Postcolonial Africa

Mario Pissarra

Post colonial art criticism has introduced many challenging perspectives to the ways in which African art is perceived and presented to the public. One of the key critiques has concerned the need to liberate individual artists from being seen and presented as representatives of the 'tribe', where artists are treated as the embodiments of 'ethnic/cultural traditions', unlike their western contemporaries. A second critique has tackled the apparent preference of Western collectors for self taught African artists over and above their academically trained counterparts, with some critics seeing this as corresponding to a form of paternalism or racism. It is impossible to view an exhibition titled 'Contemporary Art of the San People' in an art gallery in central London without surfacing some of the issues contained in and around these critiques.

In approaching this exhibition my own primary concerns were how would contemporary San art be presented to a London public? Would we learn about the artists, and the issues surrounding the production of their work, or would we learn more about the San? Would the San be presented as an insular, homogenous culture, the living representatives of an ancient, hunter gathering, shamanic, and rock painting people? Or would we be introduced to a more complex, even contradictory 'culture' directly affected by critical issues framing the lives of historically dispossessed Southern Africans in the 21st century?

The exhibition consists mostly of paintings on paper and canvas, as well as monochrome and colour linocut prints. These include examples that demonstrate little technical dexterity and could easily be mistaken as the work of young children. Indeed it is self-evident that all of the artists are not trained in terms of naturalistic or illusionistic modes of production, nor do they appear to be aware of, or influenced by any of the latest conceptual trends. Despite this 'naivety', there are several bold and vibrant works that demonstrate skill, innovation and confidence. These include paintings from Stefaans Samcuia (Bushman, Hut and Gemsbuck, 1999), and Madena Kasanga (Huts, 1996) and a print by Thamae Setssho (People Climbing on Trees, 1999). These latter examples all exuberantly communicate a joyfulness in the act of making art that is sensual and unpretentious. All works are conventionally presented, and contextual information is discretely accessible near the entrance. Most of this information concerns the San and some of the artists involved, and to a lesser extent, the arts and crafts projects the works are drawn from.

There are also a host of co-collaborators or interest groups involved, some more visible than others. The exhibition was planned in association with the music company MELT 2000. They have recently released Pops Mohammed's field recordings, 'Bushmen of the Kalahari', and 'Sanscapes', contemporary dance and ambient recordings by mostly UK based musicians and producers that sample San music. A programme of events including live music from Mohammed and San musicians, and an award winning documentary accompanies the exhibition. There are also other interest groups whose respective agendas were accommodated in different ways, some more explicitly than others. There is Survival International that is campaigning to restore land rights for the 'Bushmen' in Botswana. They are openly critical of the Botswana government who they accuse of surreptitiously pursuing economic interests over maintaining human rights, and they have used the exhibition to circulate a petition for their campaign. Then there is the Working Groups of Indigenous Minorities of Southern Africa (WIMSA) who are indirectly represented by MELT 2000, as the music company is donating all the proceeds from the sale of Sanscapes to them. Despite the criticism, especially from Survival International and MELT 2000, about the ways in which the San have been treated historically, nobody at the press launch was directly critical of the South African government. This may or may not have something to do with the fact that the South African High Commission is also in there somewhere, as this exhibition is described in the main information sheet as a 'curtain raiser' to 'Celebrate South Africa Festival' which was held in London this May. Then there is the corporate sponsor, Diesel, whose fashionably thin, black hair straightener and/or retro wigs friendly media campaign constructs provocative images of Black coolness. Diesel's involvement is a touch incongruous when you try to reconcile their logo, 'For successful Living' with terms such as 'genocide' and 'forced resettlement' which were liberally used at the press launch by some of the exhibition's collaborators. Then again this is a fashion outfit that describes irony
and irreverence as ‘core values’. Perhaps the artists will be able to swap their (genuine) combat clothing for some designer wear?

My point in the above paragraph is not to simply name some of the collaborators or to substantially interrogate their individual agendas. Rather what concerns me most is that amidst all the layers of activity enveloping this exhibition, there are, I believe, four strategic levels of representation that an exhibition of this nature should simultaneously address. At the most obvious level it must be about the work itself, and this is addressed in that the art retains the focus despite the involvement of a host of collaborators. At a secondary level it must introduce us to individual artists, especially since these are not household names. This is partially addressed as there is information on some of the artists involved, especially the artists from the Schmidtsdrift workshop in the Northern Cape, although there are also examples of the anonymous tribal artist, which I pick up on later. On a broader level the exhibition has to address issues affecting the San, and the information and activities do go some way to doing this, especially the information supplied by Survival International. However, somewhere between an individual art work and the artists, and the bigger issues concerning the San there is a key level of agency that makes this work possible, and it is this level, I feel, that is not adequately addressed in this exhibition. I refer specifically to the three workshops which provide the basis for this exhibition, and also to the ‘middlesmen’ such as Germany’s Bushman Art who effectively mediate between the arts workshops and the gallery.

Granted there is some information on the Schmidtsdrift, Kuru (Botswana) and Witdraai (Northern Cape) workshops in the information pack, but this gets easily lost amongst everything else, and even if you do find it, it is not particularly informative. My reason for zooming in on this level is that these workshops, and buyers or agents, are not neutral conduits for San artists. They are, as Sidney Lidlefield Kasfir puts it, engaged ‘not only in art production, but also in the production of “Bushman culture”’. Kasfir insightfully notes: ‘It is advantageous to link the workshop artists with a Bushman hunting and gathering past, even though none of the artists or their families have ever lived that way, because this gives their art a pedigree which spectators will recognize as authentic.’

Although the work from the three workshops is grouped separately, the distinction between these three ‘producers of Bushmen culture’ is not clearly signposted. Even if it were, I do not personally think that this would in itself be adequate. For unless we can distinguish fundamental differences between the historical origins and ideological and practical oricutions of the three workshops we would continue to view them as essentially one project, especially since all the work selected for this exhibition draws on subject matter that is illustrative of ‘traditional’ San. This emphasises a sense of community and continuity, whereas there are some critical distinctions that should not be overlooked if we are to gain more than a romantic vision of contemporary San art.

For example, the Schmidts Trift project consists of a unique community in that its members are mostly Angolan born men and women. Most of the men were recruited into the Portuguese colonial army, and subsequently they joined the South African Defense Force in Namibia (then South West Africa) in its war against the South West African Peoples Organisation. Shortly after the unbanning of political organisations in South Africa in 1990, these trackers and soldiers were resettled by the Nationalist Party government on an army base near Kimberly. Clearly this pedigree would have some ramifications for their reintegration into the ‘new’ South Africa. While no one can dispute the insidious success of apartheid’s divide and rule policies, the matter is altogether more complex than simply speaking of forced resettlements. Especially since it is not only the San, but in fact almost all South Africans of colour who were dispossessed of their land. Clearly some may prefer to ignore these uncomfortable issues in favour of the image of the archetypal hunter gatherer victimised by ‘development’, but does the perpetuation of the romantic image facilitate real understanding of their contemporary situation? Does it represent a genuine quest on the part of the artists themselves to reclaim their ‘true’ identity, or is it just good marketing?

According to Kasfir, the Schmidtsdrift project uses ‘artmaking [as] a kind of therapy to counteract alcoholism and hopelessness, as well as a community development strategy’. These very real concerns and important objectives are totally ignored by the presentation of this exhibition. This is despite the fact that some of these artists have produced work which directly draws on their experiences of war and which reflects on their difficulties with coping with the present. Apart from what we could learn about these artists by seeing some of this work, it
would also be very interesting to know more about how these projects work. In particular it would be useful to see how these workshops have actually contributed to improving the lives of the artists and their families, or to find out more about the difficulties faced by these projects in achieving these goals. However well intended these workshops may or may not be, without bringing them into the equation in a transparent manner inevitably raises the question as to who the buyers, especially those with a human rights agenda, are actually supporting.

While the Schmidttsdrift and Kuru workshops have produced work that is similar in many respects, it is the exhibition of work from the ‘WitTruai project’ (its official name cannot be gleaned from the available information) that is the most problematic. Essentially this work is nothing more than stylised, monochromatic copies of rock paintings executed in traditional pigments on handmade paper. The kind of stuff you’d expect to see on sale to international visitors in a stall at Cape Town’s Waterfront or alongside painted ostrich eggs in a tourist shop in Oudtshoom. The small heads of the figures, the captions inform us, are representative of how the San see themselves when in trance, and this is as close as ‘Contemporary art of the San’ gets to fitting into the series of exhibitions of ‘shamanic cultures’ that the October Gallery hosts periodically. But unlike, for example, the Peruvian exhibition where the artists were either shamen themselves, or closely associated, these particular works appear a lot more derivative than inspired. The obvious intention in the works from Witdraai is to demonstrate cultural continuity, mediated only by paper in place of rock, despite the very different reasons for making the art. This is compounded by a decision (by the project’s organisers?) to present the artists as anonymous entities. On an information sheet the reasons for this are explained as ‘the ethos of the clan is not one of individual consciousness but of group or clan consciousness.’

Apart from representing a view of the anonymous ‘tribal artist’ that has been widely discredited as a colonial construct, the absurdity of exhibiting work by ‘Khomani Artist’ is indirectly challenged by an article on the resettlement of the Kalahari San written by Roger Friedman. Friedman explains that the resettlement programme involved six farms. Quoting San Leader Dawid Kuiper the article explains that only two of these farms, one of which is Witbraai, is to be set aside for ‘people wishing to live the traditional Bushman life’. This clearly indicates, as Friedman puts it, that the San ‘identify to differing degrees with their ancestry’ as a majority have evidently chosen to live in ‘non traditional’ ways. Clearly what it means to be called, or to call oneself, ‘San’ or ‘Bushman’, is not a simple matter. That the artists in these three workshops apparently use Afrikaans as a common language merely hints at how complex the notion of ‘San culture’ is.

This exhibition implicitly contained a minefield of difficult issues about culture and identity, and about the past, present and future of the people/s sometimes called San. It’s only the unadulterated lovers of autodidactic or naive art who can walk away without feeling at least a little unsettled.

2  Ibid, p 62.
3  Cape Times, 5 May 2000, p 9.