

{ ART }

Khayaletu Witbooi drew his own plans to escape poverty. Now they hang in galleries, writes Dave Chambers

It was early in 2004 when a young man clutching a couple of pencil caricatures arrived unannounced in my office, asking for work.

I was deputy editor of the Cape Argus, and part of my job involved saying no to dozens of aspiring illustrators who wrongly thought they were good enough to see their work in print.

This time was different. A few days later I called the young man and asked him if he could spare the time from his work as a casual packer at Pick n Pay in Milnerton to draw a caricature of radio presenter Mike Wills. Wills was writing weekly columns building up to what was then known as the Argus Cycle Tour, and an illustration was required.

Khayaletu Witbooi was grateful but slightly sheepish. "Thank you, Dave, but there is a problem. I don't have any paper or pens," he told me. Together we went to an art supplies shop, found what he needed, and the following day Witbooi took a taxi to the city centre from his shack in Du Noon to deliver his commission.

It was the first of dozens of contributions over the next few months flamboyantly signed "By K Witbooi". Driven by his dream of being an artist he became a regular fixture in the newsroom, determined to improve his skills, learn computer programs and immerse himself in a creative environment.

Witbooi's dream reached its latest zenith this month when he opened his current exhibition, History Begins With a Garden, at Gallery Momo in Johannesburg.

For Witbooi, history began in Uitenhage, where he was born in 1977, one of five brothers. After matriculating, opportunities to explore his art were limited, and like so many young men from the Eastern Cape, in 2001 he decided to seek a better life in Cape Town.

For him, at least, it worked. In 2005, with the portfolio and the computer skills he built up in the newsroom, he landed a job as an

illustrator at a firm of architects in Pretoria. He was the "artist" who produced the "impressions" of buildings, and after hours he kept tinkering with computers, building up technical skills. Then came his big break: unemployment. "It was 2009 and I was really happy to be retrenched," says Witbooi. "I

figured that I was missing out on the thing I'm fascinated with, which is making my own art." He went to see Ayanda Madulu, later to win renown for his

painting of a nude President Jacob Zuma, and picked his brains. "The main thing was to understand how galleries work and how to get my foot in the door," he says. Back in Cape Town, Witbooi found studio space in the Castle of Good Hope, and went out of his way to catch the attention of Charl Bezuidenhout, owner of Worldart gallery, who was a

frequent visitor. It worked, and before long he had a commission.

"Charl gave me advice and set me a challenge to paint something that would fully encapsulate what I was trying to do. I was happy with the piece but not very confident. I gave it to Charl thinking that at least if he put it up in his gallery, I would get some feedback from people who saw it."

That feedback turned out to be immediate. "An hour later he called me to say the painting had sold for R12 000," says Witbooi. "He asked me to do a second one. The same buyer wanted to see if I was someone who could sustain a career. He bought that one too."

That was November 2011. In 2013 Witbooi had his first exhibition at Worldart, and since then the trajectory of his career has headed steadily north. He's even invented a genre, "pap art", to define his approach as a self-taught artist from a part of society with a fairly basic diet.

He has been a resident artist at Greatmore Studio in Woodstock for years; his work is collected nationally and internationally; and two of his paintings have adorned the South African National Gallery.

In his new exhibition — typically, Witbooi was burning the midnight oil when we spoke and unsure how many paintings he would finish in time ("it might be 15, maybe more") — he "explores the colonial genealogy of gardens in South Africa", and links them to "slavery, land dispossession and nationalist propaganda".

There's a lot more I don't really understand in Momo's publicity material. But that's fine. I'm happy to let my mind quietly boggle as I stare at Witbooi's richly complex and wildly colourful paintings, marvelling at his audacious skill and creativity.

"I still have a long way to go," says Witbooi, now 40 and a father of two.

"I'm always trying to get more relevant and to make the language of my art more accessible. The most important thing is for me to be able to say things as a person who lives in the same conditions as anyone else in this so-called democracy."

● 'History Begins With a Garden' is on at Gallery Momo in Parktown North, Johannesburg, until April 16



MORE RELEVANT: Khaya Witbooi

All artwork Khaya Witbooi © courtesy of Gallery MOMO

Drawing Room



Made in SA (Anna de Kooning), 2017



Untitled Sketches 1, 2017



Labour of Glove, 2017

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