

# What happened to Wopko Jensma?

Unlike contemporaries Ernest Mancoba and Gerard Sekoto, the elusive artist did not enjoy a late-career rebound.

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19 Apr 2013 11:52 - Sean O'Toole



Distinctive style: Wopko Jensma.

We know where artist Dumile Feni went when he got tired - tired of his “soft voice”, tired of being “their darling”, as Wopko Jensma wrote in 1973. He went to London. The same cannot be said of Jensma, the ambidextrous slang poet, graphic artist and vernacular conceptualist whose head full of jazz became clouded with noise as he grew older.

Jensma’s incantatory poem *Portrait of the Artist*, which celebrates Dumile’s journey “elsewhere”, possesses the tone of augury when applied to his own myth-prone biography. Born in 1939, in the Eastern Cape town of Middelburg, and schooled at Potchefstroom and Pretoria universities, Jensma’s life ended imprecisely: some time in the early 1990s, near Simmonds Street in central Johannesburg.

“Having lived for some years in the Salvation Army Men’s Home in Johannesburg, he was taken one day in 1993 to hospital for his routine medication but was nowhere to be found thereafter,” writes Michael Gardiner in the catalogue accompanying a timely survey at Johannesburg’s Gallery AOP of this enigmatic artist’s output. “Searches of different kinds at different times have yielded nothing of his actual whereabouts.”

In a way, Jensma’s disappearances were gradual, until they became decisive and total. In a remembrance included in the catalogue, art historian Elza Miles mentions last seeing Jensma in 1988. It was shortly before the opening of *The Neglected Tradition*, curator Steven Sack’s revisionist history of South African art from the years 1930 to 1988.

## **A spent force**

Unlike Ernest Mancoba and Gerard Sekoto, two key South African modernist painters featured alongside Jensma on this landmark exhibition at the Johannesburg Art Gallery, he did not enjoy a late-career rebound. Celebrated by Peter Horn in 1977 as “the first South African” — a hyperbolic claim made in an era when it was necessary to dream the impossible — by 1993, when it was reasonable to imagine life here as more than just numbered colours and regulated binaries, Jensma was a spent force.

Tracking his career as a printmaker, abstract painter and sculptor who flared briefly in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Gallery AOP’s *Possessing Tools/Professing Artistry* gathers some two dozen of his works. It is a modest but valuable showcase.

The sampling, which took seven years to assemble, shows Jensma as someone ecstatically immersed in the spirit of his time. His print multiples, many featuring his strangely proportioned human and animal figures, come in both small and large, deadpan black and Battiss-rivalling primary colours.

The show includes an attractive 1974 screenprint of an abstract black form laid on a yellow ground. Printed in an edition of 250 and marketed by artist Fred Schimmel’s Graphics Club, the work easily rivals Battiss’s popular faux primitivist work from the same period.

Unlike Battiss, on whose door he knocked in 1968 for a recommendation, Jensma was not a colourist. Dealers Alet Vorster and Wilhelm van Rensburg have, however, found a number of singular pieces that reveal a warmth and complexity to Jensma’s visual output.

The lone painting on view is a gorgeous burnt-orange colour field piece with rhizome-like shoots reaching into a horizontally diminishing area of black. It is not for sale. There is also a large wood relief mural overlaid with red, orange, pink and hints of green (R200 000), as well as a coppery green and sunflower-yellow monotype and gouache (R60 000).

Jensma is the source of some perplexity for art historians. Was he a proto-conceptualist? Or is he a syncretist of the ilk of Cecil Skotnes and the rest of the Amadlozi Group? Was he perhaps *sui generis*, one of those inexplicable polyglots who defy pigeonholing?

Leti Kleyn’s work-in-progress biography may shed light on these querulous typological questions, as well as tame the mythmaking. Who knows, it may even do for Jensma what a recent doccie did for Sixto Rodríguez. But, until then, it is just as Jensma wrote in 1977: “I still find myself in a situation.”

***Possessing Tools/Professing Artistry* is at Gallery AOP until May 4, 2013**