

# City Press

## **Brett Murray ... a national treasure? How did that even happen?**

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Controversial artist Brett Murray is representing SA at the Venice Biennale. Picture: Michael Hammond/Foto24

The ANC's most reviled artist, Brett Murray, is officially representing the country at the Venice Biennale, one of the world's most prestigious art exhibitions.

Murray's barbed satirical work is installed on a group show at the South African Pavilion and paid for by the department of arts and culture.

Brett Murray ... a national treasure? How did that even happen?

At the height of the culture clash ignited by *The Spear* – as court actions flew, ANC marchers descended on the Goodman Gallery and the painting of the exposed President Jacob Zuma was vandalised virtually live on national TV – I remember thinking the division between party and state had fallen away entirely. The wrath of the party was the fist of the state.

But now the same state is sponsoring Murray.

Is it that we overreacted to the attempt to wipe out a work of art and the way state censors tried to ban the film *Of Good Report* at about the same time?

After all, the National Film and Video Foundation not only contributed financially to the making of *Miners Shot Down*, but awarded it an SA Film and Television Award – despite it being a documentary that passes scathing judgement on the state's actions that led to the massacre at Marikana.

Perhaps the choice of Murray and *Miners Shot Down* marks that it is time to acknowledge that, even if artists displease the state, our legal and free-expression processes triumph in the end – and not all state institutions have propagandist tendencies.

Or are these endorsements a sleight of hand to lure the eye away from the department's recent bulldozing through of a centralised arts funding agency called the Cultural and Creative Industries Federation of SA? There is a shocking lack of information on the plans for the centralised megafunding agency that places all the state's endorsement power in one basket.

Many artists fear it increases the chances of corruption. And there are perfectly valid fears that the new federation will be used to support only artists who toe the line – art that supposedly builds a nation instead of sniping at it.

Or is the choice of Murray a case of the state's right hand not being entirely sure what the left hand is doing?

The department blames Treasury for the bungled tender that saw this year's South African Pavilion scramble to come together at the last minute. There was no time to veto a Murray, even if there had been a desire to.

But that's not the real problem with Venice this year. The problem is that, even with the edginess of Murray and a decent display of contemporary black artists, government's pavilion has attracted virtually no attention during this all-important preopening week.

Instead, the Venice thunder is being stolen by a fringe collective, the Joburg Pavilion. An independently funded group of fresh-as-hell South African video and performance artists is invading the Italian city – with exactly the right tone for this kind of art-forward event.

A state that tries to control cultural production – even by backing its enemies – holds no water in spaces such as Venice.

Instead, it does a disservice to its artists.