat, volgens beskikbare inligting, u vier kinders geen aanspraak op Suid Afrikaanse burgerskap, ingevolge die Wet op Suid-Afrikaanse Burgerskap, No 44 van 1949, het nie, aangesien hulle geboortes nie volgens artikel 6 van bogenoemde Wet in Suid-Afrika geregistreer is nie.*

*Soos reeds aan u verduidelik in my brief van 29 Mei 1974 kan die uitreiking van visums aan u kinders slegs oorweeg word indien hulle in besit is van geldige reisdokumente.*

*Die uwe  
R. van Niekerk*



*Wail for the Beast xiii, linocut on paper, 7/10, 26 x 32 cm, 1972*

*Wail for the Beast xiv, linocut on paper, 1/5, 23 x 32 cm, 1972*

Not only is the news devastating on a father who wants nothing more than to be reunited with his own children but is aggravated by the fact that he had been in correspondence with the Department of Interior for over three years. A month later to add insult to injury he received the following letter written by Mr P M Dlamini of the Immigration Department of the Swaziland Government saying:

*Dear Sir*

*Your letter dated 21 June, 1977 addressed to the Registrar General refers.*

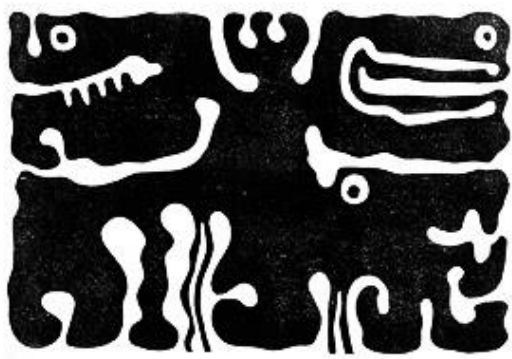
*Your children are entitled to Swaziland citizenship provided you are a Swaziland citizen by registration.*

*In 1974 the constitution was repealed and the King's Order – in – Council no. 22 of 1974 substituted. It follows, therefore, that any person born in the Kingdom by parents who are not citizens of Swaziland, their children are not Swazis as well.*

*Yours faithfully*

*P. M. Dlamini, for/CHIEF IMMIGRATION OFFICER*

*19<sup>th</sup> September, 1977*



*Wail for the Beast xv*, linocut on paper, 3/10, 24 x 32 cm, 1972

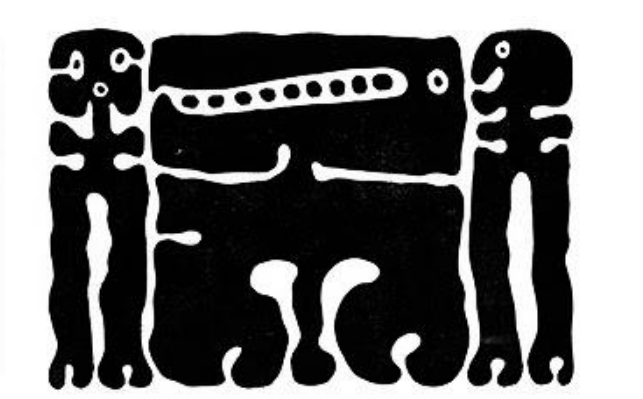
*Wail for the Beast xvi*, linocut on paper, 3/10, 24 x 32 cm, 1972

With these two letters putting an end to the possibility of being reunited with his children in South Africa, his ongoing financial difficulties and the decline in his mental health and well being Wopko Jensma dropped off the scene at roughly the time these letters were written. This was also the same time his third and final volume of poetry *I Must Show You My Clippings* (1977) was published.

Ten years later in 1987 Michael Gardiner, the South African literary expert and great supporter of Wopko Jensma's work, tracked him down. His recollections of that day formed part of an extensive article submitted to the Mail & Guardian who published the piece on 10 March 2000 under the title *Looking for Wopko Jensma*:

*When I visited Jensma at the Salvation Army Men's Home in Simmonds Street, Johannesburg, I understood how, once in one's cubicle amid the other unwashed, down-and-out men, it could prove difficult if not impossible to leave such a place, enclosed as one is in that relatively stable and simplified society, where access to fresh instant coffee is a significant event. As a recipient of a state pension for the permanently disabled – a pension which the home drew on his behalf and gave him credit at its tuck-shop – Jensma had ceased to produce both the poetry and the graphics for which he is so respected. Earlier and extensive support from his friends in Pretoria, Cape Town and Johannesburg had dwindled, and he spent his days on the streets or in the Carlton Centre for warmth, scrutinising scraps of paper and conversing in a loosely associative manner, unable to write or draw.*

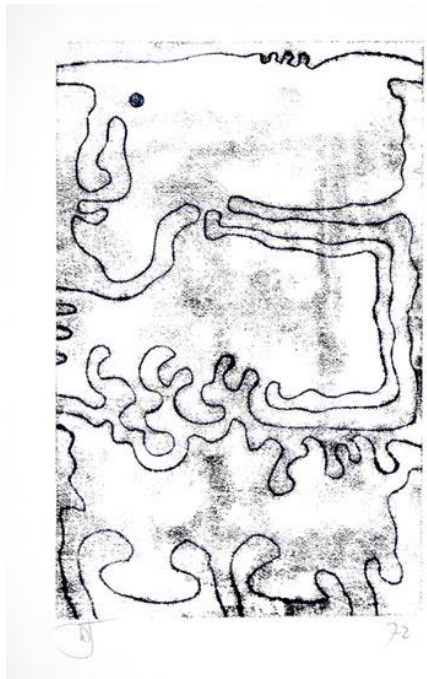
*This identity as a tramp, derelict and painfully lost soul meant, ironically, that far from being born in four distinct situations ("Spanner in What Works?" 1975), he was now living nowhere, doing nothing and without any directness at all.*



*Wail for the Beast xvii*, linocut on paper, 4/5, 21.5 x 26 cm, 1972  
*Wail for the Beast xviii*, linocut on paper, 3/10, 20 x 31 cm, 1972

*So when his daughters and son contacted me in 1989 and came to see him at the home, a 20-year gap had to be leaped by both them and him. Though there was further contact between the children and their father, he chose to remain where he was in the shelter of a racially exclusive environment rather than live with his children in Johannesburg or back in Swaziland.*

*At some point in 1993, he was taken to the Johannesburg General Hospital for his weekly treatment. When the Salvation Army driver came to fetch him, he was nowhere to be found. I established that his pension was last drawn in August 1993. The next year, the Salvation Army Men's Home burned to the ground. People who knew Jensma were contacted in all the major centres, the Salvation Army checked all its shelters and attempts were made to determine whether he had entered a mental home in Pretoria. All efforts failed to produce any trace of him.*



SOMETIME NEXT TIME  
 i plant my corn on the rocks  
 it does not grow  
 i plant my corn oh fertile land  
 it does not grow  
 next time i plant  
 i'll start beyond  
 i'll start beyond the bread

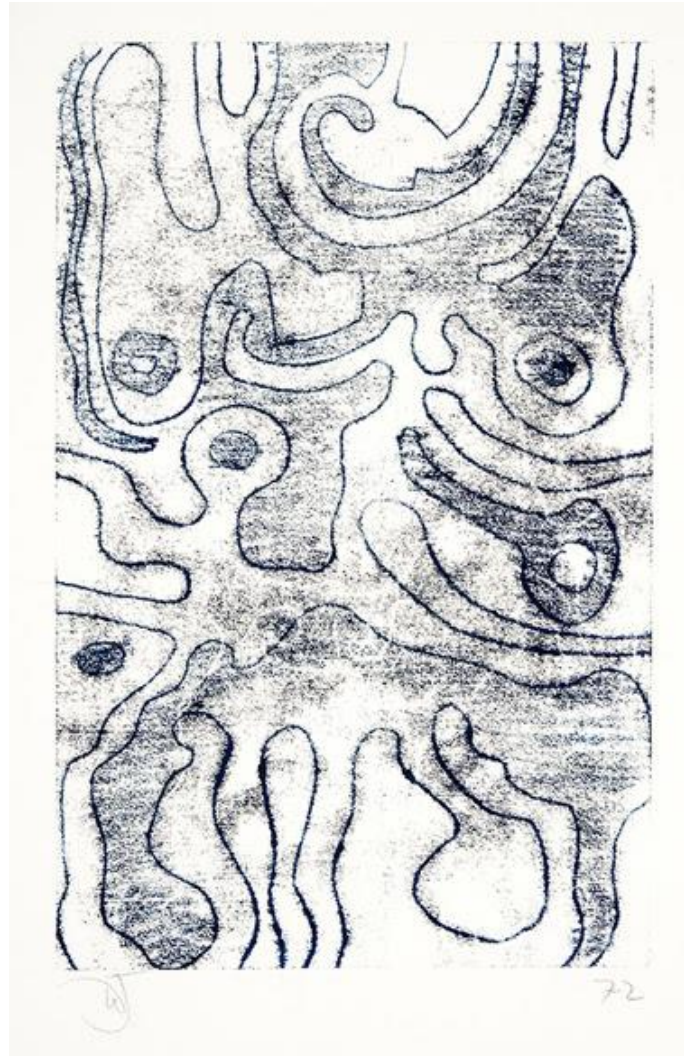
*Sometime Next Time*, hand written poem by Wopko Jensma in black ink and corresponding monotype, unique, 56 x 76 cm, 1972. Another 8 poems and corresponding monotypes are also available for sale.

This was not the first time that an influential poet had disappeared under mysterious circumstances. The American Beat poet Lew Welch (1926 – 1971), who was a dear friend of Allen Ginsberg, walked off into the mountains of the Sierra Nevada in May 1971 carrying a shotgun. He was living on Ginsberg's mountain farm at the time and was suffering severe bouts of depression. His body was never found. His final poem titled *Song of the Buzzard Turkey*, written in early



1971 shortly before his disappearance, was a song of desire to re-enter the food chain - literally to be picked apart by the buzzards.

*Not the bronze casket but the brazen wing/Soaring forever above thee o perfect/O sweetest water o glorious/Wheeling/Bird/With proper ceremony disemboweled what I/No longer need, that it might more quickly/Rot and tempt/My new form.*



SING A SOUL OF SIXPENCE

hack open their skulls with stenguns  
blood will spurt through guilt

yes, a communal fear unites us  
some forts are impenetrable

*Sing a Soul of Sixpence*, hand written poem by Wopko Jensma in black ink and corresponding monotype, unique, 56 x 76 cm, 1972. Another 8 poems and corresponding monotypes are also available for sale.

Although hardship, adversity and tragedy brought an abrupt and untimely end to Wopko Jensma's distinctive style of poetry and graphic art, nothing can change the fact, that in 1972, when this body of 33 linocuts, poems, monotypes and carved panels was produced, he was at the zenith of his creative powers. These works have been painstakingly assembled over the past three years with about half the works emanating from the collection of his dear friend and poet from Pretoria, David Botes (1935 – 2013). David Botes and his wife Marti supported Wopko through thick and thin and would always help him out financially. On Sunday 2 June 2013 David Botes died suddenly at age 78 due to a heart attack with a small portrait and obituary appearing two days later in Die Beeld.



*Panel i (Head in Profile), carved, incised and painted wooden panel, unique, 15 x 15 cm, 1972*

*Panel ii (Skeletal Figure), carved, incised and painted wooden panel, unique, 30 x 7 cm, 1972*

*Panel iii (Four Heads), carved, incised and painted wooden panel, unique, 30 x 30 cm, 1972*

Wopko wrote his last letter to David Botes on 12 November 1985 shortly after returning from Cape Town where he was staying in a government home in Perth Street, Observatory. The letter reads:

*Beste David*

*Ek is nou in Johannesburg. Kan ek jou miskien in die dorp kry as jy weer boekwinkels toe kom? Het jy nog geld vir my? Of ek kan een dag Pretoria toe kom met die trein. Hoop dit gaan nog goed met jou en Martie.*

*Groete*

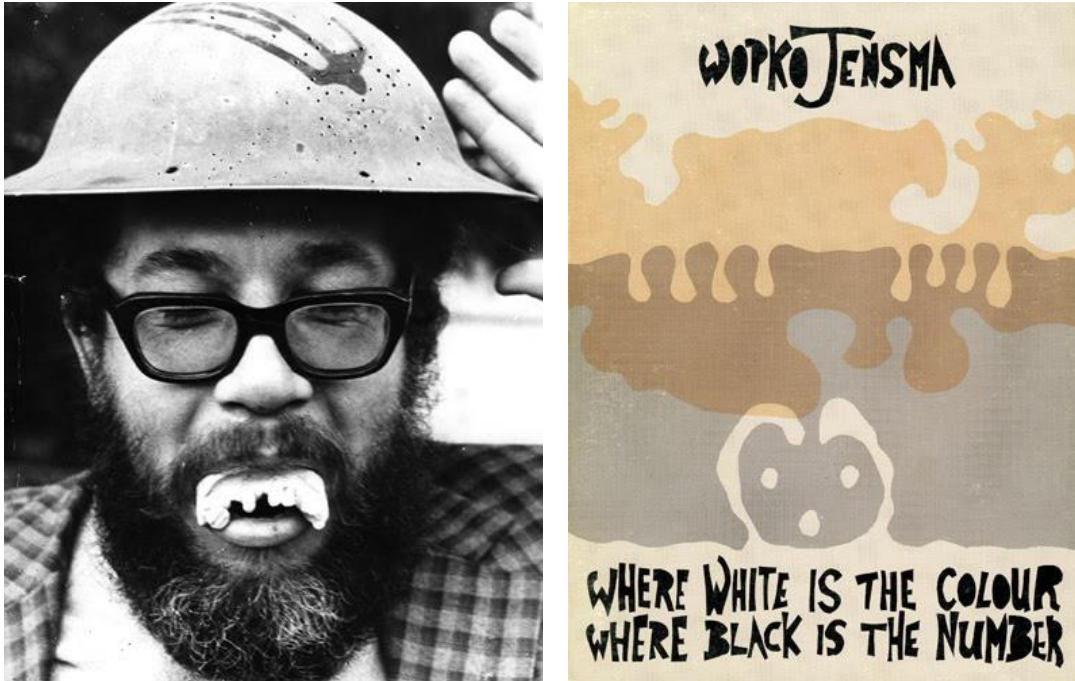
*Wopko.*

This was the last time Wopko sent David Botes a letter after a friendship that spanned more than two decades.

Jensma is gone; Botes is gone, along with most of Wopko's close friends and associates. What is left however is a rich body of poetry and graphic work which deserves our time and attention for the simple reason that is it some of the finest work to have been produced in South



Africa in the 70s in both the fields of poetry and graphic art.



Wopko Jensma (b 1939), back in 1973 in happier times when beards were originally in fashion.  
Wopko Jensma (b 1939), *Where White is the Colour Where Black is the Number*, published in 1975 and banned for possession in 1976.

It is also interesting to note, when referring to Gallery Y's newsletter announcing *Wail for the Beast* that they made the following comment:

*The prices? Really, we are not fooling you: R 16 to R 25.*

To put these prices into perspective today a silkscreen by Walter Battiss titled *Orgy 5* (1973) was sold at the beginning of June this year at Strauss and Co for R 47 700,00. This same print cost R 30,00 in 1974. A linocut from the *Wail for the Beast* series by Wopko Jensma, which sold for R 16,00 in 1972, is therefore competitively priced at R 12 500,00 in the current market.

As it happens Wopko Jensma was 33 years of age in 1972, making the 33 works collated for this exhibition a fitting tribute to a great South African artist and poet.

All works will be available for sale at the Turbine Art Fair,  
Warren Siebrits, Stand GH 14, 17 – 19 July, 2015.

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