

Bringing home the heritage art of the era of anguish

By Dirkie Offringa, Chief Curator, Pretoria Art Museum
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A global hunt is underway to recover works of South African ‘township art’ that flourished during the apartheid era and came to represent a unique commentary on that dark time. Unsung at home, much of this art was recognised by diplomats and visitors, bought almost clandestinely, and shipped away from our shores. Now we want it back to help fill a kind of void in our art heritage.

The effort is spearheaded by the Ifa Lethu (Our Heritage) Foundation, an organisation formed especially for that purpose after what some see as a prompting by fate. Dozens of works have already been retrieved, but much more lies out there, waiting to fill some very empty space in our collective consciousness.

It is a fascinating story.

Hundreds, possibly thousands, of paintings, drawings and sculptures by black artists, created in the heaviest of the apartheid years and directly depicting its many ugly facets, or simply recording township life, were bought by diplomats, foreign businessmen and tourists with an eye for art, a sense of history, or out of mere altruism and then taken home with them. It is a collection scattered over the globe, and much of it will probably never be recovered.

The sampling in this exhibition is a tiny clue to what actually lies out there. Being curator has been an enormous and fulfilling pleasure, and indeed an honour. The talent is so profuse and the times so poignantly portrayed that even after spending many hours with it, the vibrancy still astonishes me.

The way Pretoria’s township art of the 1970s and 80s came to the attention of, and influenced the outside world, has “magical, musical roots,” in the words of one of those who played a major part. Now a senior vice-president with the giant American Bechtel engineering conglomerate in San Francisco, Jock Covey was an American diplomat in South Africa at the time. He recalls it all began with a meeting between American Embassy second secretary Frank Strovas and Jeff Mpakati, a young musician living in Mamelodi township.

“The black drummer covertly took Strovas to night music sessions in the township. Frank was completely overwhelmed by the energy, vibrancy and sheer creative talent of those musicians. The sounds they coaxed out of old and often crude, home-made musical instruments was nothing short of incredible,” recalls Covey, who often joined Strovas on his sorties into the township.

Covey and Strovas, along with another US embassy staffer, Jim Baker (the first black US diplomat in South Africa), resolved to bring the musicians to a wider audience, beginning

with “jam sessions” in the auditorium of the American embassy in downtown Pretoria. Each was “packed to the rafters” with other foreign diplomats, visiting businesspeople and some South Africans.

“The art connection happened because we discovered the musicians were not creatively one-dimensional; some were also excellent artists and made extra cash with their drawings and sculptures,” says Covey. “We encouraged them to bring their art to the gigs at the embassy. So we held township art exhibitions with the music performances and they were terrifically successful – everything was sold at every session. It was for the artists to make pretty good extra income, and for us diplomats to advance the cause and show the kind of freedoms the United States stood for.”

Mpakati was also the unofficial agent of the artists, organising the art to be exhibited and arranging its transport.

Now, fast forward to 2003 for the first inkling that works of such historical value were somewhere out there. That was the year that Diane Johnstone, a former Australian Diplomat in SA, decided to donate her collection to the Pretoria Art Museum. She had assembled seventeen fine pieces during her three-year tour as a young third secretary at the Australian embassy and she seemed to know instinctively that they should be back home in South Africa.

Diane arrived for her South African posting in 1974, at about the time Covey was completing his tour of duty, and in a sense, picked up the torch. She had developed strong views on racism and apartheid before being sent to South Africa. Along with many thousands of Australian university students, she participated in demonstrations against the Springbok tour of Australia in 1971 and was “therefore somewhat surprised to be posted to Pretoria”, she says. When she arrived she was “appalled and fascinated by apartheid – utterly appalled by the racism and fascinated by the extraordinary politics of the country”.

At that time she was not a great art lover, nor did she profess to any great knowledge on the subject. It was more a means to an end.

“The initial reason for becoming involved with the artists was, on reflection, mostly about access,” she says. The reasons for staying involved were more personal, and related to the art and to the artists themselves.

“When Jock introduced me to the work, what I saw was good art with a strong anti-apartheid message – political art. It struck a very personal chord. However, I could also see that getting to know the artists would be a good way to gain access to the black townships.”

In those days African townships were largely off limits to white South Africans, the vast majority of whom did not want to go near them anyway and considered them dangerous places. Few diplomats visited either, some because their governments did not want them

to and others worried about their personal safety.

“The contact with the black artists was an opportunity to find out what was really happening in the townships – to talk to black South Africans frankly, and in their homes, about political and other issues of concern to them – and to produce reporting about black South African perspectives that would better inform Australia’s policy on South Africa,” says Johnstone.

“At the time Australia played an active international role in opposition to apartheid, and one of the arguments for keeping the mission open was precisely because through this Australia would have a better window on events in South Africa than if we had not been there at all. It was also an opportunity to make contact with members of the Black Consciousness movement – some artists were also members of this – including movement leaders.”

Black Consciousness leaders saw township art as a way to get their message out to a wider audience – and welcomed sympathetic diplomatic interest in it.

“I suppose, too, it was a way to get a message to the politically aware in South Africa, that Australia was interested in black perspectives – and actively opposed apartheid,” she says.

But once involved with the artists, her interest deepened to the nature of the art – the way they were using it to get out strong anti-apartheid messages, as well as in the artists themselves – their passion, their sheer talent and their courage. She became keen to help get greater exposure in South Africa and internationally, which she did by providing support and access to diplomatic venues and by buying their work and encouraging colleagues to do also.

“The artists needed the money,” she says, “and by displaying and selling the works I had collected in my residence, I was able to help.

“So the political became the personal.”

In many ways, however, for Johnstone the act of collecting was personal from the outset. “I collected other pieces because I knew the artist and/or for the art. I don’t claim to be an expert, but I did try to be selective. For the most part I simply collected pieces because I fell in love with them – and my taste tended to pieces that I thought had high quality workmanship and universal themes – although some I liked because they were simply humorous, such as the ‘Gossip’ linocut by Ezekial Madiba and Johnny Ribeiro’s ‘Dancers’.”

Some works, generally more ‘political’ pieces, were given to her. After she was evicted from her apartment by angry white residents because she’d held a township art exhibition there, the artists collectively presented her with an untitled pen and watercolour work by Hugh Nolutshungu “dedicated to a very courageous lady”.

“The very first piece I collected was a work called ‘Woman’. It was a wooden sculpture carved from a railway sleeper. It is contemporary, planes juxtaposed with curved surfaces, a beautiful and an expressive representation of the female form – truly an “everywoman”. The artist – Ezekial Madiba – turned up at my door asking for money to cover his rent, and offered the piece in return. I paid him much more than the rent – it was worth much more to me – and he was very pleased. Some time during the posting a German art dealer offered me a very large sum for it. I turned him down. I told him that if I sold it the money would soon be spent and the work would be gone forever. I adored that piece – still do. It was very hard to part with.”

The return to South Africa of Diane Johnstone’s collection might have been relegated to a paragraph or two in the local press and quickly forgotten had it not been for journalist Tom Nevin.

As South Africa correspondent for the Australian Sunday Age newspaper, Tom had been invited by Australian High Commissioner, Ian Wilcock, to cover the official handover to the mayor of Tshwane, Father Smangaliso Mkatshwa. Intrigued by the story, Tom later called Diane in Canberra and in an hour-long conversation came to realise the implication that there might be thousands of pieces of ‘forgotten township art’ scattered around the world.

He set about the formidable task of tracking them down.

Getting all possible contact names from Diane of other diplomat collectors of the time, he got the ball rolling. It took him a year to gather enough evidence of the existence of such art around the world to approach me as the chief curator of the Pretoria Art Museum and seek my help.

I readily agreed. When Tom showed me what he’d discovered, and in subsequent discussions with Di Johnstone, I was quite astounded that so much of our art heritage, especially from so historically poignant and significant a time, had disappeared. And, anyway, Tom on his Homecoming Mission, as he called it at, was hard to resist – you were simply carried along on the voyage of discovery. And what a ride it was, battling against all kinds of odds, many quite unexpected.

Another Australian diplomat collector, Bruce Haigh, has now returned his collection, while Canadian diplomat, David Gillett, says he can’t bear “to part with my beautiful art” but has bequeathed it to Ifa Lethu. I’m grateful to Brooks Spector, another US diplomat in Pretoria at the time, who has graciously lent some of his collection for this exhibition. Like the Negro music that was born of the slaves’ misery in the American Deep South, black South African artists in the grip of the darkest evils of apartheid made their finest work trapped in South Africa’s prison-like locations on edges of the white cities.

A question the returning diplomats’ collections pose is whether African township art lost

its creative soul with the death of apartheid, or simply shifted onto another spiritual plane to reflect changed landscapes and altered social and political states. If it has, is township art as poignant today as it was “back then”? And what has happened to the rest of the art that was forged on the harsh anvil of apartheid; and to the artists? The pieces already retrieved suggest that much of the best work was taken out of the country. Naturally, not all the artists of the era have survived – some were victims at an early age of township violence, squalid living and disease. Others simply disappeared.

Accepting that art flourishes in times of oppression and hardship, most experts agree that apartheid and the prisons it made of South Africa’s ‘locations’ was also the spark that kindled some of this country’s most compelling works, albeit in a crucible of unimaginable hardship and fear.

Sadly, some of the very best of it may have disappeared.

Why was this work spurned by so many South African collectors? What did foreigners see in it that many white South Africans could not? Johnstone, for example, collected pieces “because I fell in love with them – and my taste tended to high quality workmanship and universal themes”.

Johannesburg gallery owner Warren Siebrits says white South African buyers at the time were not exposed the “township genre” to any great extent. “They didn’t go into the townships, and black people weren’t allowed to roam around freely or exhibit their art in white areas. So South Africans were Eurocentric in what they collected and, with a few exceptions, when they bought South African art it was by white artists – Pierneef, Stern and Boonzaier were hugely successful,” he points out.

“Black African art was almost completely overshadowed by white art and the black artists – they were township artists because that’s where they lived – were ignored by most South African collectors and it was left to foreigners, amongst them many diplomats, to amass the cream of it, and take it out of the country with them.”

The emotion and anguish in many of the apartheid-era works can never be recreated because the socio-political conditions of the era have gone.

Michael Maapola, one artist of the era now living in Hammanskraal north of Pretoria, says: “I am one of the old school of township artists, and I worry that our art today is losing some of its heart and soul of the 70s. Township artists today are more competent and skillful in the work they produce,” he says.

Black art at the township level is growing in its competency because the townships are no longer prisons. Painters and sculptors can come and go as they please, and ironically much of their work is still being bought by foreigners because it’s cheap, openly available and makes wonderful souvenirs.

By carrying off what former Johannesburg Art Gallery curator Steven Sack has described

as “the neglected tradition”, foreign buyers of the 1970s and 80s unwittingly plundered the townships of black art recording the history of the era in general and life in the townships in particular.

Incidentally, I argue with the term ‘township art’ – let’s rather call it what it has become – black African fine art.

Gavin Younge, author of *Art of the South African Townships* says “the term township art is offensive to some artists and stylistically indefensible”.

Maapola now has a successful studio at Hammanskraal and runs an academy of art for aspiring young artists in the area. One of the old school of township art, he worries that it may be “losing its innocence” as new generation artists hone their skills. He admits that he is part of the problem by teaching his students to produce work that is technically competent and commercially viable. “But how can you teach people to be naïve in what they create? Township life is still hard, but in a different way to what it was then,” he says.

And there’s the rub: For a decade or more the ‘school’ of township art has slowly but surely been losing its identity and fading away, as a smarter, slicker, better-equipped, more market-smart generation of black suburban artists takes over. As a result, South Africa’s lost township art has taken on greatly increased historical value, and probably significantly enhanced monetary worth as well.

The townships were the heart of the struggle, they were the birthplace of the revolution and cradle of the uprising. Artists living there gave eyes to black nationalism’s soul, their works were the windows through which black people themselves and the world could glimpse what black South Africans were going through. Even today the townships represent a kind of Black Consciousness sanctity in South Africa’s still very young democracy. For this reason, *Ifa Lethu* is a deeply political, and also spiritual, happening; it revisits and recalls the time of South Africa’s great pain that only black South Africans in the townships can truly know.