

Desire

IDEAL NARRATIVES IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICAN ART

Theminkosi Goniwe

Desire: Ideal Narratives in Contemporary South African Art, marks democratic South Africa's debut at the Venice Art Biennale. Over the past 17 years, since throwing off apartheid rule and entering into the 'club of nations' with constitutional democracies, South Africa has emerged as a symbol of how best to fan freedom from the ashes of bondage.

As democracy has emerged, so has South Africa's role in the global art world. South African artists have received considerable global attention, especially those working in the realm of contemporary art – as do the three artists represented in *Desire*. Many of the country's artists have long been closely followed by the international art world, the interest spurred in part by the obvious, as well as more subtle, links between this art and democracy.

It is only apt, then, that the works in *Desire* offer three approaches to re-thinking the ideals and experiences promised by democracy. Here, *desire* is taken to mean yearning and need, recognising what individuals do not have, but long for. The notion of *desire* suggests both a lack as well as alluding to the simple motivation behind many human actions and deeds. *Desire* speaks to crisis and determination. It is an unrelenting force. Nothing is inert, complete and fixed about desire. Neither is desire tangible. It is rather a mystical force that exists in the form of imagination, the aspiring agent inherent with the power to dream. And, desire is the source of both creativity and of art.

Democracy in South Africa provides enabling conditions for artists to explore works of art that centralise their desires, to explore subjects that were no longer restricted to oppressive conditions primarily concerned with apartheid and its consequences. Post-apartheid art tackles a variety of subjects ranging from memory, history and culture to the self, the body, psyche and emotions. Representations of these subjects are imaginative and poetic, more so rendered in subtle and nuanced ways that avoid political over-determinancy. These representations engage the meaning and value of life in the social realm at its most complex and ambiguous levels. Through the works of Mary Sibande, Lyndi Sales and Siemon Allen, the exhibition *Desire* presents some of these South African artistic developments at the Venice Biennale.

It should be noted that South Africa's participation in the 54th Venice Biennale is not technically a debut, but rather a return to this international cultural venue: it is our first appearance as a nation since the country was excluded from international events due to its race laws during apartheid. Although South Africa has been present in the Venice Biennale in 1993, 1995 and 2009, it was not through an official pavilion as is the case this year.

We are therefore proud to join Egypt, which has maintained a national pavilion since the Venice Biennale began, in representing Africa. Together with Morocco, The Democratic Republic of Congo and Zimbabwe at this year's Venice Biennale (hopefully to continue and expand in future), it is a step toward making Africa – a continent comprised of more than 50 countries – visible where it has long been nearly absent. Such a development is important taking into account the push for democracy that has arisen in Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, Congo, Cote d'Ivoire and Egypt.

South Africa has been a leading example for instituting and nurturing democracy on the continent, not to mention its stable and growing economy. It is fitting that in a year when South Africa earned recognition on the global economic stage by joining the BRIC nations (Brazil, Russia, India, China) notable for their influential developing economies, it is also earning recognition on the global cultural stage by having a pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Such developments extend to South Africa's achievements in hosting the FIFA 2010 World Cup, for instance.

At a time when a push for democracy can be detected in many parts of Africa, *Desire* offers a chance to contemplate the openness and limits of democracy and to explore the politics of optimism, of hope and delight. The South African artists represented in *Desire* explore a range of realities, memories and fantasies. Their work presents imaginary truths or, rather, ideal narratives that reflect on South Africa and how it has transcended its past to foster equality, respect and dignity for all human beings.

Sibande's work is based on a character named Sophie. Informing the work is a story of the artist's mother who has worked as a maid and has not quite enjoyed a sustained romantic relationship with the artist's father. Sophie yearns to be free from domestic subordination and to attain not only social affluence but also subjecthood – as a human subject that matters. Sophie is modelled in Mary Sibande's image, as such the work, in some way, is autobiographical and represents concerns of the artist.

Lovers in Tango and *...of Prosperity* reflect on a failed relation of the artists' parents, a relationship that was once passionate and dramatic but now has become the cold and distant coexistence of two strangers. Despite her failed romantic relationship, Sophie is rendered daring and poised, embodying a set of fantasies. She is monumental in size, dressed in elaborate blue costumes that are a fusion of a maid's uniform and Victorian dress. Her bodily gestures and facial expressions are a both combination of seriousness and of putting up a front. These characteristics make Sophie a complex figure, a sophisticated black woman; she represents the artist's alter ego and desire. In this sense, Sophie exists as a site for dreaming, of becoming something other than subordinate, a servant and failure, particularly in a world in which black women are not treated with the dignity they deserve.

Sales' work is concerned with creative avenues of perception and the possibilities of alternative realities, thus her work leans toward abstraction. Mining archives and referencing astronomy, Sales constructs aesthetic objects whose geometric

and symbolic shapes become visual sites for imagining a world different from our social reality. Devoid of overt sociopolitical concerns, Sales' *Satellite Telescope* makes reference to a satellite that was sent into space from Kenya in 1970. The success of this satellite through innovative radiation technology revealed the great wonders of an infinite universe beyond our own world.

Besides this reference to scientific artifact, the work offers not only a temporary escape from entrapment of material reality as it transports us to an imagined space; it also offers the possibility to imagine different worlds, in particular for those who are yearning for a world beyond their grasp. Sales' work is utopic, created through visual illusions that might offer relief and comfort for those who are looking for an opportunity to appreciate beauty and pleasure.

A collector and an archivist, Allen is interested in South African artifacts that serve as material data to re-construct in artistic representations. In collecting, cataloguing and (re)configuring the artifacts into meaningful art objects, Allen reorders and rewrites aspects of South African history and memory. This is evident in his project *Records*, comprised of large-scale prints of musical recordings from South Africa. These records bear their own history and yet speak to other histories: history of South Africa, apartheid, music, musicians, Sophiatown, collecting and the archive.

The records have travelled from one owner to another, from one place to another, and they carry with them not only musical melodies, rhythms, beats, lyrics, etc., but also damages and traces of a variety of ownership and transaction. As prints, they read as abstract shapes and aesthetic objects in themselves. Upon closer inspection, observing their magnified dated record labels, they are visual representations that seem nostalgic for a lost history whilst also providing fresh ways of engaging with history. Evident in Allen's work is the desire to revisit, recuperate and rewrite (vanishing) histories, doing so in insightful and innovative ways also notable in the work of Sales and Sibande.

In these artists' works, post-apartheid South Africa is a site to explore ideals of beauty, pleasure, democracy and freedom. These artists do so in intimate ways that defy political rhetoric or ideology. Their work is charged, like South Africa itself, with emotion, even if their aesthetic language and representational approaches are conceptual and abstract in form.

Whether working within or outside South Africa, our artists explore conditions that give rise to lack of and longing for personal and societal change: to desire. They wrestle with ideals of humanism and democracy, ideals whose fundamental concern is freedom: freedom of expression, freedom of being and becoming, and freedom of self-definition.

It is not always possible to achieve these fundamental human desires; they often remain elusive. Such is desire. It is a force inherent in the creations of many visual artists around the world: the process and experience of becoming, of attaining, of acquiring, of searching, of looking, of discovering... *Desire* is journey, voyage, plight and passage; it is an ideal experience. Our exhibition is a space for Mary Sibande, Lyndi Sales and Siemon Allen to present these ideals, whilst also participating in and contribute to an ever-widening 'global history of art'. ■