

Reggae gives life to Jamaican art

CULTURE

Jamaican artist **VEERLE POUPEYE- RAMMELAERE** is one of several international artists participating in Johannesburg's first art Biennale. In an interview with **MFUNDO NDEBELE**, shortly before she left the country, the Kingston-based artist told him about Jamaican art.

MN: Tell us about art in Jamaica. How much art consciousness is there in Jamaica?

VPR: Art consciousness in Jamaica is tied to social class. Though the interest in art is pervasive, the concept of art beyond mere appreciation exists only at the level of the intelligentsia and the business sectors of the population.

Until recently art struggled for survival because it was generally ignored. The situation has since changed.

The business community has begun to show a marked interest in art, so that arts survival now depends largely on commercial value.

Business funds art projects such as workshops, exhibitions and conferences to stimulate visual art.

Business people also commission art works and sell them at a profit to the intelligentsia in the country, the rest of the Caribbean and all over the world.

I must add though that despite an improved perception of art among Jamaicans, the most popular art form is music, which has had an impact on the visual arts.

The revolutionary lyrics of reggae offer visual artists themes to explore in their works. It is not unusual to come across paintings, sculptures and drawings of reggae stars such as Bob Marley and Peter Tosh. Most of the captions of art works are derived from the lyrics of reggae.

MN: Does the government play any role in the development of art?

VPR: In the 70s, there was an outburst of cultural vibrancy in Jamaica. Racial identity was undergoing a radical transformation.

People of African descent who were political and economic underdogs began to assert themselves in all spheres of life. Art reflected this change on a large scale.

The government was not immune to change. For the first time it acknowledged the importance of culture.

Art institutions such as the National Gallery of Jamaica were established. Government funding of art doubled. Before then, art received about a quarter of what it needed.

The government passed legislation making art a compulsory subject in schools.

MN: Are there any similarities or differences between the art of Jamaica and that of South Africa?

VPR: Because of the racism and violence in both countries, similarities are not surprising. South Africa has been a dominant theme in Jamaican art.

In as much as art in Jamaica has advanced the cause of racial equality, particularly during the Black Consciousness period in the 60s and 70s, blacks in Jamaica owe their political advancement to art to some degree.

The liberation struggle of Jamaica's Marcus Garvey, Bob Marley and other exponents of the Rastafarian religion was reflected in works by our artists.

Art in the two countries has a strong ideological connection.

But while the Jamaican government attaches importance to art, here in South Africa art is obviously not a priority. I was shocked to learn that Soweto, with a population of over three million, is without art galleries or museums.

I have also gathered that there is no formal art education in your schools.

MN: What is your impression of the Biennale?

VPR: It is a great moment in the history of South Africa because this gathering indicates without doubt that your country is now part of the international community.

It strikes me as odd though that there were no representatives of the arts and culture ministry at the three day conference of the Biennale.

Also I have noticed very few black patrons compared to white. Art works by white South African artists are far greater in number than those by blacks.