

SOUTH AFRICAN ART – TWENTY YEARS SINCE THE ADVENT OF THE POST-APARTHEID ERA

Only very recently – i.e. only a few months ago – occurred a truly historic moment in time: South Africa celebrated the 20th anniversary of the abolition of apartheid. The anniversary of that day, April 27, 1994 is now a public holiday and it is called Freedom Day. President Jacob Zuma presided over the official celebrations organised on Sunday April 27th to commemorate the 20th anniversary of post-apartheid democracy in South Africa, insisting that South Africa today is closer to its dream of a multi-racial nation despite problems of stubborn inequality, poverty and corruption. “Our country has done well,” said Zuma at the ceremony which was held exactly two decades after the first democratic all-race elections that decided that Nelson Mandela would become the country’s first black president. “We all have a good story to tell. (...) We have moved closer to our cherished dream of a united non-racial, non-sexist and democratic South Africa,”¹⁾ he said also at the “Freedom Day” ceremony held in the gardens of the Union Buildings, the seat of the South African government in Pretoria. Another important moment of national reconciliation occurred during the burial ceremonies of the first black South African president Nelson Mandela on December 10th, 2013.

South Africa is now the most developed country on the African continent and boasts, among other things, a strong constitution and an independent judiciary system. But its enormous democratic success has been sullied by mismanage-

¹⁾ Njanji (2014).

ment and high-level corruption, which is blamed largely on the African National Congress (ANC) party and the ANC-led government, as well as a legacy of racial inequality, poverty, rampant crime and a lack of basic social services. Although many contemporary issues relating to South African politics and culture are worthy of discussion, I have decided to present in my paper only some of the more important facts which are somehow connected with visual arts and are related to methods and ways of preserving the national heritage²⁾.

The history of South Africa is unusually colourful as a result of the various strong influences of different and conflicting cultures. These opposing cultures come into direct contact with each other and collide with the traditional African cultures: the black majority and the Khoisan population³⁾ versus the white foreign Boer⁴⁾ culture and the English community. However the political history of South Africa is also characterised by domestic unrest. Similarly complicated situation exists in South African art which has adopted varied forms in distinct historical contexts⁵⁾.

The contemporary and present day art of South Africa was dominated for many years by the existing political situation, which to a large extent was shaped by the doctrine of apartheid which basically lasted for almost fifty years – i.e. from 1948 until 1994. During the time of apartheid, the existing laws and legal regulations which were in force under this racist political doctrine discriminated against the civil rights of the black people of South Africa. It restrained the free movement of the black population around the country and limited the possibility for black citizens to acquire a better level of knowledge or higher education. Inevitably, in the years of the apartheid era, the black artists were largely neglected and for many years remained unnoticed and were completely unknown by the general public⁶⁾.

Some of the new forms of Black Art evolved in the cities and townships in the mid of the 20th century, however the adoption of racial segregation in

²⁾ Important themes such as “Searching for identity: Imaging the new society”, “Old influences, new work”, as well as “Punchline: A grim humor holds up a mirror to society” are presented in Williamson (2009).

³⁾ Khoisan – name given to indigenous people of South Africa.

⁴⁾ Boer is the Dutch and Afrikaans word for farmer, which came to denote the descendants of the Dutch-speaking settlers of the eastern Cape frontier in Southern Africa during the 18th century. For further reference about Boer art, cf. Pawłowska (2013a: 56–96).

⁵⁾ For further reference: Rodney et al. (2000); Thompson (2001); Brown et al. (1991); Curtin et al. (2003); Pawłowska (2013a).

⁶⁾ Coombes (2003: 243–278).

South Africa resulted in the scarcity of educated black artists⁷⁾. Since the end of the apartheid era, both black and white artists have created a variety of art works in an array of media. The Post-Apartheid Art is a continuing reverberation between expression and politics (for example, Sue Williamson or William Kentridge). Some artists have utilised the Western canon of art history as a central theme in their work (for example, Johannes Phokela or Wim Botha)⁸⁾. Another important aspect is the new role played by Black Art in the search for a proper place and acknowledgement of the Black Artist. As a result, some Black contemporary South African artists became quite successful commercially and have found international acclaim as well (for example, Willie Bester, Zenele Muholi, Moshekwa Langa, Zwelethu Mthethwa, Phokela)⁹⁾. It is also highly relevant to note the significance and importance of art in the process of nation-building, reconciliation and in the formation of national unity and pride¹⁰⁾. At the end of the 1980s redefining the role of art in the “new” South Africa involved a re-setting of the boundaries of critical and theoretical discourse. Albie Sachs’s influential and much-cited paper *Preparing Ourselves for Freedom* (1989), sought to redraw the role of creative production in South African society in anticipation of political change¹¹⁾. Although many cultural workers objected to Sachs’s apparent dissolution of the link between art and politics, the views in this paper sought to establish a new and independent ground for creative work in a post-apartheid context. In 1994 the international boycott was lifted and many artists in exile returned to South Africa, or cooperated in exhibitions that included their works.

Twenty years after the process of liberation from apartheid rule, South African artists and art exist in the period which serves as the melting-pot in which various new forms of communication are sought and desperately required. This has been a time of reclamation, restoration, renewal, and remembering of dismembered communities. The role of art in identity creation and in reconciliation is much in demand, for art has a way of articulating truths in different manners, which are often subtle, subliminal, and sometimes without obvious confrontation¹²⁾.

⁷⁾ Berman (1993: 241–291).

⁸⁾ Pawłowska (2013b: 281–285); Perryer (2005); Watt (2005:5); Jones (2002: 2).

⁹⁾ Williamson (2009: 24–27).

¹⁰⁾ Ntuli (2013).

¹¹⁾ Sachs (1990: 19–22).

¹²⁾ Ntuli (2004:1).

Good examples of these new types of visual arts in South Africa are: Gender Oriented Art (leading representatives – Zanele Muholi and Nicholas Hlobo) or Neo-African style Art (for example, Willie Bester, Kagiso Patrick Mautloa)¹³. Not surprisingly, democratic changes have created opportunities for various new artists to investigate issues relating to race and colour (for example, Thando Mama, Minnette Vári, Bearnie Searle, Marlene Dumas)¹⁴. Another important trend which can be observed in present day South Africa is the growing increase in popularity of community mural art, which has been witnessed and experienced over the past few years, especially in larger cities (for example, in Cape Town, Durban, Johannesburg) or the formation and construction of new heritage sites (for example, *Hector Pieterson Memorial* in Soweto or *History* in Johannesburg and *Freedom Park* in Pretoria)¹⁵.

While contemporary artists have been pioneering the ways of involving themselves in expression of the new post-apartheid reality, the main bodies responsible for policy in national institutions are dealing with commemorating history and heritage. A good example is the scrutiny that has been levelled at much of the public sculptures, set up over the long apartheid years to commemorate key moments and figures in the Afrikaner nationalist canon and that these debates took place in the highly public forums of the national press and television, especially between 1993 and 1996. The enormous *Voortrekker Monument* in Pretoria/Tshwane was built in the forties of the twentieth century in order to commemorate the Voortrekker pioneers and their journey – the Great Trek¹⁶. This provides a useful point of entry into the complexities of the debates concerning the appropriate forms for commemorating the past and envisaging the future in the “new” South Africa. Some curators recommended keeping the monument as a reminder of the oppression of the apartheid era – to learn from the lessons of the past. Although some critics favoured abandoning the monument altogether and demolishing the site, the South African solution has been notably unlike their East European counterparts. The ruling African National Congress – the ANC – spokespeople involved in outlining the cultural policy for the new democratic government were adamant that most of the Afrikaner monuments should remain, including the *Voortrekker*

¹³ Bedford (2004:40–42, 88–92); Pawłowska (2013c: 82–87).

¹⁴ Bedford (2004: 120–126).

¹⁵ Pawłowska (2013c: 73–75); Pawłowska (2013a: 348–350).

¹⁶ Moerdijk (1954: 30–32, 50); Heymans (1986: 10–14); Pawłowska (2013a:153–157).

*Monument*¹⁷). Consequently, although in practice some monuments dedicated to the memory and legacy of apartheid have been destroyed (certainly the fate of most statues of Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd, the man considered by many to be the major architect of apartheid), many of those most symbolically laden are still intact, including the Voortrekker and the *Taalmonument* (Afrikaans Language Monument) outside Paarl¹⁸. Indeed, at various points in the debate over the future of monuments in South Africa there was criticism about the amount of government funding being apportioned to monuments dedicated to aspects of Afrikaner culture.

Another fundamental problem in the sculptures and pictures made by young South African artists is focused on the sense of loss of power and identity experienced by the white Afrikaners under the new African National Congress (ANC) government. At the same time the new South African Government of National Unity initiated the political and socio-economic transformation of the country, according all races or ethnic groups and their respective cultures equal status. Art and culture were seen to play a vital role in the process of transformation, correcting the injustices and biases of the past and achieving cultural equity or “redress”¹⁹. This was codified in the government’s White Paper on Arts and Culture, published in 1996, which was meant to guide all public institutions and eventually filter down into every level of society. Prominent curator Marilyn Martin in his “Foreword” to *Contemporary South African Art* from the South African National Gallery Permanent Collection writes:

There are many divergent opinions and positions regarding the meaning, role and future of our art, a situation which has been brought into sharp focus by the end of the academic and cultural boycott, and years of isolation. The discussions and debates are local and specific, but they are also situated in the global context of post-colonialism and neo-colonialism, as well as post – and late-modernism, multiculturalism and pluralism. There is no consensus on the exact meaning and application of such nomenclature in South Africa: no word, concept or construct can be taken at face value, or be dissected or theorised upon any objective, academic or distant manner – our history is too painful, our challenges are too great²⁰.

¹⁷ Pawłowska (2013b: 280–281), Coombes (2003: 19–33).

¹⁸ Galasko (2008:1).

¹⁹ Marschall (2002: 55–71).

²⁰ Marilyn (1997: 19).

Another important element and aspect of the South African art in the post-apartheid period is fact that contemporary artists have progressively participated more on the international and continental arena for presentation and debate, fuelled by a global interest in the complex history and contemporary realities of the country. The contemporary art scene in South Africa has positioned itself increasingly as a leader rather than a follower in the international contemporary discourse on the visual arts, supported by the proliferation of a number of print and on-line art critical platforms that explore the philosophical and political complexities of contemporary art practice in a postcolonial and post-apartheid context. A significant number of major exhibitions and catalogues have been concerned with challenging and breaking down preconceptions about South African people and art, exploring the ambiguities, diversity and dynamics of this context, both in their form and content. The birth of the “new” South Africa was heralded by major exhibitions such as the Collateral exhibition under the patronage of the Forty-fifth Venice Biennale in 1993. Writing about it in an introduction to the exhibition catalogue, *Affinities: Contemporary South African Art*, Glenn R.W. Babb, Commissioner for South Africa, said:

After a long, involuntary silence, South African art now can speak out at one of the most prestigious of the art world’s events, the Forty-fifth Venice Biennale of Visual Arts. In all its vibrancy, its crossings, its diversity and its dialogue, South Africa emerges renewed in the final decade of the twentieth century (...).²¹⁾

Soon after this, two major developments took place: the institution of the Arts and Culture Task Group (ACTAG) by the then-Department of Art, Culture, Science and Technology to map out the way forward for South African art; and the first Johannesburg Biennale in 1995, sponsored by the Johannesburg City Council. After the years of isolation as a consequence of the apartheid system, the Biennale of Johannesburg was meant to restore the dialog between South Africa and the international art scene. The 1st Edition took place in 1995, merely a year after the first free elections.

It was very symptomatic that, in spite of the great international interest, the 2nd Edition in 1997 was closed a month ahead of the planned schedule. The “financial problems of the city of Johannesburg,” were announced as the

²¹⁾ Klopper, Godby (2004: 34).

official reason²²). Since then, no further Johannesburg Biennale took place. The organising institution, the Africus Institute for Contemporary Art (AICA), was dissolved in the meantime. The two Johannesburg Biennales of 1995 and 1997 put South African art in a contemporary international context. On an international level, the contribution of African curators such as Salah Hassan, Olu Oguibe, Okwui Enwezor, and Simon Njami can hardly be overestimated, not only because they promoted the art of black South African artists alongside their white counterparts, but also because they rigorously theorised the practices and concerns of these artists²³.

With the cultural boycott over, post-apartheid South African artists emerged to grace some of the world's leading art galleries and museums, bringing with them a fresh outlook. There were problems, however. For instance, during the Johannesburg Biennale 95, a programme was initiated to train young black curators by pairing them with Western curators. Yet after the training, these young curators were abandoned and the training was lost! Similarly, black curators were underrepresented during the exhibitions commemorating ten years of democracy in Cape Town. There seems to be no cohesive programme for training young black conservationists or, rather, there seems to be no clear succession plan established to aid young black professionals in the field of heritage. In this, as in other matters, the problem or, rather, the challenges of redressing the imbalances of the past are pressing and urgent.

Many South African art works have started to be acquired by collectors abroad²⁴, such as pieces by Jodi Bieber, David Goldblatt, William Kentridge, Thabiso Sekgala and Sue Williamson, all of whom featured in the exhibition *Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Photography and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life* at the International Centre of Photography in New York subsequently in Munich, Milan, and finally in Johannesburg at Museum Africa from the 13th of February until 29th of June 2014²⁵. This exhibition, widely commented by artistic bodies, is a field of narratives about diverse photographic practice from colonial ethnographic studies to “insurrectional” image-making during apartheid, with some reflection on contemporary, post-apartheid views. In the exhibition's catalogue,

²²) For further reference: Collins 2014 and *Johannesburg Biennale*, <http://universes-in-universe.de/car/africus/english.htm> (12.05.2014).

²³) Herreman, D'Amato (1999:8–31).

²⁴) Williamson (2009: 16–20).

²⁵) Curated by Okwui Enwezor with Rory Bester, September 14, 2012 – January 6, 2013. Enwezor, Bester (2013).

in an essay titled “Bureaucratization of memory”, South African curator and writer Khwezi Gule notes:

Maybe museums or memorial sites of the future need to be a lot less driven by curators and more by a participatory approach to the varied interpretations of the past. Implied in this proposition is the issue of how sites of memory can become more dynamic and evolving spaces that can account for different, inconvenient, and discomforting counter-narratives, the mutability of memory, present-day contestations over power and privilege, the means to life, as well as symbolic representations, instead of acting as monoliths to ideology and the prevailing social order. Perhaps that is the best guarantee that the horrors of the past will not be repeated.²⁶⁾

The post-apartheid period has also seen a new generation of largely university-trained young black artists such as Nandipha, Donna Kukama and my favourite Mary Sibande (b. 1982), who questions the traditional role of black women in South Africa and other countries with a history of black servitude²⁷⁾.

At the end of the apartheid and in the wake of the Johannesburg Biennales a new generation of contemporary South African artists has emerged, and many of these artists have shifted both their aesthetic criteria and artistic strategies from those prevalent during the early years of the post-apartheid system, when it seemed that the Mandela inspired rainbow nation would become a bottomless mine from which to extract the ore that would ornament the various organs of multiracial and multicultural worlds of contemporary South African culture. Today that model is completely destroyed, and the evident simplification that attended the reception of post-apartheid art has shifted to the scepticism of a new century. Younger artists like Moshekwa Langa (b. 1975), Robin Rhode (b.1975), and Mikhael Subotzky (b.1982) – all three of whom have achieved in a relatively short time remarkable international visibility – are extracting a different sort of material from the debased mine that served to inoculate the mind with the empty pieties of the rainbow nation. Diane Victor (b. 1964) comments on this situation in a series of 16 small drawings called *Disasters of Peace*

²⁶⁾ Gurney (2006: 69).

²⁷⁾ Mary Sibande is a South African artist based in Johannesburg. Her most interesting and ambitious series *Long Live the Dead Queen* was featured within Johannesburg on the side of buildings and other structures as large, photographic murals black women are depicted wearing extravagant Victorian dresses in vivid colours. <http://www.africandigitalart.com/2010/11/mary-sibande/> (11.07.2013).

(2003). She presents every horrendous perversion of South Africa: taxi violence, poverty, drought, street kids, abuse of woman, AIDS, a corrupt government, court and prison corruption, family murders, hijacking, incestuous child abuse and baby rape²⁸). No rainbow here, because today's South Africa is torn apart by an internal struggle against both an emerging totalitarian democracy and a debilitating amnesia that seeks to return the country back to the comforts of segregated lives.

Naturally the changes in the political system manifested changes within contemporary artistic discourses in South Africa. The end of apartheid was actually a blessing for most artists but it also produced a set of complicated assessments of how the divergent creativities of black and white artists ought to be situated. For those artists who were unable to shift easily from the mode of resistance art to international artistic styles, such as installation, performance art and conceptual art, life became difficult again, especially for many black artists who felt that such structures tended to privilege and highly reward the work of white artists over those of black artists.

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²⁸) Matthews 2003.

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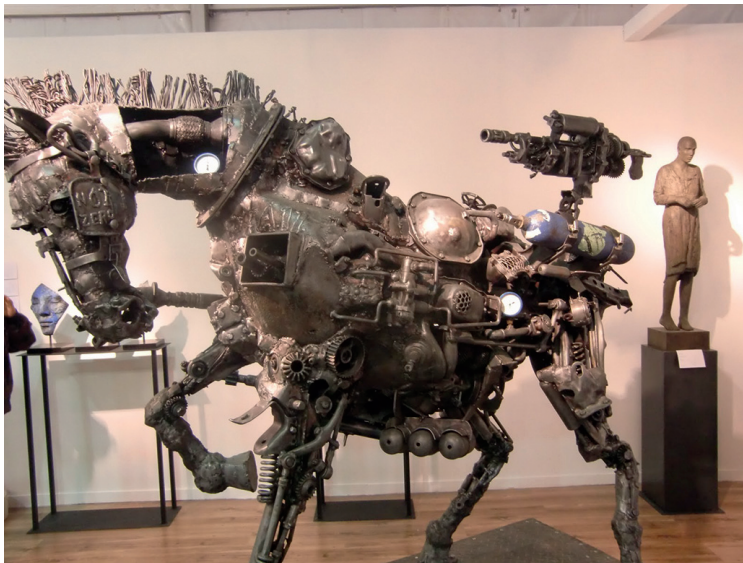


Fig. 1. Willie Bester, *Trojan Horse*, 2010, mixed media. From "The India Art Fair", 2012



Fig. 2. *Human rights wall*, Mural in Durban, 1997 [destroyed]



Fig. 3. *Freedom Park* in Pretoria 2007–2008

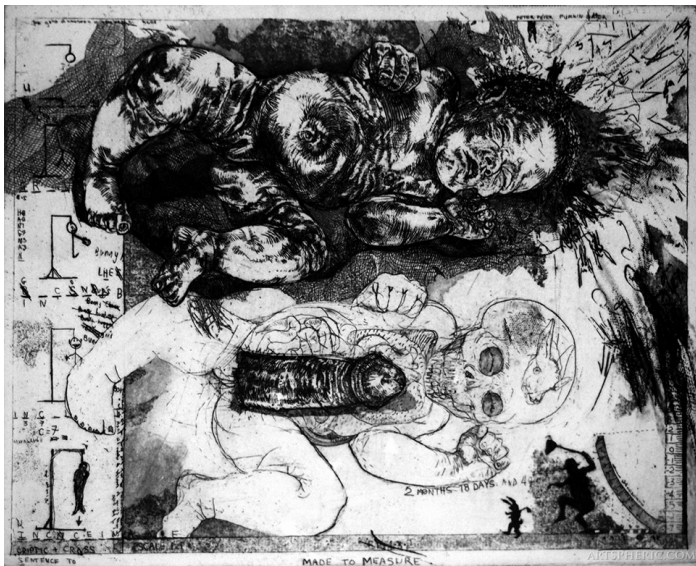


Fig. 4. Diane Victor, *Made to Measure* from *Disasters of Peace*, 2003, one from a portfolio of sixteen etching, aquatint, and drypoints, (22 x 29 cm), private collection