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Liza Essers, Gallery Owner, on the Show that Scandalized South Africa

by *Steven Dubin* 06/05/12

Brett Murray's exhibition "Hail to the Thief II" opened quietly at South Africa's Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg on May 10. It wasn't until Sunday, May 13, when the show was reviewed in *City Press*, that a public and legal commotion was set into action. The piece was illustrated with a reproduction of Murray's painting *The Spear*, which riffs on the style of a 1967 poster of Lenin by Soviet artist Victor Ivanov. Murray's version presents embattled President Jacob Zuma in a heroic pose and with his genitals exposed.

A cascade of angry reactions ensued. The nation's ruling political party, the African National Congress (ANC), filed an emergency court injunction to have the painting removed from display; the constitutional guarantees of both an individual's right to dignity and freedom of expression were pitted against one another; a leader of the Nazareth Baptist Church called for the artist to be stoned to death; large protest marches took place in Durban, led by one of Zuma's four wives, and in Johannesburg; the art work was defaced with paint in two separate incidents on the same day, after which it was taken down; and in an unprecedented expansion of its powers the Film and Publications Board rated an artwork, restricting viewers to those 16 and older (even though the image is widely available on the Internet).

The Spear continues to dominate the news and public discourse in the country, triggering a painful dialogue around the enduring legacy of apartheid injustices in a democratic South Africa; the politics of race, representation, and reconciliation; the status of traditional culture and beliefs within the contemporary world; individuals' rights and responsibilities; and censorship.



Liza Essers purchased the gallery and became director in 2008. With locations in Johannesburg and Cape Town, the gallery's roster includes David Goldblatt, William Kentridge, David Koloane, Sam Nhlengethwa, Mikhael Subotzky and Sue Williamson, among other South African and international artists. *A i A* interviewed Essers on June 4, under the careful watch of her recently hired personal bodyguard.

STEVEN DUBIN Given that Brett Murray's "Hail to the Thief II" was essentially a replay of an exhibition the Goodman presented in Cape Town last year—with the addition, of course, of his painting *The Spear*—had the Gallery made any preparations for possible backlash?

LIZA ESSERS There was actually no controversy around the Cape Town show. In fact, there was little response to it, and so it was very surprising that the Joburg show created this much of a stir. We didn't really think there would be any issue, because a lot of the work was about the ruling party in the Cape Town show and we hadn't come up against any resistance or pressure.

DUBIN What was your first indication that there was a problem?

ESSERS I suppose the first indication should have been when I received a call on Sunday the 13th from special advisor to the minister of arts and culture Mduzuzi Mbata. He said, "We just want to know what your thoughts are about this exhibition." It was very vague. And I said, "Well, have you seen the exhibition?" And he said, "No."

"Well, then," I said, "why don't you meet me at the gallery on Tuesday at 11 o'clock and let me take you around the show, and let me know what your thoughts are and whatever your concerns or comments are. I'll be glad to talk to you about it." And he didn't show up at the gallery as planned. So I should have seen that as a sign of things to come, but I didn't.

It was a very, very short conversation. But he specifically mentioned the ANC logo and the defamation of the coat of arms of the ANC [in certain works]; he didn't say anything about *The Spear*.

That was the Sunday it was reviewed in the *City Press*, and I can only assume they must have seen the review and the image, and that's why I got the call.

DUBIN What happened next?

ESSERS On Thursday the 17th I got a call from my staff. I was at home on maternity leave. My staff said, "Oh my gosh, my gosh, you've got to get to the gallery. The ANC has issued this press statement and E-News, the BBC are all at the gallery and want your comments."

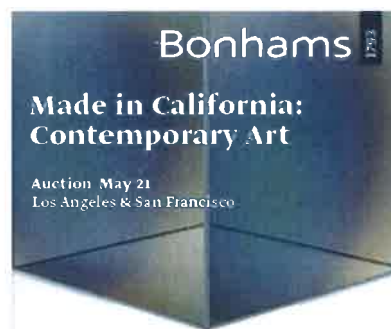
I hadn't yet seen the press release that had been issued by the ANC early that afternoon. It went far and wide, talking about the outrage of the painting and that they were going to order an application to the High Court to have it removed.

And then literally at like 5 or 5:30 I got a letter [by email] from the ANC's attorneys and from President Zuma's

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Kirstine Roepstorff, *Rockin Rocks, Version 3, 2008*

Mixed Media, 212 x 66 inches, Courtesy the artist

Artist Kirstine Roepstorff was born and trained in Denmark, but lives and works in Berlin.

attorneys that ordered me to take the painting down or otherwise there would be an urgent application to the High Court the next day. And from there everything unfolded.

DUBIN Former arts and culture minister and well-known poet Dr. Wally Serote argues that *The Spear* is "no different to labeling black people as kaffirs." How would you respond to that statement?

ESSERS I'm distressed by the fact that it's become a race issue and I'm relieved that in court the ANC's attorneys conceded that it wasn't about race.

On the flip side what I'm conscious of is that for some people there has been a *real* hurt and humiliation that has been brought to the surface as a result of experiences of apartheid and one has to be conscious and sensitive to that.

DUBIN Do you believe Murray's painting is racist? Why or why not?

ESSERS I don't think it's racist; I don't believe that Brett is a racist.

I think one has to view the painting in the context of the exhibition and Brett's practice. It establishes that his practice has included satire for a very long time. He uses well-known posters, trademarks, texts in his work and recontextualizes those texts. The interesting thing is that no one really pays much attention to the fact that it was [based upon] Lenin. It's all about genitalia.

The first thing that was in my mind when I saw that painting was looking at issues of patriarchy and abuses of power: Berlusconi, Strauss-Kahn, Bill Clinton, even Kennedy. This is international; so we're adding Zuma to the list.

DUBIN Comedian Loyiso Gola remarked, "As modern as we are and we go and eat sushi and what not, this is still Africa. Black people will always interpret something like that in a different way." Do you believe there are fundamentally different racially based attitudes and behaviors in South Africa? Do Brett Murray and Liza Essers simply "not get it?"

ESSERS Tough questions.

I think that not all black people have interpreted *The Spear* in a specific way. To say that every black person has interpreted *The Spear* with cultural sensitivity is not correct.

My position has been that the gallery is a neutral space. Very controversial artworks have often been on these walls. The gallery does not have a political viewpoint, a social ideology; it remains a neutral space.

And I certainly, personally have felt at times that, "Gosh, I would really prefer not to hang a particular artwork because of my own personal feelings or views." But I have never censored an artwork in this gallery since I've owned it. So a work by Willem Boshoff [in the 2011 show "SWAT"] where he cut up the Torah and wrote the word "pig" was personally offensive to me, but I still hung it because my belief is that the gallery is a neutral space, where dialogue is critical and where everybody's viewpoint is valid.



I do think that Brett and I need to be separated out of this. I don't know what Brett's political or social views are, but they have nothing to do with me.

DUBIN Were strategies and responses to the objections to the painting shaped by you, Brett Murray, and/or lawyers?

ESSERS It happened so fast that I don't think that there was time for any strategies. That's the actual truth. When you're given an urgent application to the High Court from the president of the country and the ruling party and you've got to reply with affidavits within 48 hours, there isn't a lot of time to strategize. You feel like you're thrown into a situation and you just need to go with it.

Brett and I disagreed a lot along the way. I was sort of saying, "Brett, I think we need to take responsibility. You need to come forward. You need to step up. Where's your voice here?"

Eventually he did attach himself as a respondent to the affidavit, which I thought was important. Everyone was shell-shocked, so I'm not blaming him. It took him time as well to come forward.

DUBIN As this debate heated up, there was fear of a race war possibly erupting. How deep a social and political crisis do you believe *The Spear* generated, and why do you believe it happened at this point in time?

ESSER I think that we are a political football.

And I think that there are a lot of issues that come to the table. It's not just about freedom of artistic expression. There are deeper concerns, like the race issue.

There is fear of a race war, and that's why I was so relieved when the ANC lawyer in court said actually it was not about race, because it was being made a race issue. And that's far from what I think any of this was about.

A lot of those problems have come to the surface in post-apartheid South Africa and clearly they need to be addressed. In a way it's positive because maybe it's part of the healing of what we do need to go through as a young democracy and as a country.

But it's difficult if things get mixed up and the artwork, the artist, the gallery, the gallerist are seen as racist. Let's address those underlying race issues that do exist in post-apartheid South Africa. 18 years on. There's a lot of healing to happen, there's a lot of conversations that need to take place. But it was scary for me that that anger was all being directed at me, at the gallery, at the artwork.

DUBIN You were quoted as saying the ANC used bullying tactics. What did you mean by that?

ESSERS Well, the call for a march. They haven't marched since 1994—did you know that? They marched on

ALSO

Nick van Woert, *Haruspex*, 2010

Joe Fig, *Inka Essenhigh*, 2005



the gallery. And boycotts [of *City Press*]. I mean, that's not what one does in a democracy. I said to Jackson Mthembu [ANC spokesperson who held a press conference with Essers on May 30], "You guys needed to sit down and talk to me about this. This is not the way to deal with it."

It has made a number of people, who are an uneducated audience, really angry, and I think that's unfair, that that kind of anger was manufactured by the ruling party.

DUBIN Congress of the People party president Shilowa Lekota accused arts and culture minister Paul Mashatile of forcing you to make a public apology at the news conference on May 30. What do you think of that characterization?

ESSERS That wasn't true at all. In fact, I didn't make an apology. What I did say, and which I stand by, is that the gallery didn't intend to hurt anyone.

Arts and Culture is not the ruling party, they are not the president. I suppose that they felt—and I think they were too late, actually—that they needed to raise their voices and be part of this conversation. And I think it was positive, because what Paul Mashatile said was, "We believe in freedom of artistic expression."

I don't recall that being a place where there was an apology made. I think it was a space for recognizing the importance of art.

DUBIN As the director of an art gallery, what challenges did this situation present that you had never confronted before?

ESSERS Feeling responsible for a national crisis. Or feeling like I had a role to play in avoiding a national crisis.

DUBIN What was the scariest moment? Were there threats against you, your staff and/or the gallery?

ESSERS Yes: the threats on my life, on my staff's lives, threats of the gallery being burnt down, the artwork must be destroyed. We've had numerous threats. One of the black staff had the word "traitor" put all over her car. Even though things have settled down, there are still ongoing threats, mainly by phone: "We're following you." "We're going to kill you." "A white person has to die for what's happened." "If we can't track you we are going to kill one of your white staff."

DUBIN With the benefit of hindsight, is there anything you should have done in advance of the controversy? And is there anything you would have done differently, once the controversy exploded?

ESSERS I was unaware of the deep cultural sensitivity with respect to genitalia being exposed, and I feel like on my part that was an oversight, something I wish I'd been more educated on.

And I actually brought it up with my young black curators and I said, "We're a curatorial team here. And did you guys think that there was going to be an issue with respect to this painting and the cultural sensitivity with respect to the genitalia being exposed?" It was interesting because the young black curators said "No," that was not an issue at all. But they were a bit concerned about the fact that it was so controversial [in regard] to the ruling party. That was the sensitivity that they felt. But certainly not with respect to the genitalia.

But as I said before, there definitely has been a lot of manufactured rage. But, without a shadow of a doubt, there is real hurt and humiliation, which for an older generation, particularly, is very real. And one has really to be sensitive to that. And for any of the hurt that was caused, it certainly wasn't intended.

DUBIN Do you believe this episode has changed the creative climate in the country and will affect the types of work South African artists produce in the future? Do you believe it will result in self-censorship?

ESSERS I don't want to be a situation where I feel as though I need to self-censor and I'm very concerned about that because I would be compromising my integrity and compromising myself. And I think that's something that I do need to look at. And will I be able to find a voice through which to take responsibility and ownership?

It's concerning for both gallerists and artists. It's already happening. There's a young artist who has won a lot of awards, and he has a show that opens in two weeks' time, and in one of the art works he's made a video looking out of the window of his apartment in Cape Town. And you see everything going on in the neighborhood, including a beggar, a black man who's begging on the street and he's masturbating. The artist's really in a state of limbo, whether he can show this piece. So it is an issue for artists.

DUBIN When we look back in the future, what lessons will we have learned from this controversy, and what will be its legacy?

ESSERS So many lessons, where does one begin? And I think that what I'm really looking forward to is having some time to pause and reflect. Right now I still feel like I'm so in the thick of it because I have to give an answer whether or not I'm appealing the ruling by the Film and Publication Board that came out on Friday that classified the artwork.

We have to listen, and we have to hear. And that's for everyone. Not to get so caught up in a one-dimensional approach or viewpoint, that can be dangerous. And I think the other thing is to take responsibility and to stand up for what you believe in. That's why it was so difficult to reach a settlement with the ANC, because in the actual wording of the legal document I refused to compromise on the legal, constitutional issues. I was not prepared to agree to remove the painting from the website. What was important for me was to stand my ground in terms of the legal and constitutional principles and points.

I think that part of me feels afraid and I think "Well, what does this mean for contemporary art in South Africa, what does this mean for the arts, for censorship, for self-censorship," and I get very sort of hysterical about that, because I think "Oh, my God, what does it all mean?"

And then there's another part of me that thinks it's actually all okay, that it's going to be okay, it's not going to be a problem, it's not going to be an issue, it's really only going to be about a moment in our political history.

Top: Liza Essers, of the Goodman Gallery, and Jackson Mthembu, of the A N C

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