

## Murray fights back, with his gloves on

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**Johannesburg - During the backlash against Brett Murray's derisive portrait of President Jacob Zuma, the infamous *The Spear*, many wondered whether Murray would continue producing art, or art with a political bent.**

Would he presume to depict the president in an artwork again? This question is cheekily referred to in the title of his first solo exhibition since the debacle over *The Spear*. Titled *Again Again*, the show opened on Saturday at the Goodman Gallery in Cape Town.

The art featured in the exhibition made clear that Murray will remain active and persist in satirising and critiquing the president and the political status quo.

There was also a bitter if not angry edge to the show, perhaps born from the manner in which the government may have bullied him and the gallery representing his work in 2012 when *The Spear* caused a national furore.

His impudent and wry manner has not been extinguished, but there were no artworks at this new show that directly depicted or referred to the president, barring one hidden in the loo.

In this way, *Again Again* sees Murray fighting, but he keeps his gloves on.



Murray's ire and persistent sense of humour in relation to The Spear debacle is best encapsulated in a very cheeky but defiant work titled Call and Response.

This bold scripto-visual work presents two statements, which are juxtaposed.

The one reads: "I must not make political art", duplicated to fill the expanse of a block.

The other bears a contradictory phrase: "You are a corrupt f--k."

As if in anticipation that the series will prove popular, due to the defiant and subversive sentiment underpinning it, it is rendered in different mediums and materials, giving buyers at both the top and bottom end of the market a chance to purchase it.

Is he cashing in on his reputation?

The price of his work has not become inflated, according to Tony East, the manager of the Goodman Gallery Cape Town.

"I think he wants to keep his art accessible," he said.

It is the Call and Response etching rendered on the hard Somerset black material that has the most impact as it resembles both a blackboard and a grave headstone.

This evokes the recurring sequence from The Simpsons where Bart is depicted scrawling statements on a chalkboard as punishment – it was often the vehicle for the American creators of the series to insert political commentary.

The allusion to a gravestone might refer to the risk or negative outcome from making political art, or the manner in which censorship and the punishment of artists, "kill" art.

This artwork directly references the president's response to The Spear. Aside from Zuma's office denouncing the work, the ruling party took the artist to court and organised a rally outside the Goodman Gallery Joburg, where the work was on display.

The government even mobilised the Film and Publications Board, which declared that it would be illegal for the work to be viewed by anyone under the age of 16.

This ruling was subsequently overturned and it was found that the board had overstepped its authority.

Nevertheless, in almost every way, the government put pressure on the artist and the gallery representing him to remove his artwork from public view, creating the impression that there was no place for Murray's brand of satire.

During the debacle, Murray's family were subjected to death threats.

The ANC and the President's Office argued that it was not the political content of the artwork – which depicted Zuma in a Leninesque pose – which caused offence but the undignified manner in which his likeness was represented.

In this new show, Murray has not presented any direct depictions of Zuma. There is only one work, *Joker in the Pack*, that features his first name. It is displayed quite discreetly in the toilet and is therefore “not part of the exhibition”, according to East.

The joker card motif is also present in the work *Mr Charmer (He He He)*, where Murray references the president's predilection for laughter in the face of criticism – as was the case during the recent State of the Nation Address.

You could view Murray's choice not to represent the president as an act of self-censorship.

Ironically, however, because the ruling party and the president responded so aggressively to *The Spear*, Murray need no longer make work directly representing Zuma, as most people might assume now that any of the artist's scripto-visual works presenting statements, sculptures or paintings will invariably refer to the president, whether that was the artist's intention or not.

As a result, a sculpture dubbed *Liar, Liar*, depicting a short figure with a long nose that reads like a phallic symbol, will be associated with Zuma.

Once again, Murray declined to give interviews to the media. No doubt he wishes to leave it up to viewers to make up their own mind, which is a brave move, given that when he did so before, he became the target of abuse.

The exhibition will show at the Goodman Gallery Cape Town until May 16 and encompasses paintings depicting other “corrupt” African leaders, including Muammar Gaddafi and Mobutu Sese Seko.

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