

## **Brett Murray's Painting "The Spear"**

In the last two weeks, South Africans have been in an uproar over Brett Murray's painting "The Spear" which presents the figure of President Jacob Zuma in a Lenin-style pose with his genitals exposed.

The artist who painted the portrait, the Goodman Gallery which exhibited the painting and the City Press which published a photograph of the painting have all been accused of racism, and a lack of respect for human dignity. There were protests outside the Goodman Gallery; the painting was defaced; the matter was taken to court where an advocate was reduced to tears at the insult to the President and black people in general; the ANC led a formal protest march to the gallery; and demands have been made that the painting be taken down and photographs of it be removed from websites.

Barend la Grange and Louis Mabokela were arrested for defacing the painting at the Goodman Gallery. La Grange a white man and Mabokela, a black man, worked on the painting at the same time, but independently of each other. Strangely, it seems they were hardly aware of each other, did not even speak to each other. When they were arrested, the white man was treated with dignity but the black man was pushed around and handled very roughly by black policemen. This little noted complex of racist behaviour continued into the media. La Grange was invited to appear on TV programmes to explain his motive in defacing the painting. He said that he wanted to demonstrate that not all white people are racist. As far as I can tell, no one interviewed Mabokela, who was as intent on restoring human dignity. Why? Because he is black and not a prominent citizen? The complexity of racist attitudes that is implied in the treatment of these two men has been overlooked. Such subtleties cannot compete with exposed genitalia, but they are indicative of ingrained racism. As long as we take for granted

that whites and blacks are to be treated differently, we will never be rid of racism

Andile Mngxitama, criticises the ANC for allowing such a situation to prevail. In his article, "Murray's 'Spear' exposed ANC's inability to deal with racism," (*Sowetan*, 29 May 2012) he writes: "Murray's painting is racist from beginning to end. The fact that the ANC has no language to explain and speak back to white arrogance speaks volumes about its state of mind as a party in power." This statement unwittingly echoes Brett Murray's view of the impotence of the ANC. Where Murray depicts it visually, Mngxitama depicts it verbally.

**Puleng Mmila of Seokodibeng in an article "Painting is not racist" (*Sowetan*, 29 May 2012) writes:**

"... it is a fallacy to claim, as Mantashe and others seem to suggest, that the painting is an insult to all black people. ... To label all whites racist because of Murray's action is no different than labelling all blacks corrupt because they are in charge of the government, where graft is rife. What an iniquitous generalisation."

It is too easy, but very common in South Africa, to label racist that with which we do not agree. This tendency to label things racist diverts us from real issues and makes it difficult to solve actual problems. Mmila reminds us that the tendency to use the race card is in itself racist because it denies individual freedom, confines us to group-think and leads to racial stereotyping. Individual freedom is the cornerstone of democracy.

In news24 (Internet) article, "I Am Not A Racist", Brett Murray explains:

"*The Spear* had a dual purpose: it was a work of protest or resistance art, and a satirical piece.

"For me, *The Spear* has a far broader meaning.... It is a metaphor for power, greed and patriarchy,"

"From my perspective as an artist, I felt a sense of betrayal, where heroes of the struggle now

appeared to be corrupt, power-hungry and greedy, or where ideals that many had died or made sacrifices for were abandoned on the altar of expedience."

"For me, satire is critical entertainment. While I might be attacking and ridiculing specific targets, what I am actually doing is articulating my vision of an ideal world in which I want to live."

Many people in South Africa, Black and White, identify with these views. It is unfortunate that the real meaning of the painting was lost in the furore over human dignity and the witch hunt for racism. The penis was more compelling in itself rather than as "a metaphor for power, greed and patriarchy." The symbolism of the painting was completely lost. No one could see that the figure in the painting was symbolic.

It is time to recognise that we live in conflicting paradigms: tradition versus democracy.

We have consciously chosen democracy as a way of life. Our traditions are what we are born into and traditions are conservative. There can be no democracy without freedom of expression and that means the freedom to criticise. Democracy does not recognise sacred cows; everyone lives under scrutiny and is subject to criticism, even presidents. So we have to make up our minds. Do we have the courage for democracy? Or do we want the security of restricting social conventions? Do we want to live under authoritarianism again?

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