

van Wyk A. BITES OF ART, in Life, Sunday Independent newspaper, Independent News & Media, Johannesburg, South Africa, October

An Art Fair draws a rather different crowd than galleries of exhibitions do. It is designed to expose people who might not ordinarily bother to go to opening nights or exhibitions to works by new and established artists.

The FNB Joburg Art Fair is now in its fourth year. Organisers changed the date from April to September and ran it across the Heritage Day weekend. This year 24 galleries had a chance to exhibit what they think are some of their key pieces in a large exhibition hall at the Sandton Convention Centre. Well established galleries such as Smac, the Goodman, Everard Read and Gallery Momo all had a presence.

The fair was a mixture of big names in South African art and a host of unfamiliar ones. William Kentridge, Diane Victor, Strijdom van der Merwe, Irma Stern and Angus Taylor are but some of those many who are very familiar with. Then there are artists from across the continents and some fresh ones.

But, while the fair certainly had buzz to it, there was very little that stood out for me. Overheard at the fair: "Last year's was better. There's nothing very original here. Even the big names haven't impressed me." I did not attend last year's fair but I tend to agree.

While some artists and pieces did catch my attention, there was a blandness to the show.

I was particularly disappointed with the finalists of the FNB Art Prize. Again, it's not that the works were not "good", but rather they did not "grab" me. They didn't challenge or confront the viewer.

I wasn't left wondering what they meant (or don't mean). I wanted more. After all, not all art necessarily has to connote or denote or "mean".

The winner of the prize was Cedric Nunn for a black-and-white photograph called *Arniston Kids Body Surging off the Western Cape Coast* (1989). Nunn is a self-taught documentary photographer who was prolific during the 1980's, capturing the realities of apartheid he believes was being ignored by mainstream media. The photo shows three black children on the rocks at a beach watching two others in the water below. The image recalls the segregation of beaches for different races.

The other two finalists were Athi-Patra Ruga with a work of brightly coloured tapestry thread on cloth, featuring a man wearing a drag-like outfit called *the Speller, The Killer* (2011) and Nirveda Alleck with three oil paintings called *Continuum Beirut* (2009).

However, this year's featured artist, Paul Emmanuel, left me lingering at his space at the fair.

He showcased some pieces from his *Transitions Multiples* series. It consists of five hand-printed lithographs and the award-winning short film *3SAI: A Rite of Passage*, a documentary about the head shaving of new recruits in the SANDF.

The lithographs capture changes in time from one fleeting moment to the next. Platform Number 5, for example, almost looks like a photograph taken with a long exposure with blurry figures moving through the turnstiles at a train station. It's people, life and time in flux.

"My works are about liminality and liminal spaces. *Platform Number 5* is far more nebulous and open-ended (than the other works) and is about every day transitions for a lot of people who use public transport. These transitions don't necessarily have to be something monumental," he says.

There are some works that would seem to have a bit of shock-value. US photographer Ayana V Jackson's two images called *Pov-porn: Death* and *Povporn: Destruction* did grab me. *Povporn* (poverty-pornography) explores the representation of the impoverished body in photography. The first image shows a naked African woman pointing her index finger, as if about to pull the trigger of a gun. The second image shows a naked African female hanging from a tree with a rope about her neck.

Sanell Aggenback's series of works uses eroticism to explore insomnia, restlessness and illusion. "I didn't want to do erotic works for shock value. I wanted to do really sensual, strange, nebulous kind of works. The paintings are all nudes. Some are dancing, many are having sex. The paintings are in black-and-white and look like ghostly negative prints of photographs or X-rays."

The works of Johannesburg artist Mary Sibande are autobiographical. Three photographs tinted with bright blues take her back to her childhood. Two images of soldiers who are mounted on a base like toy soldiers in *Living Memory* and *All is Not Lost* refer to her father, who was in the army. Her parents split up when she was three years old, leaving behind only four photographs.