

UNION BY DEFAULT?

Author:
Rayda Becker¹

Affiliation:
¹Independent curator

email:
raydabecker@gmail.com

Postal address:
32 Ocean View Drive,
Green Point 8005, Cape
Town, South Africa

How to cite this article:
Becker R. Union by
default? S Afr J Sci.
2010;106(5/6), Art. #295, 2
pages. DOI: 10.4102/sajs.
v106i5/6.295

**This article is available
at:**
<http://www.sajs.co.za>

**'1910–2010 from Pierneef to Guguletive': Exhibition at Iziko South African National Gallery, 16
April – 03 October 2010**

The year 2010 marks the 100-year anniversary of the Union of South Africa but, despite the significance of this centenary year, there has been little public acknowledgement of it. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the exclusion of Black voices in the final agreements reached by the National Convention in 1910. The space for commemoration has largely been taken over by the 2010 FIFA World Cup with fervour, flamboyance and a great deal of financial support. One cultural exception would seem to be the '1910–2010 from Pierneef to Guguletive' exhibition at the Iziko South African National Gallery, which runs from 16 April to 03 October 2010.

I use the term 'seem' advisedly, however, because this exhibition was not primarily motivated by the formation of the Union, but, according to its introductory statement, it has been

produced to showcase the history and diversity of South Africa art and provide insight into the soul of our complex nation, from the hilltops of the Union Buildings, 100 years ago to the townships of Cape Town today.

And that is what it is – a survey exhibition of the last hundred years. The majority of featured works are from the National Gallery's permanent collections while the remaining 40% are loaned from public collections elsewhere in the country – in the latter category, works not usually exhibited from Cape Town were deliberately selected. However, the timing with FIFA is not coincidental. The event provided this state-funded institution and its staff with an opportunity to curate this kind of large show and fly the cultural flag for local and foreign visitors.

The entire gallery – the gift shop was moved – is filled with art made by South Africans primarily during the 20th and early 21st centuries, although a few earlier works are also featured. Many of the artists (but not all) are famous and many iconic works are included, such as *Butcher Boys* (1985–1896), by Jane Alexander, *Piling Wreckage upon Wreckage* (1989), by Penny Siopis and two early videos, *Monument* (1990) and *Mine* (1991), by William Kentridge. There are also many works by less well-known artists, some of which are small and humble, such as those by Jabulani Ntuli from the 1940s. The two small works are naive drawings, lightly coloured in watercolour, of rural landscapes with beehive huts and scenes of a traditional nature – one of regiments and the other of dancing groups. Included in the exhibition are pieces of local, traditional, indigenous art acknowledged generally by region (e.g. Unknown Artist, KwaZulu-Natal) or occasionally by group name (e.g. Northern Nguni, KwaZulu-Natal), unless the name of the individual is known. As an aside it is interesting to note that no traditional work is displayed in the rooms devoted to art from the 1980s onwards.

The '1910–2010 from Pierneef to Guguletive' exhibition opens with selected pieces from an exhibition entitled 'Us' that was held in Johannesburg in 2009, which dealt with the consuming issue of identity for South Africans and linked it to xenophobia. Underlying this placement, albeit not blatantly, is the idea that history can be read backwards: the end is the beginning. The rest of the exhibits are arranged in themes following a broad chronology, starting from the room to the right of the first gallery. Beginning with 'Setting the scene', with literally a sideways glance at Union, it continues with 'Modernity', 'Rorke's Drift and Polly Street', 'Abstraction (non-figurative art)', 'Resistance art', 'Post-apartheid art' and 'Contemporary art'. Rooms are not signposted, yet the themes may be gleaned from the works and the quotations on the walls above the hanging line. The quotations are acknowledged by authors (without dates or sources) who write on representation or Africa and range from theorists, such as Edward Said, to South African artists, such as Bongi Dhlomo. They are meant to provide thoughtful and provocative entry points into the underlying concepts of each room.

Within the rooms there are what the exhibition's curator, Riason Naidoo, also recently appointed as Director of Art Collections at Iziko Museums of Cape Town, has called 'discussion points', such as *Drum* magazine, Mining, Christianity, Vlakplaas, 1994, and so on. Only one of these discussion points focuses on the Union and only three of the approximately 700 works on show deal directly with Union, pointing, again, to the fact that Union is not a main theme in this exhibition.

The first encounter with Union is in the first room 'Setting the scene', with Hendrik Pierneef's painting of the *Union Buildings, Pretoria* (1939). Although only completed in 1915, the buildings, through their name and function, have come to symbolise the Union itself, with the great arched arena designed by Herbert Baker to represent the meeting of Brit and Boer. The painting, as with almost all Pierneef's work, is deserted and empty of people. In contrast, the two small sculptures positioned in front of it are individual portraits. The first is Anton Momberg's *Maquette for the Ghandi Memorial Statue, Pietermaritzburg* (1992) and the second is Anton van Wouw's small bronze entitled *President Kruger in Exile* (1907). The two individuals represented in these works may have had little direct influence on the Union itself, but they certainly had a great deal of influence with regard to the making of South Africa. All three works provide a foil for the important work by Willie Bester, *The Land Act of 1913* (1995), in the centre of the room. It is essentially a bench assembled from found materials. On the front of the bench is carved 'Europeans Only' and it is covered with symbols, words and signs, such as 'Keep Out' and 'Restricted Area', that are meant to deny and control access. As this artwork so clearly demonstrates, nothing speaks more powerfully to the dispossession of Black African people, as legalised by the Union, than that particular Act.

In the small adjacent space to one side of this main narrative, the conversation with Union continues, firstly in a vicarious representation of the establishment of the Union in Edward Roworth's lithograph of his monumental painting *The National Convention of South Africa* (1910) (still in Parliament). All but

© 2010. The Authors.
Licensee: OpenJournals
Publishing. This work
is licensed under the
Creative Commons
Attribution License.



Source: photo by Carina Beyer

Bench by Willie Bester (Collection: Tatham Art Gallery, Pietermaritzburg)

one of the unnamed members of the convention are seated in the old Cape Legislature Building Chamber (later the Senate and now the National Council of Provinces) in Cape Town. In front of this work stands Anton van Wouw's small, portrait bust by of *Louis Botha*, the first prime minister of the Union. This bust can be contrasted to the photographs of a *Bushman, Postmasburg, Griqualand West* (first half of 20th century) and *Matabele Woman and Child* (late 19th century) that represent those excluded from the settlements reached for Union. In the manner of ethnographic photography, the man is bare-chested and the woman dressed in skins, reinforcing their stereotypical otherness in relation to the White men in suits in Roworth's lithograph and the individual head of Botha.

A different kind of dialogue takes place opposite this installation, where the stinkwood model of the parliamentary mace, designed in 1961 for the Republic and replaced two years later by a gold one, is displayed horizontally, as it would have been when used in the Parliamentary Chamber. The change from Commonwealth to Republic is made manifest in the mace's iconography. The images are clearly South African; with the local coat of arms replacing the British crown at the top, engraved proteas supplanting roses along the shaft, with anchors on the lower end and covered wagons circling the base. But that is not all – the mace is juxtaposed with nine vertically hung wooden staffs (mostly from KwaZulu-Natal and dating to the late-19th century). They, like the mace, are emblems of status and ceremony and so the spectator is offered an opportunity to compare the shape, form and decoration of the how vastly different cultures visually express status. To either side of this display are two black and white photographs, which show the splendid beadwork of Ndebele women. In this context, these photographs, taken by photographers Constance Stuart-Larrabee and Alfred M. Duggan-Cronin in the 1930s and 1940s, do more than act as reminders of exclusion in the formal political structures, but also anticipate things to come – separate, different, but equal.

The Union display is marginalised both in place and representation and this is probably how most South Africans

think of the Union today. Some works in other parts of the exhibition, however, relate tangentially to the Union and it is possible to argue that everything produced in the first half of the 20th century was, in some way, the result of the 1910 constitution. Exclusion from art education and training opportunities led to the visual disparity between White and Black artists, as is apparent on the walls and evident in the clear advantages that White artists had through their access to European Modernism. It is noteworthy that, with democracy, Black artists have more than come into their own, with the likes of Nandipha Mntambo and her digital photograph, ironically entitled *Europa* (2008) and Moshekwa Langa's video *Where do I begin* (2001).

There has been a public difference of opinion in the press about the exhibition and two reviews of opposing responses have been placed on the entrance notice board. Miles Keylock appreciates the fresh look in the gallery and the removal of the old 'putrid art history', as well as the fact that the space is filled with a single subject. On the other side, Lloyd Pollak deplors the lack of curatorial control – in particular, the unprofessional presentation of the artwork labels – and generally believes, as the title to his review indicates, that the exhibition lowers the standards of the National Gallery. It has been a while since any exhibition has stimulated such a debate and that in itself is a good thing. Whatever one's response, the show does provide an opportunity to rethink South African art, even if some key works, such as Dumle Feni's *Guernica*, are missing. But any visitor will require time and patience to fully appreciate the works exhibited, as this is the kind of exhibition that throws the responsibility of interpretation back onto the spectator. In contrast to Cape Town, the Johannesburg Art Gallery has shown absolutely no cognisance of the Union, even though it had an extra reason for doing so – its collection was launched in 1909, while the building itself was launched in 1910. Their programme for 2010 simply states that exhibitions will 'coincide with the Soccer World Cup'. The remaining question, then, is what will the foreign visitor make of the Cape Town exhibition when so little context has been provided? Will they know who Pierneef was and who the Guglective are (i.e. the collective of artists from Guguletu whose works open the exhibition)? ■