

Artist Proof Studio Turns Twenty

Kim Berman reflects on an initiative that has proven one of the most sustainable community-based arts projects in South Africa

Turning twenty is a milestone, a reaching of maturity. It's hard to remember the struggle of the first steps, the falls, the tears, the times of nearly giving up ... and then, too suddenly, it's time to reflect on an extraordinary life.

APS began as a dream. I was an impressionable and idealistic student in Boston in the 1980s, active in the anti-apartheid movement, working as a student intern in a women's collective printmaking studio called Artist Proof. I supported my post-graduate studies by working shifts in edition printing for two Boston artists (printing multiple colour, five-plate etchings for high-end hotels) and as the teaching assistant and printshop technician at the Museum School of Fine Arts. I also volunteered for the office of the ANC in exile, compiling news briefings, coordinating campaigns and distributing Afrapix collective's images of the State of Emergency in South Africa. When Nelson Mandela was released from prison in 1990, I wanted to be part of the call to South Africans to participate in building a new democracy. I wanted to share the skills and knowledge I had acquired over the seven years of living in the USA. My dream was to start up a community-based printmaking studio in Johannesburg, along the lines of Artist Proof in Boston.

I packed up my life in Boston, sold my car and belongings and bought my French Tool etching press, the "Rolls Royce" of presses, to ship to South Africa.

At home, I began my search for members for a printmaking cooperative. Many people were skeptical and warned me of the foolishness of such a venture in Newtown. Then I met Nhlanhla Xaba, a talented artist exhibiting his work at my mother's art gallery (The Berman Gallery) in Braamfontein. We connected immediately. Nhlanhla bought into my dream and we co-founded APS. We shared a passionate commitment to creating opportunities for young black artists who were unable to access specialised education and learning in visual art. Artist Proof Studio at 57 Jeppe Street was born. Nhlanhla invited ten artists to join us, including Mmakgabo Sebidi, Charles Nkosi, Gordon Gabashane, Muzi Donga, Vincent Baloyi and others who had trained at the ELC Art and Craft Centre at Rorke's Drift. Our collective had no funds, and only a year after registering the organisation could we finally receive our first grant for bursaries to allow artists to work at APS. Then we were joined by younger artists from FUBA, FUNDA, Katlehong, Alex and other community arts centres.

Our early years were characterised by passion and idealism. Artists were seeking a community, camaraderie, a welcoming enclave to make ends meet through their artwork. The old APS tasted the romanticism of the "rainbow nation". It was a mix of the white suburbs and the township and offered a mutually beneficial exchange (white income from part-time classes supported the purchase of materials for black artists). We experienced the magic of working cross-racially, side by side in the new South Africa.

I worked part time as the South African coordinator for World Education's women's rural development, and as the project officer for Fund for a Free South Africa. This earned us enough to support APS in the first three years with the partial employment of Nhlanhla as the manager and teacher at APS. I then joined the former Wits Technikon (now University of Johannesburg) full time in 1994 to secure greater financial stability for our work at APS. 1994 was a year of growth. We secured twenty bursaries for graduates from community art centres. We felt we were on the cusp of change and could give

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expression to the colour, texture and imagery of a new democracy. APS artists documented the elections and illustrated ten literacy books in several African languages. In addition, we made street prints with a steamroller during the Arts Alive festivals, and other collaborative prints that were installed in the foyer for the opening of the first democratic Gauteng Legislature.

For the first Johannesburg Biennale in 1995, we flexed our printmaking muscles with the production of twenty-five multiple-colour editions. Sixty portfolios of forty artists' works, representing prints from nine countries, were exhibited around the world. We explored and celebrated "volatile alliances" and experimented with collaborations between white and black students, and north-south intercultural and cross-national exchanges. The Biennale allowed us to step onto an international stage that promoted continued exchanges. This sharpened our expertise and placed us on a level with many print studios in the world. For the Biennale exhibition, and long-term residence, APS was awarded a large warehouse in the heart of the cultural precinct adjacent to the electric workshop. And there we stayed until the fire. We registered as a Section 21 company and established a



LEFT First APS building, 57 Jeppe Street, Johannesburg
RIGHT Aftermath of the fire, APS, 1 President Street, Newtown, Johannesburg, 2003. Photo: H. Berman
BOTTOM Motsamai Thabane and Pontsho Sikhosana printing William Kentridge's *Eight Figures*, APS, 2010. Photo: John Hodgkiss



LEFT Collaging from fragments of prints pulled from the ashes, Bus Factory basement, Newtown, Johannesburg, 2003. Photo: K. Berman



RIGHT Discussing Paper Prayers, workshop with Phumani Paper representatives, APS, 2006. Photo: S. Antonopolou

Board of Advisors, receiving funding grants year by year. APS established the Paper Prayers Campaign in 1997, which took HIV/AIDS education around the country using printmaking. We also started making our own paper, which became a research project in my department at the University of Johannesburg and subsequently, building on the networks of Paper Prayers, Phumani Paper, a national poverty-alleviation programme funded by government to create new jobs around the country.

Over the years APS became a haven to broken and disabled spirits until they found a space for their own expression. We have lost many members of our APS family along the way and we have tried to honour their lives by breaking the silence and challenging stigmas. We have paralleled the journey of South Africa's democracy – the long walk, conflict, reconciliation, new applications of ubuntu – and have emerged as a model of leadership and organisational structure.

On 9 March 2003, an electrical fire burnt APS to the ground. Nhlanhla was asleep on the couch at the time. The losses from that fire, in which Nhlanhla perished, included the livelihoods of 100 artists and students. Most of the equipment was damaged beyond repair.

It took a great deal of courage, hard work and collective commitment to rebuild what was lost and to recover from the death of the founding father of APS, our mentor and teacher. The art community in South Africa and the international printmaking network rallied. Days after the fire, the artists gathered around the site and, with the support of the Art Therapy Centre, sought to transform loss into healing. We pulled out fragments from the remains of the fire and collaged them onto large panels. These now hang in the new APS premises as evidence of the resilience of the creative spirit and a leaping out of the ashes. The stairway railings are a collage of metal fragments from parts of plates and presses pulled from the burnt remains. They are traces of our past that lead visitors and studio members up the stairs and testify to our journey forward.

The response to the tragedy was remarkable and humbling. People gathered together and donated equipment and help. We set up a makeshift studio in the garage basement of the Bus Factory where we recycled and worked on “out of the fire” prints for our fundraising events locally and in Boston. I was due to attend the Southern Graphics print conference in Boston, which became a platform for an exhibition at the Museum School of Fine Art and a fundraiser. Hundreds of prints sold. The funds raised were sufficient to buy APS a beautiful, large-scale Takach press. In addition the Ford

Foundation supported the rebuilding of the studio to enable the state of the art equipment to attract and promote excellence.

The new studio in the Bus Factory, built by the Johannesburg Development Agency for APS, was, quite literally, born out of the ashes.

Artist Proof Studio designed a new strategy for moving into the future. The fire gave us the opportunity to imagine a new model – an NGO built on the lessons of ten years of democracy. The struggle for positive change is ongoing, evolving and transforming. We continually revisit our organisational structure and strategy for sustainability. We have discovered and experimented with multiple ways to survive a dry funding climate for the arts. Our Board of Directors leads by example, using their own businesses and professional practices to engage partnerships with artists. APS is not the recipient of services bestowed by the corporates, but engages in partnerships of collaboration and mutual exchange, for example, the patron programmes where corporates provide bursaries for artists in exchange for artworks and interactive projects. In an exchange with a local law firm, ten artists led ninety staff members, including top litigators, in a team-building project that presented their strategic plans through images painted on the basement walls. The inversion of the hierarchy of skills and power was humbling and inspiring to all. Through these collaborations, artists learn not only technical proficiency, but also diplomacy, organisation, and partnership skills. They also see the value of qualities such as leadership, patience, optimism, a sense of humour and a love for the unpredictable and complex nature of community arts work.

Our facilities have allowed us to attract some of South Africa's top artists to APS, including Willem Boshoff, Dianne Victor, Clive van den Berg, Deborah Bell, William Kentridge, Wim Botha, Joel Mpadoor, Walter Oltmann, Colbert Mashile, Marco Cianfanelli, Gerhard and Maja Marx and many others. APS has nurtured artists like Philemon Hlungwane, Nelson Makamo, Lehlogonolo Mashaba and Paul Molete, who now have self-sustaining careers from their work.

We have had successful artists in residence, international artists and educators coming to teach, and have promoted exchanges with printmaking and papermaking studios around the world. We have hosted tourist groups, guest workshops, seminars, overseas internships, research projects and social advocacy campaigns. Our student body has expanded through the accredited training qualifications, skills certificates, our three-year training programme and post-graduate internships and assistantships. APS students

TOP The New APS, Newtown, Johannesburg, 2004. Photo: I. Haverson **BOTTOM** Street printing with a steamroller, Jeppe Street, Newtown, Arts Alive Festival, 1993. Photo: K. Berman



in the three-year programme are required to reach into their personal histories, explore their legacy and roots, understand the spiritual poverty of the past, strive for the attainment of human dignity, and find ways to become empowered through their work. If they enter their careers from a place of possibility rather than the fear that accompanies emptiness, they can own their futures and dreams.

APS has blossomed, floundered, and walked on a tightrope; made mistakes, fallen, risen and survived damaged confidence. We pride ourselves on graduating young people who can think about our world in new ways, plan for their own economic sustenance, and who understand the quest for self-actualisation. Our experience with art students is that when they are challenged, when they are willing to believe in their potential, they understand that imagining possibilities is the first step in a journey to reach their goals. We incubate leaders in the arts who quickly get snapped up by the cultural industries. APS can count dozens of their artists who have shown their work internationally, earned commissions in and around the city, or are in demand to exhibit their work. Our outreach programmes take art to remote communities for income generation, or after-school programmes for orphans and vulnerable children. We have superb patrons who believe in what we do. We are guided by a challenge issued by Mamphela Ramphele: “The question each one of us must ask every day is whether we are giving the best we can to enable our society to transcend the present and become its envisaged self.”¹

A response to this requires imagination, aspiration and resilience and a process of self-creation. The ability to be truly creative, to imagine that which is not there, and to have the skills to bring what is imagined into being is a fundamentally empowering capacity, one that gives people agency and opens possibilities for mobility.

1. Mamphela Ramphele, *Laying Ghosts to Rest*. Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2008, p. 311.

Kim Berman is an associate professor in the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture at the University of Johannesburg. She is the founding director of Artist Proof Studio, the founder of Phumani Paper, and a practicing printmaker.