

BETWEEN THE LINES



Collection: Brooks Spector

BY PETER DEARLOVE

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APARTHEID ART A CRUCIBLE OF CREATIVITY

SOUTH AFRICA is beginning to forget apartheid. In conversations around the dinner table you seldom hear it mentioned these days. In the words of what's-his-name, we've all 'moved on'. But every once in a while something surfaces to make the memories and the agony come flooding back. Right now it is art; amazing, evocative, capital, apartheid, ART. And South Africans are celebrating it in an exhibition driven by blacks and whites and funded by both the state and private enterprise. It opened in Pretoria in November.

The exhibition, and the foundation, go by the name *Ifa Lethu* (Our Heritage), but the art itself is described as 'township art' because black artists of the time were only able to do their work in the townships where they lived, showing and selling privately, or at the side of the township roads. Behind the 're-discovery' of this work is a remarkable sidebar story of the apartheid era of the 60's and 70's that could be called A Diplomatic Intrigue.

Briefly, the story goes like this. In Pretoria, in the 60's, an American diplomat with a taste for jazz, met a black South African musician and they became friends. Somewhat clandestinely (because whites were officially discouraged from social intercourse with blacks) 'he' would go with 'him', quite frequently, to jam sessions in the township where the musician lived. Now the muso also happened to be a talented artist and part of quite a community of others the same. One thing led to another and the jam sessions began to double as art shows. More and more of the diplomat's diplomatic friends came along for the fun, and would almost always buy a piece of art or two. They were inexpensive, they were clearly very good, and in any case their creators needed the money. For some of the diplomats, it was too, a deliberate act of defiance of a system they abhorred. In due course that particular community of diplomats all went home. And that is where the story might have ended.

In 2003, the Australia diplomat, Diane Johnstone, came to the conclusion that her own collection of township art held within it a story for all South Africans and should, properly, be at home in the country of its creation. She took steps to return it.

Tom Nevin, a South African journalist and regular contributor to the *Melbourne Age*, was asked to cover the official handover. He was fascinated by the story and recognised that what Diane had so spontaneously done, others might be encouraged to do. He made contact with her and got the names of all the players she could remember.

Tom contacted everyone he could trace, and after about a year's work had enough material in prospect to add to Diane's 17 pieces, to make up an important body of apartheid art. He took the idea to Pretoria Art Museum chief curator Dirkie Offringa, who ran with it enthusiastically, and widened the circle of interest to include the government and the private sector. In time the *Ifa Lethu* Foundation emerged, chaired by Dr Mamphela Ramphele and mandated to foster a culture of understanding and healing.

Minister of Arts Pallo Jordan calls the collection 'a treasure' that must be built on and safeguarded for generations of South Africans to come. "It is a glimpse of life in the townships in those hard years."

The initiative is quickly attracting the financial support of the government through the Department of Arts and Culture with a grant of R4mn and the private sector, with a BHP Billiton sponsorship of R3mn.

Liberation icon, former managing director of the World Bank and today Co-chair of a new Global Commission on International Migration, Mamphela recalls her own excitement when she heard the story: "Two and a half years ago I had breakfast in Cape Town with journalist Tom Nevin. What he outlined to me literally knocked my socks off. He explained how an untold number of valuable artworks, crafted in the townships during the 1970s and 80s, the darkest days of apartheid, now rested in the studies and living rooms of diplomats the world over. He asked me if I would chair a trust to drive the recovery of the art.

Minister Jordan is quick to point out that the purchase of the art and its departure from South Africa was no act of plunder. "It was an act of altruism in the purest sense. So, if it is hard to celebrate anything about apartheid, it remains true that it was a test of a people's endurance and at the same time a crucible of creativity. ♥