Malangatana: *Viagem Salvadora*, Where Blood and Tears Run

It was mid-August and winter in Mozambique when I called Malangatana on the telephone from Maputo. “Yes, come tomorrow,” he said, “between 4:00 and 5:00.” I was surprised at how easy it was to talk to him, how he immediately made time for an interview, and then, the near impossibility of finding my way to his house and studio in the Bairro do Aeroporto on the outskirts of the city.[1]

We were driving a rented car with South African plates and were oddly out of place as we pulled into a petrol station to ask for directions. “Malangatana?” Oh yes, they knew him. The artist. A great man. So important, you know, as an artist and during the revolution. We will tell you where. “That way, over there, down that dirt road, turn left, you’ll find him. A big red house.” And there he was, with his assistant, kind, imposing, generous, ready to answer questions. We sat among his paintings and books, his volumes of poems and prints rolled up in the corner of the room. Everywhere there was evidence of his work and the importance that it has had in defining a particular language of Mozambican art and culture: a mural on the façade of the house, inside on the walls and the ceiling. “You’ve come at a good time,” he said. “I’ll show you what I’ve been doing, and we’ll walk through the house so that you can see everything.” From the doorway, his assistant nodded his head and then disappeared. After we had sat together for a while, we wandered through the house, opening trunks, looking at his books, entering his studio and talking about his family, of his daughter in Rome. He was thoughtful and laughed easily, open and ready to answer everything that I asked.

Long before his political beliefs during the revolution and the role he played in it were known, Malangatana was recognized as an artist. He began as a ball boy at the Clube de Tênis in Lourenço Marques, where he met mentors who gave him materials and space where he could work. Augusto Cabral, a scientist and artist, gave him paint, brushes and plywood and advised him to “paint what is in your head.” This meant the myths that he knew, a spirit world, and an early blend of Western and African imagery. In the early 1960s, Pancho Guedes, the architect who collected his work, was the architect of his house, and with whom Malangatana had a lifelong friendship, gave him a garage to use as his studio

with the promise of buying two pictures a month at good prices. Before long, Malangatana had planned an exhibition, and in 1961 he held his first solo exhibition in Lourenço Marques. He had received no academic training, and as a commentator remarked, revealed a genuinely original and creative form in which he featured familiar African themes.[2] From his earliest works, he used the intensity of color, and later red and blue specifically, to show the violence of colonialism and war. In our conversation, he emphasized this: that the traditions of the people among whom he lived, their sorcery, their monsters, and their healers were at the basis of what he felt, saw and put on canvas.

One of the ways to judge the talents and abilities of an artist is to observe the development from the early work to that of maturity. Broadly speaking, Malangatana's work can be divided into four phases. In the first, as a young painter in his twenties in the early 1960s, he painted expressionistic nudes that played with European culture. In some there are religious symbols and attributes of crosses and Bibles, Adam and Eve and the snake, or sleeping figures in blue surrounded by clocks, chairs and windows. These were experiments that extended to surrealistic-like narrative: secret voyages (*A Viagem Secreta*), lost women *(A Menina Perdida),* a note in *Historia da Carta no Chapeu* that ends with 'goodbye forever.'

In an early interview, Betty Schneider, who spoke with Malangatana in 1972, describes this early work as vivid and violent, displayed in heavily carved frames.[3] Claws, sharp teeth and blood are everywhere. In one of his early paintings, a man sits in a dentist's chair pulling a bloody tooth, Malangatana himself. His mother was the village expert at sharpening teeth, a tradition of the time. He watched her as she worked, and later in his paintings embedded sharp aggressive teeth that bite and threaten. From this early experience of pain, and his mother's profession, Malangatana unfurled paintings in which bared teeth of animals and humans repeatedly appear. In some paintings only the teeth are bared, stripped from the body and face.

Hair, too, has its place in these pictures. He likens the long black hair of women to the strings of a guitar, a trope that also appears in his poetry.

> "This is your hair,
> strings of Xitende
> strings of the Xipendane
> that Harossi and Tshinguele
> play."

Some of his poetry was published in *Black Orpheus.* From his earliest work, Malangatana was quick to experiment in various media: in painting and drawing, poetry and sculpture. He writes:

> "When she dies I shall cut off her
> hair to deliver me from sin
> Woman's hair shall be the blanket
> Over my coffin when another artist
> Calls me to Heaven to paint me…"[4]

Almost immediately, in the second phase in the mid to late 1960s, he made pictures of workers, wizards and diviners. Even his final judgments (*Juizo Final)* are invaded by the monsters from local mythology that became a trademark of his work and increased during the revolution. There are paintings of what he saw before him in the streets: women carrying water, densely packed men in forced labor (*O Trabalho Forçado*). He experienced firsthand the effects of physical repression and, by 1964, as a result of his imprisonment by the PIDE, there are drawings of men leaving for war and inmates packed into prison cells: *Cela 4, Cela Disciplinar I* and *Julgamento de Militantes da Frente de Liberação de Moçambique*; the last, a picture where the accused sit in court surrounded by lawyers and wives. His later paintings and etchings are different from the more Europeanized works of the early 1960s, many of them in the collection of Pancho Guedes. The work that followed, first in the 1970s and after in the third phase, more fully incorporated African mythologies and burst with the energy of creatures that recall birds, crocodiles, and pigs. They lean towards a world of fantasy, a world populated with animals that create a disquieting and ominous cosmology. "A cosmology," writes Júlio Navarro, "from popular culture, animals who move in the night in the secrecy of nocturnal darkness."[5] There is a return to the fire pit, to a blending of the real and unreal. With his use of magical ritual, so familiar to him, Malangatana relied on stories long known, the songs that he had learned as a child, the dances that he and others performed. He took what was familiar from his people and from the tradition that sustained them. This, Malangatana says in our conversation, this reference to his people was just a simple dialogue, full of life, "worth making as an expression of ourselves." But this art, with its African references and its representation of the struggle of Mozambicans, was seen as a threat by the colonial administration.

Finally, from the 1980s until his death, the artist's work retained its densely packed space populated by monsters with sharp teeth, but it was now painted

almost entirely in red and blue, with surfaces that by the 1990s were layered with scumbled dry paint: *Relatos do Tempo da Guerra dos 15 Anos* (1992), *Primavera Radiosa* (1995), and *Ritual Nocturna* (1995). These are the works that he showed in retrospectives in Lisbon and around the world. Some of them are stacked against the walls in his house; some are in the Museu Nacional de Arte. Many of the heads in these pictures look like Malangatana himself, his hooded eyes, lips divided into four parts, vertically and horizontally.[6]

By this time he had secured his subject matter and the dense manipulation of space in which figures are jammed together, much as one might see in an urban crowd, or in earlier pictures, in a teeming prison cell. Now the paintings are more freely drawn. They are more erotic, more explicit. Men and women kiss, embrace and copulate; there are erect phalluses, enlarged breasts, bellies and bodies sensually drawn with curving, wandering lines. (*Carta a Gelita* II, 1981). He repeatedly emphasizes ritual and magic, the *missanga* (beadwork) and the importance that family has for him.

Malangatana has always consistently used whatever came to mind, along with personal experience that included the faces of friends and family, birds, especially the owls they feared, lovers, ritual, dance. All of these have fed his work.

When I asked him about his work during the revolution, he replied: “Ah, yes, the revolution,” and looked away, though after awhile he began to talk about the cell where he had been imprisoned, densely packed with too many men, a jar used for a toilet. He was quiet. He remembered some of those with whom he had been held, and mentioned that he’d been questioned for seventeen hours at the PIDE headquarters at the Vila Algarve before being hauled off to Sommershild prison.[7] And then he went on to another topic. It was time, he said, to go upstairs, time to look at the enormous collection of his own work that he had retained, along with pieces of Ronga sculpture that are all over the house.[8] Malangatana was, and still is, known for his participation in the revolution as an artist, and he was taken by the PIDE, imprisoned in 1964 and again in 1965. He has spoken about this period at length in an interview recorded in Maputo in 2000 and published online in 2016 after his death. In the interview, he was explicit about his involvement with FRELIMO, his jail sentence, the conditions there and those he knew as part of the movement.[9]

He told the interviewer that he became politically aware at the end of the 1950s through reading the writings of Kwame Nkrumah[10] and the work of Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya on his education. As a participant in the Núcleo de Arte, the

local gallery in Lourenço Marques, Malangatana began to exhibit and continued to paint. At about the same time, he met José Craveirinha with whom he began to talk politics.[11] Malangatana had cared for the children of Portuguese colonials, and through them, was exposed to intellectuals whose conversations he heard, but whose ideas he didn't yet fully understand. Some of his friends had already been taken by the PIDE.[12] By 1962, Malangatana was already involved with FRELIMO, and remembers those that he knew: José Craveirinha, Daniel Tomé Magaia, Cristina Tembe with whom he was taken prisoner and others. "We were called to the Vila Algarve," he remembers. "This included Ebenizario Guambo whom I never saw again and many others, many part of the Centro Associativo dos Negros de Moçambique." Although Malangatana couldn't remember the name of the interrogator, he says that he remembers perfectly the three days from June 1 when they were taken prisoner, when he was questioned, how they were removed from the interrogation room, and, after three days, taken in a car that waited for them in the garage and sent to the jail. By this time, Ebenizario Guambo had already been murdered during the interrogation.

He remembers that the reasons for his being questioned had to do with his links to the Quarta Região Militar, and to the fact that he spent some time with the poet Craveirinha in Swaziland, out of Mozambique. Most tellingly, he describes the conditions of the cells, recalling that he was in Cell Four, so called after state mine Number Four where some of the prisoners had worked, the prisoners placed in a cell too small for so many, crawling with bedbugs, fed with bread and oranges thrown onto the cell floor covered with urine, and water provided according to the will of the jailer. His most telling record of this are the drawings that he did of these conditions: *Cell* 4 of June 27, 1965; *Calcinados 1965; Cela Disciplinar I*, 1965.

Six months later, he was taken prisoner a second time when the lawyers appeared to defend all prisoners. Finally, the PIDE had no further reason to detain them, and Malangatana and the others, who been well represented, were sent home from Machava, the second prison. Because of these lawyers, he says, "we were more or less untouchable." While there was no interrogation, the accused had to wait for six months for a final judgment. "Our work had been to sweep because we were political prisoners who also did some carpentry."

"I never stopped being a part of FRELIMO," he says. "I am honored to say this. None of our group left FRELIMO, the three hundred of us." From this time and after independence, Malangatana worked for various ministers in the government: as head of the department of Artesanatos for the Secretaria de Estado

da Cultura, and one of the teachers at the Escola de Estudos Culturais. He was consistently dedicated to teaching young artists, and collaborated with instructors who taught African art history and art at Eduardo Mondlane University where he demonstrated his belief in creating work with links to traditional culture, in his lectures, and by encouraging students to look at the designs used in beadwork and cloth as a basis for their work. In 1984, he established a small school in Matalana for children where they could sing, make pictures in the sand and improvise with the few materials they had.

During all of those years, from the Lisbon coup in 1974 through the formation of the new government in 1975, he painted and drew, and in the aftermath dedicated himself to educating the young. His late work done in the 1990s shows a greater technical skill and a fluency in conveying his message. But it was Malangatana's service to the revolution as an equal, a comrade and an artist who was known internationally that brought him focus and acclaim. The revolution provided him with ways to serve, with searing pictures of a nation under the thumb of oppression, but the exchange went both ways: the revolution elevated his work to an international audience and Malangatana provided the revolution with official designs that the new nation needed: with others, he worked on the flag, a stamp series with reproductions of his work, and his murals.

Malangatana has always drawn from his African roots, his people's personal lives, their resilience in the face of political struggle and violence and repression. The revolution, and those he met during and afterwards, gave his work a distinct focus, one useful for a new African nation and in this sense, his art was in service to a political idea. But the revolution also provided Malangatana with a greater sense of himself as an artist whose work had significance beyond the personal, and a sense of his place in his community. From his earliest work in 1957 to the work that he showed me as we walked through his house, there was development both with and through the revolution. The prison drawings done during his incarceration are reflections from 1965 on a period of hardship. His drawings from the 1970s, even after his Gulbenkian fellowship in Lisbon, continue to show what he had developed earlier in his concerns for ritual and tradition, and the murals that he did in 1985 continue to fill his canvases with what was his signature: many figures, rendered in shorthand, biting, and with widened eyes that look back at the observer. Although he was fully aware of the Western tradition of art, he did not waver from his initial impulse and revealed in his own visual and African inspired language a genuinely creative and African perspective.

To gain a sense of the range and diversity of Malangatana's expression and of the artist as a person, one has to look further. To see him dancing, singing, speaking with his neighbors and family gives an insight into the content and power of his work. In 2007, four years before he died, Isabel Noronha made *Ngwenya, o crocodilo*, a ninety-minute film that shows his formation in the mythical universe of the Ronga, with comments on his work by the writer Mia Couto. As spectators, we are given an intimate view of his daily life as we see him through the guiding eye of the camera with Noronha as guide. Noronha, a friend of Malangatana's daughter, had seen his drawings and paintings as a child and asks Malangatana why he draws so many bloody monsters, to which the artist replies, "they are my friends and magical beings."

Structurally, the film is a series of fragments that lacks a distinct narrative. The artist appears among the sun and trees, watches children at play, feeds the pigs and goats, and sings for his ancestors. He teaches children to paint and tells us through song how to court a Ronga woman from within the region in which Malangatana grew up. There is *curandismo* and magic in the appearance of chicken feathers, ashes and symbols of wizards. There is the legend of how the Ngwenya came to Maputo as crocodile eaters and the origin of his ancestors. Early in the film we walk through his studio, see his books and sculpture, and the murals high on the walls of the house. He reads from his poems, and goes outside where we see more murals on the red exterior of the house.

At the center of the film are comments by those who have shared the artist's life and those who know him best as they locate him in the close circle who recount his past: his brother, family members and teachers comment on how he learned to play the guitar, what he was like as a child, how he drew flowers and monsters from an early age. As he listens to these personal stories, Malangatana laughs in agreement and looks on as they continue.

In an interview on camera, Mia Couto relates the effects that Malangatana's work had on his writing, how each trace of color prompted him to think, to dream and to describe *mestiçagem*. He reads from his own work, *O beijo da palavrinha* (*The Kiss of the Word*), which was published in 2006 with illustrations by Malangatana, and one that links the writer and artist in a search for distinct aspects of Mozambican culture, the desire for well-being among the diversity of the country formulated with a dreamlike language.[13] Both, Couto says, seek a language that is their own, a Mozambican idiom specific to the African myths of the country. Malangatana's cover for the text is not just an illustration of the story. "Metam a menina

no barco numa viagem salvadora," it reads. Put the girl in the boat on a voyage that will save her, a metaphor itself for Malangtana's life, a voyage that began in his immersion in Ronga culture that took him far away, to Lisbon and other cities where he exhibited his work.

(Elsewhere, and years earlier in an interview in *Jornal de Letras*, Couto observed that in the work those tortured figures with their infinite bitterness are images created by us, and finally against us. "The monsters, that we thought were extinct, are reactivated by Malangatana's pencil. A fear that we thought was asleep resurges. We are at the mercy of these visions, assaulted by the fragility of our visual representation of the universe." This artist who invokes chaos, he says, undoes our certainties and calls for us to find order beyond the picture.) [14]

In the final scene of the film, Malangatana opens a suitcase filled with magical things used to call up the spirits. He holds each object carefully and turns each one over in his hand. As he does so, he thanks his ancestors who have provided him with imagination and ability, and those, along with his friend and patron Pancho Guedes, who have made it possible for him to find himself among other artists. Those ancestors have inspired him, and he closes by saying: Kanimambo! Thank you in Malangatana's native tongue. He could as easily close his story and my questions about his life and work by referring to the 'viagem salvadora,' the title that he gave to the illustration to Mia Couto's story, and the objective that he held close, both for himself and all Mozambicans who traveled with him on the road to independence and nationhood.

NOTES

1. The visit to Malangatana's studio and the interview took place on August 11, 2008.

2. Eugenio Lemos. *Retrospectiva de Malangatana Valente* Ngwenya. (Maputo: Secretaria de Estado de Cultura, 1986).

3. Betty Schneider, "Malangatana of Mozambique," *African Arts*. 5, no. 2 (1972): 40-45.

4. Schneider notes that while African women generally cover their hair, Malangatana painted whatever entered his imagination, even though this was not in keeping with the realism of women's practice. Betty Schneider "Malangatana of Mozambique," *African Arts*," *African Arts*. 5, no. 2 (1972): 40-45. The lines of poetry are from *Black Orpheus*, in Ulli Beier. *Contemporary Art in Africa* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1968).

5. Júlio Navarro. *Malangatana* (Lisbon: Lisboa: Caminho, 1998), 206.

6. Other artists, such as Inácio Matsinhe, use the same division of the lips. He claims that the swollen lips of his paintings are divided in four parts which means that the people in those territories [Mozambique, Angola and Guinea, that is, the people oppressed

by the Portuguese] for five hundred years would not speak out, "so I portray their suffering, their inability of speaking out in those lips divided into four." In Inácio Matsinhe. *Transformei-me em Tartaruga para Resistir* (Lisbon: Colecção Artistas de Moçambique, 1975)1. Edward Alpers argues that this was an image shared with Malangatana and the sculptor Chissano. In Edward A. Alpers,"Representation and Historical Conscious in the Art of Modern Mozambique. *Canadian Journal of African* Studies 22. No. 1 (1988): 88.

7. My information here comes from the interview with Malangatana. As a political prisoner during colonialism, he was an object of various actions meant to 'reconcile and purify' those who had been active in Frelimo. The trial has not been well studied, although Malangatana mentions it here. He was sent to the northern province of Nampula to work on various social and cultural projects in some of the villages there.

8. Ronga (or XiRonga) is a south-eastern Bantu language spoken south of Maputo, and the dialect spoken by Malangatana. Ronga is also used to describe the form of sculpture made in the area. Both Malangatana and Craveirinha speak of Ronga as part of their local culture, and a source of the meanings of their work.

9. See Batalho de Caçadores 1891 http://bcac1891.blogspot.com/2016/01/entrevista-malangatana-valente-ngwenya.html. Accessed May 30, 2017.

10. Kwame N'krumah was the first prime minister and president of Ghana and led the country to independence from Britain in 1957. Malangatana may be referring to Nkrumah's book *Africa Must Unite* (New York: Praeger, 1963). Nkrumah's administration was socialist and nationalist.

11. For an analysis of the links between Malangatana and Craveirinha see Carmen Lucia Tindo Ribeiro Secco, "Craveirinha e Malangatana: cumplicidade e correspondência entre as artes." *Scripta* 6, no 12 (2003): 350-68.

12. The PIDE, (Polícia Internacional e de Defesa do Estado) was the secret police under Salazar's Estado Novo. In Mozambique the PIDE was housed at the Vila Algarve in Lourenço Marques, and was used by the regime as a repressive force against any opposition considered to be enemies of the Portuguese colonial administration.

13. For a critical review of the narrative of O beijo da palavrinha as an example of the preservation of culture and a diverse society see: http://ricardoriso.blogspot.com/2008/01/mia-couto-o-beijo-da-palavrinha.html. He notes that "Mia Couto conduz-nos ao interior de sua Moçambique, a um lugar onde *vivia* uma menina que nunca vira o mar, e para enfatizar a distância da localidade do litoral, afirma: viviam numa aldeia tão interior que acreditavam que o rio que ali passava não tinha nem fim nem foz." Accessed May 1, 2017.

14. Mia Couto, Depoimento inserido na reportagem "Malangatana Valente Ngwenya: Relação Fiel e Verdadeira", organizada por Rodrigues da Silva. (*Jornal de Letras* 663 13 a 26 de março de 1996):12-13.

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Malangatana and the author at his studio, Bairro de Aeroporto, Mozambique, August 11, 2008.