

DOING IT FOR DADDY

THE ONGOING PRIVILEGE OF WHITE ARTISTS IS SUPPORTED BY AN ELABORATE INDUSTRY FOUNDED ON THE SEEMINGLY UNSHAKABLE HEGEMONY OF WHITENESS, ARGUES **SHARLENE KHAN**. THE OUTCOME IS THE PERPETUATION OF A WARPED SYSTEM THAT CONTINUES TO DISADVANTAGE THE MAJORITY OF THIS COUNTRY'S CITIZENS

Last year I attended the South African Architecture and Art Historian (SAAAH) conference for the first time. Held annually, this time in Grahamstown, I was intrigued by a discussion highlighting the shift in the power dynamics of the visual art world. In his presentation, artist, curator and academic Thembinkosi Goniwe explained how a patronizing white mommy has displaced the art world's patriarchal apartheid white daddy. It was refreshing to hear Goniwe articulate this, a fact black academics, writers, curators and artists have long been bemoaning.

White domination of the visual arts industry is overwhelming, the dominance of white females especially glaring. This statement can easily be gauged by a simple census. [See attached sidebar] The possible reasons for this tendency, which started taking place throughout the 1990s, can perhaps be attributed to a shift in national politics. Post 1994, the constitutional emphasis has been on redressing gender and racial inequality, particularly at institutional level.

In a paper titled 'Take Me to the Centre', artist Mgcineni Sobopha identified a glaring quirk of this redress. According to Sobopha, it has resulted in a "white-female-only ascendancy" into positions of power formerly occupied by white males. Both Sobopha and Goniwe were sceptical of this new power broker in the South African art world, and shared the view that these white women are, to quote US writer bell hooks, merely "doing it for daddy".

Since the discussions at the SAAAH conference, I have been troubled by the underlying presumption implicit in this power transfer – that it has benefited all South Africans. On one level, this attitude is founded on a shaky bit of essentialist logic that holds white women are less racist, this because of their ability to endure, and in some cases overcome, sexism. The idea is that they understand the experience of oppression. If one were to extend this line of thinking to its perverse conclusion, it would almost suggest that apartheid was a white man's construction, and that white women had little to do with.

There is growing dissatisfaction with the white domination of the visual arts industry. This should not be surprising. The ascendancy of white women into positions of power suggests a glaring lack of faith in black cultural workers and intellectuals. When asked why there are so few black writers, curators and academics staffing key institutions and projects, the rote answer is that there are no "qualified" black incumbents, or simply too few. This attitude has successfully thwarted substantive racial redress in the visual arts, and also been used as a ploy to promote 'yes baas' blacks.

As it stands, the ascendancy of white women into positions of power has seen little in the way of the implementation of new techniques, concepts or strategies in cultural policies. Viewed cynically, the rise of white women into exclusivist structures, many of them dating back to the apartheid era, bears out theorist Geeta Kapur's insight that the periphery (read white women) will sometimes infiltrate the centre (read white male world) not to effect change but to maintain power. Implicit in this action is the replication of systems of privilege (read whiteness) at the expense of the periphery (read black people).

Nothing that I have said so far seeks to disavow the individual achievements of white women in this country. I am also not claiming that every white woman is racist and has been of no benefit to the visual art scene. Fieke Ainslie, for example, is deeply respected in

the visual art world for her amazing contribution to seeing black artists get art education and exposure. Estelle Jacobs, at Cape Town's AVA Gallery, has a solid reputation amongst artists of different races and cultures, and is known for encouraging exhibitions from previously disadvantaged artists. However, I am daily privy to unheard complaints against white female 'dictators' (the Durban Art Gallery and the South African National Gallery are examples of this).

Responding to Goniwe and Sobopha's argument at the SAAAH conference, art historian Anitra Nettleton pointed out that white women have "worked hard" to get into their positions. Am I to interpret this to mean that black people have not also worked as hard? Working hard ultimately means nothing in a system that continues to privilege, reward and support achievements based on race. The challenge for South Africa's white female captains is clear. They must challenge and actively fight for institutional reform, otherwise they will simply perpetuate a warped system that continues to disadvantage the majority of this country's citizens.

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Geeta Kapur, 'A New Inter Nationalism: The Missing Hyphen', in *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*. Edited by Jean Fisher. (London: Kala Press in association with the Institute of International Visual Arts, 1994), pp.39-49

CENSUS REPORT

WHITE WOMEN RULE THE ROOST

Many public, university and private galleries and art associations have white women as their directors or chief curators, including Iziko SANG, Durban Art Gallery, Pretoria Art Museum, Association for the Visual Arts, MuseumAfrica, ABSA Gallery, Standard Bank Gallery, Wits University Gallery, Oliewenhuis Art Museum, Polokwane Art Museum, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Art Museum, Unisa Gallery, Anton van Vouw Museum, University of Johannesburg Art Gallery, University of Stellenbosch Gallery, Goodman Gallery, Art on Paper, African Art Centre, Ardmore Studios, ArtSpace (Johannesburg), ArtSpace (Durban), Gallery on the Square, amongst others. White women also predominate in academia, including the universities of Cape Town, Johannesburg, Rhodes, Stellenbosch and, until recently, Wits. The same is true for community projects, artists studios and visual art workshops (for example, Joubert Park Project, Gerhard Sekoto Foundation, Drill Hall, Imbali, South African Craft Council, Greatmore Studios, Bag Factory Studios, Artists Proof Studios). African art history too is often written by white women (for example, Esme Berman, Anitra Nettleton, Elsa Miles, Nessa Leibhammer, Julia Charlton and Fiona-Rankin Smith). White women also serve as curators to major corporate collections, including Sasol, MTN, Spier, KPMG, SABC, Wits University Art Galleries, BHP Billiton, Rand Merchant Bank Collection, ABSA Corporate Collection, Standard Bank Collection, Telkom Art Collection and Hollard Art Collection.