



Bonggi Bengu  
After 1, 2003  
Mixed media on canvas, 140 x 90 cm



Norman Catherine  
Double Speak, 2001  
Oil on fibre-glass, 220 x 120 x 12 cm

### The ID of South African Artists

by Joost Bosland

I was ready to encounter the worst kitsch possible. The more than 100 works of 57 artists that make up 'The ID of South African Artists' belong to the Van den Ende Collection, and were hand-picked by Janine van den Ende, wife of Dutch media mogul Joop van den Ende, of *Big Brother* and *Isidingo* fame.

Ms Van den Ende stresses in the catalogue that she is 'not really an art expert'. And as if a curator who brags about her lack of knowledge isn't enough, the show is the official accompaniment of the musical *The Lion King* produced by - yes - her husband.

I feared some cute African art intuitively chosen by *matrone* to match the abject Disney kitsch of Simba.

My assumptions were totally misguided: it was a show of the highest calibre. As her advisors, Van den Ende had selected Sharlene Khan (one of the writers of *10 Years 100 Artists*) and no one less than Mr. David Koloane himself.

Before I go on to praise the exhibition, I want to ponder a moment on the implications of her choice of advisors. While the show claims to have no heavy academic aspirations, the names of Khan and Koloane breathe an air of respectability. No longer a solo project of a bored society wife, the exhibition has come into being under the guidance of two outspoken and respected members of the SA arts community. The result is a rather curious chiasm of academia and the whims of a private collector.

The catalogue of the exhibition is a rather professional full-color 285-page bilingual (Dutch/English) publication. The introduction is an endearing personal statement by Janine van den Ende. Because of her position as quirky collector, I will forgive her the occasional phrase like 'Africa has been in my heart since my childhood.' I was amused by her use of artists' names as product references, when she spoke of adding 'a Botha, a Kriel and a Dumas' to complete her collection. On the whole, though, her statement is upright and open-minded, and appropriate for the occasion.

The introduction is followed by a full-length essay co-authored by Khan and Koloane. Its title, 'Rethinking Identity', comes across as somewhat pseudo-academic, but don't be deceived. It is a proper, plain-spoken introduction to the fundamentals of identity politics in contemporary South-Africa. It speaks for the essay's authors that they openly admit that 'the theme of 'identity' has been one of these issues that seems to have been exploited sufficiently.'

At the same time, the actual exhibition challenges that assertion. Of every artist, the book announces the 'IDENTITY.' An example: Bonggi Bengu is introduced as: 'South African black, female, 34 yrs old, born in Eshowe, Kwazulunatal [sic.] (b. 1970).'

Initially I was somewhat averse to such a limited, essentialist description of artists' identities. Leafing through the booklet, I slowly changed my mind. For the appreciation of some of the work on show, knowing which of such basic apartheid-era classifications are applicable to the genius in question can be helpful, if not essential.

It is striking to realise that Norman Catherine is a middle-aged white male. It is fascinating too that a rich, Dutch lady has no problem finding the talented black female artists that the institutions in SA are supposedly still looking for. On a pragmatic level, the awful identity categories can provide a tool for accessing the art.

A more valid criticism would be that such categories do not have the same significance for the - in this case Dutch - audience as they would have to South Africans, and in particular to the artists. The catalogue essay addresses that problem somewhat, but explaining the complexities of SA identity structures is a nearly impossible task when one is limited to one essay. Some errors in the Dutch translation only complicate things for the average theatergoer.

Confusingly, the essay is at times written in the first person, while Koloane and Khan are listed as its joint authors. In a footnote, someone writes 'it was quite liberating for me to see work being chosen for its aesthetic merit and its content rather than on the racial identity or gender of the artist.' I presume this is Koloane's voice, since Khan has made a point of selecting only black female artists for *10 Years 100 Artists*. The problem is that it remains a guess, albeit educated, and that at other points the 'I' in question is less clear.

In the catalogue, each artist is introduced by a brief description of their work. Except in a few cases, where the description is provided by their dealer, I assume the words are those of Khan. The texts are well-suited for the target audience: people who do not necessarily have a passion for the visual arts. For the connoisseur, the texts will prove bland.



Phillip Rikhotso  
Untitled, 2001  
Painted wood, 84 x 23 x 20



Phillip Rikhotso  
Untitled, 2001  
Painted wood, 47 x 18,5 x 20



Ricky Ayanda Dyaloyi  
The Prophet, 2004  
Mixed media on canvas, 204 x 108 cm

For a full list of names of participating artists, I refer you to the show's listing on this website. Let me just say that the artists are demographically representative, without the selection looking forced.

For sure, some bad work by black artists is included. Before anyone starts yelling that it is affirmative action gone wrong, let me state loud and clear that there is also some bad work by white artists on show. Van den Ende's taste is just a bit peculiar, though for the most part delightful.

Her decision to buy three sculptures by Phillip Rikhotso was sound business sense. After his victory at this year's Brett Kebble Art Awards, the value of these pieces must have made a nice jump. One could even call it visionary, since at the time of his selection for 'The ID' the sculptor was hardly a household name. To me the Rikhotso works in Scheveningen are undeniable proof that he is much more than a one-hit wonder. Who will host his first solo show?

Bongi Bengu's mixed media works were a delightful discovery. The two portraits of women - Winnie and Dorothy will probably go unrecognised by the audience - are intriguing, but also simply beautiful. The same can be said of Ricky Ayanda Dyaloyi's mixed media work *The Prophet*. The juxtaposition of the ponderous figure in the top field of the painting with the abstracted (ritual?) object below is immensely powerful.

I could go on to describe other marvellous works. I could also spend time criticising the inclusion of work by both Koloane and Khan in their own exhibition: a practice that is too common in SA. If I wanted to be really malicious, I could list all the art that I personally would never have bought for such a prestigious show.

But the show as a whole is more important than any of the individual works. The fiction of Africa's timeless past, perpetuated by the *The Lion King* musical itself, is reframed by lively works of contemporary South Africans.

It is not an academic or institutional exhibition, and it should not be held to higher standards than is reasonable. If Koloane and Khan feel comfortable with their contribution to the project, who am I to call them rent-an-academics? The catalogue is not on the cusp of intellectual sophistication, but it does make SA art accessible to a new audience. Moreover, it remains a project of a wealthy private collector. As such, it deserves the highest praise.

When the musical finishes, the works are to be auctioned. Maybe we can convince Van den Ende to first bring the collection back to SA soil for a while. Anyone with ties to the President?

Runs until the end of *The Lion King* production

Fortis Circustheater, Scheveningen, the Netherlands