

INSTITUUT VIR EIETDSE GESKIEDENIS

Die Universiteit van die Oranje-Vrystaat

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NEW NATION

Jg..... Nr. 601 P. 8 Dat. 17 JAN 1991

TREFWOORDE

Shifts bring

Culture

new challenge
for arts

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THE new year commences with the arts facing the challenge to explore new ground.

Critical this year, according to both artists and critics, will be a shift from an affirmation of the traditional anti-apartheid positions to an exploration of aesthetics.

In the past, the focus was on progressive and pro-struggle art. The exploration now has to extend to explorations of technique and an assessment of the artists' creativity and degree of original input.

Critic and exiled writer Lewis Nkosi and painter David Koloane discuss how the changed circumstances affect their spheres of activity.

Nkosi looks at the socio-political climate in which South African literature developed and then lays solid critical standards that have to influence new developments.

Koloane identifies the negative critical approaches that distorted art in the past to identify the pitfalls that artists should avoid. The salient message is that sociological criticism has undermined the work of black artists. Obviously, the future ought to shift to a

discussion of the style used by black artists.

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David Koloane

THE policy of racial discrimination practised by the government since 1984 has virtually created two separate and distinct worlds for art practice and criticism in South Africa.

The black artist found that his product was judged by white academics whose standards were developed in white institutions outside of his social milieu in both setting and outlook.

The situation that developed was one in which discussion of the work of black artists was engaged in a condescending and patronising manner.

This practice and its impact can be gleaned from newspaper reviews. Reviews on white artists' work are generally more comprehensive and detailed, while reviews on black artists' work churn out preconceived and stereotypical notions. Such an approach promotes the creative superiority of white artists, as their work is inadvertently held up as appropriate aesthetic models.

The work of black artists has been cast in a romantic aura of a spurious African mystique.

The cliché-ridden way of defining work done by black artists has a long history. In the fifties and early sixties, the work of Polly Street artists was "raw", "naturalistic" and "naive".

This was followed by the "expressionist", "Africanist" and "distorted" work of the late sixties and seventies.

The late seventies and eighties saw the advent of

"protest", "committed" and "resistance" art.

Recently, the work of black artists became "transitional" and "ethnic".

In this context, specific characteristics such as a crude technique, bold iconography and unrestrained colour are identified as embodying "primitive" qualities.

That black artists have been won over is demonstrated by the prizes and other honours they have received for producing work identifiable with current definitions.

The double standards used and their tendency to promote inferior work was recently demonstrated when the inferior work by a white artist was accepted for a competition because he had entered it as a black artist. His far superior work for the same competition was turned down.

Another example is Bonnie Ntshalintshali. While conspicuously lacking in formal training, she is more hailed since the tradition in which she is working allows a certain "ethnic licence" that tends to cover for our (blacks) difference or "otherness".

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