

CURATED EXHIBITION, RECONCILIATION

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2 April 2006

The curated art exhibitions entitled *Reconciliation* formed part of the Arts and Reconciliation Festival held at the University of Pretoria from 14 to 20 March 2005.

The exhibitions comprised the work of eleven individual artists and two group exhibitions, that were on view from 15 to 30 March 2005 at the Visual Arts Gallery, the Gallery of the Department of Architecture, the UP Conference Centre, the Rautenbach Hall and the UP Technical Building. The exhibitions included the Fatherhood project, a photographic exhibition, and an exhibition of art and craft from Moçambique.

As part of the exhibitions, two lectures by participating artists were presented in the Sanlam Auditorium on 18 March: Carine Zaayman presented a lecture entitled *The Reconciliation Theme in New Media Productions of Selected Cape Artists* and Minnette Vári presented a lecture on and demonstration of her own video productions.

Honourable Judge Albie Sachs opened the exhibition and the patrons of the Festival were former Archbishop Desmond Tutu and former President F W de Klerk.

Conceptualisation and curating process

The organisers of the Arts and Reconciliation Festival formulated the strategic objective of the Festival as the provision of a forum to redefine and celebrate the role that music, drama, films and the visual arts have played in the process of healing and reconciliation in present-day South Africa¹. I was therefore given a specific brief around which to construct an art exhibition.

A proposal document was compiled and submitted to the organising committee that was chaired by Prof Piet Meiring and included marketing consultants; a public relations company; academic staff of the UP School of Arts; the head of UP's cultural affairs, Dr Andre Breedt; UP Vice-Principal, Prof Anthony Melck, and other invited parties.

¹ The Festival followed on events such as the celebrations concerning the first decade of democracy in South Africa (1994-2004), as well as the work of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission that was initiated in 1995.

After the proposal was accepted, I compiled a budget for the exhibitions and several meetings were attended. Sponsorship was sought and artists were briefed in terms of submission and installation dates and procedures.

I interpreted the brief that was given to me as a kind of hypothesis or position statement; that is, as I stated in the curatorial statement in the catalogue, "that it could be *assumed* [my emphasis] that within the domain of the visual arts the processes of reconciliation and healing have manifested. Since the University of Pretoria was hosting the Festival, a natural decision for me was to select artists that reflected the major role the UP Department of Visual Arts has played over the last few decades in the domain of art education in South Africa.

Artists were thus partly selected due to their connection with the afore-mentioned department as graduates, post-graduate students, lecturers or as participants in community projects, which presented a number of challenges. Questions of institutional theory and of institutions being instruments of government policy were pertinent, which would (and did) on the exhibition reflect the 'almost-entirely-white' history of graduating Fine Arts students of UP. It seemed impossible to not ground the curatorial process within the context of an educational institution and its associated ideologies, although it is

certainly the curator's task to challenge and suggest alternatives.

In the end I took the curatorial decision to follow an alternative non-political route and rather raise understanding for the material realities of artworks which would in any case reflect the sensibilities and orientations of the times in which they were produced. A number of prominent contemporary South African artists were thus selected to participate in the exhibition, based on the conceptual and material content of their artworks that reflected processes and traces of reconciliation and healing. The works dealt with "metaphoric significance and about a kind of aestheticisation of politics and histories, even maybe about an exploitation of forms of representation for its own discourses of power, than about offering solutions regarding political issues" (from the curatorial statement in the catalogue).

The objective with the curating was to demonstrate that artworks can function as monuments of reconciliation, but simultaneously speak of transformation, transcendence, resistance, survival, self-reflexivity and connectedness. In terms of demonstrating notions of suffering and survival, Diane Victor's *Smokeheads* were included a series of forty portraits made from photos documenting the day clinic users on a single day at the St. Raphael HIV centre in

Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape. The portraits are made from deposits of carbon from candle smoke on white paper and are exceedingly fragile, metaphoric of the fragility of life.

Chiurai Kudzanai was selected due to his depiction of Zimbabweans' sense of congestion and channelling of emotions into various modes of behaviour, as well as South Africans' xenophobia and frustrations about the extent of rising poverty. Similarly, the embroideries of a number of artists from the Mapula project such as Rossinah Maepa and Selinah Makwana were selected based on their depiction the everyday life of people in the townships, the prevailing social conditions and the socio-political transformations that have taken place in the area.

Minnette Vári' was selected based on her sustained engagement with South African socio-politics as a particular order of victimisation. Johan Conradie's work reflected an interest in the poetics of ruin and vitality that played with the notions of past events and nostalgia. Frikkie Eksteen's *Hanging Garden* presented a comment on the impermanence of memory as it is about the embellishment of the past.

Leora Farber's video of a performance in which 750 chocolates changed state from solid to liquid. dealt with

notions of the abject that have a distinct place in South African racial politics. Jan van der Merwe's *Baggage Arrival* was chosen based on its suggestion of transformation in time and history, and his interpretation of baggage as identity and spiritual journey. Keith Dietrich's work, *Horizons of Babel*, was selected for its post-colonial content and it being a map of healing and reconciliation where the body and land are metaphorically mapped over each other.

In order to accommodate the substantial body of art for the exhibition, space had to be carefully considered in order to allow each work to be presented most advantageously. The size, number, media and content of each artist's artworks were considered in the arrangement and layout of the exhibition as a whole. Formally Kudzi Chiurai's colourful large paintings set up an interesting dialogue with Diane-Victor's monochromatic drawings and Guy du Toit's bronze heads in the Architecture gallery. Similarly, Frikkie Eksteen's Perspex-mounted collage paintings were placed in terms of the lighting in such a way that the play of shadows created a metanarrative to the physical works. Leora Faber was given a private separate corner to display her video in order to strengthen the personal and intimate content of the work. Keith Dietrich's series of digitally manipulated maps were placed in a semi-circle in conceptual reflection of his notion of panorama and colonial gazing.

The Fatherhood project

I did not curate this exhibition, but it formed part of the group of exhibitions.

The Fatherhood Project is built around an exhibition of photographs taken by professional photographers, students and children, of men involved in caring and protective relationships with children. The photographs reveal fatherhood in its many aspects and moods and give graphic expression to the possibilities and challenges of men's closer engagement with children.

The exhibition consists of approximately 120 photographs, selected from hundreds sent in by photographers from all over South Africa. It features the work of a wide range of contributors, including some of South Africa's best-known photographers, as well as students and children who used disposable cameras to record the people they recognize as fathers. Three photographic essays, each an intimate portrayal of the life of an ordinary father, have been provided by celebrated South African photographers Paul Weinberg, Ruth Motau and George Hallett.

Catalogue

A catalogue (ISBN 0-620-33947-0) that accompanied the exhibition was on sale. I compiled and designed the catalogue, it was printed by Dyason Printing and sponsored by Media24.