An Activist Art: The Anti-Apartheid Prints of Norman Kaplan

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Since early 2024 a small exhibition of prints by Norman Kaplan (b. 1947), marking the 30th anniversary of the fall of apartheid in South Africa, has been showing at venues around the UK.[1] Kaplan devoted much of his life to the struggle against apartheid, abandoning art for activism for many years, and the eventual end of apartheid marked a profound change in his artistic development. There is little existing literature on his work, and he is far better known to veteran anti-apartheid activists than to the art world. In its first iteration, in the gallery at St Martin-in-the-Fields, London, the range of works on display was, on the face of it, puzzling – simply drawn cartoons for liberation movement publications, portrait sketches of ordinary people of various ethnicities, more complex scenes showing working life and other aspects of everyday existence, and finally a few intricate prints that integrate their figures and backgrounds with strange and compelling patterning.

[1] '"All Shall Be Afforded Dignity": An Exhibition of Artwork by Norman Kaplan', The Crypt Gallery of St Martin-in-the Fields, April–May 2024, organized and co-curated by the Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives, Action for Southern Africa (ACTSA), and the Liliesleaf Trust UK's Anti-Apartheid Legacy: Centre of Memory and Learning. I am very grateful to the artist and to the film director Jenny Morgan, for much of the information in this article.

Installation view of 'All Shall Be Afforded Dignity': An Exhibition of Artwork by Norman Kaplan, showing *Compound Gates* and political cartoons, at the Portico Library, Manchester, 2025.

Kaplan's opposition to the regime changed his life dramatically – he was expelled from art college, spent many years in exile and was initially denied entry to the UK. In exile, he undertook

a vast range of work for the African National Congress (ANC) and other organizations, before eventually returning to South Africa and to more concerted cultural activity, which included works for two windows of the nation's newly founded Constitutional Court. The discussion here will be on the changing qualities of Kaplan's work at different stages of his development and the issues of political representation raised at each stage.[2]

During his school years, Kaplan, who is Jewish, experienced much open antisemitism. Such attitudes were common among whites in South Africa and contributed to the decision of some Jews to enter the struggle against apartheid. Notable Jewish artists creating work critical of the regime include William Kentridge (b. 1955) and the photographer David Goldblatt (1930–2018). In 1964 Kaplan entered the Technical College School of Art at Port Elizabeth (now Gqeberha), which was run by a supporter of the banned Congress of Democrats, a white anti-apartheid organization. The work of George Pemba (1912–2001), a self-taught painter of the townships, influenced Kaplan into depicting working-class people there, and to express something of their dispossession and dehumanization. Kaplan was one of the few white artists to do this, and his work was implicitly critical of the regime. While he was studying for an Art Teachers Diploma at the Technical College, the Department of Education imposed A M du Toit as the new art-school head, an Afrikaner extremist who mandated religious instruction and uniforms and sought control over the content of the students' art. Kaplan was expelled half-way through his course in 1970.

While at the Technical College, Kaplan had been tutored by Alexander Podlashuc (1930–2009), a printmaker who worked in woodcut, and his artist wife, Marianne (1932–2006). They introduced him to satirical prints published in *Simplicissimus* and to the work of Frans Masereel

[2] N. Kaplan and J. Morgan, 'The Creative Fight', *Printmaking Today*, Spring 2013, pp. 14–15; J. Morgan, 'Red Ink from the Eastern Cape', *Socialist Lawyer*, February 2014, pp. 22–23; D. Carrier, 'Cutting Comment', *Camden New Journal*, 21 November 2024, online.

(1889–1972), Ben Shahn (1898–1969) and the Mexican revolutionary printmakers of the early twentieth century. Kaplan chose linocut as his primary medium, noting that when he was at school, linoleum was essentially free, since old material from wartime battleships could be found lying about on the art-room floor.[3] Kaplan was attracted by this cheap and accessible medium, and how it was used by artists living in the townships.

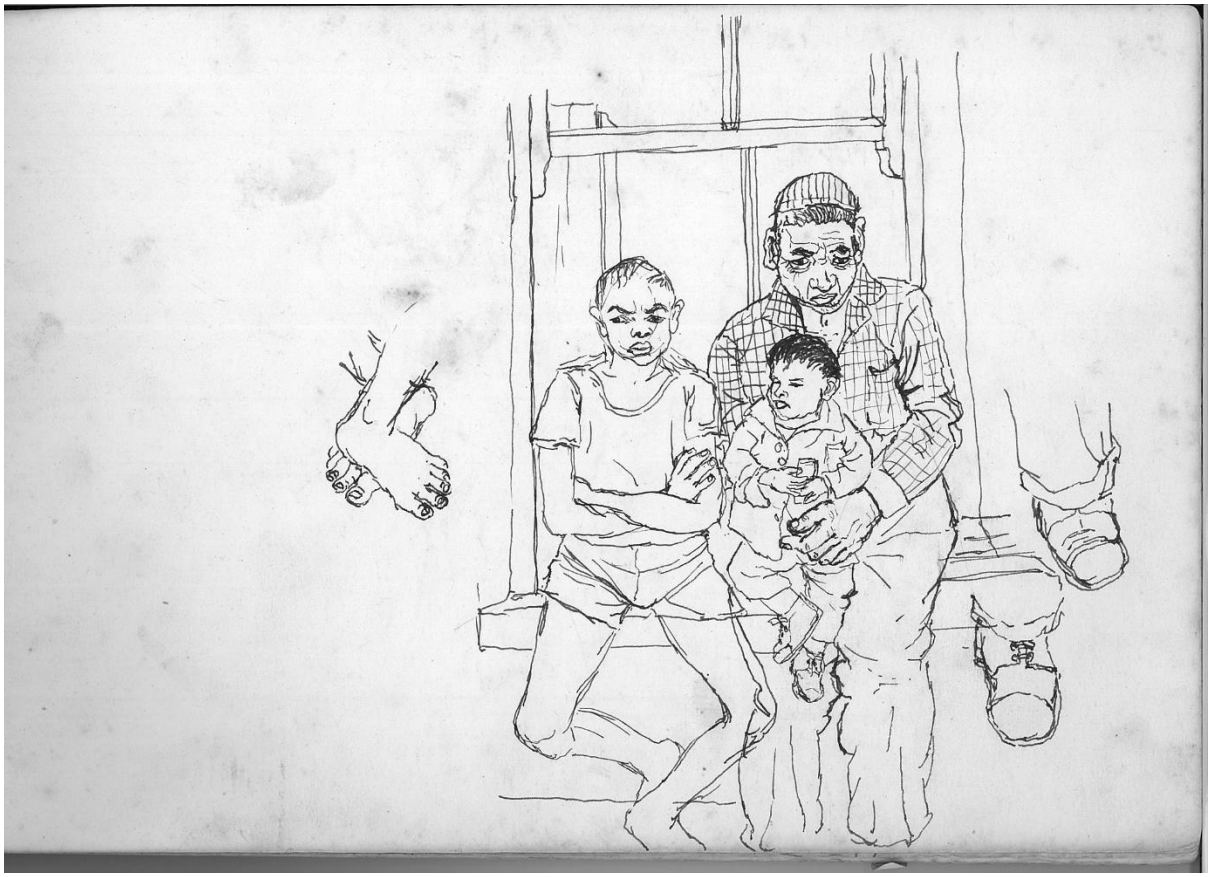
The young Kaplan visited the townships to make drawings and sometimes to take photographs of his subjects with a Kodak Brownie camera, which he would then use as the basis for linocuts. In *Hoe Lekker Pose Ons Nou,* Afrikaans for 'Look how nicely we're posing', the people depicted are living in Cape Town's District Six, a multi-racial, working-class and lower middle-class area near the docks, which contained a dwindling Jewish population. Most of its inhabitants were of mixed Malay, European, African, Indian and indigenous Khoisan origins, classified by the apartheid regime as 'Coloured'. The year before the print was made, the government had designated the area for destruction under the Group Areas Act: its residents would be forcibly removed and their homes bulldozed.

[3] Author's interview with the artist, May 2024.

Hoe Lekker Pose Ons Nou (Look How Nicely We're Posing), District Six, Cape Town, 1967, linocut, 320 x 320 mm (© the artist).

Kaplan's subjects in District Six knew that their way of life was threatened by imminent extinction. When comparing his preparatory drawing for *Hoe Lekker Pose Ons Nou* with the final linocut, the artist's decisions are forceful: the figures have become separated by a window mullion, while the panes have become ominous black slabs. The subjects hold themselves with greater stiffness, and the infant who is looking to one side in the drawing now casts a rather

baleful eye at the viewer. The textures of wall and clothing have been emphasized so that the subjects appear to blend into the narrow space of their environment.



Hoe Lekker Pose Ons Nou (Look How Nicely We're Posing), District Six, Cape Town, 1967, pencil on paper, 160 x 190 mm (© the artist).

Depicting such poor people at all has an honorific function, of which his subjects were certainly aware, but Kaplan does so without sentimentality, taking a steady look at their condition and its alienating effects, and without recourse to the sometimes suspiciously comforting notion of 'dignity'. He says that the reactions of people to his presence in the townships were various, and that while most were accepting of what he was doing, a group of youths once chased him out of

District Six.[4] People would sit for him as he drew for half an hour or more, and, as indicated in the print's title, would self-consciously present themselves for his pencil.

Mr Lindstrom, Shopkeeper, South End, Gqeberha, 1967, linocut, 815 x 630 mm (© the artist).

In another work made in Port Elizabeth from the same year Kaplan portrays a shopkeeper of Swedish origin, known in the area only as Mr Lindstrom, who had married a black woman before apartheid came into force. Once again, the subject is in an area condemned by the Group Areas Act of 1950, South End, a neighbourhood of modest housing facing the docks where a number of early Jewish immigrants had settled, including Kaplan's family, who had fled pogroms in Russia at the turn of the century. As the artist recounts in his extended caption to

[4] Author's interview with the artist, May 2024.

the print, although the Lindstroms fought hard to maintain their 30-year marriage, they were finally obliged to live separately – Mr Lindstrom in a 'white' area; Mrs Lindstrom in a 'black' one. Once again, the figure occupies a narrow space, and does so awkwardly, stretching out his arm as if to embrace the shop's till. This old-fashioned till is strangely detailed when compared to the rest of the print, a sign perhaps of the importance of small-time commerce in the subject's life, as emphasized by the price label placed close to his head. The dangers of the area are indicated by the baseball bat that he keeps close at hand. In this narrow space where the shopkeeper is confined, the hot colours add to the feeling of claustrophobia and seem indicative of the oppressiveness caused by separation, and of the impending destruction of home and shop and of the district it had served.

It is clear that from the tradition of politically charged printmaking introduced to him by the Podlashucs, Kaplan had taken a strong interest in the depiction of everyday life, especially of people who dwell under oppression. At the same time, his work is distinct from that of Masereel and many socially engaged artists; there is precise social observation, but it is not used to satirical effect; the overt emotional tone of expressionism is lacking, as is its dynamic rendition of figures. There is no visible destruction, no overt mourning or weeping. We do not see the oppressors – either in the form of their agents, or allegorically – nor do we see acts of resistance against them. Rather, starting with the naturalistic drawings made of individuals in a particular place, Kaplan's mode is closer to realist documentary. There is an ordering and an alteration which emphasize the sitters more general character, and a sense of their self-aware resignation is conveyed with a considered emotional flatness.

These early prints of the 1960s were occasionally exhibited in South Africa, where, if the gallery owner was exceptionally liberal, they might have been seen by their subjects. They were on view, for example, at the Shear Gallery in Port Elizabeth in 1969 and in two shows in Johannesburg – at the Lidchi Gallery in 1970 and the Totem Meneghelli Gallery in 1975. There followed, however, close to a twenty-year hiatus in Kaplan's exhibition history, and he did not

show again in South Africa until the apartheid regime was on the verge of relinquishing its power in the early 1990s.

Kaplan's prints of the 1970s maintained much of their early character but with a sharper social focus, in part caused by the 1976 Soweto uprising, in which the police killed schoolchildren who were protesting against the parlous state of education for black people and the regime's attempt to impose teaching in Afrikaans. Those events brought him, and many other white people, to actively participate in the anti-apartheid struggle. Kaplan also drew inspiration from South African photography, particularly the work of Peter Magubane (1932–2024), a news photographer with whom he worked on the liberal *Rand Daily Mail* in the mid-1970s. Magubane and his fellow photographers captured striking images of young people resisting the regime during the Soweto uprising, as well as of the massacre itself. Kaplan remembers that although the paper's photographers would arrive back at the offices bloodied from beatings by the security forces, they would still go out day after day to make their essential documentation of the regime's brutality.[5] In formal terms Kaplan appears to derive little from Magubane, who was a highly accomplished photojournalist capable of fine compositional ordering of complex, chaotic and perilous situations. In some of Magubane's photographs, however, people do present themselves frontally before the camera in an attitude of defiance, as if to display what the regime has done to them. Here, there is an affinity between Magubane's work and much of what Kaplan creates in this period.

[5] Author's interview with the artist, May 2024. See also '"To Fight with my Camera, to Kill Apartheid": Peter Magubane – A Life in Pictures', *The Guardian*, 22 January 2024.

Compound Gates, Johannesburg, 1977, linocut, 730 x 590 mm (Private collection. © the artist).

As an example, *Compound Gates*, of 1977, marks the shift in Kaplan's work. Each of the three figures first appears in a separate drawing and they come together only in the print. Compounds were single-sex hostels in which African workers from both rural areas and neighbouring countries were forced to reside, leaving their families behind. Residents had to get permission to leave the hostel, and a strict curfew was imposed for their return. Unlike in earlier work, the agent of oppression – albeit a sorry-looking specimen – does appear as the central figure. Oppressive regulation is suggested not just by the presence of the guard but by the ominous shadows of the hostel gate. The residents, especially the figure on the left with his fancy shirt and stylish demeanour, appear far from resigned to their situation. Indeed, both young men are dressed as for a Saturday night out. The hated 'dompas' (identity book or passbook)

protrudes from the pocket of the man on the left. The works of this period often illustrate the liveliness of black life as led in Johannesburg, despite all of the regime's oppressive controls. There is again an affinity with documentaries, and in this print perhaps with Goldblatt's eloquent photograph of 1972, of two black youths sitting in close proximity, suggestive of their solidarity, as one displays his dompas.[6] Kaplan was describing a distinctive and resistant urban culture, which was also seen in the pages of *Drum* magazine and in Ernest Cole's photographs documenting what he called 'black ingenuity' in the form of visual art, literature, music, dance and fashion.[7]

Following the Soweto uprising, the regime intensified its suppression of opposition through imprisonment, torture and killings. Kaplan's home was raided by the police, following which he was detained, interrogated and put under surveillance. In 1977 he and his wife-to-be Bronwen Morgan (1952-) left South Africa. Kaplan was denied entry to the UK on grounds that were never specified, and it was only with assistance from Robert Hughes (1932–2022), a Labour MP and supporter of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, that he was eventually able to obtain a visa. Once in London the following year, Kaplan began to undertake intensive and wide-ranging work for the liberation movement. At the International Defence and Aid Fund, which had initially been set up to support political prisoners and their families in South Africa, he designed books, illustrated pamphlets and recorded sound for Barry Feinberg's films. With the ANC and other bodies he made photography and documentary film and video, while also designing and illustrating publications, leaflets and posters intended for distribution in South Africa and internationally. Although there were many anti-apartheid activists in the UK, the official

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[6] *Young Men with Dompas. White City, Jabavu, Soweto*, 1972, impression of the print in the V&A, acc. no. E.39-1992; online database.

[7] Reissue of E. Cole, *House of Bondage*, New York, 1967, in *Aperture Magazine*, 2022, , pp. 206–31. Photographs recently on view 'Ernest Cole: House of Bondage', exhibition, Photographers' Gallery, London, June–September 2024.

atmosphere was hostile. The Thatcher government denounced racism yet rejected the imposition of sanctions on the South African regime and continued to supply it with arms. Thatcher herself condemned the ANC as a terrorist organization.[8]

Kaplan was publishing cartoons anonymously in journals and newspapers such as *Sechaba,* a monthly produced by the African National Congress; *The African Communist*, the South African Communist Party's quarterly journal; and its newspaper *Umsebenzi*. All had to be smuggled into South Africa, where they were distributed clandestinely and passed from hand to hand. Kaplan's images were sketched in an informal and lively manner, serving their instrumental function well. In graphic form, they showed black South Africans – some of whom, given the prejudicial education system, had difficulties reading – the rudiments of resistance: for instance, how to rig booby traps against troops sent into black neighbourhoods. On returning to South Africa in 1991, when the ban was lifted on political organizations, Kaplan undertook many projects, including involvement in TV films about the situation in the country, province by province. In 1994 he helped make, again with Feinberg, the documentary film *Pemba: A Painter of the People*, which led to a revival of interest in the artist's work and a major Pemba retrospective at the South African National Gallery in Cape Town.[9] Kaplan's prints were shown once again in numerous exhibitions, including at the British Arts Council and the National Gallery, Cape Town, both in 1992; at the Nelson Mandela Metro Art Gallery in Gqeberha in 1999; at the Gloucester Printmaking Co-op Gallery, UK, 2013; in the exhibition 'Encuentro 2014' in Havana in 2014; and in the exhibition 'City to City, Face to Face' in Gothenburg, Sweden, in 2000.

[8] S. M. Boehmer, 'Questionable Allies: British Collaboration with Apartheid South Africa, 1960–90', *The International History Review*, XL, 2023, p. 113.

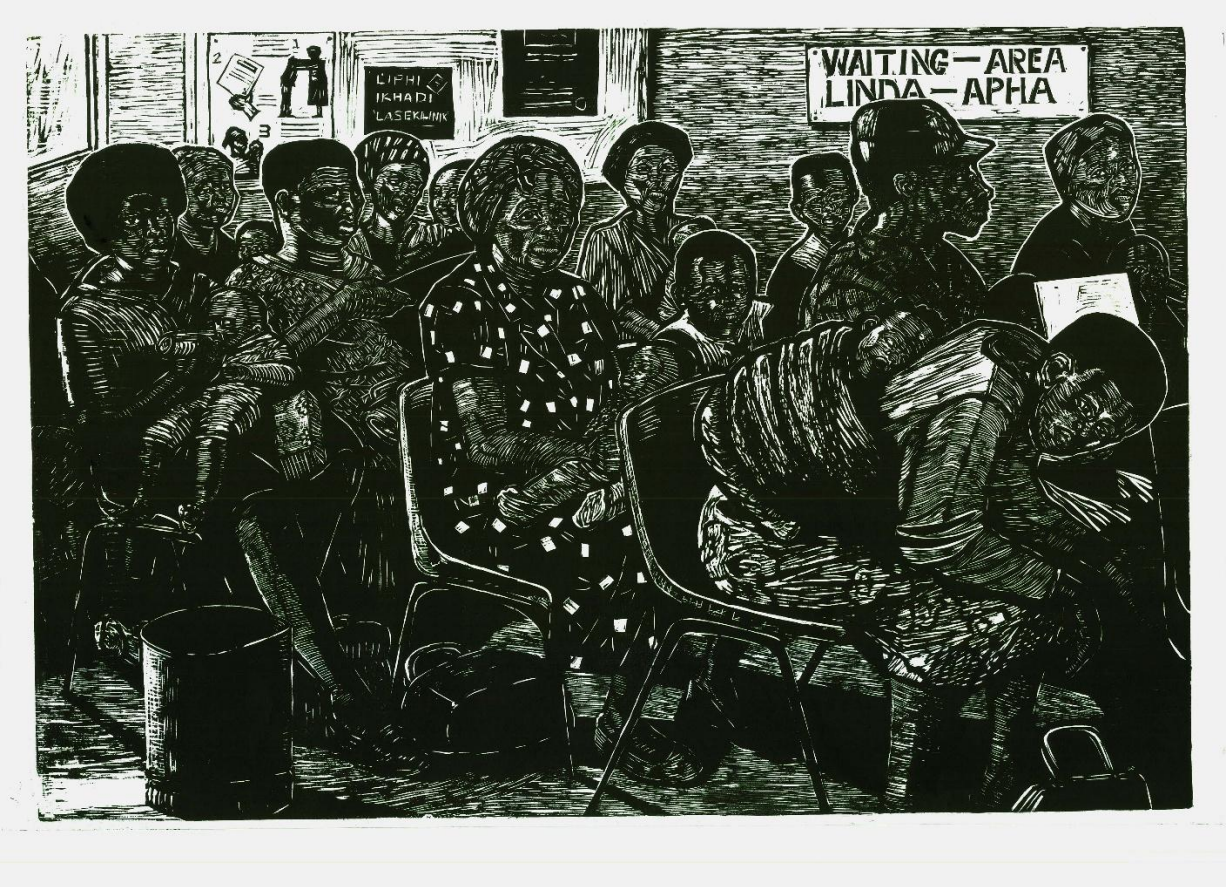
[9] 'George Pemba Retrospective Exhibition', South African National Gallery, Cape Town, 1996, with catalogue, *George Mnyalaza Milwa Pemba*, Bellville, Mayibuye Books, 1996.

Freed from immediate activist concerns, Kaplan was able to work on larger and more elaborate prints. In 1996, he was one of the artists selected in a competition to design windows for South Africa's new Constitutional Court in Johannesburg. In a striking architectural statement, the Court was housed in a fort that had been used as a prison under apartheid – a notoriously brutal one, divided into sections by race. This work was vastly different from anything that Kaplan had done before, as he moved from being an oppositional and activist artist to creating work for the new government.

In these new circumstances, the concept of 'dignity' was the brief, as the new nation set out to fulfil the requirements of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, from which the title of his design is drawn. Kaplan composed a hieratic and honorific structure filled with the burdened, the impoverished and the disabled. The figures are crowded into a narrow space with the central figure, a mother and child, standing at the entrance to a shanty town hut. On either side we see crops and city buildings, while all are pressed down upon by a sky that looks like distressed concrete. The print – which would be faithfully reproduced in the Constitutional Court window – represents an allegory of the nation, bringing together figures who represent different types: a miner, a farm worker, a beggar, people in traditional dress, in ages ranging from children to the elderly.

All Shall be Afforded Dignity, 1996, linocut, 562 x 377 mm (Private collection. © the artist).

Unlike most allegories of this kind it is a highly partial view, in which the nation is formed exclusively of those who have been dispossessed and abused by the past regime. The complex and intricate patterns covering almost the entire print, producing in places something close to a moiré effect, are a departure for Kaplan. Dignity there may be, in the way that people hold themselves and are arranged, but Kaplan uses these patterns to stamp faces and figures with strange devices that sometimes suggest deformation – surely of a social kind. There is hope here and at the same time an acknowledgment of the terrible legacy bequeathed to the liberated nation.



The Waiting Room, Kwazekhele Township, Gqeberha, 1995, linocut, 950 x 630 mm (Private collection. © the artist).

A very different print, made a year earlier, had seen Kaplan returning to his previous method of going into the townships to make drawings and photographs, which are then used as the basis for linocuts. He shows an apparently mundane scene of people in the waiting room at a clinic, except that these people would almost certainly have been refused access to general healthcare under the old regime.[10] Here they wait patiently for what has been denied to them for so long, and the bureaucratic apparatus of signage, information posters and the ranks of plastic chairs so familiar to many of us take on a charge of anticipation and hope. Each person is carefully described in their individuality – how they hold themselves as they sit, what they wear, whether they look towards the viewer, whether they are in charge of a child or baby. The view is oblique rather than frontal, introducing a more open perspectival space in contrast to the narrow opening that marks previous prints, as if the subjects were able to breathe a little more easily.

The Waiting Room was part of an extensive series of large linocuts that Kaplan wished to make depicting township and rural life in the Eastern Cape, taking subjects such as health, education, youth unemployment and gang warfare. It was to be a long-term project tracing the process of reconstruction and development in the area, and suggesting the wider transition and reconciliation processes changing the new nation. Sadly, arthritis has prevented Kaplan from pursuing his plan to make this series, and he has turned to painting instead. South Africa did not fulfil the early guarded optimism. The vast majority of black people remained in poverty and inequality prevailed, albeit while improvements were made to health, education and infrastructure. Corruption became an issue during successive ANC governments, unemployment

[10] See the figures in R. Kale, 'Impressions of Health in the New South Africa: A Period of Convalescence', *British Medical Journal*, CCCX, 1995, pp. 1119–22.

and as violent crime increased the townships became too dangerous for Kaplan to enter.[11] Dignity, as well as many other requirements of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, were denied to large numbers of South Africans.

Another in the series, the linocut *Xhosa Woman Playing the Uhadi*, shows a traditionally dressed woman seated in a typical Eastern Cape landscape, surrounded by cycads and euphorbias, as she plays an ancient musical instrument called the uhadi, or 'harp' in Xhosa. The uhadi consists of a curved wooden branch with a single string attached to a calabash or gourd. The string is stroked or tapped with a stick bow and is usually accompanied by singing. Performances with the uhadi have been linked to ongoing black resistance in South Africa, and to deeply felt connections with a history that stretches back beyond colonialism and apartheid. After the liberation, some players and singers, such as Latozi 'Madosini' Mphahleni, became famous.

In Kaplan's later prints there is a fascinating interweaving of patterning and modelling. In *Xhosa Woman Playing the Uhadi* everything but the sky is finely and variably textured – the patterns of the woman's dress and skin, the plants, the hills and the harp, suggesting their connection to and integration with the landscape. The print was made on the basis of drawings which Kaplan sketched while travelling the country, often at night, while making the film, *A History of Xhosa Musical Tradition* (1995) about harp players. Yet the emanation of light in this print does not seem naturalistic, especially since the figure and plants should be backlit by the moon. The carving of the linocut suggests the way that light plays over the woman's muscles, while at the same time retaining its own integral pictorial logic.

[11] For two contrasting views on the causes of this situation, see R. W. Johnson, 'False Start in South Africa', *New Left Review*, LVIII, 2009, pp. 61–74, and the reply by P. Bond, pp. 77–88.

Xhosa Woman Playing the Uhadi, Transkei, Eastern Cape, 2003, linocut, 1,000 x 700 mm (© the artist).

Without recourse to sentiment or nostalgia, this image points towards an experience of deep time and cultural continuity. It reflects powerful elements in Xhosa culture, and by implication in indigenous South Africa as a whole, which had resisted first the colonial attempts to destroy its social and cultural fabric, and later the apartheid regime's elaborate programme to instrumentalize 'tribal' culture for tourism and propaganda purposes. Kaplan, who dedicated much of his life in arduous work to bring down the apartheid regime, has here developed his own particular visual language to represent the ongoing affective force of enduring resistance.