

Speech by the Minister, Dr Z Pallo Jordan at the Launch of the Ifa Lethu Foundation, November 19, 2005

Thank You Programme Director.
Dr Mamphela Ramphele,
Mr Andile and Mrs Ngcaba
Your Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

My Ministry has recently completed a series of public interactions with artists and the arts community in three provinces. In all of these encounters it was clear that South Africa is not lacking in talent. I found this to be true whether one was visiting the Khomani San in Kgalakgadi, or Uppington in the Northern Cape, the Eastern Cape, Free State, or any other province in the country.

This evening's event is a celebration of South African talent, specifically in the visual arts. I am extremely heartened by the milestones we have laid down during the course of these past twelve months alone. The Dumile Feni Retrospective at the Johannesburg Gallery, which later moved to the South African Gallery of the Iziko Museums in Cape Town, was surely one of the highlights. The National Gallery in Cape Town is presently hosting "Revisions", an exhibition comprising the Bruce Campbell Smith collection, made up of works of 20th century South African artists. This evening's exhibition, featuring South African artists of the seventies and eighties, perhaps is the highpoint of this year's path breaking events.

My Ministry is extremely proud to be associated with this initiative.

The sixties, seventies and eighties will probably be remembered as among the bleakest years in twentieth century South Africa's history. These were the decades that saw South Africa being transformed into a police state run by a gaggle of unaccountable securocrats, driven by the dangerous illusion that bloody repression could halt the inexorable march of history.

The arts were one of the few spaces where the individual or the collective could express ideals, emotions, aspirations, and values that the White minority regime had stigmatized as either illicit or down right subversive.

Despite its brutality, the racist state did not succeed in silencing the voice of the arts. Artists from every community and every discipline grabbed the opportunities that were available to give expression to these values. They played a significant role in the mass mobilisation that took-off during the 1980s. Indeed it could be said that if you wanted to gauge the mood in the townships, the arts were among the most reliable means of measuring it.

Working through their own organisations in alliance with others, artists became an integral element of the struggle against apartheid. Two international conferences, one held in Gaborone in 1981, the second, held in Amsterdam in 1986, helped galvanise the progressive arts community. An international movement of artists apposed to apartheid complimented their efforts, in some instances offering material support.

It was in that environment that a number of foreign diplomats who were stationed in South Africa during the 1970s and 80s, purchased these works, both as a gesture of solidarity with the artists, but also for the intrinsic value in these artistic creations. I think I speak on behalf of all South Africans in expressing our profound appreciation of such simple gestures, which probably helped preserve an important part of our national heritage. Thanks to the efforts of the Ifa Lethu Foundation, these works are being repatriated to South Africa. Tonight marks the commencement of that operation.

I specifically want to acknowledge the contribution of the Australian High Commission to making tonight's event possible. It's proper to recall that it was an Australian diplomat who spearheaded the systematic purchase of Black South African Art among the diplomatic community. I must also thank the many bodies from the South African business community who have contributed what we have achieved thus far. The South African arts community has been equally active, and we acknowledge their role as well.

It is our hope that once all the works have been assembled, this exhibition can be constituted as a single collection. Perhaps called Ifa Lethu – Our Legacy/Inheritance in Nguni. We hope to tour the collection to various parts of South Africa so that it is not only the people in the big urban centres who will get to see it. But after that tour it will have to find a home in the urban areas so that it's integrity can be preserved and future generations will be able to visit it.

South Africa has always been blessed with talent. We owe this collection to the women and men whose work is on display here this evening. Some of them are no longer with us. This is the most lasting monument we can dedicate to their memory.

As government we are committed to enhancing the arts by mobilising available public funds to assist our artists, to support the arts community and to stimulate cultural activity in all parts of the country.

The role of the arts in society is to enrich our lives, to entertain us, to stimulate our minds, to excite critical thought and to uplift our spirits by touching those areas of our being beyond the reach of conventional everyday discourse. The human animal is unique in its ability and desire to externalize itself through acts of creation that reflects its imagination, reflect on its experience, and its environment, and its own life as a species. The animal sings, dances, recites poetry, tells stories, sculpts, carves, paints and records its memories because nature endowed it with the unique ability to pose a rather elementary question: why? By consistently posing that question, the human animal arrived at the second, and perhaps more important one; why not?

Artistic creation and other cultural activities are an important dimension of that search for meaning and of our urge to create a better world. Perhaps it is humanity's efforts to create a better world for ourselves and future generations that spurred us to change and constantly transform our environment, and by so doing, to make and re-make ourselves.

Working together, I am certain, we can build a platform for the growth and development of the arts, which enrich all our lives and can bring joy to so many.

Thank You.