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Resumen: Willie Bester is regarded as one of the most important resistant artists against the injustices of “apartheid” and “post-apartheid” in South Africa. His artworks expose the state of extreme poverty in which the inhabitants of the townships of the Cape of Good Hope still live today, defining a strategy of opposition, as well as a means to generate a rebellious consciousness among his people. They present the oppression, violence and racial discrimination often misreported or ignored by the newspapers, law enforcement, and the South African government.

Palabras clave: African , Apartheid , Installation , Nelson Mandela ,
Painting , Sculpture , South Africa , Willie Bester

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Willie Bester: An Artist Resisting the Injustices of Post-Apartheid in South Africa

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Introduction

Willie Bester is regarded as one of the most important resistance artists working against the injustices of apartheid and post-apartheid realities in South Africa. The term “apartheid”—which is from Afrikaans, one of the official languages of South Africa—literally means separation, segregation or “apartness,” and, more broadly, the official government policy of South Africa from 1909 to 1994 which rigidly controlled the movements and living conditions of non-white citizens. Bester’s sociopolitical commentary dwells on the unchanged racial attitudes of the whites (24% of the population) in South Africa, and how the processes related to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) were ultimately ineffective. As he notes, “People who thought they were superior before haven’t really changed. I try to find out through studying history what gives people the right to think that way. I try to find a solution, not to be disappointed, to reach an understanding” (NLA Design and Visual Arts). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission appointed by the ANC (African National Congress) political party initially seemed to be one of the answers for the conclusion of apartheid. The ANC won the elections in 1994, and the independence from white-minority rule was declared. Even though democracy appears to exist, the regime of racial separation and discrimination is still very much alive. One of the



Photo of Willie Bester.

themes that Bester has consistently tackled pertains to the Group Areas Act (the law that segregated people by color into designated areas), as can be seen in his wood sculpture with chains titled *Land Act Bench* (1999). His criticisms directed against racial inequality, as well as laws that defined people by race, continue to resonate, echoing the government's failures to make good on its promises to improve the socioeconomic conditions in townships across the country, where the privileged status of whites over blacks and other minorities persists to this day. Through his art, Bester demonstrates a sustained focus on discrimination and segregation—realities that are perpetuated regardless of recent legislation. His artworks also incorporate recycled and found materials, which are reworked into his paintings, assemblages and sculptures, creating an ongoing record of the political and social injustices and human rights issues of the day.



Bester, Art and Apartheid

Willie Bester has lived in the Cape Town area for his entire life, most notably in “colored” neighborhoods, since he was classified by the government as “other colored” given that he was the son of a mixed-race couple. After working as a dental technician’s assistant for fifteen years in Cape Town, he began to attend part-time classes at the Community Arts Project in District Six in 1986. In 1991, he became a full-time professional artist. His meteoric rise as an artist has also brought him international renown, and his work has been exhibited in his native South Africa, as well as in such diverse venues as Senegal, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, Spain, the United States, Brazil, and Cuba.



No. 4: Nelson Mandela – Transition in Progress (1998)

Bester's first works consisted of paintings in oil and enamel in bright colors displaying life in the black townships. These pieces also incorporated cardboard, photographs, and debris collected from local trash dumps, often embedded with descriptive words about daily life or text from newspapers and legislation, all in response to the racism and discrimination that was, and still is, rampant in South Africa. Often comprising a plethora of recovered objects, these works reflect the waste of consumer society, and the excesses that sometimes remain beyond the reach of black and minority township residents, yet which are often deposited in facilities near these very townships: Coke cans, war toys, scraps from electrical appliances, shovels and paddles, automobile parts and license plates, parts of weapons, and other salvaged objects.



Willie Bester, Tribute to Steve Biko (1992). The Contemporary African Art Collection.

During the 1990s, Bester painted figures of children and women, as well as a series of iconic portraits of opposition leaders, popular heroes, and political figures. These works include a portrait of Nelson Mandela, the first black president of the nation (*Transition in Progress*, 1998); *Tribute to Chris Hani* (1998), a political figure assassinated in 1993; *Homage to Oliver Tambo* (1993) and *Steve Biko* (1992), martyrs of the ANC. These portraits, aside from eulogizing these historic figures, are also intended to promote the ethics of struggle and resistance. The artist has thus become a creative voice for the people, similar in many respects to the very political icons he has represented.

In Bester's third phase, the artist focused on large-format sculptures reflecting the complex realities and injustices of apartheid and post-apartheid life, in addition to metal installations incorporating materials found in the townships. These works continue to grapple with difficult themes, both national and global in nature, in an attempt to use art as a vehicle for making visible the invisible. Bester forces the international community to unpack preconceived ideas about South Africa. To paraphrase one art critic, in Africa, art is very close to life, and issues that South African artists are dealing with are issues of life. Bester's work centers on representations of the real, lived world created through the combination of materials from the real world.

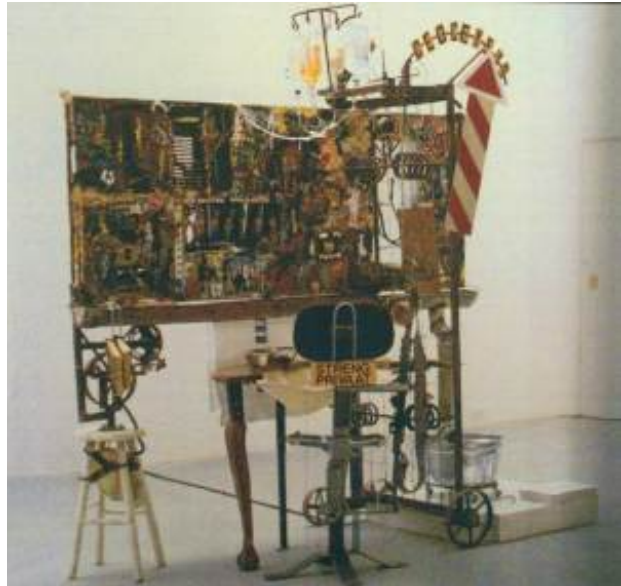
The artist often paints on extremely rough surfaces, such as crushed tin, Coke cans, and other detritus, while also creating large assemblages, cutting and welding together materials from trash heaps, junkshops and the streets, which are reworked to create a layered commentary on South African history. Although he sees rubbish dumps as symbolic of the community where he lived, he uses these materials to show people that something greater can be made from materials perceived to be of little use.

The artist is probably most widely known for a series of disturbing and often grotesque works. The titles of many of these pieces reveal his underlying concerns: *Under the Gun* (1991), *For Those Left Behind* (2003), *Dogs of War* (2001), *Who Let the Dogs Out?* (2001), and *Scarce Resources* (2001-2003). Bester has described his art as a form of "bad medicine," something you take for your own good but which may seem noxious or even offensive, given the gravity he has assumed as well as the potentially shocking nature of some of his work.

The exhibition which bore this same title, *Bad Medicine* (2000), includes what is possibly his most striking piece: *Apartheid Laboratory* (1995). This installation/contraption was designed to represent the lunacy of race classification and the power and paranoia of the apartheid regime. It presents a laboratory chair facing a desk and a big board with a mixed-media collage in sculptural form documenting the legacy of apartheid. The work is filled with countless drawings and recycled detritus, such as wires, bolts, chains, a street sign, belt, measuring instruments, and intravenous drips. It foregrounds what the artist has termed, quite simply, the "ugliness" of apartheid. Bester exposes the industrial technology that has also been deployed by the government—a closed-circuit TV, radio aerial and satellite dish, as with the tail section of a bomb that appears to protect the installation from possible intrusion. At the pull of a chain, the operator can decide the fate of any given victim, which is subsequently displayed on a pressure gauge clock. The aggressive nature of these instruments confirms the radically

divisive processes of apartheid, while also pointing to the extreme arbitrariness in its exercise of power. As the artist has noted, those in power today might introduce some of the old elements of the past. This piece can serve as a light into the future.

Each work by Bester also acts as a form of social documentation. His piece titled *Head North* (1997) consists of a life-size ox made from metal scraps flanked by an intravenous medical bag filled with blood. Behind the ox, entangled in a long trail of barbed wire, are various crude doll-like human figures. The work also includes three pine coffins with red crosses drawn on their lids evoking the bodies that accumulated as a result of the “Great Trek” northward in South Africa, when non-white communities were removed from white residential areas and sent off to relocate in more northerly regions of the country. It is dedicated to South Africans who were forcibly removed from the Cape Town colony by the previous white regime as part of a system that sought to insure marginalization of the non-white population. This piece was removed from a hall hosting a parliamentary activity of the ANC (African National Congress) in 2001, after one of its members declared that it was “not African enough.” Afterwards, it was donated by Bester to the South African National Gallery in Cape Town and, after being attacked by a local art critic as being “preachy,” was rejected by the museum.



Willie Bester, *Apartheid Laboratory* (1995).

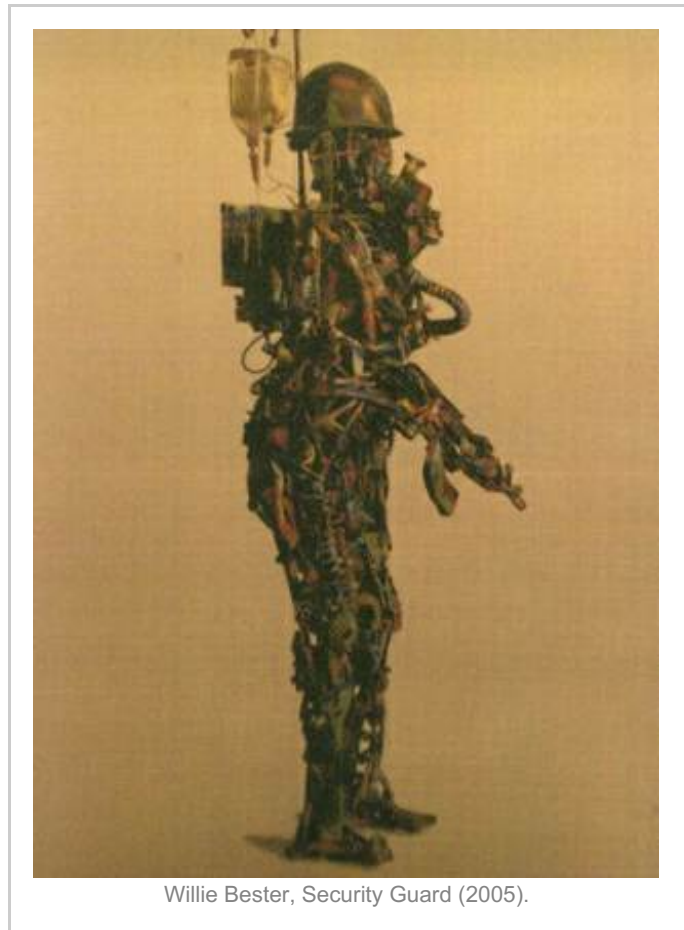


No. 11: *Head North* (1997)



The striking art installation *Who Let the Dogs Out?* (2001) is based on a 1998 incident that drew global condemnation, in which six members of the South African Police Service were captured on camera setting their dogs on three suspected undocumented immigrants from Mozambique during a video-recorded “live-baiting” session. The policemen, all members of the Dog Unit, were arrested shortly before the TV broadcast the images of the dogs being set on the men, with the policemen also hurling racial abuse. The monumental sculpture installation presenting the policeman and the dog biting the immigrant (with a simultaneous video recording of the event) was exhibited in 2001 at the exclusive Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Bester’s extraordinary work has focused on the complex realities of life in contemporary South Africa, and on the transformation of human beings into dehumanized cogs serving the interests of a state apparatus developed to exploit captive labor. He communicates the possibly cynical yet realistic conviction that people are less free than they would like to believe, having little control over their lives, and being constantly lulled or silenced from expressing any resistance. The monumental sculpture titled *Security Guard* (2005), which features a machine gun, a plastic oxygen tube and a medical drip, is emblematic of the lack of freedom South Africans currently enjoy. Moreover, the composition *Under the Gun* (1991) presents a massive soldier with glaring eyes made from all kinds of metal scraps, partly painted with bright colors, carrying a machine gun, ammunition, a



Willie Bester, *Security Guard* (2005).

bullhorn, handcuffs, wires, a plastic oxygen tube, a shoe, and a metal bag containing various paraphernalia. These works reflect a society that continues to be kept under strict surveillance and that is plagued by a host of other inequities, despite the alleged triumph of democracy in 1994, when Nelson Mandela was elected president in South Africa’s first multiracial election. These metal sculptures are a reminder that the legacies of the apartheid era continue to haunt the nation today, and that they are likely to persist into the future unless the pressing realities of poverty and marginalization are addressed by the government. The legacy of apartheid has yet to be destroyed, the promises made have yet to be fulfilled, and the long journey toward democracy and social justice has yet to be completed.

A work of art, like other forms of creative expression, is able to carry the collective memory of a given culture. Modern South African art, especially since the end of apartheid rule in 1994, embodies the tragic collective memory of the South African people, the painful themes of colonialism, merging with the memory of injustices and violence of the slave trade, and the fears of more recent times, most notably the AIDS virus. Bester's creations are inhabited by these images: the difficult everyday life of the townships; the searing blue of the police; the yellow of the bulldozers; the despicable massacres; the heroic opposition of the artist's community, and all the events that have been concealed or



Willie Bester, *Under the Gun* (1991).



Willie Bester, *Bantu Education* (2004).

Another highly complex large-format installation is *Bantu Education* (1994), a model of the former South African education, the pernicious heritage of the apartheid educational system designed to train people for specific roles in society according to their race. Students within this system were provided with substandard education in order to restrict their employment opportunities to manual labor in agriculture and industry. The chair in the installation, with its bedspring and barbed-wire supports, represents the highly curtailed sense of private space under this regime. Migrant workers hire bed-space in hostels, living in extremely confined spaces. The schools, which potentially might serve as an educational haven, are more often a prison for the poorest in South African society.

The colossal, recycled metal sculpture *Monument for Those Left Behind* (2003) is dedicated

to those South Africans who, having supported the previous regime, remain unwilling or unable to accept the new order of post-apartheid. It comprises three elements: a sinister uniformed human figure, an automatic weapon and a ferocious dog. The human figure stands atop a vehicle that evokes the image of a small bulldozer (which Bester uses to embody the experience of displacement, forced removals, and the systematic destruction of families and communities) employed to eliminate undesirable “elements.” The dog is seen as the necessary accompaniment which the state engages to protect its own agents over the interests of its citizens. This piece also serves to highlight the inability of ordinary people to resist this increasingly successful state apparatus, thus communicating, again, the pessimistic conviction that we are less free than we would like to believe. The work was exhibited at the Georges Pompidou Center in Paris in 2005.

Another impressive piece, *Dogs of War* (2001), is created from scrap-metal components welded together forming the image of a fierce, muzzled dog, carrying an oversize machine gun on top of its head, as well as Bester’s signature intravenous drip. This sculpture is similar to the work titled *P.W. Botha’s Dog* (1993), which is also equipped with a gun. Botha, a former president of South Africa during the apartheid era (1984-89), was referred to in Afrikaans as the “Groot Krokodil” (Great Crocodile), a nickname that was picked up by the international press. During his term, he consistently refused to make any concessions to the non-white population or to hostile international media criticism.

As has been mentioned, Bester often includes the insertion of intravenous drips in his artworks. These drips for curing



Willie Bester, *For Those Left Behind* (2003).



Willie Bester, *Dogs of War* (2001).

ailments are a timely reminder that the idea of freedom and justice, suggested by post-apartheid rhetoric, which is often no more than an illusion. Here, however, the drips alert the viewer to the cynical manipulation of people who, like concentration camp victims, have lost all control over their own lives.

Bester's metal sculpture *New Arrival* (2005) is meant to portray a new arrival from the rural indigenous territory of Thembuland, which had been incorporated into the Cape Colony in the nineteenth century. Migrants, such as the subject of this work, leave the extreme poverty of such rural areas hoping to join the urban economy. For the vast majority, they are only met with segregation and financial hardship.

Bester also examines the daily problems experienced by families living in the nation's townships. Here, women and children are often trapped alone in the rural periphery of industrialized southern Africa, while male family members are impelled to work in distant places, employed in agriculture, manufacturing, or diamond and gold mines, often without seeing their families for extended periods of time. Women are thus forced to raise their children on their own, usually with great difficulty and hardship.



Willie Bester, *New Arrival* (2005).

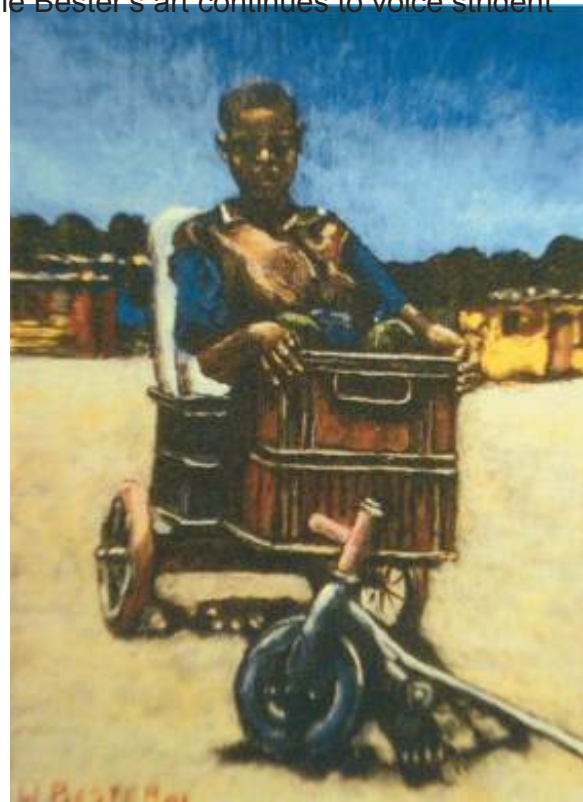
The painting *Go Cart* (2001) presents a boy in a cart with wheels made of a commercial plastic container salvaged from a trash dump. Children and families in townships are very creative in making toys from anything they can find, since they often cannot afford to buy such items in commercial stores.

Bester's work offers a commentary on society's enduring injustices—which include abuse and neglect of women and children—through a powerful medium conveying a powerful message. All South Africans live in a society alongside those whose lives have been directly affected by politics and legal issues. As the artist notes,

People have built up a resistance to anything that addresses the psyche of mankind or people or themselves. I believe that we must protest against that which is wrong. There is no form of escape. Remaining apolitical or indifferent to the legal system is a luxury South Africans can't afford. (NLA Design and Visual Arts).

Apartheid may have officially ended, however Willie Bester's art continues to voice strident opposition to realities he has had to face first-hand. When he was eight years old, he first saw his father's food dish, beside the dog's dish, behind his boss's house; and saw his father being whipped and called a "dirty Kaffir." The family home was, at one point, bulldozed and their possessions stolen. Bester later joined a street gang and was ultimately sent to a reformatory.

To paraphrase the artist, apartheid is the highest form of colonialism; there may be a post-apartheid or neo-apartheid, a new colonialism, which continues to exert a grip on society more than thirty years after South African independence. It is a living past which will go on projecting its shadows for a long time to come. Still, Bester celebrates the morality of ordinary life. He affirms the dignity of people struggling to support their families and elderly people who have survived lives affected by economic hardship and racial abuse.



Willie Bester, Go-Cart (2001).

In keeping the memory of oppression alive, Bester's intention is not to make people miserable, but to keep them "awake." As the artist states: "I am sometimes tempted to go to the seaside and to paint beautiful things from nature, but I do not do it because my art has to be taken as a nasty-tasting medicine for awakening consciences" (Hightet).

A variety of images and themes recur in the works of Willie Bester: crowd scenes, industrial landscapes, incarceration, authority figures, paramilitary forces, shanties, weapons, bulldozers, hospital equipment, and all manner of debris and detritus. Graffiti, painted surfaces and drawings are also incorporated into other mixed-medium supports and installations. His works also focus on the sufferings and the heroic tenacity of the individual, often underscoring the more joyous aspects of life in the townships

Closing Observations

Willie Bester's art exposes the state of extreme poverty which the inhabitants of the townships of South Africa continue to endure to this day, defining a strategy of resistance, as well as a means to generate a defiant consciousness among his peers. Most significant is Bester's insistent endeavor to restore human dignity to a population beset by institutionalized racism, segregation, and degradation. These works reflect the complex heritage of not only South Africa but of the postcolonial condition that defines nearly all of Africa today, while also responding to the historical traditions of his own culture and the more recent influences of globalization.

He is probably South Africa's most well-known and highly respected "struggle" artist. However, as South African art critics have lamented, few of Bester's most important works remain in South Africa. Unless a genuine transformation takes place in his country, Bester will continue his relentless commentary.

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Notes:

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