

Sassen, R. FESTIVAL'S HALF – 'ARTED ATTEMPT in Cue, Grahamstown, July

Visual art at this year's Festival was spiked with controversy as well as poignancy and bad art, but was not lacking in gems. The fear, however, seems plausible that art is losing prestige in this Festival.

The greatest irony was the fact that the best art on show was reflected in a 25-year retrospective, and critically acclaimed art was censored by venue management. Furthermore, the chasm between so-called community art and fine art grows ever wider, in quality and professionalism.

A visual artist's challenge is more complex than that of a performing artist. He or she is compelled to whisper or bellow 'come hither' to you, on the work's merits, without the support of music or set. Art gets Festival-long seasons; the artist is hard pressed not only to draw you in, but to hold you, and in some cases to get you to spend money.

25 young artists

The absence of Alan Crump, who died some weeks ago, was palpable, particularly in the Standard Bank Young Artist: 25, in which he had had a significant hand in planning. Showing a couple of works by each of the last 25 winners, the show offered dignified insight into those upon whose shoulders the current young artists stand.

While the show of this year's young artist had interesting if unfulfilled promises, there were other gems, visually speaking, in the Monument.

The strongest Monument show was Construct from Unisa, comprising photographic work by contemporary artists. This show achieved a dynamic balance between the traditions of this relatively young discipline and presented a refreshing, important body of work.

Bronwen Findlay's exhibition offered jewel-like resonance, but drowned in the large space. Gille Ruth de Vlieg's political photographs, like many photo shows before it, rested on the power of the captured historical moment.

Paul Emmanuel's *Transitions* was unequivocally the pick of this year's Festival. It comprised a series of drawings made with a blade on photographic paper. Like many other projects on the Festival it contemplated manhood, and the transitions an individual goes through in society. It was supported by a film by the artist, considering the ritual of army recruits having their heads shaved. The acuity with which these images were produced, juxtaposed with the professional magnificence of the film, made this a constantly full gallery space, filled with people responding emotionally.

Rude art

X2, curated by Zach Taljaard, in the Albany Museum, forged controversy: Museum leadership rejected a work selected by the curator; they perceived it to be rude. This gesture reflected poor understanding of visual arts currents, embarrassing a space like the Museum to articulate a village mentality, not a festival one. The work, by Mark Hipper, has been

shown broadly to critical acclaim; it was a pity festival goers were prevented from engaging with this piece themselves.

Fringe art comprised over 40 listed shows, and more in the public arena. Made by artists young and old, this element of the Festival offers a blurry distinction between street trade, craft and art.

In addition, several important traditionally used fine arts venues this year, including the Gallery in the Round, lay fallow, which was disappointing.

Hopefully, next year, the new art professionals on the Festival committee will give art an injection of relevance and professionalism it lacks right now.