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Die Universiteit van die Oranje-Vrystaat

Bron Datum Onderwerp Knipsel
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1121 444 Sa rie Grn ie ee

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Figâ\200\231s tricks: a wnimper,
not a subversive bang

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_ \D EXHIBITION: Fig

VENUE: SA Association of Arts

Gallery, Pretoria

THE people at the South African Association of Arts Gallery in Pretoria are as polite as, on Monday evening, they were politely bewildered. You could tell who they were by the fact that they had arrived in understated evening dress and by the fact that they did not attack wine as though it was free and about to run out any second. f.i.â¢ a
"to be fair ene sfachn-
trive to maintain a certain savoir faire in the most trying of circumstances.

To begin with, the work on the Famous International Gallery (Fig) exhibition which they were hosting was draped in black cloth when they arrived to view it and the exhibition itself was sealed off from public view.

They had to hang around, rubbing shoulders with a distinctly motley Johannesburg crowd, who even at this stage of the evening were being more than a little abusive and scornful.

Next they had to endure an immaculately inappropriate speech by painter Braam Kruger on the supreme investment potential of all this dubious work they were not allowed to see.

Finally Fig came to the point â\200\224 a kind of manifesto drawn from African National Congress Department of Arts and Culture head Barbara Masekelaâ\200\231s recent address at the Grahamstown festival. From this the Fig artists had extracted a passage attacking the continuing hegemony of â\200\234elitist white cultureâ\200\235 in the arts and calling for a redistribution of cultural resources in the country.

As a gesture in this direction Tig proposed to donate 15 percent of all sales to an unspecified Pretoria-based community cultural organisation â\200\224 and before â\200\234symbolically unveilingâ\200\235 the exhibition, they called upon the government-funded

Association to do likewise.

Representing the SAAA, painter Gunther van der Reiss took the microphone. In the politest and most conciliatory of tones he said the association was

fully in sympathy with the stand being

. taken by Fig. Education and the promo-

tion of a broader cultural base, he continued â\200\224 with aplomb, if not necessarily

- accuracy â\200\224 had always been priorities

with the SAAA., The association therefore had no hesitation in matching the Fig offer.

And, so finally, with more of a whimper than the subversive bang that Fig

might have been hoping for, the patrons were allowed to look at the artwork.

Most probably went home wondering
what all the fuss had been about.

Me too. Barbara Masekela's call for the
broadening of the cultural base is hardly
contentious in these times, and 15 per-
cent is hardly going to break the SAAA's
bank. Ironically, the gesture, intended to
challenge the values of the association,
merely provided the opportunity for its
hierarchy to gain some inexpensive and
much-needed credibility.

Nor did the exhibition as an exhibition
have the power to shock or confuse.
There was, to be sure, some challenging
and puzzling work on display, there
were pieces with real power. But as a
whole the exhibition was quiet without
being provocatively silent, à la avant-
garde without being subversive. à la

The problem was that, given the fan-
fare of the unveiling, the exhibition need-
ed to embody those values which it was
proclaiming. It needed to speak with a far
more unified voice about the problems
facing culture in South Africa today.

Instead it merely collected work by
people who, in one way and another and
often merely by default, are individually
grappling with those issues. Thus
Wayne Barker's pastiches of Pierneef à la
one a crypto-cubist landscape copy mod-
ified by the affixing of rows of wire
brushes à la displace emblematically the

visual rhetoric of colonial and apartheid
South Africa and thus address the prob-
lems of a transitional culture.