

1986-1999: Looking Back at Politics, Art and Young Artists

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Art is never free of the spirit of its time and place but although the weight of history and geopolitics haunts art objects, this does not control their identities. Looking back at the years 1986 -1999, when I served on the National Arts Festival **Committee**, the extraordinary pressures exerted on South African art reflect the society at large as it suffered the burden of apartheid, the fragile promise of a negotiated transition of political power, and then the upheavals of post-1994 social transformation. But looking at the exhibitions produced by Young Artist Award Winners for Visual Art, their interpretations of the complex South African situation produced remarkably creative and diverse responses. They proclaimed the power of the imagination to intervene with bleak reality and liberate the individual human spirit.

Politics entwined itself around art many times during the **20th century**. While the 1917 Russian Revolution offered opportunities to modernist artists and designers, Hitler's fulminations against modern art quenched hope for the German avant-garde. In the name of art, propagandistic public sculptures of 'heroic' leaders – Joseph Stalin, Kim Il Sung, Saddam Hussein – reminded subject peoples of authority's ubiquitous presence but, in response to the pressure of events, art's capacity to engage society (work by the Mexican muralists) or be proactive and stir debate (Feminist art for instance) was demonstrated decisively in many different places.

South Africa art became politicised reluctantly. For much of the 20th century art was conceptualised as a repository of Western values, and cited as evidence that European culture could advance the cause of 'civilisation' in the colonies. Modernism made its presence felt slowly and for decades its non-realist strategies were viewed with deep suspicion. In the 70s, when the West had adopted postmodern language and embraced narrative and allegory, the Nationalist Government's cultural apparatus came, late in the day, to view abstract art as progressive and safely non-political. However, by the **1980s**, when legitimate political channels of expression were comprehensively blocked by bans on political parties, the arrest of leaders, and prohibitions against freedom speech, artists recognised that culture offered a space for creative action and perhaps political activism. In **effect**, culture was forced to voice and image what could not be uttered as discourse in the political arena.

The term, 'arts festival' suggests celebration, and indeed the Standard Bank National Arts Festival was exactly that, but there was an edge to celebrations. We paid tribute to cultural creativity despite living in a violent society, despite restrictions on freedom of expression, despite the brooding gaze cast by the Government on an arts festival held in Grahamstown, at a living monument dedicated to the memory of English settlers.

As politics exerted pressure on South African art it lost any vestiges of innocence and autonomy; music, dance, poetry, plays, novels and images interpreted the diverse lives of individuals and communities whose existence was branded by apartheid ideology and its repercussions.

Despite censorship and prohibitions on freedom of speech the annual National Arts Festivals were allowed to debate and criticise art, life and politics in South Africa. The power of art at the Festival to radicalise the population was not taken seriously by Nationalist politicians, probably because they considered Grahamstown to be a small, remote enclave where English 'liberals' met each July to communicate with **like-minded** people. It is true that Festival audiences were, for many years,

predominantly white, middle class, English speakers but they shared the belief that art moves the imagination. People with imagination engage with the moral and philosophical issues generated by the arts and the Festival hosted plays, music, dance and art exhibitions that were more than entertainment: they probed the human condition and challenged audiences and viewers to make connections with their own lives and their country's politics.

My involvement in the National Arts Festival began in 1984, the year **that** Standard Bank commenced its festival sponsorship. Having been informed that I was the 1985 Award Winner for Fine Art (the term then in use), I went to the 1984 Festival to see Peter Schütz's impressive display of beautifully crafted, carved sculpture. We had been fellow students at the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg and now Peter was a sculptor with a uniquely individual vision. He went on to become a very significant artist in subsequent decades **AND HIS UNTIMELY DEATH ON 15 OCTOBER 2008 DEPRIVED THE ART SCENE OF A MAN OF IMMENSE INTEGRITY, WHOSE SCULPTURE WAS A WITTY AND INSIGHTFUL EXPLORATION OF HUMAN BEHAVIOUR AND BELIEFS.**

In 1985 I showed paintings and pastels in an exhibition entitled, 'Encounters'. Both Schütz and I were, I think, concerned with metaphor rather than explicit realism and with relationships and disjunctions between nature and cultural objects. Interestingly, Peter's vision was infused with his German heritage (his respect for meticulous craftsmanship) whilst mine was greatly influenced by my Zimbabwean domicile and British culture and education. In 1986, Award Winner Gavin Younge, exhibited 'Koperberg', a series of metal sculptures which was generated by South African mining history. He too expressed himself metaphorically, alluding to the prevailing atmosphere of oppression and complex histories of exploitation of the land and its peoples.

I was asked to join the Festival **Committee** in 1986. I accepted this invitation because, having been the beneficiary of the Festival's support for the arts, I wanted to contribute in return. As a relatively recent South African resident, I thought I could bring an oblique view to discussion of what constituted 'South African' visual identity (my view of history had not been infused by interminable lessons on the Great Trek). I served on the **Committee** from 1986-1999, thirteen years which crossed the divide between apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. Representing the Visual Arts (and briefly the new discipline called '**Craftart**'), I worked with Alan Crump (**before he became Festival chairman**), Christopher Till and Sydney Selepe. Before discussing the Young Artist Award **Winners** for Visual Art who were selected during my involvement in the nomination process, something must be said about the South African **art world** during those **years**, for it constituted the background to decisions taken about the **Awards**.

By the 1980s the professional **art world comprised** largely university- and technikon-trained artists, many of whom taught at tertiary education institutions. This meant that the overwhelming majority of professional 'artists' were white. A small number of black artists graduated from Fort Hare University but the Rorke's Drift Fine Art School, which had produced distinctive and significant black artists, closed in 1982. Art centres began to be established in black communities, notably the **Community Arts Project (CAP), Cape Town, in 1977; Fuba Academy, Johannesburg, in 1978; Funda Community Art College, Soweto, in 1983; the Community Arts Workshop (CAW), Durban, in 1983; and the Alexandra Arts Centre, Alexandra, in 1986.** Artists were active in all the provinces and major cities but they did not enjoy equal opportunities to further their careers.

Producing art is one thing but making it visible is quite another. Images in studios do not stir debate or exert influence. Compared to the performing arts, exhibitions are not easy to mount. A distinctive hat and a sharp sense of humour can characterise a stand-up comedian, gumboots enhance dance rhythms, and four instruments define a string quartet. In short, performing artists need themselves, their talent, costumes, props or instruments to communicate with an audience. The visual arts require exhibition spaces with adequate shelter, good lighting, temperature control and security. By the 1980s there were commercial galleries and dealers in all the major South African towns and cities. Regular exhibitions were presented, publicised and critiqued, especially in **Johannesburg**, where the largest number of galleries and tertiary education art institutions were situated. In addition, corporate patronage of the visual arts became more significant as businesses and banks began to include arts sponsorship in social responsibility initiatives. The South African National Gallery and regional and municipal art galleries, which were never generously funded, faced competition for acquisitions as the corporate collections were developed. Sponsored art competitions with substantial prizes were launched (good news for artists). As well as the Standard Bank Young Artist **Awards**, the visual arts had the Triennial exhibitions (four were held between 1982 and 1991), the Volkskas Atelier Award, and Vita Art Now.

Support for the visual arts during the 1980s grew against a background of internal political unrest and oppression, international isolation and the cultural and academic boycotts. All of this impacted on how the arts in South Africa operated. The blunt truth is that South Africa's disengagement from the world community meant that artists had limited access to the free circulation of knowledge and stimulation of new ideas (the internet did not yet exist), and no opportunities to present themselves on the world stage and measure themselves in international contexts. Put that with political pressure to create 'resistance art' and to fight apartheid, and it is easy to see why art focused on life within South Africa. But, given the fact that many artists felt moral outrage about living in an unjust society, was their role as citizens the same as their identity as artists? How did race impinge on creative expression? What could art do to render a critique of art or life in a deeply fractured nation?

One way of addressing the issues confronting artists was to present many different examples of work created in the extraordinary place that was apartheid South Africa, and subsequently the nation battling with post-1994 transformation. The National Arts Festival became an important vehicle for exposing young talent nationally. The Visual Art Award offered a modest cash prize but, more importantly, there was provision for a catalogue and an exhibition which opened in Grahamstown and then went on a national tour (venues differed from year to year). All of this facilitated the development of an artist's national reputation. Other art awards offered bigger cash prizes but their concomitant exhibitions did not tour.

One of the valuable attributes of the Standard Bank Young Artist Awards was that the sponsors did not define the nature of the **Awards**, establish ground rules, or play any part in the decision-making process. **One person or more** sat on the Festival **Committee** to represent each arts discipline making Young Artist **Awards**. The Visual Arts members were responsible for doing research on artists who were arousing regional interest but the **Award** was not made on the basis of an exhibition, or work submitted to a jury. It was made to artists of promise whose work had integrity and distinctiveness. Although they had attracted interest locally, they had not yet attained national profiles. For this reason several significant artists were never seriously considered for the Young Artist Award. Karel Nel, for instance, had achieved major success at the 1982 **Triennial**, and Penny Siopis won prizes at the 1985 Triennial and Volkskas Atelier competition in 1986. Both received **well-merited**

national attention as a result; both were to be Artists in Residence at the Festival when this concept was initiated to give a platform to acclaimed, established artists. In short the Young Artist **Award** was *not* given to the 'best' artist discovered in any given year or made on the basis of the 'best' work submitted to a competition. Indeed some of the problems that erupted around the Triennials (pre-1994) and the Brett Kebble **Awards** (post-1994) were associated with hierarchies of prizes from gold medals to highly commended citations. Of course, precisely because Young Artist specifications were not written down, we were open to the question – how do you make your decisions? The best answer is – look at the exhibitions. We believe this is excellent work characterised by individual vision; prove us wrong.

My colleagues and I made our nominations to the Festival **Committee**, which **then** discussed them. Generally **speaking**, the artists chosen were no older than their early forties and were 'young' in terms of their personal evolution, which had advanced from experimentalism to something uniquely compelling. For me there was another consideration as well. I felt strongly that a national award should represent what was being produced throughout South Africa by a range of artists working in all the visual art genres and media. I argued for a variety of art practices and acknowledgement of difference to be built into the pattern of **Awards** – differences in training, places of domicile, gender, and race.

This is, I think, demonstrated by the artists given the **Award** while I served on the Festival **Committee**: William Kentridge (1987), Margaret Vorster (1988), Mmakgabo Helen Sibidi (1989), Bonnie Ntshalintshali and Fée Halsted-Berning (1990), Andries Botha (1991), Tommy Motswai (1992), Pippa Skotnes (1993), Sam Nhlengethwa (1994), Jane Alexander (1995), Trevor Makhoba (1996), Lien Botha (1997), and Nhlanhla Xaba (1998). They lived in Gauteng, the Cape and KwaZulu-Natal (we never located a Free State artist for the **Award**), worked with drawing, painting, sculpture, printmaking and photography (the practices of the period), and were white and black, female and male, and from a range of educational and cultural backgrounds.

Having been the first woman to receive a Young Artist **Award**, and being committed to **Feminist** theory, research and practice, I knew how difficult it was for women artists to become visible in a society that incessantly placed race before gender in identity formation and political imperatives. I made sure we considered women artists. The artists we chose for the **Awards** reflected important differences in training: the white artists had tertiary education, but Sibidi studied at the Johannesburg Art Foundation, Nhlengethwa at Rorke's Drift and Xaba at the Funda Community College, while Motswai and Makhoba were largely self-taught. I think that overall we achieved a measure of balance in our selections and that our decisions were seldom predictable or obvious prior to the announcements.

The Young Artist Award was intimately related to the exhibition produced for the Festival and subsequent national tour. The residues of exhibitions are their catalogues and South African art history owes much to exhibition catalogues. Even today publishers are wary of art books because they are expensive to publish and difficult to market. In the 80s and 90s illustrated catalogues offered ways of contributing to South African art history. Seldom lavish and hence affordable, the Young Artist catalogues **are** more than visual records. They contain insightful essays by the art theorists/historians and critics of the period: Elza Miles (Kentridge), Jillian Carman (Vorster), Andrew Verster (Halsted-Berning and Ntshalintshali), Elizabeth Rankin, Adam Small, Marilyn Martin and Carol Becker (Andries Botha), Raymund van Niekerk (Motswai), Michael Godby (Skotnes), David Koloane (Nhlengethwa), Ivor

Powell (Alexander), Paul Sibisi (Makhoba), Sydney Selepe (Xaba), while I wrote on Sebidi and Lien Botha.

It is interesting to re-read the catalogues and disentangle what we know now about the Young Artists from what we wrote when they were emerging. The difference between writing as a critic and **as** a historian is that critics, if their insights are prescient, bring the art of the present to the judgements of history. The critic trusts personal discernment; the historian places interpretation in a context of received opinion. Our artists went on to have notable careers within and beyond South Africa; tragically Trevor Makhoba, Bonnie Ntshalintshali and Nhlanhla Xaba died young but their Young Artist exhibitions remain as testimony to their talent and the distinctive work they produced on that occasion.

The first decision in which I participated in 1986 was for the 1987 **Award**. It went to William Kentridge. It is now difficult to recall the days when Kentridge was not widely **known**, for his is a most distinguished career in the visual and performing arts. His 1987 exhibition featured works on paper – drawings and prints – which engaged with Western art historical sources (notably Watteau and Hogarth) and South African spaces. He demonstrated the importance of inherited tradition (culture) and response to environment (the spaces of South Africa, especially in and around Johannesburg). He expressed himself graphically on paper and etching plates, fusing observation with commentaries on human desires and actions. Kentridge's oeuvre is still defined by drawing and his inventive ways of developing narratives as stills or animations suffused with deeply human concerns and behaviour. He connects the local with the global.

Contrasting with Kentridge's evocations of the South African environment, Margaret Vorster's 1988 show offered an interior vision, articulated by an emphatically decorative use of symbols drawn from a wide range of literary sources and cultural references. She was interested in concepts of the feminine and ways in which it confronts masculine power. She explored spiritual, physical and divine love and its relationship to violence; the South African situation is present by inference. In her pictorial arena, African objects compete with symbols and forms such as the Venus figure, derived from Europe.

The themes of Vorster's pictorial **world**, with their strong intrusion of European **culture**, were entirely absent from Mmakgabo Helen Sebidi's 1989 exhibition. Sebidi, the first black woman artist to receive a major art award, had an extensive knowledge of Tswana mural painting and her personal experiences of rural and township life, single parenthood and economic migration shaped her pictorial iconography. As I noted in her catalogue (1989: 12), "**Sebidi's work is about being a black woman in South Africa. It is about what she calls 'life cut in pieces' and it expresses the conflict between rural and urban life, women and men, past and present.**" Her groundbreaking show of images drawn and coloured, torn and reconstituted, persuaded the art public and collectors that they could not position all black female creativity within material culture or 'craft'. Black women had something to say with urgency and power through painting and drawing about the humiliating and economically challenging social conditions they confronted daily. Furthermore, as custodians in rural communities of oral histories and the skills required to use and shape organic materials, they preserved and sustained their ethnic identities.

The following **year**, different interpretations of female experience were expressed in ceramic sculpture by Fée Halsted-Berning and Bonnie Ntshalintshali, operating out of the Ardmore studio, then sited in the Drakensberg foothills near Winterton. In **retrospect**, how apt this joint **Award** was in 1990, the year that witnessed

cooperation between white and black politicians – F.W. De Klerk and Nelson Mandela. Just as attempts to define and homogenise ‘South African’ art are doomed to failure, it is also unwise to be prescriptive about women’s art. The 1990 Festival made people question preconceived ideas about the ‘decorative’, ‘craft’ and ways in which gender and ethnic identity influence form and content. Halsted-Berning (originally from Zimbabwe) was Ntshalintshali’s mentor but having introduced the young Zulu woman to processes of modelling and decorating clay in a studio space, she and Ntshalintshali engaged with materials and ideas and in their own ways. Their joint exhibition alerted viewers to the long history of ceramic sculpture prevalent in all cultures, iconoclastic ways of working with clay (using glue and paint for instance) and its versatility as a medium for three-dimensional narrative. Halsted-Berning created pictorial plaques of white colonial life and Ntshalintshali, a Catholic, constructed Zulu interpretations of bible stories.

The exhibition mounted by Durban-based sculptor, Andries Botha, 1991 winner, eroded conceptual divisions between ‘art’ and ‘craft’ erected by Western art theory and established his work within a paradigm of postmodern hybridity and eclecticism. Using weaving techniques and materials (such as thatching grass and wood) favoured by the Zulu to create functional forms, Botha worked with the aesthetics of natural materials employed in handmade structures, and a range of industrial and synthetic materials. Different processes, techniques, forms and references were fused inventively. His large, process-driven sculptures, complex in both construction and meaning, were redolent with a sense of being-in-Africa but suffused with his knowledge of western art and significant sculptors. As Rankin noted in her comprehensive discussion of his work, Botha attempted **“to reincorporate his Afrikaner/African experience in a vision shaped by his English/European education” (catalogue 1991: 13)**. Looking back on Botha’s show, it seems appropriately positioned in 1991 when apartheid’s collapse was becoming inevitable. What had been rigid was now fluid; meanings which had been fixed were ambivalent, and sculptural metamorphosis was an apt equation for change.

Tommy Motswai’s 1992 **Award** was testimony not only to the vitality of his pictorial vision but also to his courage in becoming an artist; he was born deaf. This is relevant only because it helps to explain his perceptiveness. Motswai reads the world through his eyes. For **him**, visual detail matters. His exhibition demonstrated an insightful interpretation of South Africa identity and daily life. Where most artists saw their fellow citizens as members of the privileged minority or the oppressed majority, Motswai noticed clothes, mannerisms, facial expressions and gestures. He cast an egalitarian gaze over absurdity, pretension and foibles, bringing to our attention the details we overlook when our senses are assaulted by noise. Since Motswai never hears words of venom or flattery he observes the size of teeth, the glint in eyes and the body language of elation, arrogance or obsequiousness. His exhibition made his viewers smile wryly in recognition of the fact that underneath skin colour is the blood of humanity.

In 1993 Pippa Skotnes put the emphasis squarely on academically informed art practice; her intellectual concerns became visually resonant in a series of etchings which represented her research into the lives and art of the indigenous San (Bushman) people and the enormous contribution made by ethnographer, Lucy Lloyd, in preserving knowledge of San culture. In his erudite catalogue essay, Godby traces the evolution of **Skotnes’** imagery in her books (she fought a notable court case to get recognition of artists’ books as works of art), and discusses the many references embodied in the etched symbolism and descriptive realism of Skotnes’s complex visual texts. The prints constituting ‘In the Wake of The White Wagons’,

resolutely South African in form and meaning, adopted a wide-angled view of South African history.

In complete contrast with Skotnes, Sam Nhlengethwa's 1994 exhibition, mounted in the year of South Africa's historic democratic election, engaged with popular culture and took cognisance of ideas relevant to many urban, black viewers. Trained by Bill Ainslie and at Rorke's Drift, Nhlengethwa applied his knowledge of image-making to cut paper collage and photomontage. He entered a history of practice which had redefined concepts of 'reality' via the Cubists, and facilitated social critiques in the hands of German Dadaists. Nhlengethwa took jazz as his theme. His images, cut and reconstituted from photographs in old magazines, including *Drum*, referred to black urban music and musicians in the United States and South Africa and to South African township life. There is an element of nostalgia in his imagery. Nostalgia can be dismissed as escapist, but imaginative escapism through art can be understood as a refusal to be brutalised by life. Nhlengethwa's collages, pictorial constructions of jazz performers, were not social realist critiques of society; they endorsed the power of music and visual art to uplift humanity under difficult circumstances.

Jane Alexander's 1995 exhibition of sculpture and photomontage established a different tone to that in Nhlengethwa's show. A figurative sculptor, Alexander's commitment to the human form rendered poignant and disquieting comment on processes of violence and estrangement but avoided the pitfalls of didactic or sensationalist overstatement. In his evocative catalogue essay, Ivor Powell noted that "ambiguity lies at the heart of Jane Alexander's sculptural method" (1995: 5). He is right. It is an ambiguity forged from the power of presence: presence as physical form, presence as resemblance, presence as art that summons up life as we know and do not know it. Profoundly South African, Alexander's work moves beyond political specifics to the embodiment of historical and universal abuse enacted in still and silent sculptural forms and compelling photomontages.

Although he produced narrative paintings, not sculptures for his 1996 exhibition, Phila Trevor Makhoba's work shared something with Jane Alexander's – a confrontation with the unspeakable. Makhoba created a series of raw and visceral paintings drawn from his experiences of KwaZulu-Natal. Living in a province and country experiencing transition, Makhoba looked at customary practices amongst the rural Zulu and addressed the myriad troublesome issues of the unstable present. Pride in his Zulu heritage (mirroring Sebidi's passion for her Tswana roots) was expressed in paintings which juxtaposed long established rituals with evidence of community disruption. He found urban life distressing and replete with amoral behaviour. This he depicted in his Festival show in uncompromising images about sexual temptation, abuse, rape and paedophilia; these are dark paintings about ugly and very South African issues.

The Young Artist for 1997, Lien Botha, is a photographer who aligns herself with the constructed and calculated nature of art photography. In 'Boxing Days', she presented photographs as independent objects and elements within sculptural forms. She drew attention to space frames (cubic 'box' structures) and the dimensions of time (signified by 'day'). Using found photographs, reprocessed or incorporated into three-dimensional boxes, Botha's sensual and evocative collisions of things wrested from their original contexts referred to realities derived from memory and perception, and emphatically asserted through the aesthetic quality of her imagery. In a world becoming saturated with still and moving images, she alerted viewers to the deceptiveness of photographic information.

Nhlanhla Xaba, **the** 1998 Award Winner, was the last artist whose nomination concerned me (we did not have a Young Artist in 1999 when we celebrated **25** years of the Festival and mounted 'Emergence' as the major visual arts Festival exhibition). Xaba remains forever young, having died in 2003 when a fire burnt down the Artist Proof Studio where he worked. The fire also destroyed the body of work he was producing for a new exhibition. His 1998 exhibition of paintings and prints is testimony to a talented artist whose work evinced a strong sense of direction and a deep concern with the transforming society in which he lived. Growing up under apartheid he finally acquired his art training at the African Institute of Art at the Funda Centre, Soweto and the University of South Africa. In his exhibition catalogue Selepe quotes Xaba (**1998: 4**), who comments that he is concerned with "**shifting boundaries**". The post-1994 climate facilitated this objective. Boundaries had shifted. The pressure to be political in a narrow sense, to produce 'struggle art' had eased and life in all its fullness offered Xaba expressive opportunities. His art expresses optimism for he chose to look widely at past and present, rural and urban life. His vigorously executed paintings and rich prints interpreted photographs, memories, cultural history and direct observations. A man of independent spirit, Xaba offered a social commentary on his own terms.

My survey from Kentridge to Xaba reveals one thing above all else: the distinctive individuality of each Young Artist Award **Winner**. The choices made have, I believe, survived the test of time. The works produced for Young Artist exhibitions remain significant and, through their insertion into South African art history, they help to disrupt attempts at a narrow categorisation of art under apartheid, in transition, or post 1994.

So what do we conclude about those Young Artists of 1987-1999 who are still part of the fabric of South African art? Their careers demonstrate commitment to art practice in many different ways. What they do now – **as artists, community workers, writers, and educators** – indicates that the **art world**, in a functioning democracy, accommodates a range of skills, ideas, actions and modes of communication. Some Young Artists (now no longer able to bear the adjective lightly) are artists and academics; others are full-time artists. Their creative practice, written research and teaching skills have enriched South Africa. Many are known beyond South Africa's borders and today all benefit from the globalised artworld and instantaneous circulation of information. They negotiate the intersections between professional and civic commitments, private beliefs and public **values in different ways** and an exhibition of **25 years** of Standard Bank sponsorship of the Young Artist Award for Visual Art will make this point eloquently.

Looking back on the years 1986-1999 from the early **21st century**, what do I recall about my time on the Festival **Committee**? I remember the human face of art – my colleagues on the **Committee** who paid close attention to the proposals **my art colleagues and I** made, and I remember the artists, especially those with whom I interacted closely. I recall that the artists selected for the annual **Awards** rose to the challenge of producing a significant body of work in a year. Despite the short preparation time no one disappointed us; each artist worked very hard and it was exciting to see their work installed in the Monument Gallery in Grahamstown, and sometimes to see the exhibitions in different venues as the shows toured.

At the Festival, some artists conducted their own walkabout discussions; others preferred that a member of the Festival **Committee** undertake this task. When I did walkabouts I learnt an enormous amount about the artists and the works. I listened to the artists talking informally to me and, since writing about art has been a key part of my life, this was privileged access to the wellsprings of creativity. I also heard the

public's responses and, because art is about reception as well as production, the ways in which people reacted to exhibitions was always enthralling.

Being part of the Festival **Committee** made me think about the nature of artistic identity, especially in South Africa. One is always cognisant of the friction between cultures, each with its own heritage, and equally aware of the reality of African landscapes, cities and southern hemisphere seasons. The Young Artists offered a microcosm of this tug between history and geography, spaces of inherited knowledge and spaces of physical and sensory experience. Black and white artists, female and male artists see their world differently. So they ought. Viewers respond differently. So they should.

Amongst the viewers of art are critics and theorists. Some of the ideas expressed between 1986 and 1999 in and beyond South Africa remain influential and others were a storm in a political teacup. One of the most provocative articles was by Albie Sachs whose paper, 'Preparing ourselves for freedom' was written for an ANC in-house seminar on culture, held in Stockholm in 1989, and subsequently published. It generated a range of responses because Sachs drew attention to the role art and culture play in unjust societies and the roles they can assume in free societies. He asked his audience (and his readers) to think of a future where artists had choices. Whilst acknowledging that a politicised perspective was a cultural option under apartheid, he argued for the ambiguous, contradictory and poetic nature of art. He asked the question, "**What** are we fighting for, if not the right to express our humanity in all its forms, including our sense of fun and capacity for love and tenderness and our appreciation of beauty in the **world?**" (**Sachs, 1990: 11**). In attempting to disentangle art from the politics that still **encircles** South African culture, it is worth pondering the options artists have to express our humanity.

References

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