

HALF ART: Sobering slice of our fragility

BY CHRIS THURMAN, JUNE 26 2015, 08:04



Sam Nhlengethwa's Marikana March points to a sardonic dismissal of the very notion that we have been living 'in the time of democracy'. Picture: SUPPLIED

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NEXT week TWENTY: Art in the Time of Democracy opens at the University of Johannesburg Art Gallery. Gordon Froud's curation was first displayed last year in North Carolina — a debut marking SA's second post-apartheid decade. It will also travel to October's Beijing Biennale. The likely reception for the exhibition in SA (it has already had a stint at the Pretoria Art Museum) differs substantially from responses in the US and China.

Froud's previous group shows at the UJ Gallery have been ambitious and thought-provoking. TWENTY offers more than 200 works by 115 artists. Despite these numbers, and the impressive list of contributors — including William Kentridge, Mary Sibande, David Goldblatt, Sam Nhlengethwa, David Koloane and Diane Victor — TWENTY does not claim to provide an overview or survey. It is offered as "a slice of life" (perhaps a "snapshot" would be a more appropriate metaphor).

I am intrigued by the exhibition's subtitle. Even a year ago this may simply have sounded catchy — one of a thousand "in the time of" formulations that each have the effect of sounding like a riff on the Gabriel Garcia Marquez novel *Love in the Time of Cholera*. But 2015 has brought a level of anxiety into the national zeitgeist that gives the phrase a particular inflection.

Democracy in SA, it seems to imply, is a temporary thing.

Our artists created art before democracy; for 20-odd years they have created art "in the time of democracy"; at some point in the future they will create art in the time after democracy. Is it possible that something so hard-won, entrenched in a constitution that is so greatly admired around the world, protected by a legal framework and a raft of institutional measures, can be so provisional — so fragile?

The answer, if the impunity with which Jacob Zuma and his cronies have increasingly been allowed to flout the rule of law is anything to go by, is a sobering "yes".

The Omar al-Bashir episode seems like a new nadir to Zuma's tenure in terms of mocking the jurisdiction of the courts, just as the Nkandla debacle demonstrates his scant regard for the authority of watchdog offices.

It could be argued that focusing exclusively on these controversies understates the threat that the African National Congress (ANC) under Zuma now poses to almost every state institution and parastatal enterprise. That is to say that the damage wrought under Zuma's presidency is more widespread than sagas such as Guptagate, "Nkaaandla" and the Spy Tapes; and that while Zuma himself is culpable, he is also just a symptom of the general malaise that the ANC in power has suffered.

But it could also be argued that the ANC's manipulation of due process has been opportunistic and ad hoc — not a calculated effort aimed at establishing a one-party police state so much as it is a series of circus acts by a troupe of insecure performers who just want to keep their portion of the takings for as long as they have a position in the big top.

If this seems like cold comfort, a bolder argument could be made that our relatively new democratic infrastructure is strong, with deep foundations, and is bolstered by an active civil society, shuddering and shaking, but not yet breaking.

Some of the works in TWENTY encourage another way of interpreting the subtitle: a sardonic dismissal of the very notion that we have been living "in the time of democracy". Here I am thinking in particular of Sam Nhlengethwa's and Nathi Quewe's paintings of scenes from the Marikana massacre. Could such an event really occur, we may well ask, in a time of democracy?

Perhaps full, participatory, institutionally secure democracy is something yet to come — not something to be lost. Adopting this view might turn our helpless hand-wringing into contained, proactive anger; then we might chase the circus out of town.