

# AN EXTRACT FROM THE STAR NEWSPAPER JOHANNESBURG

'I'm making tomorrow's history today'  
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His paintings adorn corporate offices and homes round the world, and his work is worth thousands of rands. Yet Vusi Khumalo, the renowned Eastern Cape artist, isn't your average painter. He has achieved fame for his unconventional - and infinitely realistic - approach to his work. While most artists only record the beauty of South Africa's flora and fauna, he looks to the very heart of the South African story - the informal settlements - and, starkly yet colourfully, depicts what he sees. "I am a visual historian," he explains. "Nobody wants to live in informal settlements under difficult conditions, but it is the only option for many. What I am doing is documenting history. "I was part and parcel of that life. I lived in a shack. I know what it's about. Some 50 years down the line, when we don't have this any longer, it will be remembered through my work. I'm making tomorrow's history today. "If you look at my paintings, there is never a crime scene - it's just about people going on with their daily lives. Lately, I started working on rural housing. These days people in the rural areas are getting rid of rondavels and building conventional houses. The thatched huts of yesteryear are becoming historical buildings." Khumalo documents his art pieces in the form of collages by using bits of cloth, wood, rusted metal and discarded tin. The effect is devastatingly realistic - and it touches the heart. Virtually every piece he produces is snapped up by art collectors. He says that a hundred years from now, through his work, people will know where they came from. "I want to show future generations how people lived today," Khumalo says.

The artist, now resident in the Eastern Cape, left for China on a cultural exchange programme earlier this month, the first South African to be selected for such a visit. The exchange was arranged by businessman Dabing Chen, who belongs to an organisation that supports young artists in China. Chen made South Africa his home 15 years ago and says this is one reason why he decided to introduce the exchange programme. "South Africa and China share a warm relationship," he says. "They are both Third World developing countries and their history is common, so the work produced by the artists is interesting. Tourism is well established between the two countries, and I think the arts should catch up." Khumalo will be working with artists at the Hubei Institute of Fine Art, the third largest art institution in China. During the first five days he will lecture to 1 500 young Chinese artists and he will then travel for 10 days with a group of artists to rural parts of the country that are not commonly visited by foreigners. Already well travelled, Khumalo is excited at the prospect of visiting China and seeing the work of artists there. "It's my first visit to the Far East," he says. "It will be interesting to see the extent to which Chinese art will influence my work and, perhaps, how my work will affect them." Chen says Khumalo's political experience will be welcomed in China.

"This is a pilot project. The Chinese artists will work with Khumalo, and later this year Chinese artists will come to South Africa, where the work they did with Vusi will be exhibited in Cape Town." Although Khumalo now lives in the Eastern Cape, his roots are in Gauteng. He was born in Balfour North in 1951, received his basic education in Germiston and spent 10 years working for various companies there. He says that

by 1986 he was something of a "cultural activist" and, while working in Germiston, felt compelled to leave South Africa. It was a huge decision giving up the land of his birth, but he left with his family for ANC camps in Zambia and Tanzania. This move was to change the direction of his life. It was in the Dakawa camp in Tanzania where he first had an opportunity to fully explore art, his lifelong hobby. He completed his O-level General Certificate of Education through a correspondence course with the University of London. He learnt and later taught textile printing, art and design. His work was soon noticed, and in 1991 he was invited to attend a summer course in art at the Gerlesberg Art School in Sweden. But times were changing. Nelson Mandela had recently been released from jail and exiles were beginning to return to South Africa. In 1992 Khumalo was repatriated and the Dakawa Art and Craft Community Centre was re-established in Grahamstown. He continued to teach there, and his efforts won him a one-year scholarship to the Konstfack National Art College in Stockholm, where he gained a certificate in textile printing and art. He was soon making a name for himself and winning awards for his work.

His first exhibitions were held at the Saba Saba National Exhibition in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, between 1988 and 1991. At the same time he was part of a touring group exhibiting work in Sweden and Norway. In 1990, Salim Ahmed Salim, secretary-general of the Organisation of African Unity, acquired one of Khumalo's wall hangings for his collection. In 1991 he received an award as the best student in ex tempera technique at Gerlesberg Art School in Sweden. His first one-man exhibition was held at the Konstfack National Art College in 1994. Since returning home Khumalo has had exhibitions at the Wezandla Gallery in Port Elizabeth, has exhibited at the Skotnes Gallery and the Albany Museum at the Grahamstown arts festival and, since 1997, has had several solo exhibitions at the Everard Read galleries in Johannesburg and Cape Town. He has also had two one-man exhibition at the Portland Gallery in London. In 1996, when Dakawa's funding from Sweden ended, Khumalo decided that the time was ripe to dedicate himself full-time to his own art. When he first tried to reflect the burgeoning squatter communities in South Africa, he felt frustrated. He found that oil painting did not bring him the intense realism that he was trying to evoke. This led him to his startlingly realistic collages. His ability to reconstruct life in squatter camps is evocative. As one critic wrote, "It takes us where we might, otherwise, fear to tread and, perhaps, reminds us that behind the facade of brutality, crime and squalor, these outcrops on our landscape are populated by human beings living under very trying circumstances". It is Khumalo's relationship with the Everard Read galleries that has given him this opportunity to visit China. Works inspired from Khumalo's travels and experiences in China, as well as a selection of pieces from Chinese artists he meets on the trip, will be exhibited at the Everard Read Gallery in Cape Town from October 19 to November 1.