

Visual art



Sam Nhlengethwa's *Humiliation* (above) from *Glimpses of the 50s and 60s* (courtesy the Goodman Gallery); and (below) Johannes Phokela's *South Pacific Seascape* (courtesy SMAC Art Gallery)



Wim Botha's *Untitled* (above) from *Witness series* (Courtesy of the artist and Stevenson Gallery, Johannesburg and Cape Town)

An imperfect past

South Africa's exhibition at this year's Venice Biennale includes works by a radically diverse group of artists — but it does not reflect an all-defining view

Brent Meersman

There is a sense of relief and a restrained consensus among the arts community that this year South Africa will go to the Venice Biennale (the 55th International Art Exhibition) with its head held high. The history of the country's participation in one of the foremost and biggest windows in the art world has been a fraught affair.

Ostracised for decades due to apartheid, South Africa returned to Venice in 1993. Ivor Powell, writing in the *Mail & Guardian*, described the presentation "as a salad of South African art under apartheid; though much of the art was of real quality, the exhibition as a whole lacked perspective and curatorial intent".

South Africa participated again in 1995 under the curatorship of Malcolm Payne. A long lull followed until 2011, when Johannesburg art dealer Monna Mokoena obtained the contract to represent the country.

Claims of a lack of transparency regarding the expenditure and practices involved in South Africa's par-

ticipation sparked some controversy, however, which left parts of the arts community outraged and led to the matter being discussed in Parliament.

This year, Minister of Arts and Culture Paul Mashatile has shrewdly appointed the National Arts Festival (NAF) to manage the country's exhibition, which in turn has drawn on the expertise of writer and curator Brenton Maart. He has been on the festival art committee for many years.

At long last, it also appears the government has made the necessary long-term commitment to the event and the South African pavilion will be in the Sale D'Armie building in the Arsenale.

The budget is R10-million (excluding the leasing of the site), the same as it was in 2011.

The exhibition will again have a cogent curatorial vision, as it did in 1995, but also hark back to 1993 in being something of a salad. After last year's controversy, however, this seems appropriate.

"It was a conscious decision to have a big group show because it is part of

our introduction back into the Venice Biennale," says Maart.

Titled *Imaginary Fact: Contemporary South African Art and the Archive*, "the exhibition shows how artists use materials of the past to comment not only on the past but how the past continues to comment on the present", explains Maart.

When the names of the first artists selected were released there was an outcry on social media sites that no black female artists had been included, something that has subsequently changed.

A valid criticism that he would have made himself, says Maart. The reason it came about was accidental, and due to the condensed time frames (the arts and culture department only announced the appointment of the NAF on February 27). "Six months to do what other countries have had two years to do, and there are extensive negotiations and programme planning, so we decided to release names as they were contracted," says Maart.

The final list of artists includes performer Nelisiwe Xaba, and photographer and visual activist Zanele Muholi will show her entire oeuvre to date.

"The apartheid archive," says Maart, "can be seen as a white male archive ... Looking at those archives now is to be able to read what was

and its impact on the present

glossed over, to introduce the black experience, the female experience ...”

Maart believes there has been a significant shift of late in contemporary South African art, one that “looks at the products of history with the kind of insistence that history has longevity beyond what we imagined.

“From a sociological point of view there is no post-apartheid.”

The concept for the exhibition is exemplified by the work of Wim Botha, who will be showing a new sculpture and a selection of his busts. Botha uses books, that most archetypal image of the archive — old encyclopaedias, English-Afrikaans dictionaries, school textbooks, Bibles — but transforms them into new, contemporary objects.

“The main thing that attracted me is how his [Botha’s] new work has taken a leap away from classical figurative work to objects in the process of becoming something else,” says Maart. “They may be modelled on the grand narrative, the classical completed marble sculpture, but the works are clearly in the process of becoming or unbecoming.

“The archive,” says Maart, “suffers from the impression of the unchanging. Yet the mutability of the archive is its key strength, open to interpretation each time one looks at it.”

But is Maart in some way not also creating a canon of art when curating



Art and the archive:
Brenton Maart, curator
of South Africa’s exhibit
at the Venice Biennale.

Photo: Paul Botes

“Part of the vision here was to make a move away from trying to define what is contemporary South African art today”

a national pavilion? “That is a major danger of curating,” concedes Maart. “Part of the vision here was to make a move away from trying to define what is contemporary South African art today. The work we have selected almost without exception indicates that uncertainty ... We tried to get away from that all-defining view.

“Having said that, curating is a professional undertaking, so there is something to be said in the value of curating, in reading a certain moment, without discounting the mutability of that moment.”

Joanne Bloch, for instance, makes

clay facsimiles of everyday throwaway objects and spray paints them gold. Presented as archaeological finds she is questioning the value we ascribe to the archive.

Then there is one of the primary archives of democratic South Africa, the testimonies of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, interrogated in David Koloane’s oil pastel series of drawings, *The Journey*, and the films of Gerhard Marx, Maja Marx and Philip Miller.

Sam Nhlengethwa’s 30 photolithographs revisits the 1950s and 1960s, reworking images of apartheid infrastructure such as mine hostels, early urbanisation and migrant labour.

Cameron Platter introduces some humour and, as Maart sees it, “post-modern direct quotation” with his pencil crayon drawings of John Mufangejo’s linocuts.

Johannes Phokela takes Western classical iconography with its implied superiority and then subverts it by introducing a new layer of experience.

In a similar vein, Andrew Putter has appropriated the typological photos of Alfred Martin Duggan-Cronin, remaking them with costumes he designed, presenting them as ethnographic portraits, then photographing the same participants in colour in contemporary clothes.

“Contentious as Putter’s departure

is, there is innate beauty even if the work is problematic because it typified people. But Putter is playing with the beauty in the subject while showing their [Duggan-Cronin’s images] problematic nature,” says Maart.

Penny Siopis’s film *Communion* relates the murder of a nun during a riot. Siopis takes found film footage such as family home movies, splices these together, and then layers on to them the historical narrative.

Other artists include Kay Hassan, Sue Williamson, Donna Kukama, Athi-Patra Ruga, James Webb and Kemang wa Lehulere.

Africa has long been underrepresented at the Biennale. This year only five of the 55 countries participating in the national pavilions are from African countries.

Maart says the South African exhibit has something special to offer the world.

“The interrogation of a unique combination of colonialism and the added burden of apartheid ... South African cultural products are unlike any others, and it’s reflected in this exhibition not only through an astonishing materiality, but also through the conceptual concerns of a radically diverse group of contemporary artists and their spectrum of experiences.”

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