Reflections on the exhibition 1910-2010

From Pierneef to Gugulective

Riason NAIDOO

Curator and Writer: Contemporary African Art

The South African National Gallery's initial schedule for 2010 was looking like the schedule of many other art and cultural institutions in the country: it was about football. The National Gallery had numerous requests from abroad to show high profile foreign artists in the year of the FIFA World Cup, when the country was expecting many foreign visitors.

I thought that if I was a visitor to a foreign country I would want to get a glimpse of that country's art and to see how the context of the country – the politics, the economics, the social or the historical – had informed the work produced there. When we look at the art of the Renaissance today we can see the influence of the church and the state on the art produced during that era. On a visit to Leipzig in the former East Germany in 2009, I visited the city's art museum and it was a treat to see the art produced during the time of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and how that was directly or indirectly linked with the political context.

So it seemed inappropriate to me to show celebrity foreign artists at the South African National Gallery, who could choose to show anywhere in the world, anytime they wanted. Historically South African art has been below the international radar, so this was an opportunity to reflect on our local art, and showcase our indigenous artists. This was the first shift that had to be made towards the exhibition.

With a store of over nine thousand artworks in the national gallery collection, we cleared the schedule and decided to reflect on our stories. At the same time it was not just about putting up an exhibition showcasing a century of South African art. It was also an opportunity to tie in a new vision for the gallery with the exhibition. It was a moment to address longstanding and pertinent issues.

For example how do we address the legacy of apartheid ideologies that determined which artworks were collected and which exhibitions were shown?

And if we say that we are the National Gallery, then the next question is how representative is our collection of the nation's art? I wanted to move away from a kind of geographic parochialism, away from a Cape Town centred exhibition, in a show that we could say was truly representative of artists and works from around the country; an exhibition that celebrated the richness and diversity of cultures on offer, while engaging with the history of the country over this period. So it was not simply about raising the National Gallery flag, but about meaningfully and sincerely working with other museum collections and learning from them and not being afraid to show the gaps in our own collection, for the benefit of visitors, for research, for students and learners.

So there was a drive to go out and look at other collections around the country. With this in mind, I travelled together with Joe Dolby, long time Curator of Works on Paper at the National Gallery. We visited some of the big municipal collections in Johannesburg, Pretoria, Durban, Pietermaritzburg as well as university, corporate, and private collections. We also looked to the main commercial galleries in Cape Town and Johannesburg for oversights in our contemporary collection.

Growing up in Durban and having worked at the Durban Art Gallery I was accustomed with some of that collection. I had been a regular visitor at Johannesburg Art Gallery during the seventeen years I lived in that city, so I was familiar with some of the iconic artworks in that collection. But to go through the storerooms at the Johannesburg Art Gallery, the Durban Art Gallery, the Tatham Art Gallery, the Pretoria Art Museum – was revealing in the story of how art was collected around the country. This yielded a number of pleasant surprises. Jabulani Ntuli's drawings (c.1940s) from the Killy Campbell Collection (University of KwaZulu Natal), Richard Baholo's painting *What a Horror!* (1992) from the Johannesburg Art Gallery, Bongi Dhlomo's abstract painting *Serving Time,* (2004) from the Standard Bank collection, Harold Strachan's *Nature Morte (1970)* from the Durban Art Gallery – these were unexpected. Most of the collections were strong in collecting artists from their cities and provinces, as perhaps one would expect.

One of my main intentions was that someone walking through the gallery would get an idea of who the important artists were and are; that a visitor would get to see works from around the country, and would also get a sense of place *via* the history, which I find is one of the most interesting themes when talking about South Africa. While the intention of the exhibition was to showcase prominent artists and some iconic works of art in the National Gallery permanent collection such as Jane Alexander's *Butcher Boys* (1985/86) and Andries Botha's *Alleenspraak in Paradys* (1991), many of the loans were intended to open a window on some less known artists and pieces, such as those mentioned earlier.

Also, how do we speak about the diversity of cultures through aesthetics in the country, about artists from different communities, about art production through formal

Published in : RICHER-ROSSI, Francoise ; PATIN, Stéphane (dir.), *L'art et la manière. Quelques réflexions sur les industries culturelles et créatives*, Editions des archives contemporaines, Coll. «InterCulturel», France, ISBN : 9782813004093, doi : https://doi.org/10.17184/eac.9782813004093

and informal schools within the context of privileged racial access to art education; and where do these all fit in to the larger narrative of what we call South African art?

Another important issue was how do we get audiences who have never been to the National Gallery to see their own histories (and themselves) reflected in the space? For long considered elitist and exclusive, part of the challenge of how to broaden our audiences and invite communities to take ownership of the National Gallery relates directly to the exhibitions that we show and the artworks that we collect. How do previously marginalized individuals, artists and audiences see themselves, their histories, their cultures, their art reflected in the National Gallery? So it was also about changing the image of the National Gallery, creating a new space where all kinds of people from different backgrounds (of culture, nationality, race, class, education, etc.) could feel more at home; that this was also *their* National Gallery.

These were all questions that I was also occupied with as curator of the show and director of the institution.

Back to the exhibition and the thinking behind it. With a show like this we were dealing with the general chronology and a grand structure. For instance the rooms were allocated a variety of themes. Some were sequential, such as looking at the period from around 1910-1930; or the articulations of an early modernism from 1930-1960; or the photographs from *Drum* magazine, which at its peak in the 1950s was distributing 450,000 copies a month across the continent; or the informal art school Polly Street in Johannesburg, where Bill Ainslie and Cecil Skotnes guided many talented Black artists like Durant Sihlali and Louis Maqhubela; or Rorkes Drift, that other prominent training ground for Black artists, especially for work on paper, that produced the likes of Lionel Davis, Bongi Dhlomo-Mautloa and Azaria Mbatha, *et al.*; or the theme of abstraction, which has been so contentious in the history of South African art; or the period we now refer to as Resistance Art, which looked at the political, where artists of all backgrounds both Black[1] and white and all shades of brown, took on the apartheid state with their art, their posters and photography inspired by the slogan of using 'culture as a weapon of the struggle. I won't go into details of each art movement here because that would require some detail but each was significant in the telling of the South African narratives of art and history. And significantly half of the museum – six galleries – was allocated to art of the last twenty years [1990-2010].

Recognizing the perils of nationalism, and its manifestations, I also wanted to be critical of the South Africa in the now. I was reminded of the graffiti painted on a wall on the corner of Hunter and Cavendish streets in Yeoville, Johannesburg, a few hundred metres from where I lived. It quotes from Nelson Mandela's 1994 inauguration speech, "Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another." Fourteen years later, the xenophobic attacks [of 2008] left many bodies in its wake and thousands mentally scarred. With

[1] 'Black' is capitalised to refer to all people who are not white. In many English-speaking contexts like England and South Africa, the term 'Black' is used to include people of colour. It derives its origins from 'European' and 'non-European', then 'white' and 'non-white', then 'white' and 'black'. Under apartheid South Africa (1948-1994) 'non-European' or 'black' was divided into 'African', 'Coloured ' and 'Indian' racial categories. These 'non-white' groups joined together in solidarity and identified under the term 'Black', which can also be seen as a political identity when used with a capital 'B'.

Published in : RICHER-ROSSI, Francoise ; PATIN, Stéphane (dir.), *L'art et la manière. Quelques réflexions sur les industries culturelles et créatives*, Editions des archives contemporaines, Coll. «InterCulturel», France, ISBN : 9782813004093, doi : https://doi.org/10.17184/eac.9782813004093

this in mind I also included a selection from the exhibition *US*, curated by Bettina Malcomess and Simon Njami, that featured a handful of mainly young South African artists, including Gugulective, commenting on the issue and bringing the making of art in this country full circle.

The title of the exhibition *1910-2010: From Pierneef to Gugulective* was also meant to reflect the intentions of the show. 1910 marks the year of the Union of South Africa, the moment of the formation of a colonial nation state under the British Empire. 2010 refers to the contemporary, the moment of the FIFA World Cup in South Africa, a first for the mega global sporting event on the continent. Pierneef was one of those South African artists that started to articulate a South African brand of modernism. While trained in the Netherlands, and no doubt influenced by European traditions and influences, his work responded to the particularities of the South African landscapes. He was part of that generation that started to articulate a fresh, local formal language. Based in Pretoria (the Pretoria art Museum has an interesting and varied collection of his opus), his work has been associated with an Afrikaner nationalist interpretation of the local landscape in the first half of the last century. Gugulective (an art collective of young black artists from Gugulethu, the township of on the outskirts of Cape Town) is a marker for the contemporary, of the present, and possibly the future. Time will tell. So the title itself marks the timeline that links to significant moments in the country's history, the beginnings of a local modern idiom to the contemporary and refers to geography from the capital in Tshwane (previously Pretoria) to a township in Cape Town today.

So while we have a broad chronology and as well as other major themes, mentioned earlier, there were also other intentions in the curation. I did not want it to be a tedious staid chronology. Where's the adventure in that? An important idea I was playing with was different takes on the past; that if you ask a diverse group of South Africans about the history of this country you are likely to get, in return, many different versions of that history. I wanted to put those different responses next to each other, to set up relationships between them, to juxtapose them.

For example, you've got J.H. Pierneef's painting of the Union Buildings (1938) – the South African parliament buildings built in 1910 and designed by Sir Herbert Baker – and Willie Bester's bench after the 1913 Land Act (1995), which brought racial territorial segregation into law and reserved over 80% of land for whites, who made up less than 20% of the total population, directly opposite each other. Pierneef's painting unites the artist, Baker and the Union of South Africa all together. You also have Anton Momberg's maquette of Gandhi in close proximity to the same Pierneef artwork. Gandhi lived in the country for twenty-one years from 1893-1914, at the same time as the formation of the Union in 1910, so this is a direct connection to the Union Buildings and the British history in the country. The intention was not to obliterate the Pierneefs or Afrikaner history, or the Union, or British colonialism – we acknowledge these – they are part of our history. But what *else* was happening? What was suppressed?

Published in : RICHER-ROSSI, Francoise ; PATIN, Stéphane (dir.), *L'art et la manière. Quelques réflexions sur les industries culturelles et créatives*, Editions des archives contemporaines, Coll. «InterCulturel», France, ISBN : 9782813004093, doi : https://doi.org/10.17184/eac.9782813004093



Figure 1: Untitled fired terracotta sculptures (1997) by Noria Mabasa and Claudette Schreuders' *Officer Molefe* (2004) in wood at back (left) against Manfred Zylla's large poster *Interaction* series at the Community Arts Centre, Cape Town (1982). Photo by Carina Beyer, Iziko Museums of South Africa. Courtesy Riason Naidoo.



Figure 2: Anton Momberg's Gandhi (1992) with Pierneef's Union Buildings (1938) in the background. Photo by Carina Beyer, Iziko Museums of South Africa. Courtesy Riason Naidoo.



Figure 3: Ndebele beadwork in the foreground set against Georgina Gratrix's 2008 artwork *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (left). Photo by Carina Beyer, Iziko Museums of South Africa. Courtesy Riason Naidoo.

Published in : RICHER-ROSSI, Francoise ; PATIN, Stéphane (dir.), *L'art et la manière. Quelques réflexions sur les industries culturelles et créatives*, Editions des archives contemporaines, Coll. «InterCulturel», France, ISBN : 9782813004093, doi : https://doi.org/10.17184/eac.9782813004093

So apart from the Maggie Laubsers and the Irma Sterns interpreting South African landscapes, how did Black artists such as the Moses Tladis and the Jabulani Ntulis differ in representing the landscapes, their own environments and their own people? How does their work differ in the broader discussion on the representation of Blackness? This was another major thread that ran throughout the exhibition: the politics of representation. How do the ethnographic and scientific photographic studies of Alfred Martin Duggan-Cronin differ to these portraits by Gerard Bhengu and Simon Nguni? And how do these relate to the emergence of black photographers working for *Drum* magazine in the 1950s, who for the first time give insight into intimate instances of urban Black life. So while we have a room foregrounding the art from 1910-1930 for instance there is already another major theme on the politics of representation working alongside. That was definitely a strategy on my part, so that someone walking through a room gets different takes, multiple voices, rather than a master narrative.

Likewise there were visual connections that sprang up that I could not resist. Pierneef's *Karibib* (1924) next to Wayne Barker's *Blue Colonies* (1995), a parody on Pierneef, which is easy to see when these works are next to each other, was also about introducing an element of play, while still raising serious issues.

Portrait of Ali Bhai (c.1950s) by Ebrahim Badsha is shown together with Bertram Dumbleton's *Abdul* (c.1942) and Edward Roworth's *White Wall on Signal Hill* (c.1920) (Roworth was also the first director of the National Gallery in 1930) touch on the presence of Muslim communities in the country. Elsewhere in the show works by Faiza Galdhari and Chris Ledochowski reflected more contemporary expressions on the same theme.

As we know art does not operate in isolation so the intention was to simultaneously reflect on important moments as well as attitudes of different eras.

Vladimir Tretchikoff's figure of the *Herb Seller* (1948) was set against the backdrop of United Party and National Party election posters. This was a turning point in South African politics that brought the National Party into power in 1948 and that led directly to apartheid policies being enforced. Tretchikoff, a Russian emigrant to South Africa, was an art phenomenon in the country. He sold thousands of prints of his paintings in the 1960s and 1970s in unconventional places like department stores, which made their way to millions of households both within the country and outside of it. And his appeal cut across race and class – very important in the context of apartheid South Africa. Because of a certain genre of his work that was regarded as kitsch, the artist was an outcast of the South African art establishment. This was the first instance of an artwork by Tretchikoff being shown at the National Gallery.

So juxtapositions, multiple layers and narratives, and visual connections were the threads of the exhibition.

Well-known artists like Gavin Younge and Sue Williamson from Cape Town shared limited hanging space with John Roome and Vedant Nanackchand from Durban. Zulu earplugs sparked off a relationship with Kevin Atkinson's *Arena* (1975). A similar

Published in : RICHER-ROSSI, Francoise ; PATIN, Stéphane (dir.), *L'art et la manière. Quelques réflexions sur les industries culturelles et créatives*, Editions des archives contemporaines, Coll. «InterCulturel», France, ISBN : 9782813004093, doi : https://doi.org/10.17184/eac.9782813004093

affair developed between the group of Ndebele beadworks and Georgina Gratrix's *Les Demoiselles D'Avignon* (2008).

Harold Rubin, Gerard Sekoto, Gavin Jantjes and Harold Strachan offer very different takes on the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, a violent turning point in apartheid history. A range of expressions from the likes of Colin Richards, Tyronne Appollis, Dikobe Martins, Jane Alexander, Paul Stopforth and Derek Bauer on Steve Biko's murder in 1975 speaks volumes about the diversity of art production in South African society at the time.

Inspired by the debate sparked by Albie Sach's 1989 paper entitled "Preparing ourselves for Freedom" subsequently printed in the *Mail & Guardian* in February 1990, that was critical of "art as an instrument of political struggle" the same room also shows Deborah Bell's *Lover's in the Cinema* (1985) and other works from the time related to the universal themes of romance and love, something that we can all identify with.

Archival posters from the Community Arts Project (CAP), housed the University of Western Cape, provide context to the activism of the violent 1980s prior to Mandela's release. Photography also plays a very important documentary role at this time as illustrated by the range from the Afrapix collective. The exhibition also closely traced the development of photography in the country, and David Goldblatt's trajectory from *Family on Northbeach, Durban, June 1949* to a work of an old mineshaft simply entitled *12 July 2003*.

Progress Matubaku's *Something for Growth* (1995), Jackson Nkumanda's charming work entitled *The Presidential Inauguration* (1994) and Joe Ratcliff's *Vlakplaas* (1999) – reflections on voting for the first time, the inauguration of the first democratically elected government in 1994 and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission respectively – are all in close proximity. These shared the same room with other outstanding works from the period by key artists such as Penny Siopis, Clive Van den Berg, Johannes Segogela and Noria Mabasa.

During the curation many smaller themes made their way into the show. Indigenous initiation rites, influences after colonial Dutch masters, the influence of San [rock] art, landscape, afternoon tea, depictions of township life, humour, the formation of a new national identity, representation and reflections of Africa, romance and sexual politics, domesticity, AIDS, and identity politics give some idea of the sub-themes that were operating in contemporary section, which were not prescribed, rather, they emerged from the selected works themselves. This was an important process of the curation. That is, from preselected artworks themes emerged that were integrated into the exhibition.

Both Zanele Maholi's photo *Katlego Mashiloane and Nosipho Lavuto Ext. 2, Lakeside, Johannesburg 2007,* and Pierre Fouché's *Kiss* (2008) in crochet lace, each depict same-sex couples in tender embrace visually echoed by Tracey Rose's iconic work *The Kiss* (2001). Muholi, who describes herself, first and foremost as a Black lesbian activist, had been the centre of media attention when the Minister of Arts and Culture Lulu Xingwana had early in 2010 found offensive her photograph of a nude lesbian couple

Published in : RICHER-ROSSI, Francoise ; PATIN, Stéphane (dir.), *L'art et la manière. Quelques réflexions sur les industries culturelles et créatives*, Editions des archives contemporaines, Coll. «InterCulturel», France, ISBN : 9782813004093, doi : https://doi.org/10.17184/eac.9782813004093

lying in bed together. The media debate surrounding the furore also gave Muholi's career a gentle shove in the right direction.

Works by Brett Murray (*Xhosa*, 2002) and Sthembiso Sibisi (*Going Home*, 2005) use humour to poignantly reflect on the local condition. Stuart Bird's tongue-in-cheek *Zuma Biscuits* (2007) encapsulates the moment preceding the 2008 national elections, a time of internal power struggles in the ruling party. This work, which is evocative of the ice zoo biscuits, depicts four symbols (a Zulu warrior's shield, a shower, a mini skirt, and an AK-47 machine gun) each relating to [Jacob] Zuma's (then South African president) public portrayal at the time.

Ed Young's *Bruce Gordon [Torino]* (2005) may have had special place for Cape Town art groupies recalling the conceptual piece from 2003, where a bar owner (a found object) was purchased by the National Gallery and the acquisition number tattooed on the artwork (or bar owner's arm). This particular piece on show is the suit made for and that the artwork wore when it was loaned to the Triennale in Torino. The artwork (Bruce Gordon) recalls three weeks of non-stop parties, drinking lots of alcohol and meeting lots of women.

The logistics were a performance in itself. We scheduled the three major exhibitions (*Strengths and Convictions*, *Dada South?* and the *Alexis Preller retrospective*) to simultaneously close at the end of February 2010. The gallery closed its doors from the 1 March–15 April; allowing for the concurrent de-installation of the three large shows that occupied the whole gallery.

In the meanwhile I also had a meeting with the Bailey Trust that oversees the collection of over 400 paintings and works on paper donated to the National Gallery in 1947. These include the likes of William Turner, Thomas Gainsborough, George Stubbs and Joshua Reynolds, etc., predominantly British artists from the colonial era. One of the conditions of the bequest is that the collection is permanently on display. And for the first time in sixty-three years the Bailey collection was taken down.

After two and a half weeks of de-installation the whole interior of the National Gallery had a fresh coat of paint and was completely empty of artwork. Joe Dolby joked that it was the best the museum had ever looked! The loans arrived at once from all over the country. Then the curation of integrating the loans and the permanent collection started in earnest.

The programme for the opening evening was also meant to indicate a shift in thinking. Cameroonian born guest speaker Achille Mbembe (Research professor in politics and history at Wits University and author of *On the Postcolony*) opened the exhibition, followed by music by a band made up of Mozambican, Congolese and South African jazz musicians. The well-attended opening also attracted a much more diverse and younger audience than previously.

Of course no art show is ever complete without the critics' part in it. The *South African Art Times* ran an article on the cover for the May edition boldly emblazoned with the headline "*SA National Gallery's reputation thrashed for 2010 show*". Lloyd Pollak penned the piece, which read, "It is apparent that Naidoo, who has piteous

Published in : RICHER-ROSSI, Francoise ; PATIN, Stéphane (dir.), *L'art et la manière. Quelques réflexions sur les industries culturelles et créatives*, Editions des archives contemporaines, Coll. «InterCulturel», France, ISBN : 9782813004093, doi : https://doi.org/10.17184/eac.9782813004093

little curatorial knowledge, is out of his dept. As none of his fellow curators have ever been responsible for a pratfall of this magnitude, one can only conclude that he refused to heed their advice, and consequently one entertains the gravest fears vis-à-vis the future of the gallery under the present incumbent." A week earlier, Miles Keylock wrote a review entitled "*Out with the Old"* (*Mail & Guardian*, 23-29 April 2010), "In what can only be described as a revolution the National Gallery has been entirely rehung. Gone are the hallowed halls of 'putrid' colonial treasures. Gone are the same tired artworks eternally oozing out the permanent collection."

Different strokes for different folks, I guess[2].

[2]First published in *SAVVY*, edition 1, 2011, Berlin.

Published in : RICHER-ROSSI, Francoise ; PATIN, Stéphane (dir.), *L'art et la manière. Quelques réflexions sur les industries culturelles et créatives*, Editions des archives contemporaines, Coll. « InterCulturel », France, ISBN : 9782813004093, doi : https ://doi.org/10.17184/eac.9782813004093