

story and photographs by LESLIE SEHUME

# HE TALKS WITH HIS HANDS

## OF TREES AND ROCKS AND THINGS . . .

**He started off modelling simple clay animals. Today Cabinet Ministers and Prime Ministers buy his works and his name is famous right around the world**

◀ The artist with one of his pieces of sculpture which is in the lounge of his home in Katlehong. He calls it *Angel Of The North*.

IT'S an ordinary house. It has drab walls and four rooms. It's no different from all the other houses down the dry, dusty street in Goba Section, Katlehong.

But there's something about it which attracts your attention. There's a large, dead, uprooted tree with twisted branches on the pavement. It didn't grow there. Someone with an eye for the unusual has put it there. Not far from it is a huge grey rock, roughly carved.

It too has been placed there by human hands.

You knock gently on the door. It opens . . . and there in front of you, sitting on a low chair with a pretty, two-year-old child on his lap, welcoming you with a broad smile, is one of South Africa's most successful sculptors and artists — Stanley Nkosi.

He is wearing a simple T-shirt and a pair of faded blue denims. Yet this is the man whose works have been exhibited in some of the

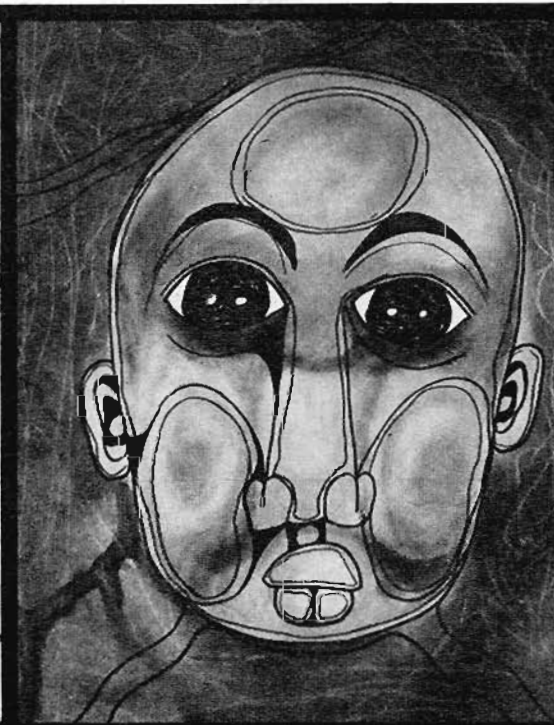
world's leading art galleries — London, New York, Chicago, Johannesburg, Pretoria, Wellington (New Zealand) and Paris.

Stanley's life began in Newcastle, Natal in 1945.

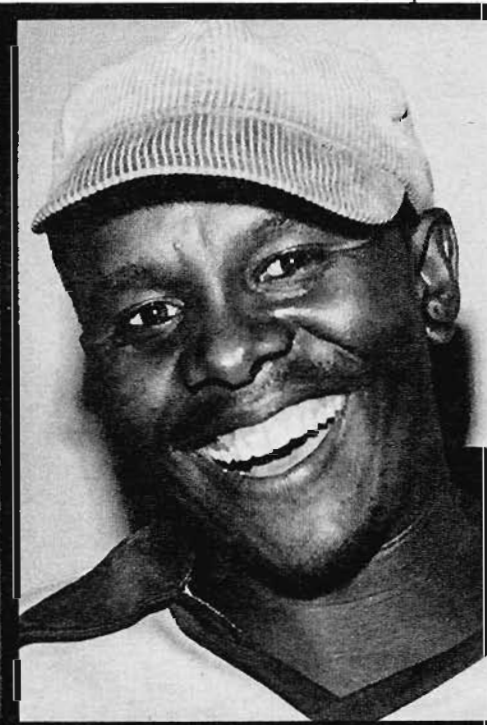
"I loved playing around with clay even then, he says. "And I loved nothing better than to model cattle and other animals — lion, leopard, wild cats, the lot. I also used to sketch on any piece of paper I could lay



▲ Another drawing by Stanley called *The Herdboy*.



▲ Stanley says this is a self-portrait and calls it *Stanley Nkosi After 77 Years*.



▲ Artist and sculptor, Stanley Nkosi.

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← my hands on. Sometimes this used to get me into trouble with my parents who said I was neglecting my school work for what they referred to as "these funny things."

Stanley is the youngest of Eliakim and Belinah Nkosi's eight children. In the early '50s, the family settled in the old Germiston Location known lovingly by residents as Dukathole.

Stanley went to school in Germiston and Swaziland and completed his education in Newcastle. He went back to Germiston with a Junior Certificate.

"Throughout this

time," says Stanley, "I kept on with my drawing and modelling. Somehow there was something compelling me to create things with my hands or draw something on paper. This interest was still with me even when I started a job in a lamp factory where I decorated the bases of lamps, in 1973.

"Still, I wasn't satisfied and I felt the urge to work more on art. After three months, I threw up the job and went to find what I was looking for."

At this time both his parents were dead and he went to live with an uncle in Katlehong.

One day he was

walking in the streets of Germiston when he saw a sign on a shop door saying African Art Project. Here he met a man who introduced him to Mrs Linda Goodman of Goodman Galleries in Johannesburg.

"It was Mrs Goodman who suggested that I join an art school run by Peter Hayden in Craighall Park. I studied part time and worked as a messenger during the day. I was a private student as most of the students were White.

"Soon I was making extra money by selling fellow students my work, which they loved. I learned sculpture and was soon taking part in group exhibitions. My work attracted attention. Later I decided on one-man shows. My first was at the Hopman Gallery in Glenhazel, Johannesburg. From that

moment I never looked back."

A short while later he was invited to exhibit his work in London — one of his greatest ambitions.

"There I was sitting in the aircraft, flying to England," he said. "Would I make it, I kept asking myself. All I had in my pocket was R300. Money for living expenses would have to come from the sale of my work. It worried me, but I was prepared to take the chance and the opportunity.

"On the first night of the exhibition, I simply couldn't believe it. I had sold only two pieces. That was bad, I felt. After all, back in Johannesburg I normally sold everything right from the first night. That night I cried myself to sleep."

The following day, he met up with two women who had seen him on



▲ Stanley's two paintings called *The Warriors* are on the glass portion of a door dividing the lounge from the kitchen in his home.

▲ Young Neo Sehume with two pieces by Stanley. On the left is *Grandfather* while *Mongoose* is near the setee.

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British television and they invited him to dinner.

"I thought little of the meeting until they came to fetch me one evening for dinner. As we went outside to the car I noticed that there was a special driver with a peaked cap and dust-coat. It was strange.

"We drove for what appeared to be several hours before we reached a large house with beautiful gardens. We were joined at the dinner table by an old English gentleman whom my new friends called Daddy.

"He wanted to know what part of Africa I was from. When I told him he

said he had visited South Africa some years previously and that he had met Dr Verwoerd.

"On the way home later that evening I asked the ladies who the old gentleman was. When they told me he was a former British Prime Minister, I nearly fell out of the car. I had been talking to Mr Harold MacMillan himself!"

(Mr Harold MacMillan was the Prime Minister of Britain in the late '50s and early '60s).

Mr MacMillan came to Stanley's exhibition and bought two pieces. The British newspapers wrote about it and from then on more and more of

Stanley's works were sold.

The singer Diana Ross, who was appearing in a theatre near the gallery where Stanley was exhibiting also came in and bought one of his works.

And so Stanley Nkosi, an unknown artist, had "made it" in the difficult world of British art with his first exhibition in London. He came home two months later completely satisfied.

One day a son of the late Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya bought two of Stanley's animal sculptures in Johannesburg and took them back to Atlanta City in the United States. He entered the sculptures in a wildlife competition in Oklahoma City — and they won first prize!

Mr Kenyatta then wanted Stanley to go to the United States.

"This was 1976," says

Stanley, "and I was preparing to travel to England for my second exhibition. It was decided that at the end of my English exhibition, I would fly on to the United States. My American prize was a trophy and R1 500."

Last year, Stanley was again invited to the United States where he exhibited at the University of Omaha, Lincoln University, the Great Plains Museum and the First Federal Bank of Lincoln City. He sold everything.

"This year, I have been invited by the African Arts Gallery in Washington DC to visit the States. I'll start exhibiting in San Fransisco, then on to New York City before going on to Washington. They only want bronze pieces. They'll pay my air fare as well as other



▲ The artist leans against a large, roughly carved rock outside his home. He brought the rock to Katlehong by truck.



▲ Stanley with his wife Mabel and their three daughters. From left Samantha (11), Dudu (2) and Pindile (7).

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← expenses."

Since 1971, Stanley has been associated with the Katlehong Arts Centre in Natalspruit.

His work has been bought by the Transvaal Museum and he has been complimented by South African cabinet ministers Dr Piet Koornhof, Dr A. P. Treurnicht and Mr W. A. Cruywagen, former Minister of Education and Training and the present Administrator of the

Transvaal.

Stanley has exhibited in South Africa with such great South African artists as Lucas Sithole, Sidney Khumalo, Zoltan Borboreki and Sidney Goldblatt.

"I have a talent that has been given to me by God," he says. "I never thought that it would, one day, become a paying proposition. I've taken chances in life and they've paid off. I do believe that art is possibly the best medium

for building bridges between the peoples of South Africa as well as with those in other lands."

At present, he is building an art gallery, a studio and a modern home in Katlehong.

"I've made arrangements with tourist agencies to bring

tourists to the gallery. I also intend exhibiting my own work as well as that of other artists."

As we left, he was bringing an old piece of iron wood into the house. "I picked this up in KwaZulu," he said.

"You'll see what I turn out of it once I get started!"

A lithograph (drawing) hanging in Stanley's home. It is one of his earlier works and has no name. ▶

