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ARTICLE

South Africa's angst: Exhibition shows that democracy can't cure all of a country's ills

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Anger, frustration, disillusionment, hope. Feelings pulsate throughout "A Decade of Democracy: Witnessing **South Africa**," a thought-provoking exhibition brought to Dallas by the African American Museum in Fair Park.

This is a gutsy move given much of the content relates to sticky subjects such as gay rights, the AIDS epidemic, police brutality and racism - issues that plague our own country. The message - that democracy can't be expected to solve all the world's problems - has particular resonance as we attempt to fix things in **Iraq**. "When I first looked at the exhibition I thought it might be a little too much for Dallas," says African American Museum chief curator Phillip Collins. "But I'm glad we're stepping forward with something like this, because it will stretch us in our thinking about who we are."

This show is a coup for the museum, which is one of only three venues nationwide.

But little is easy on the eye, much less the psyche.

Haunting black-and-white photographs by Fanie Jason provide painful views of AIDS victims: a grotesquely thin figure covered in sores, a woman transporting a sick friend in a grocery cart, a young boy reaching out to touch his gaunt mother's forehead.

Christian Nerf's happening, staged in front of Johannesburg's World Trade Center and captured on video, depicts police bearing "Polite" signs trying, haplessly, to interact with passers-by.

A harsher take on urban realities comes from Nontsikelelo (Lolo) Veleko, whose bold color photograph depicts a young black boy sitting against a wall on which graffiti stating "Their System Does Not Work for Us!" is scrawled in blood red.

Elsewhere Alison Kearney sets up tomato crates as hawkers do who block sidewalks in downtown Johannesburg, filling the cubbies with necessities such as rat poison, toothbrushes and booze.

It's important to note that the voices here are not those of an older generation that suffered the abuses of apartheid for decades, but of emerging talents who face a brighter future. And the point of view is not that of outsiders, but of a team of South African curators who organized the show under the auspices of Sondela, the South Africa Development Fund Inc.

Edmund Barry Gaither, director of the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists in Roxbury, Mass., stresses this point in the catalog, which includes insightful essays by both American and South African scholars along with statements by the artists.

"South Africa's problems, like our own, are rooted in histories that are not easily escaped or ignored," Mr. Gaither says. "The pressures of progress and regression compete daily in myriad confrontations at every level. ...What we hope for is not magic solutions but rather a principled fight in which humane values guide struggle and political pragmatism is tempered by idealism for a society that both honors human potential for greatness and balances competing interests of unquestioned validity."

Would that the artworks spoke as eloquently, with as clear a sense of purpose. But few live up to that challenge. Some artists fail to get their point across, including Brenton Maart, whose digital images of gay porn are blown up to such proportions as to make them invisible.

Nicholas Hlobo does a better job of investigating the silence surrounding homosexuality in African communities with a mixed-media wall relief titled Hermaphrodite, a deflated inner tube fringed with fussy drapery tassels.

Technical problems account for some weaknesses. Light boxes made of cardboard wrapped in African textiles - an attempt by Jeannot M.M. Ladeira to describe the transient existence of refugees displaced by wars and famine - don't work with the voltage here. The impact of the boxes is diminished despite the fact that the different textile patterns represent some of the groups that were displaced.

A stronger evocation of South Africa's segmented population comes from Fritha Langerman, whose black boxes contain "paper weapons" assembled from newsprint in the 11 official languages of the country. These are some of the strongest works in the show, and the boxes, which are elegantly crafted, are ingeniously embellished with humble materials such as thumbtacks, black-eyed peas and light bulbs.

Six of the 19 artists represented are women, and feminist issues are on the table. Bongzi Bengu depicts the profiles of two women shouting down a man in the middle, who appears to be sinking under the weight of their harassment. Pauline Mazibuko creates colorful collages reminiscent of stained glass windows, but the disjunctive placement of abstract figures points to the fragmented state of women's lives.

Much of the work is rough around the edges, which isn't surprising since the vast majority of artists are in their 20s and 30s and few have exhibited outside of South Africa.

Exceptions include 48-year-old Nirupa Sing, whose abstract monoprints make sophisticated reference to the transformative opportunities afforded by South Africa's rebirth.

Younger artists, including Isaac Nkosinathi Khanyile, also spread a message of hope. He constructed the totemic installation titled Wathinta' Bafazi Wathinta 'Imbokodo from clay, cow dung, wire and grass, all materials used by the Zulu people. A powerful evocation of the future, it also represents the 38-year-old Durban artist's attempt to reflect "the new South Africa's embrace of a diversity of cultural traditions."

Weaknesses notwithstanding, Mr. Collins is quick to note, "One thing the artists succeeded in doing was to get their voices out."

That, he adds, "is something they could never have done under apartheid."

"A Decade of Democracy: Witnessing South Africa" is on view through Feb. 27 at the African American Museum, 3536 Grand Ave. in Fair Park. Hours: Tuesdays through Fridays from noon to 5 p.m., Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sundays from 1 to 5 p.m. Closed today, Friday and Saturday. Open this Monday, but closed other Mondays. Free. Call 214-565-9026 or go to www.aamdallas.org.

RESOURCES

*Thompson, Leonard M. A History of South Africa. (Yale Nota Bene, trade paperback imprint of Yale University Press, 2001).

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