

IDENTITY

Since South Africa was officially welcomed into the world arena ten years ago, there has been many international and local shows focusing on socio-economic, historical and political issues prevalent in South African society and its cultural productions. The theme of 'identity' has been one of these issues that seems to have been exploited sufficiently. There are many (artists, critics, art historians) that feel that the South African art scene is disillusioned by international curators visiting the country with some vague notion of what identity means to South Africans. In fact, cultural theory is more than replete with the questioning of identity on all levels for the last 20 years. Using identity as the overarching theme for this exhibition was therefore the furthest subject on my mind, when Janine van den Ende and William Wells came to South Africa with the aim of presenting an exhibition on South African art.



When this project began and the curatorial team embarked on sourcing work in South Africa, the aim was to produce an exhibition on 100 years of painting in South Africa to coincide with the 100 year anniversary of the Fortis Circustheater. Although this seemed to be a daunting task, it was by no means unfeasible. Over 100 artworks and 57 artists later the show had evolved into a new concept. The curatorial team unanimously decided that the show would no longer be limited to painting or a visual documentation of South African painting. Almost every artist we had spoken to, every story we had heard, every work that had seduced us, dealt with the issue of identity. It became a subject that we could no longer ignore or downplay. As South Africans, even we were overwhelmed by the plethora of manifestations that identity presented in the various works (that now encompassed paintings, sculpture, drawings, prints and photographs). Despite all academic skepticism, we became enthusiastic about a show whose primary focus resided in the cross-cultural stories told by the artists and galleries, which wove a fascinating web of history. The selection of the work was uninhibited by the aesthetic criteria of mainstream art, academic standards or market brands of specific

FOTO: CAPETOWN, WONDER MARTHINUS AND JANINE

RETHINKING IDENTITY

by David Koloane and Sharlene Khan

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practitioners. A factor which brings to mind the irksome dilemma of aesthetic standards and choice of criteria which has to be unequivocally applied by all and sundry in spite of the inequalities inherent in the past history of South Africa.

The selection of work for the exhibition was subject to different criteria. The Fortis Circustheater is not a conventional gallery space and therefore the works chosen had to be physically suitable for the space. Installation and video work was therefore not viewed as a viable option for the exhibition venue. These criteria become advantageous as works that are considered more 'traditional', such as painting, sculpture, printmaking and drawing, were privileged for the exhibition.

The selection of work was not based on demographics, but rather on how the works appealed to the coordinating team, their vision for the exhibition space and the evolving curatorial concept¹. The final selection of works for this exhibition straddles a wide divide of cultures, training, education, technique, opportunities and market value. It also ranges from simplicity to complexity, naïve to the most sophisticated and features some work that has not been seen together in the same space before even in South Africa.

A factor that further determined the selection of works was that of availability, as all works on exhibition had to have been for sale. This is certainly unconventional, for a founder to put together an exhibition of this scale and then to have purchased all 108 works prior to the exhibition. Works were chosen mostly on the basis of the images rather than the famous names of South African artists. The random character of the works however produced unanticipated synergies in some instances, unexpected dialogue in others and still a strange chemistry elsewhere. While all of these factors could lead to pitfalls of their own the exhibition teams' awareness of the restraints imposed on the exhibition itself and the representation of South African art prevents illusions that this exhibition is a 'true' reflection of art in South Africa. This show serves as an introduction to specific media in South African art – an introduction, as the country's art scene is considerably more diversified than what has been presented here. The exhibition does not claim to be a reflection of South African art but merely a hint at some of the work produced since the 1960's.

¹. AS A SOUTH AFRICAN ARTIST, IT WAS QUITE LIBERATING FOR ME TO SEE WORK BEING CHOSEN FOR ITS AESTHETIC QUALITIES AND ITS CONTENT RATHER THAN ON THE RACIAL IDENTITY OR GENDER OF THE ARTIST. THIS DOES NOT MEAN THAT I MYSELF DID NOT AT TIMES CONSIDER THESE ISSUES AND MAKE SURE AT SOME POINT IT WAS ADDRESSED, AS THE ART SCENE AND MANY RESOURCES ARE STILL IN THE HANDS OF WHITE SOUTH AFRICANS AND THEREFORE DOES AT TIME PREJUDICE BLACK ARTISTS (ATKINSON, 1999: 14). THAT HOWEVER WAS MY CONCERN AND DID LITTLE TO HAMPER THE SELECTION OF WORK.

IDENTITY UNDER NEGOTIATION:

The 1994 elections in South Africa were an amazing feat for humanity, let alone South Africa. As the world media camped around South Africa to await the expected civil war, South Africans of all races, cultures, religions and educational levels lined up at voting stations to peacefully send South Africa into its' democracy. A country divided for decades by history, politics, economics and legislation, voted against apartheid to bring the 'rainbow nation' into being. Rainbow nationalism, 'unity in diversity', 'we are one' slogans became the anthem of the 'new' South Africa, as the country tried to foster a national spirit and national identity, where despite all the differences that made each South African unique, our common identity and pride in being South African was promoted. Despite recent criticisms of such paraphernalia², one cannot undervalue the importance of such an attitude ten years ago in a country as fractured as South Africa.



It seemed identities had functioned for such a long time along binary lines: white/black or white/non-white, male/female, tertiary educated/self taught, etc. that they appeared as normative ways of thinking. Within these dichotomies however were many contradictions and ever-receding distinctions. While females generally operated within a sexist society, racial, cultural, economical, religious and educational differences had severed common lines of identification between 'femaleness'. Faced with the grand narrative of 'APARTHEID', identities took on a rather oppositional face of good and bad, good versus evil and right and wrong. With the demise of apartheid however, these facets became harder to negotiate. Binaries don't seem to work so well in a pluralistic society. 'White' as an institution became harder to criticize without lumping together and offending white individuals who actively participated in the struggle. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) brought black individuals to the fore who 'sold out' other black comrades, whose self ambitions and self preservations led to the deaths of many activists, both white and black. South Africa became an increasingly complex place to negotiate an identity. It's easier to sit in a pub or a shebeen³ with friends of

2. RAINBOW NATIONALISM' HAS BEEN CRITICIZED BY MANY CULTURAL THEORISTS IN SOUTH AFRICA IN A RANGE OF DISCIPLINES. CULTURAL THEORISTS SARAH NUTTALL AND CHERYL ANN MICHAEL (2000: 1) ARGUE THAT 'AN OVER-SIMPLIFIED DISCOURSE OF RAINBOW NATIONALISM' HAS BEEN FOREGROUNDED INSTEAD OF THE COMPLEX CONFIGURATIONS OF IDENTITY THAT HAVE ALWAYS BEEN THERE. FURTHERMORE, LIKE CRITICISMS OF MULTICULTURALISM, THAT RAINBOW NATIONALISM HAS CONCEALED THE CONTINUATION OF ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL INEQUALITIES THAT IS STILL RIFE AMONG BLACK COMMUNITIES.

3. A SHEBEEN IS AN UNOFFICIAL TAVERN THAT WAS CREATED TO MEET THE NEEDS OF THE AFRICAN COMMUNITY AS APARTHEID LAWS DID NOT PERMIT BLACK PEOPLE TO SOCIALIZE IN THE SAME PLACES AS WHITE PEOPLE AND EVEN HAD CURFEWS TO PREVENT BLACK PEOPLE FROM BEING IN CITY CENTERS AND CERTAIN AREAS AFTER A STIPULATED TIME.

FOTO: AMOS MOKGABUDI LETSOALO AND JANINE



the same race and talk about the Other, it's a different situation working, living and studying with people of other races and cultures. It becomes harder to talk about an Other, when economically or religiously you bond with someone, but racial differences still separate you. Or vice-versa. Identities shaped against oppositional forces – an 'us/them' mentality, is much easier to maintain. The 'new' South Africa moved forward, becoming increasingly aware of the continued socio-economic and political inequalities that still pervade many levels of South African society. Similarly, on the eve of his term end as president of the African National Congress (ANC), Nelson Mandela remarked on the 'Rainbow Nation' concept as something that benefited the white people, as it privileged the appearance of racial unity over other inherited inequalities that would take a much longer time to eradicate due to this lip service (Atkinson, 1999: 27).

It is within this optimism, this confusion, this new-found freedom that artists have tried to negotiate identity, meaning and representation. Art now freed from the constraints of being used primarily as a political weapon⁴ many artists took the privilege of deconstructing history, education, notions and stereotypes of Self and the Other, public/private dichotomies as well as interrogating the various media itself. Artists like Penny Siopis, Wayne Barker and Roderick Sauls have sought to deconstruct the idea of history and science as 'factual' disciplines, as South Africa's past history books, monuments, icons, even the national public holidays all presented the White man as savior to barbarians on a dark continent. With history books being trashed after 1994, the process of retelling history is far from complete in South Africa. There is so much that still remains hidden, unexposed, undocumented and misconstrued. Siopis has challenged the White, male history she has been schooled on, while Barker tears apart the myths of his Afrikaner history. Jane Alexander's work has dealt with the history of violence that has marred the country, her work troubling in its portrayal of the animalistic, brutal qualities of people. Robert Hodgkin's too has questioned authority, leadership and dictatorship in his work –

4. THIS 'FREEDOM' – OF FREEING ART AS SOLELY FOR THE USE OF POLITICS, WAS DELIVERED IN A SEMINAL IN-HOUSE AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS (ANC) SEMINAR, BY JUSTICE ALBIE SACHS IN STOCKHOLM IN 1989.

5. RACIAL TERMINOLOGY USED IN THIS TEXT IS USED AS IT WOULD BE IN A SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT. THE TERM 'COLORED' WAS USED BY THE APARTHEID GOVERNMENT TO REFER TO PERSONS OF MIXED RACIAL HERITAGE. THIS TERM HAS SUBSEQUENTLY BECOME A PART OF SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIETY AND IT IS STILL EMPLOYED CURRENTLY. FOR THE ARTICLE, THE TERM 'BLACK' HAS BEEN USED TO DESCRIBE ALL NON-WHITE PEOPLE IN SOUTH AFRICA, AND 'AFRICAN' TO REFER TO THE INDIGENOUS AFRICAN RACES OF SOUTH AFRICA.

FOTO: FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: SHARLENE, WILLIAM AND JANINE IN NEGOTIATION IN CAPETOWN

but with a cynicism and humor that makes one almost feel sorry for the Emperor with his new clothes.

Roderick Sauls seeks to validate the history of Colored^s people in Cape Town, as a history that continues to have a low profile. By attempting to reconstruct a forgotten history of Colored people, Sauls is trying to instill a sense of pride in Colored people for their heritage and ancestry. Sauls proudly calls himself a 'Colored', for him this term is one that occupies a special significance in the South African context. Terminology in post-apartheid South Africa has become rather contentious, tricky ground. Terms like 'Black', 'African', 'non-white', 'Colored' cannot be used without interrogation. Is black a racial grouping or a term that can be used in place of the problematic 'non-white'? Then Colored, Indians and Africans are all black? But is this 'black' or is this 'Black'? And what of the term 'African', for South Africans know that living on the tip of Africa they are most definitely Africans, even if at times their xenophobic tendencies prove otherwise. Sauls has realized that the term 'Colored', although a result of apartheid categorization, has evolved into its own realm, much like the language of Afrikaans has moved past being an oppressor's language to one that is colloquially diversified. By interrogating national histories and collective identities, artists have tried to strip away falsities that pervade collective memory. This exposition serves to try and construct, as well as define a new identity – collective or individual.

Collective and individual initiatives have been promoted by the democratic government – the ideal of individuals working together to promote a better society. Hence, the work of many artists in this exhibition deal with the different nuclei of South Africa – the city centers. Artists (such as David Koloane, Karl Gietl and Gary Frier) depict the changing dynamics, diversity and unique characteristics of the South African city centers and the people who work off and frequent these streets.

Similarly too, places of residence, most especially the apartheid-manufactured townships have formed the subject of many works. In the 1960's and 70's, certain African artists from townships like Alexandra and Sophia Town gained international fame for what was to be called 'Township Art'. The works of Dumile Feni, Andrew Motjuoadi and Julian Motau depicted the horrors of township life graphically, but also the unique lifestyles and sub-cultures that grew out of these locations. Many black people today are still housed in these

townships, which are now conditioned more by economic needs rather than racial segregation. Artists like Velile Soha, Xolile Mtakatya and Dominic Tshabangu all depict different aspects of township life, be it the sense of community, chaos, crime, drunkenness or liveliness that exist in these locations. These works sometimes have subtle nuances that could be easily referenced by someone who lives and understands township life but could also be easily missed even by other South Africans who still have little idea of what the inside of a township looks like even in post-apartheid times.

Post-apartheid society has been racked with problems though – the government trying to meet housing needs, education disparities, unemployment, a failing health care system, crime and of course the HIV/Aids epidemic that continues to ravage communities. Some works in the exhibition deal with these broad community issues: Stephen Maqashela (HIV/Aids), Nkoali Nawa (the hardship of the mining industry). Other works deal with the dignity, strength and pride of everyday individuals, as in the works of Willie Bester, Velaphi Mzimba and Sotiris Moldovanos.

The negotiation of identity on a personal level, of rethinking 'Self' is also evident in many works. The personal re-examination of identity has influenced the works of many, notably that of William Kentridge and Lallitha Jawahirilal in this exhibition. Kentridge's work deals with his reality of being a White, affluent male in South African society – all of the privileges, discriminations and baggage this brings with these terms. His alter ego characters display a range of identities and conflicts found in society in general and individuals in particular. Jawahirilal's work likewise is a constant questioning of her South African Indian heritage, her Western education and her African roots. For too long these facets of identity had been compartmentalized and theoretically set apart, but living these concepts, one realizes that they are not mutually exclusive. Many artists, both rural and urban-based derive their inspiration from a variety of sources which include dreams, rituals, rites and socio-political concerns. The younger generation of artists who in the past decade have had the privilege of better education and the benefit of new technology explore self-reflective areas of identity, gender and the challenges of cultural taboos. Artists like Pippa Skotnes and Colbert Mashile have looked at the way religion and rituals have influenced identity formation. The Afrikaner colonizing mentality was influenced by a belief that it was their divine order to conquer the landscape that was South Africa and bring religion to the heathen savages. During apartheid however, many religious organizations served as

centers of opposition to the apartheid regime. Many artists have gone on through their works to question or affirm their religious beliefs, whether it is in Catholicism, Calvinism, Islam or traditional African rituals and rites and the role these beliefs have had on shaping their identity. There are also black artists who have, through their work, advocated traditional morals and values that seem to have led to moral degradation in society. Foremost amongst these is Mmakgabo Helen Sebidi, who believes that the morals taught in rural areas are still pertinent even in a 'modern' urban society – that the urban/rural dichotomy has led to the disappearance of sound teachings that would continue to benefit South African society as a whole.



Representations of the Other continues to provide areas of contention in South Africa and rightfully so, as assumptions, presuppositions and preconceptions of the Other still exist ten years after the advent of democracy. Whether it is the stereotype that all criminals are African, that White people cannot be trusted, that Colored people are lazy or Indian women are exotic and sensual, these prejudices haunt everyday thinking in society. The portrayal of the Other therefore should always be subject to critical analysis. Who has the right to portray whom, in what manner, with what motive? Artist John Murray plays with these issues of representation – of him as a White male portraying black subjects, or at times depicting racially ambiguous people. He is aware of the ironies and possible representational problems lying therein, but this knowledge is perhaps what frees him from such prejudices. Questions of exoticism arise with Deborah Bell's portrayal of African sculptures in her work – does she as a White woman have the freedom to appropriate these images for her statement? Living in South Africa and on the African continent, is it therefore not also her heritage? Is she not exposed to these influences as much as black South Africans are, sometimes more so through her education and travels?

Representations of the Other are not only limited to racial and cultural categories, but also to that of gender inspection. Works by Bongi Bengu and Jennifer Lovemore-Reed analyze the role of females within history and society. While women have been actively involved within the struggle on every level, history still seems to focus on the achievements of male individuals. Bengu's work pays tribute to the women in various disciplines who waged war on racism along with their male counterparts. Lovemore-Reed's work deals with the intersection of race

FOTO: SHARLENE AND JANINE

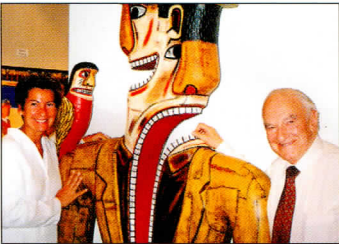
with the notion of 'femaleness', with their own bodies forming a potent site of questioning and resistance. The demise of the apartheid government has also seen what was considered outsider art in the form of work from homosexual, lesbian and queer artists, considerably grow in the last decade to claim its place in the art scene and be recognized on its aesthetic merit and social content rather than being viewed as art from the fringe.

The issues raised above and in this article as a whole, are just a hint at the complexity of issues that pervade art production in South Africa. Unless you have lived and worked in South Africa for an extensive period, it is hard to understand how much race and issues of identity and economics pervade South African society. A criticism that one hears of South African art is just this: that work is overwhelmingly about these issues, that it is stereotypical and looks like many artists are following a trend of dealing with social issues so as to catch the attention of overseas curators who expect work like this from an 'African' country. I cannot overlook the possibility that perhaps there are a few artists who might have this as a motive, but from my personal encounters with artists (in other disciplines as well), this has mostly been genuine. On a recent trip to Cairo, I was amazed how much Egypt's last war was still remembered, considering that the last war they fought was in 1973. When one considers that it is only ten years ago that apartheid was officially dismantled, one realizes that it is a very short time in memory and history and that it is but normal for the society to be as consumed as it is by issues of identity, representation and meaning.

The past decade has in some instances been positive yet there is still much to be accomplished in the distribution of resources and appropriated infrastructure. The new democratic order has, as expected, brought about a change here and there. Most educational institutions still remain racially divided, residential areas still bear vestiges of the old order with the most exclusive areas still remaining 'lily-white'. The irony is that the city centre has become black with the white corporate entity moving into leafy office parks in the suburbs. The Johannesburg Art Foundation which was incepted in the 1980's, was an independent art centre which admitted students from different cultural backgrounds. The centre also initiated a bursary fund to assist those students with potential who could not afford the fees (this applied to both black and white students). It was also the first centre to introduce black lecturers in the printmaking department. The existence of the centre became vital to the visual arts in the context of the history of South Africa and the Bantu Education Act of 1955 which denied black communities equal education. Several artists in this exhibition (e.g. Koloane, Kentridge,

Letsoalo) have in one way or the other been connected with this institution. The centre unfortunately closed in 2001 due to financial problems. There have been positive synergies inspired by the vision and foresight of the Johannesburg Art Foundation, such as the Bag Factory Artist's Studios and the Greatmore Studios in Cape Town. These initiatives have inspired practitioners to explore the concept of collectives as a vehicle of bridging cultural divides in anticipation of a new global role within the visual arts discipline.

Change in any society is slow, and ten years of democracy does not change all the inequalities that a society under 300 years of oppression endured. Talent and skills abound in South Africa, but more local and international ventures are still needed to ensure that such talent and skill is not wasted but instead exposed. This exhibition contributes to this vision as well, by having purchased all the work on display, by compiling a brilliant catalogue on the show and showcasing both internationally renowned artists along with up-and-coming names. More and more ventures are needed like this, who are not only interested in artistic concepts but instead in artwork and individual artists, their stories and the multi-faceted identities within South Africa.



For too long identity in South Africa had been prescribed as fixed, 'either/or' identities, easily negotiated by the apartheid thinking, precipitated on the color of one's skin. It is hard often to comprehend the extent of the effects of colonization and apartheid engineering on individual as well as collective identities. Analyzing cultural products from a society like this means one has to consider a range of debates and viewpoints that make up a rather difficult terrain to negotiate. This is

perhaps why international curators like Okwui Enwezor continue to suffer criticism when they come from an outside context and purport to 'understanding' and theorizing about what has transpired in this country. As one lives in South Africa, contradictions and complexities increase daily – hope lives next to fear, love in the midst of hatred, compassion in the wake of senseless violence, a determination to live, to thrive in the face of insufficiency. The curators of this show hope that this is what this exhibition will seek to do, to show a range of identities that they have been presented with, a host of ideas and skills that are used to give one a glimpse of a society that struggles with itself and its place in the global world, a country continuously in-the-making.

FOTO: JANINE WITH OWNER FROM EVERARD READ GALERY, CAPETOWN

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