

## kzn reviews

Conflicting Contexts

### Various Artists at Durban Art Gallery

By Rike Sitas

19 May - 01 August.

***We inherit our histories, they are not chosen and are often foreign and alienating to us, but they are our starting points, they are our legacies. Positive or negative, we must try to make sense of them in order to position ourselves in the present, and through them we need to try to forge a new legacy for the future.*** (Bronwyn Vaughan-Evans, 2010)

Using the Durban Art Gallery's Victorian collection as a starting point, 'Conflicting Contexts' explores the inherent complexity of South African history. Curated by Vaughn Sadie, this exhibition engages the changing socio-economic, political, cultural and spatial landscapes of South Africa over the past 119 years. As Bronwyn Vaughan-Evans asserted in her opening speech, this does not mean that history is viewed as a linear trajectory, 'ordered and boxed and neatly labelled according to the "-ism" of the moment'. Instead, the exhibition allows a unique opportunity for us to explore a more complex understanding of our historical narrative, through a series of conversations between art works.

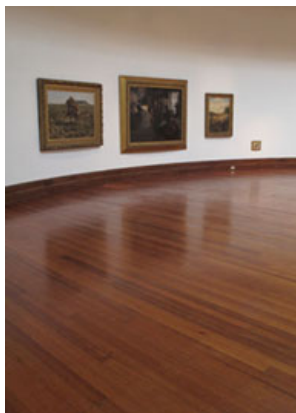
In light of this, the show is remarkable for two reasons. Firstly, it engages the shifting historical context sensitively and critically, providing a platform for dialogue to emerge. And secondly, it is beautifully curated, in a way that is rarely seen when national collections become the subject of curatorial engagement. This sets a powerful precedent for future shows of this ilk.

Various Artists  
Conflicting Contexts Installation Shot 1, . Oil on canvas .



Various Artists  
Conflicting Contexts Installation Shot 2, . Various.

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The four works selected from the Victorian collection serve as a starting and reference point for the exhibition. Although they are positioned centrally, the nature of the circular gallery allows them to be read as part of a broader cyclical narrative. Three of these works – *The Victoria Cross* (Wallen, 1903), *Saved* (Bramley, 1900) and *Hark! Hark! The Lark* (Riviere, 1909) – represent nuanced takes on the themes of war, class and ownership, and the landscape of property, all so typical of Victorian art. The fourth work introduces the tension implied by the title of the exhibition, 'Conflicting Contexts'. The exquisitely-rendered *A Dead Bird* (Colman, 1962) reminds us to question the idyllic representations of the landed gentry that are often romanticised in Victorian collections and the nostalgic memory of empire. About this work, Sadie says, 'It acknowledges the weight of our inherited history'.

This subtle critique of colonial wealth accumulation becomes echoed most specifically when considering the arrangement of *Shanty Town* (Msimang, 1971), *Black dwelling outside Durban* (Oberholzer, 1981), *Foundation Diggers* (Nkuna, 1994), *Shongweni Dam, Natal* (Seneque, 1983) and *Aurora West Goldmine* (Gwelo, 1945). The first two images depict informal settlements. Nkuna's shows massive steel foundations being laid for what is assumed is some order of commercial venture. The final two images, a lithograph and a watercolour respectively, depict two iconic industrial South African sites. Here, Sadie has subtly constructed a dialogue around the representation of spaces of home and work.

This selection of works is predominantly devoid of the human figure, which is strange when considering the hundreds of thousands of people who live in informal settlements, and who work on massive public works projects, and mines. Paradoxically, through their absence from the works, Sadie appears to be reminding the audience of the human cost SA's industrial development levied. Karl Marx's notion of 'alienation' becomes relevant here, and this vignette of the show registers how the apartheid capitalist machine was built predominantly on the backs of the urban poor.

Unlike this collection of work, where people are marked by their absence, there are other moments that are filled with people and movement. *Colour Café* (Oberholzer, 1981), *Afrikaans Wedding, Johannesburg* (McCann, 1992) and *Kruger's Day, Brand Road* (Buckland, 1996) depict three celebratory, ceremonial moments. Combined they remind the viewer of the breadth of the collective South African cultural experience.

Unlike their somewhat static manifestation as photographs, these images speak of the performance of being human in public space, amidst bigger narratives of struggle and liberation. They also counter the stereotype of 'black' people typical of colonial and apartheid representations. Furthermore, *Procession of people* (Hemson, 1994), *Street performer, Victoria St* (Basha, 1982) and *People from Darkness* (Shilakoe, 1973) serve a humanizing agenda within the exhibition.

## Venue

### Durban Art Gallery

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Various Artists  
*Conflicting Contexts Installation Shot 4* ,  
Various.

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Various Artists  
*Conflicting Contexts Installation Shot 3* ,  
Photograph.

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They are juxtaposed with the more harrowing *Group of people running* (Hemson, 1994), which is alongside *Congress Meeting – Kajeer Hall* (Badsha, 1982). These are the only two works on the show that engage apartheid politics directly. In many ways this enhances the impact on the viewer – reading these images in relation to the others humanizes history and struggle.

These are merely a selection from myriad conversations that emerge within the exhibition. Each set of works, and its relationship to the whole, allows for a number of critical discussions to emerge. It is the curatorial decisions Sadie has made in his installation that allow these moments of dialogue to exist.

Exhibitions based on collections run the risk of being cluttered or clustered loosely thematically, which results in them often becoming overwhelming, one-dimensional and literal. With 'Conflicting Contexts', Sadie has offered a unique exhibition; his sensitive and critical approach to subject matter, as well as his harnessing of the potential of the space of the tricky Circular Gallery elevates his first major curatorial outing to a level beyond mere historical revision.

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