'Second to None' at the SANG
By Linda Stupart

'Second to None' commemorates the 1956 women's march where 20 000 women made their way to the Union Buildings in Pretoria to protest the government's restrictive pass laws. According to its press release, 'Second to None' asserts women's power to action' and presents a collection of contemporary South African artists and works from the SANG's permanent collection that explores issues of identity within the country. The exhibition has been curated by Virginia MacKenney and Gabi Ngcobo.

While the exhibition, which fills a large portion of the National Gallery, includes an often impressive collection of works that deal with issues of gender, identity and power, the traditional media and content of most of the work seem to unfairly suggest a lack of informed and empowered contemporary women artists in South Africa. Due in some measure to these restrictive media, the show also fails to really interrogate the gendered notions of private vs. public space which are imperative to the action of a women's march, and its commemoration.

In some cases, the prevailing outmoded and brutal obviousness comes in the form of the artists chosen - many of whom have a number of works on a show which then manages to exclude some rather obvious choices. Diane Victor, for example, takes up two of the gallery's biggest walls with her smoke portraits (pictures of patients dying of Aids made using smoke deposits as a metaphor for the fragility of human life) and her angst-ridden female figures in Martyr/Mother/Mater. Although her draughtswomanship isn't in question, I don't feel that that is enough to justify such a prominent space in this kind of exhibition. Similarly Angela Buckland's immense, yet still not sublime, Where's Nicky? photographs which formed a backdrop to the opening's proceedings read as rather uninteresting old fashioned figurative endeavours.

In terms of painters, Penny Siopis too claims an expectedly, and here deservedly, large space within the exhibition, while queen of unintentional kitsch and banality Tracey Payne's achingly dull vagina flowers grace the wall in the same room as some of Zanele Muholi's images from her Period series.

Muholi is one of the few relatively unestablished artists to feature on the show, and boy does she feature, with a large number of the photographs recently seen at her Michael Stevenson show 'Only Half the picture' which dealt very specifically with issues of gender and sexuality among black South African women. While this show was a useful, skilful and sufficiently shocking, it certainly was not groundbreaking enough to warrant this kind of attention in a major institution, particularly so soon after the work was seen just down the road. Her notable prominence throughout 'Second to None' reeks both of an overly focussed issue of race representation and an unfortunate tendency towards overcompensation, all resting on the shoulders of one photographer. Many of the works chosen from the 'Only Half the Picture', particularly when seen out of context, are also unfortunately those that are simultaneously dreary and shocking enough to fit into a Feminism more of the 70s than today.

Another wall-grabbing shocker is Tracey Rose's Fucking Flowers which claims its medium as wallpaper, however does not read as this icon of domesticity at all. The piece shows a number of oozing dildos protruding as the stamen of ribbon flowers, all in lurid technicolour. Ostensibly the work speaks about various things, including the notions of sexual difference established largely by Sigmund Freud and criticised by Feminists since the 60s. Such notions define men as 'having' through their privileged exterior phallic, with woman as lacking, her sexual organ merely a hole to fill, with her psyche only complete when she is either fucking or pregnant with a son. Writers such as Luce Irigaray suggested that this presumed base difference leads to other stereotyped and discriminatory differences such as the notion that woman are close to nature, while men have a head for culture, science and progress. This dichotomy could also be reflected by Rose's use of man-made synthetic dildos penetrating soft, crafted ribbons. While this is all very well, and may make the image sound like an interesting one, all Rose's work really incites is nausea in the uneducated and boredom in anyone who's ever actually read any Feminism from the 80s. In essence it is a terrible mix of
80s colour and adolescent 90s shock tactics and offers nothing new or intelligent here. While this exhibition generally is a solid and interesting commemoration and exposition of gendered freedoms, sacrifices and woes, it does omit an important idea - that of women, and women artists actually being able to laugh if not at themselves then perhaps at society. Where are the works that reflect, for example, the nostalgic and whimsical trend that has so enamoured women and Feminist artists worldwide? Though Bridget Baker features, where are Julia Clark’s glitter, Doreen Southwood’s table, Kathryn Smith’s ponies or even Ruth Sacks’ cupcakes? While it’s pretty obvious that these particular young middle class white women are more empowered to sit back and wittily explore notions of class and gender than Muholi’s contemporaries who, for example, still face very extreme prejudices and violence daily, that does not mean that they don’t deserve a voice in this kind of show. Where, in fact, are the young white women? Even Carol-anne Gainer is represented by one single Piss drawing which here is easily overlooked as an abstract Modernist endeavour when the artist is renowned for her complex and contemporary installations. Why not install a wall through the National Gallery, as in MacKenny’s group show at last year’s KKNK, or at least something that challenges the gallery’s things-hung-on-walls ideal.

There are, however, some great moments in the show. Nandipha Mntambo’s work once again shows a subtle exposition of notions of South African femininity. Nicholas Hlobo’s multimedia pieces hang fittingly alongside a Penny Siopis painting and Zanele Muholi’s print of twisted pubic hair. The inclusion of old works from the permanent collection such as Evelyn Dunbar’s Sewing Army Tents is effective in their unashamed stereotyping. A standout work on the show is Dan Halter’s Untitled (Zimbabwean Queen of Rave) video piece which shows footage of angry black marchers and strikers juxtaposed with sweating young white ravers, all jiving to the sound track of the contemporary House classic, Everybody’s Free (To Feel Good). Why it is that the curators had to find a white boy to make the only self-deprecating and wryly self analysing work around class differences and privilege I’m not sure.

While I accept that I am being over-critical here, that the SANG has produced such a comprehensive contemporary, revolving particularly around women, is to be commended. Ngcobo, MacKenny and co. have in fact conceptualised and curated a show that is strong, complex and often arresting. I feel the problem is that when an exhibitor is faced with a challenge such as the representation of gender roles within a country and a history as complex as ours, it is expected to be all inclusive in a way that is very near impossible. I see a lack of contemporary Feminist mechanisms, and a less than thorough investigation of notions of domestic vs. public space. However the majority of visitors to the National Gallery are likely to find works such as Rose’s far from dull, and may well not have trekked out to the more elitist Michael Stevenson Contemporary to see Muholi’s exposition of violently sexist cultural practices common in South Africa. I see a lack of young white women in the show and undoubtedly many would feel the opposite. In essence, as with any show this big, there are likely to be numerous criticisms.

So, we can hope then that this exhibition will mark a beginning in the exhibition schedule of the National Gallery, where strong curatorial ideas bring together disparate artists towards understanding of the country’s big issues of gender, race and identity without falling over their politically correct feet before they even start. So, well done to the curators for actually curating something, even something flawed, as we all know how rare a feat that is in this country.

Opens: June 24
Closes: September 3

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