

HOME AND AWAY: A Return To The South
Opening Speech
by The Rt Hon Malcolm Fraser AC CH

Thank you Professor Cram for your introduction

I am pleased to be again in the Drill Hall Gallery. On the last occasion I visited with the Australiana Fund I was taken around to see Sidney Nolan's *Riverbend* on permanent exhibition here.

The exhibition that you will see tonight is the first major exhibition of the Ifa Lethu Foundation and the Drill Hall Gallery is the only venue in Australia where the exhibition will be shown.

As a member of Ifa Lethu's Global Advisory Council I am particularly pleased to be launching this extraordinary exhibition in Australia.

At its heart, this is an exhibition about the creative spirit and its capacity to soar above its circumstances.

It brings together works by talented artists working under apartheid and oppression, to produce art inside South Africa with those of top international artists outside South Africa who produced art to support the people of South Africa.

It reminds us of the power of art, through unlocking the creative spirit, to say something very important about a shared humanity. In the words of former Archbishop Desmond Tutu in the dying days of apartheid, "when people can assert their humanity and be creative... it speaks of a proud defiance of the hostile forces that would demean and dehumanize them... proclaims for all to hear and see that human beings are creatures of the spirit too... they can dream dreams, they can work... to try to realize the apparently unrealizable – to reach out for the stars – to try to bring utopia to earth".

The exhibition showcases a body of work that is now a significant part of South Africa's art heritage and a proud national treasure.

It also tells a remarkable story, of how the international community - Australians and others from around the world – has contributed to that heritage by returning art produced by and on behalf of the people of South Africa to the people of South Africa.

The works in this exhibition have been selected from two collections, those of the *Ifa Lethu Foundation* and *Art Against Apartheid*. The exhibition examines similarities and differences between works produced by artists directly experiencing apartheid and works produced by international artists commenting on the abuse of human rights in South Africa. The Curator, Carol Brown, has successfully drawn parallels and nodes of debate and discussion between the two collections through themes that connect and tell the story of the times and of the art. In their totality, the works reveal the power of art as both a creative and a political force.

The South African works were produced mostly in the 1960s to the mid-1980s when apartheid and opposition in South Africa was at its height. It was a time when the voices of dissent in South Africa were savagely oppressed. The South African regime was internationally condemned. It was a pariah in the international community.

Who could forget the Sharpeville massacre or the Soweto Uprising that took place during this time and the terrible loss of life? Or news that reached the international community of the daily brutality inflicted on those who opposed the regime? And the images of the inhumanity of apartheid that became imprinted on international consciousness?

Yet within those heavily patrolled South Africa townships, artists were finding a voice, working, creating and dreaming. Their work reveals a spirit of survival and hope in a seemingly hopeless situation.

Some of the art protested directly against an oppressive regime and producing such work often led to directly to the artist's own oppression. Some artists fled into exile.

But some of the art demonstrated, too, a sense of enjoyment of life and camaraderie - qualities which have been overlooked in many previous exhibitions and surveys of "Resistance Art". These works provide an insight into communities which, though largely locked away from the world, were within themselves often vital and exuberant.

The artists who produced these works did not find commercial outlets in South Africa. Their work was seen as politically unacceptable. Subsequently, some of them such as Dumile Feni, Fikile Magadla and Eric Mbatha became famous.

Dumile Feni went into voluntary exile in London in 1968 because of political harassment, particularly under the Pass Laws which restricted the movement of black people. In 1979 he moved to New York where tragically he died from heart failure a day before his planned return to his country of birth. He has subsequently become one of South Africa's most famous artists with many large exhibitions and works in public collections. Unfortunately he was never to know how successful he would become in his country of birth.

Fikile Magadla was an adherent of the Black Consciousness ideology. As well as being an artist he was well known as a poet and cultural activist and had a strong following, particularly for his poetry. He was arrested for his involvement in cultural affairs and was denied permission to leave South Africa during the apartheid period. He died in 2003. His large drawing in this exhibition, *Melodious journey through the cosmos*, depicts a person who is caught between two worlds. In what appears to be an aquatic environment, the figure, possibly the artist himself, struggles to keep his head held high despite the weight of the piano keyboard that runs the length of his body. He refuses to be drowned by another culture, of which the piano is a symbol. A piano is made up of a series of keys. Significantly, most of them are white. However, to create good music, both the white and the black keys must be inextricably played together.

Eric Mbatha's etching *Soweto young musicians* depicts a street scene that captures the pulsating life of the township of Soweto that was built to house Johannesburg's black workers and under apartheid grew to be the largest and most important black township in South Africa. The work gives us a refreshing glimpse into the communal expressions of creativity that continued to thrive under adverse conditions and sustain the town's inhabitants.

I would also like to mention two other artists who are represented in this exhibition: Melissa Becker and Victor Gordon. Melissa Becker and Victor Gordon were born in South Africa and completed their undergraduate degrees there. However, both were disillusioned with the political situation in the late eighties and left the country. Melissa Becker went to the United States where she completed her studies and after several years, migrated to Australia. Victor Gordon came directly to Australia where he pursued an academic career. He was particularly disillusioned with the role young white

men had to play when conscripted to a fight that was ideologically abhorrent to them. Because they left the country in those turbulent years, their work has been, up until now, unknown in South Africa. Both artists are here this evening and I would like to extend a warm welcome to them – Melissa Becker and Victor Gordon.

Whether now internationally famous or not, the work in this exhibition by previously marginalised artists will astonish and move the viewer - and inspire. The tortured figures by hitherto little known yet highly talented artist, Nat Mokgosi, express the agony and dehumanisation suffered by most of the South African population, whereas Victor Gordon's powerful images of the results of sanctioned brutality have a universal resonance linked to the abuse of human rights throughout the world. The works by Winston Saoli, Michael Maapola and Eric Mbatha, however, show how other artists retained a clear vision of themselves which showed strength and intellect and a refusal to accept the mantle of inferiority which the then government imposed upon them. These works renew our faith in the human spirit to overcome adversity and oppression.

Although the works were ignored by museum and corporate collections, artists will always create whether their work is purchased or not. Fortunately for South Africa's art heritage international collectors, including a number of Australians whose names are documented in the wall text, saw the value of the works and not only purchased them but kept them and have now sent them back as donations to South Africa. Two of these Australians, Diane Johnstone and Bruce Haigh, donated the significant collections that gave birth to the idea of the Ifa Lethu Foundation.

At a time when artists in South African townships were working out of sight of the international art community, top international artists in Europe were donating art to the *Art against Apartheid* collection. They included French artists Fluoman, Christian Boltansky and Patrick Betaudier, the American artist Roy Lichtenstein, the Venezuelan artist Carlos Cruz Diez, the British artist Tom Phillips, the Irish artist Louis Le Brocqyy, and the Uruguayan artist Jose Gamarra. I'll just make mention of three of their works in this exhibition.

Fluoman's painting *Tribute to Steve Biko* may at first glance appear to be graffiti. However, closer examination reveals it to be a powerful comment on the social issues of the time. Steve Biko was a noted anti-apartheid activist in South Africa in the 1960s and 70s. He created the slogan "Black is beautiful" and founded the Black Consciousness Movement which would empower and mobilise much of the urban black population.

Tom Phillips' lithograph, *Oh, Miss South Africa*, is tinged with irony and touches on the absurd lengths to which apartheid could be taken. It references a 1975 Miss South Africa beauty pageant fiasco in which the black winner was disqualified on a technicality (she also held Rhodesian citizenship) and replaced by a white blond.

The Uruguayan artist Jose Gamarra's painting *Saint George et les gorilles* appropriates Raphael's classic work of 1506, *Saint George and the dragon*, and sets it in an African landscape. An African "Saint George" slays a white gorilla while, in the far right of the picture, the liberated watch on, rejoicing.

The international works in this collection, gathered by a group of artists led by Ernest Pignon-Ernest and Antonio Saura living in France, do not bear the marks of lived experience but nevertheless speak eloquently of the universality of suffering and oppression.

The international works were donated on the understanding they would only be shown in South Africa after the arrival of democracy. Following the election for majority rule in 1995, this collection was presented to Nelson Mandela and housed in the South African Parliament from where it was

placed in the Robben Island Mayibuye archive at the University of the Western Cape. We are privileged to see these works, as they are not yet on exhibition to the wider public, and pleased that Hamilton Baduza, an activist from Robben Island, is with us tonight.

This exhibition was first shown last year during the 2010 World Cup at Constitution Hill in Johannesburg, once a prison, now the supreme symbol of justice in South Africa. It was a highly appropriate venue. The exhibition has since travelled to other destinations in South Africa to wide acclaim and will travel to other international destinations after Australia.

During the long struggle against apartheid, the international community came together to help bring about the new and democratic South Africa. Australia was at the forefront of the international effort. Twenty years on from that transformative day in 1994, South Africa is now a prominent and respected member of the international community.

In making its international journey, this exhibition is celebrating with the international community the reclaiming of South Africa's artistic heritage and the spirit of global co-operation that has made regaining this heritage possible.

It also stands as a very fitting tribute to the art and the artists who produced it.

I congratulate Dr. Narissa Ramdhani, CEO of the Ifa Lethu Foundation; Carol Brown, curator of the exhibition, and the artists present this evening.

It is with great pleasure I declare this exhibition open.