

Art Inspired by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was the source of inspiration for many people to move in a new direction. Yasmin Sooka, a commissioner from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and an advocate of human rights in the law explains that:

‘The overwhelming sense, outside the country, is that South Africa had really achieved reconciliation; it should thus be justly rewarded for having behaved nobly thirteen years ago by deciding not to send all those who had supported apartheid and had benefited from it into exile, and for not doing to them essentially what they had done to the black majority.’ (Sooka, 2007: 79)

There are two different pictures of apartheid; naturally the one most often seen by the outside world is the happy outcome of reconciliation between the divisions in racial groups while others felt that they were owed justice. The people of South Africa all responded in various ways. Artists have responded to the aftermath of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission with their work that drew on strength and vulnerability and not confrontation. The artwork produced as a response to this creative approach for reconciliation affected its audience by the messages in the art, because art has the ability to touch people on an emotional level. The art serves as a reminder of what the ending of Apartheid meant and how the course of choosing what was right for the nation was not lightly taken.

In order to fully understand what art did for South African people, the end of Apartheid and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission must be examined. The 1994 elections in South Africa were exceptional because they were the first democratic elections held in the nation. The president elect was Nelson Mandela who faced the task of bringing together a divided nation. Apartheid has been called ‘the system,’ that, ‘was responsible for the systematic exploitation of

the black majority in order to privilege and benefit a white majority.’ (Sooka, 2007:80). This period that went on from 1948 when Apartheid was institutionalized to 1994 created a messy situation for the new government to deal with. As the Truth and Reconciliation Report points out, ‘we could not pretend that it did not happen. Everyone agrees that South Africans must deal with that history and its legacy. It is how we do it that is in question’ (Tutu, 1998). Several different responses were the result of this tumultuous time; some of the most diverse came from art.

A great feeling of unrest was a mainstay for the nation and this arguably lives on today. There was no way that Apartheid would not come under scrutiny but it was a shock to some people that it would be dealt with in such a peaceful way.

‘The impetus for the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 1993 was not just the desire by the majority to unmask apartheid, but also to deal with the legacy of violence in the liberation struggle of the African National Congress (ANC). Faced with accusations that it had executed and tortured prisoners in its own camps in the front-line states of southern Africa, the ANC decided to call for a general inquiry into the past, to include both the apartheid period and the “liberation struggle”’ (Ignatieff, 2001).

Many people were critical of this action of the government. It was the opinion of some victims of apartheid that there needed to be a certain amount retribution for the pain and damage that was inflicted on people. Therefore the Truth and Reconciliation Commission came to be ‘regarded as the moral mechanism needed to build a “new” South Africa from the ashes of the discredited apartheid past’ (Sooka, 2007:80). The fact that the Commission became an issue of morality made it all the more difficult for people to deal with. Justice did not always seem to be served in this situation. ‘The Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the decision to grant amnesty on an individual basis to the perpetrators were born out of impasse and compromise’ (Graham, 2009: 31). Nevertheless the Commission was a creative solution for the separated nation. It was

a vehicle for people to learn about other's experiences through the pursuit of seeking the truth and sometimes reconciling. The Commission ushered in a new era that allowed for the freedom of the people of South Africa to express themselves, art was just one the many byproducts of this time.

Art was a way for people to publically deal with the wounds created not only by apartheid but also the remnants of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Not every case that was brought to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was neatly resolved, sometimes the cases brought forth did the opposite of healing; this could not necessarily be helped because there was no perfect solution. By looking at works of art that were created in response to this tumultuous time in South Africa a new perspective is gained. Art has the effect to reach out to people in the way that it can communicate feelings and emotions about the work's subject that cannot be done in words. It is interesting to look at these responses in a cultural context, with art and the reality of South Africa taken in at the same time. In the words of Desmond Tutu 'it is important that people know that in being creative they become more than just consumers. They can transcend their often horrendous circumstances and bring something new into being.' (Williamson, 1989:7). The discipline of art transforms a view of the world into something that can help to bring new meaning to a situation.

One of the artist's responsible for transforming the view of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was Madelaine Georgette, a world-renowned South African-American artist. Her paintings are known to provoke thought and to educate. Georgette describes the medium of painting:

'Painting for me is communication with a language of shapes, forms, color and pattern and texture. Issues of connectedness and relationship between individuals and groups, and between people and their environments underlie all my work. I focus on social and political issues and contexts using both representative and abstract forms' (Georgette).

One of her most famous subjects is South Africa, allowing her to express the history of South Africa in an artistic form. The painter created a series titled *Going to Vote* before moving on to her next series of paintings that focused on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This series featured 48 paintings with four distinct different phases making up the collection.

A painting of Georgette's *Going to Vote VI* shows the beginning of a new era (Georgette, 1995). The painting depicts long lines of black South African voters. There are two lines of women and children waiting to vote, they are outside standing on a hill. This hill seems to point out how this process took so long to get to; the end of apartheid could not have come sooner. It represents the long journey that it took to get to this new freedom and rights. The women are dressed in bright and rich colors almost as a way to show their celebration of freedom. Above the women in line is a dark sky that contrasts with the bright colors on the women's clothing. No one seems to be looking up, this could be a sign of the strife that apartheid brought the people to such a low place. It seems like there would be more of a feeling of celebration amongst the people waiting to vote. But the beauty of the painting lies in the actions of what the women are lined up to do. The act of voting is seen as a duty to one's country that unfortunately was not the case for many years in South Africa. Georgette's subject is quite remarkable because of the simplicity of the action occurring in *Going to Vote IV* but at the same time quite uncommon to the people suffering under apartheid.



Going to Vote IV, 1995. Painting by Madelaine Georgette. Permission: Madelaine Georgette and Studio Georgette. <http://www.studiogeorgette.com/images/GoingToVoteIV.htm>

While *Going to Vote IV*, dealt with the ending of Apartheid, Georgette depicted scenes of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in her painting *Should I Testify?* (Georgette, 2000). The painting is bold and emotionally raw, this is conveyed through use of oil paint. There are three women depicted in the painting perhaps to represent the ‘Three Special Women’s Hearings’ which, “were subsequently held - in Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg’ (Georgette). So in a literal sense the women may represent the three different hearings and show how these were different from the other hearings. Each of women have a look of unrest on their faces as they sit to wait or think. Women had a difficult position to be in during the testifying process of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. They were often present to testify for others and not usually themselves (TRC/Report). *Should I Testify?*, brings to light this uncertainty for the women facing the Commission and a sense of fear. Georgette honors these women who had no idea what was to come of these hearings. Despite the fact that they are not necessarily showing emotional strength, Georgette painted them strongly in order to pay tribute to the courage that it took to come forward and break the silence.



Should I Testify?, 2000. Painting by Madelaine Georgette. Permission: Madelaine Georgette and Studio Georgette. <http://www.studiogeorgette.com/images/GoingToVoteIV.htm>

Another artist committed to displaying an extensive vision of the strife of South Africa in her work is South African, Penny Siopis. She has used several aspects of South Africa to influence her work. Her work is very vivid and takes on a life of its own. Siopis has a fierce passion for her work:

'The space, friction, and energy between contending, even irreconcilable, desires are critical for me. The beautiful and the cruel, or the violent and the erotic, are not such odd bedfellows really. Each is tied to the other. And in art, the aesthetic is all but constituted through the play of contraries. The knife edge is a precarious condition where a slip and a split can happen. I want to hold this condition in a state of suspended animation rather than resolve or settle it, one way or another.' (Nuttall, 2009: 96-105).

The way that Siopis looks at and approaches her work makes her seem to be a credible voice or perspective of her art that could give an interesting perspective to the sentiments of South Africa during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. She has a rather complex way of seeing these the medium she chooses. The way she is describing her artwork in this quote lends her the ability to understand the differing perspectives on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. What she is saying in the part of this excerpt about the contradictions could directly apply itself

to the sentiments of the people involved in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. There is not a sense of closure for some because justice is not always served.

The balancing act that Siopis portrays in her artwork makes for an exciting backdrop into the world of reconciliation. Her series that deals directly with the aftermath of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is entitled *Shame: Sorry*. She describes her process for creating art:

'I start simply by being struck by an image. Something odd, curious, dramatic. The image might come from newspapers, books, movies, magazines, other art, my imagination, or direct experiences... Many allegorize deep human experiences like collapse, disorder, decay, and formlessness.' (Nuttall, 2009: 96-105).

This revelation of her process makes her artwork easily understood. David Krut describes Siopis' collection that is based off the 'idea and experience of *Shame* as both a public phenomenon and a psychological condition' (David Krut Projects, 2004). The type of shame being depicted by Siopis refers directly to a sentiment that people in South Africa can also feel for one another (David Krut Projects, 2004).

Although this series of paintings does not have an overt reference to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission the idea of shame is deeply entwined in this process.

'In the recent South African past, shame has been dramatised and confronted as a state of hurt and complicity in the hurt of others. Our Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) staged this hurt and complicity in public shows of shame, expressed in the languages of human suffering, apologetics, confession, protestations of good faith, exposures of bad faith. After this historical moment all sorts of urban legends have emerged which bespeak the state of shame, legends connecting the most public of political events to the most private and intimate of individual experiences.' (David Krut Projects: 2004).

Krut draws the connection between the works created by Siopis and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. There is a great deal to learn about the emotional state of people affected by these unsettling events in South Africa that make themselves known in Siopis prints.

Siopis series of prints convey one of the aspects of the mood the nation was experiencing after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. *Shame: Get Well Soon* shows a figure in red, and the head of the figure is not shown (David Krut Projects, 2004). Paint is sprayed across the whole canvas making the figure appear hazy. The spray of paint creates the effect of a look that there is something to hide or cover up. Siopis literally depicts shame with this print- there is an overwhelming sense of loss of dignity in the stance of the figure. She shows how the truth can be very muddy and is not always found which a theme of the Commission.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission also inspired print works such as the play, *The Dead Wait* by Paul Herzberg. Herzberg like Georgette and Siopis, is also a native South African artist. He is an actor, playwright, and a screenwriter. Herzberg wrote *The Dead Wait* in response to his experience in the Angolan War.

'South Africa's involvement in the conflict began, with US support, in the mid 1970s and continued through the 1980s. Troubled by internal unrest and increasing SWAPO activity in neighbouring Namibia it became imperative to the Apartheid Government that Angola's vast natural resources did not fall into Marxist hands. Thus two generations of South Africa's young men found themselves engaged in military operations by a government which officially denied any part in the war.' (Herzberg, 2002: 7).

Herzberg sets the story in the middle of the conflict of the war with three soldiers as the focus of the play. Two of the soldiers, Josh and Papa are fighting for South Africa, while George is their captured and severely wounded enemy. Papa orders Josh to carry George on their long journey, during which the two become close companions. After Papa sees the problem of the situation he orders Josh to kill George, knowing that it will be exceedingly difficult for Josh to follow through with. Josh obeys the command carries the burden of guilt. After the war is over Josh decides to fulfill George's dying wishes to tell his daughter that George loved him and to let her know how her father died. This process and the dying wish of George, which happens because of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Near the end of the play, Josh testifies in

a hearing and tells George's daughter what has happened to her father. He later visits Papa trying to get him to testify in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Papa replies angrily:

'You barge in here after twenty years with your burning torch... You want to debate with me? Then listen or fade away! You caught me at a bad time. Justice, hey? Nothing... There was nothing that stood between men and what I wanted' (Herzberg, 2002: 63).

Papa represents some of the cruel people who feel that they are superior to others and do not think that the Commission was a good idea. Josh wanted to inspire change in people despite the fact that he was not perfect in the past but he sought to reclaim the truth. He tells Papa *'I've given the Truth Commission full disclosure. They may not be perfect but for the moment they're all I got. And now I've found you so can they'* (Herzberg, 2002: 67). Josh's character signifies the hope of the nation that the Commission sought to bring about. Although the entire play is not dedicated to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission it exhibits how painful these conflicts were and the depth of animosity they instilled in people.

The art from the period following Apartheid and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission shows various sentiments regarding this time in South African history. These artists chose to take a stance on the political events. They not only show their unique perspective but they go beyond themselves and echo the feelings of the population.

Those who embraced the task of unraveling the human emotions in regards to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission were brave to face such a responsibility; in many ways artists have played this part. The breadth of feelings that are surrounding the Commission is impossible to be fully expressed in one work of art. Instead they have committed themselves to producing vignettes, which are perhaps the safest way to approach a polarizing issue such as Apartheid. The way the that artist can concentrate on one scene or feeling about the horrible experiences of

Apartheid and the difficulties in facing it, seems to be how the Truth and Reconciliation Commission found their footing: taking in one portion of the big picture at a time.

It is not that they necessarily sought peace or are making feeble attempts at mediation it is more that the artists are willing to confront the most difficult atrocities. An individual artist puts forth a unique voice through their work, each of the voices that spoke about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission contributed to a larger and more powerful picture of where South Africa had been and what direction it was going. None of the messages in the art is ever the same, because none of the stories were ever the same. Art gives people the opportunity to bypass moral issues and step into the human condition of emotions that is more tangible, allowing many to come together on common ground. This common ground found in art is probably the safest place for reconciliation to occur.

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