



REVIEW / FAY JACKSON

# OVER THE RAINBOW

## JOHANNESBURG ART GALLERY



Twenty years after the abolition of apartheid, South Africa's story is no longer what it used to be. The country continues to rewrite its chapter in the history books, striving towards a society that is sincerely non-racial, cosmopolitan and democratic. Many have come to regard the universally recognised overthrow of institutionalised racism as the climax of its narrative, even, according to Achille Mbemba, as "the best gift Africa had ever given to the world". In most narratives, the climax is the point at which a conflict is resolved, often through a dramatic accomplishment such as South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994. Although, according to Mbemba, a post-colonial theorist and African philosopher, we have yet to reach that turning point. The antagonist in our story lives on, hulking beneath the rainbow in Desmond Tutu's 'Rainbow Nation', breeding virulent legacies of intolerance, corruption and poverty.

The 'Over the Rainbow' exhibition at the Johannesburg Art Gallery (JAG) seeks to address crucial considerations about our Long Walk to Freedom, including whether the Rainbow Nation ideal is a true reflection of the South Africa we find ourselves living in today. The exhibition draws from its vast collection of artworks by artists such as Zanele Muholi, Pieter Hugo, The Essop Brothers, William Kentridge, Churchill Madikida, and Nicholas Hlobo. According to the press release, "[these]

artists, as social commentators, have always been at the forefront of social engagement and [their] work will explore different aspects of South Africa as a post-colonial and post-democratic society".

Musha Neluheni, Curator of Contemporary Collections, was appointed to organise this exhibition in celebration of 20 years of democracy. Limited to the works already contained within the JAG collection due to a lack of funding, she set out to create an unconventional exhibition of works from the last 20 years, focusing on the key issues of democracy and the problems that still prevail, long after the legacy of apartheid.

There is a strange sense of déjà vu walking through the exhibition; a familiarity, certainly, with the work and its makers, most of whom have achieved acclaim both locally and abroad; but there is also the slightly uneasy sensation that, indeed, perhaps nothing has changed. David Goldblatt's images of daily life for those living in poverty become revealing portraits of apartheid's aftermath, while Diane Victor's ongoing series *Disasters of Peace* (delicate etchings about delicate subjects) reveals that the end of apartheid certainly didn't signal the end of hardship, and that democracy is not the common cure for widespread and ongoing issues like institutionalised violence, destitution and drug abuse.

There is, of course, a light at the end of the end

**LEFT TO RIGHT:** Sue Williamson, *From the inside* Benjamin Borrageiro, 2000. Digital Print. Courtesy of Johannesburg Art Gallery; Nicholas Hlobo, *Igqirha Lendlela*, 2005. Mixed Media. Courtesy of Johannesburg Art Gallery.

of the tunnel (or at the end of the rainbow, as the case may be), and the hero in our story has not lost his way completely. Although not without issue, many of the works on display are representative of freedom of movement and of association, freedom of expression, religious freedom, and freedom of sexual orientation; chapters in the South African Success Story otherwise known as the Constitution.

Although the overall narrative is no longer one of entrenched racial hierarchy, the reality for many people living in South Africa remains more or less the same as it was during apartheid, and 'Over the Rainbow' reminds us that South Africa is still very much in the process of writing its story.