



President Jacob Zuma. Picture: THE TIMES

## **CHRIS THURMAN: As in Hamlet, Zuma betrays himself in his moral outrage**

President Jacob Zuma and his allies, through their over-reaction to Brett Murray's art, are in fact acknowledging that there is some merit in its critique.

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ONE of the more annoying aspects of the controversy surrounding Brett Murray's *The Spear* is the lack of appreciation for context: that is, for the artwork both as part of an exhibition and as an addition to the artist's already-substantial portfolio (never mind as a contribution to a pre-existing national discourse).

Reading the diatribes of the artist's sternest castigators and staunchest defenders alike, one could be forgiven for thinking that Murray woke up one morning, decided to draw a penis — a black man's penis, the president's penis, [Jacob Zuma](#)'s penis — and asked the Goodman Gallery if he could hang the picture on a wall, quietly assuming that nobody would be upset.

The fact is that *Hail to the Thief II*, the exhibition in question, is not a new departure in Murray's work. Nor was the first incarnation of *Hail to the Thief*. If advocates of Zuma's right to dignity had paid any attention to Murray's work before now, they would probably have read (emblazoned on the walls of the same gallery three years ago) his declaration: "Every time I hear you sing the machine gun song, I want to find one and shove it up your fat arse."

Murray has been saying insulting things about the African National Congress (ANC) and its top brass for some time now. So why — apart from the fact that, as spokesman Jackson Mthembu so felicitously put it, the transgression was "brought to our attention by one of the media houses" — is *The Spear* deemed so offensive by ANC bigwigs?

Moreover, why has their umbrage been adopted by so-called "activists", to the point of hysteria? What can explain the frenzy of courthouse protests and, ultimately, the defacing of the work

earlier this week? Whether the vandals who added their censorial red-and-black paint did so on behalf of a larger constituency or not, they enacted what had been threatened by others.

A cynical answer is that the ruling party realised the picture would simultaneously appeal to the prurient and appall the puritanical, two overlapping South African demographics whose sympathy for the president might (with the correct spin and an emphasis on moral outrage) be increased — or whose attention might temporarily be distracted from the daily news coverage of government ineptitude. A more earnest answer, echoed by the most convincing voices in the tripartite alliance, Gwede Mantashe and Zwelinzima Vavi, comes in the form of an accusation: Murray is perpetuating the stereotype of the sexually rapacious black male.

Neither of these answers is adequate (and the second, however sincerely felt, is misguided). The actual cause is a basic misunderstanding of how "realism" and "representation" operate in works of art — or, to apply some art-circuit jargon, of the limitations of mimesis. This can be explained by recalling Murray's 2009 exhibition, *Crocodile Tears*, in which he mocked the idea of [Thabo Mbeki](#) as a pipe-smoking "philosopher king" by reproducing the 1928 painting, *La Trahison des Images* (The Treachery of Images), by Belgian surrealist René Magritte.

Magritte wrote the words "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" (This is not a pipe) below a picture of a pipe. The point he was trying to make was that works of art imitate things in the real world, but are not the objects themselves. In fact, what appears on the canvas is often a representation of an idea, an image of an image. Murray adapted this, inscribing the words "Ceci n'est pas un president" below the pipe — the implication being that the version of Mbeki so often touted by his supporters, the unappreciated intellectual, was a sham: a pipe does not a president make.

How does this apply to *The Spear*? First,, the appropriation and adaptation of iconic works of art is an established part of Murray's practice; he often conflates the global symbol and the local politician, typically with an ironic or allusive title, and leaves the viewer to join the dots. In this case, both Zuma's stance and the red/black colouring are obviously modelled on a Soviet propaganda poster depicting Vladimir Lenin in revolutionary pose. Is it outlandish to compare the decline of communist idealism into totalitarianism to the manifest failures of our own "revolutionary party" in government? Or to suggest that, in SA as in Russia, the seeds of postrevolutionary corruption, brutality or neglect were sown even in the heady days of Bolshevism? Here, "Zuma" stands for something much larger — the party, and the state, he heads.

But what about Zuma in his personal capacity? His struggle credentials rest heavily on his involvement in UmKhonto we Sizwe, "the spear of the nation". Equally, during his watch, terrible atrocities — including sexual abuse — were committed in MK camps. There is no dispute that, over the last five years, sex has been a major part of Zuma's public identity: one that he flaunts when convenient (each time he marries again) but deflects as "a private matter" when activists chastise his irresponsible sexual behaviour as the leader of a country beset by unhealthy sexual practices (we cannot forget that rape trial). The spear is a shorthand but evocative description of the damaging phallus.

Second, then — if Murray is simply using the penis as a metonym for a series of already-current critiques — Magritte's warning should hover over *The Spear* like an invisible subtitle: This is not Zuma's pipe. It is not even a mimetic representation of Zuma's pipe. It's a provocative placement of a symbol. I've made the point on these pages before: famous people, politicians included, are (to all intents and purposes) just simulacra. Yes, the president is a husband, a father, a man whose feelings can be hurt; but to most South Africans, he is nothing more than an accumulation of

images, most of which he is responsible for placing in the popular imagination. This is the choice he made in taking office.

Zuma's penis — or, at least, representations of it — has been in the public domain for some time now.

It is telling that the ANC and the prudish moral high-grounders who wag their fingers at Murray seem to think that a painting always functions like a documentary photograph of the real. In their defence, Shakespeare said something similar — or rather, Hamlet, his creation, did: the purpose of art, affirms Hamlet, is to "hold the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure".

Hamlet's idea is to catch out his uncle Claudius, who has usurped the throne by killing Hamlet's father. So the meta-theatrical prince devises a plan to have the murder acted out in front of the murderer: "guilty creatures sitting at a play", he says, cannot tolerate it when their sins are portrayed to them by actors, and so they "proclaim their malefactions" — they are forced to confess. As expected, Claudius betrays himself through his outraged response to Hamlet's play. He falls into the trap of mimesis, confusing the work of art for the real world, precisely because it aggravates his guilty conscience.

Zuma and his allies, through their over-reaction to Murray's art, are in fact acknowledging that there is some merit in its critique. Claudius calls off Hamlet's play; Zuma wanted *The Spear* removed from the gallery; two "free radicals" pre-empted any court decision by defacing the painting. But although Zuma and his supporters have pretended to be offended by the artist, or may even have convinced themselves they are truly offended, like King Claudius they will soon privately admit: "O, my offence is rank — it smells to heaven!"

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