

**I**n 1980, a pair of French artists, appalled at what they were hearing about the struggles of South Africans under apartheid, put out a call to well-known artists from around the world. The idea was to form a collection of works that would travel the world to raise awareness of what was happening in South Africa.

But the artists stipulated that the collection, containing works by well-known artists including Roy Lichtenstein and Joe Tilson, would never be shown in South Africa itself until the country became a democracy.

It wasn't until 1995, then, that the collection, *Art Against Apartheid*, was finally presented to the South African Government. It was stored, unseen, in the Houses of Parliament, and later transferred to the Robben Island Museum archive.

Many art lovers from around the world had seen the works and learned about the plight about South Africans, but it would years before South Africans themselves would see the collection.

Meanwhile, a different collection of works was also being gathered for posterity. Canberra resident Diane Johnstone, a former diplomat who spent her first posting in South Africa in the 1970s, at the height of apartheid, decided to donate her own collection of South African art to the Pretoria Art Museum. It was, she believed, part of the country's cultural heritage, and should be returned home. Another former diplomat, Bruce Haigh, followed suit, and by 2005, the Ifa Lethu (Our Heritage) Foundation had been established. A not-for-profit

# Art out of South Africa

An exhibition that began as a way of raising awareness of the apartheid regime opens this week, **Sally Pryor** writes

organisation that receives both government and private funding, it now includes donations of apartheid-era art from several Australian collectors, as well as donors from 14 different countries. The two collections have since been merged into a powerful new exhibition, *Home and Away: A return to the South*, which opened at the ANU Drill Hall Gallery in Canberra this week.

Curator Carol Brown says structuring the show into themes has been an interesting challenge, especially as the collections come from different focal points, and the artists have used diverse media.

The *Art Against Apartheid* collection, for example, has a wider focus on human rights and the struggle against oppression – one work is a tribute to Che Guevara, while others contain Biblical references.

"There were some really big names, but most of them had never visited South Africa, because at that stage, there was a cultural boycott," she says.

"Artists from South Africa were not showing their work overseas and also international artists were not bringing their artwork to South Africa, in an attempt to try and speed up the process towards democracy."

While many black artists were being ignored in their own country by museums and corporate collections, Brown says the cultural boycott precluding international art from being shown in South Africa and vice versa was also contested at the time.

"Some people were saying you are just isolating yourselves even more, but the feeling was that one has to put pressure on everybody to try and change the old regime," she says.

"It had an interesting effect on the art, one being that artists looked inward and perhaps produced very authentic art, and another one being that they were out of the loop of current, contemporary movements."

Both collections eventually

made their way back to their rightful home, but it was some time before the two were brought together last year – just in time for the Soccer World Cup. The show toured the three main cities – Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban – for a year, and after its month-long run in Canberra, the works will head to London. By this stage, it seems incredible that there was ever a time when the two collections were not linked, but in fact, the links have had to be discovered by Brown during the curatorial process.

"I think there's an interesting parallel, I suppose, in looking at how people from the outside were looking in at us, and how people from the inside were looking at themselves, and that was the main curatorial concept of the exhibition, to bring these two together," she says.

"It did not start off as a travelling exhibition, it was really to show South African people the works which they had never seen before but were being made under their noses, and this *Art Against*

*Apartheid* collection, which was other people donating towards South Africa. That is the sort of dialogue, the discourse of the exhibition overall."

She has also deliberately blended the two collections and arranged the works in series of themes, rather than separating them. Some of the South African artists, she says, could never have imagined while they were creating their art, that their works could one day hang alongside those of eminent overseas artists.

Finally, the exhibition's link to Canberra, of course, is obvious. Along with Johnstone and Haigh, many of the Ifa Lethu donors have been Australian diplomats.

Johnstone says Ifa Lethu is now the largest art heritage foundation in South Africa, and the works in the collection are occasionally used for significant events.

"In a way, what this is doing is bringing back a body of work which would have been lost," Johnstone says.

"But there's a pragmatic element as well. One would hope that Australian companies that have interests in South Africa may see this as a worthwhile project to support, and we hope that they might be encouraged to become sponsors not just of this process of returning works of art to South Africa, but of the many wonderful projects that are associated with the foundation."

■ *Home and Away: A return to the south*, at the ANU Drill Hall Gallery, runs until July 3. Curator Carol Brown will give a floor talk at the gallery today at noon.



Home and Away, A Return to the South curator Carol Brown with Di Johnstone; Saint George et les gorilles by Jose Gamarrá, top; Melodious Journey through cosmos by Fikile Magadla.