

PRESS RELEASE

South African Art and the Archive at the 55th International Art Exhibition – la Biennale di Venezia

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The South African Department of Arts and Culture presents an exhibition entitled ***Imaginary Fact – Contemporary South African Art and the Archive***, curated by The National Arts Festival, on the first floor of the Sale d'Armi in the Arsenale, Venice.

During the turbulent twentieth century, art in South Africa was often a vehicle for political resistance and insurgency against human rights abuses. After the advent of democracy in 1994, artistic expression shifted towards an exploration of issues of identity, with race and gender gaining prominence. Today, contemporary South Africa is witness to a further significant change: a renewed and invigorating focus on processes of the past. The curatorial concept—artists who use materials of the past to comment on the contemporary—is poised as an assessment to show where South Africa is, and how far it has come, as the country approaches its twentieth anniversary of constitutional democracy.

Curator of this exhibition, Brenton Maart, provides further context: "To understand how and why histories continue to impact on the world today, contemporary South African artists are turning to the archive, and the chronicles of history become the building blocks for creative action. Working with archives in a creative ways allows the artist to create work with the potential to (de)construct ideologies, and thus change the course of our contemporary world. In South Africa, specifically, artists may therefore be seen as activists in the evolution of democracy, and it is this evolution that is explored in *Imaginary Fact: Contemporary South African Art and the Archive*."

Becoming a platform to use artistic and cultural archives to build an architecture of meaning between South African histories and its contemporary societies; the chronicles of history are used as source material—from apartheid-era passbooks, film, and family snapshots, to African linocuts, paintings of the European golden age, and entire libraries of books—archives here become the building blocks for creative action. The painting, drawing, sculpture, installation, film, electronic, and performance work on exhibition are as representative of the diversity of concerns as of the kinds of archive they access.

Wim Botha sculpts lexicons to create figures which challenge the framed history of the very lexicons of which they are comprised. **Joanne Bloch** explores the slippery issue of value in relation to archival object collections, in *Hoard*.

If there is one icon of the apartheid system, it was the passbook. By law, every black South African had to carry one at all times, ready for inspection on demand – an indignity poignantly expressed by **Sue Williamson** with *For thirty years next to his heart*. **Penny Siopis** makes further commentary on such rules of belonging in her single-channel digital video about Dimitrios Tsafendas, the man behind the 1966 murder of then-Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd, called *Obscure White Messenger*.

Gerhard Marx, Maja Marx and Philip Miller recall The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), through the creation of an installation of seven films with audio; using source material from their theatre production *Rewind: A Cantata for Voice, Tape and Testimony*. *The Journey* is a series of drawings by **David Koloane**, also inspired by the TRC, narrating revolutionary Steve Biko's capture, interrogation, detention, death and autopsy.

Using a combination of personal archives and archival fragments from public documents, **Sam Nhlengethwa's** *Glimpses of the Fifties and Sixties* is a series of 30 collage and mixed media works, highlighting some of the issues that affected people's lives then; from significant events the Sharpeville Shooting and the Rivonia Trial, to the more banal, like soccer, weddings and schools in the townships. In *Native Work*, **Andrew Putter** presents a series of black-and-white portraits of contemporary black South Africans wearing 'traditional' costume in a critique of subjects who were typically viewed by 'white' South Africans as wild, sub-human, and primitive. Affirming 'traditional' inheritances in South African cultural history, he contrasts these with a second series of images in which the same subjects choose how to dress themselves for a formal colour portrait.

During the oppressive years of apartheid rule, not all South African artists had access to the same opportunities. **Cameron Platter's** medium quotes this complex history; while his content reflects a "younger generation with new and evolving artistic concerns" and critiques contemporary South African popular culture. **James Webb** will translate and transform T.Rex's 1972 glam rock hit, *Children of the Revolution* into a South African protest song for choir. **Zanele Muholi** has recently made headlines for winning the international Freedom of Expression Index Award in acknowledgment of the significance of her work in the field of black queer visibility. She will exhibit the entire archive to date, of her seminal *Faces and Phases*.

In addition to the exhibition mounted on the first level of the Sale D'Armi in the iconic Arsenale, Venetian authorities have granted permission for an exciting series of public performances to take place within public spaces of the city. **Athi-Patra Ruga, Donna Kukama**, and **Nelisiwe Xaba** will each interrogate, in some way, the critical concerns of

contemporary archival practice. Kukama will adapt existing work specifically for the occasion of the Biennale. Ruga will present his latest incantation of *The White Women of Azania*, with 4 local performers; and Xaba will perform an extension of her project, entitled *Venus in Venice*, which reflects on the dehumanisation of an early African woman, Saartjie Baartman whose body was put on display in museums in Europe.

Details of Kukama's performances will be announced prior to her performances later in the year.

The *55th International Art Exhibition – la Biennale di Venezia* will take place in Venice from 1 June to 24 November 2013. The title chosen by Exhibition Director Massimiliano Gioni for this year's exhibition is *Il Palazzo Enciclopedico / The Encyclopaedic Palace*.

The full list of South African artists taking part is Andrew Putter, Athi-Patra Ruga, Cameron Platter, David Koloane, Donna Kukama, Gerhard Marx, Maja Marx, Philip Miller, James Webb, Joanne Bloch, Johannes Phokela, Nelisiwe Xaba, Penny Siopis, Sam Nhlengethwa, Sue Williamson, Wim Botha and Zanele Muholi.

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