

Opening remarks at BRANDED, a solo exhibition of monoprints, paper sculptures, T-shirts, postcards and mugs and photographs from Ann Gollifer.

Speaker: Alice Mogwe of the Ditshwanelo, Botswana Human Rights Organisation – 13.6.2012 (Abbreviated)

I wish to thank Ann Gollifer and her curator, Harun Harun for having invited me to perform the official opening of the exhibition this evening.

I found myself in deep reflection about the role of the artist or social commentator in society. Who tells whose stories? Who is able to tell the story accurately? Do we, or can we abdicate that responsibility to others, to tell our story? Is it the role of some social activists to tell *of* the story but not tell the story itself? Does it ultimately matter who tells the story, as long as it is told correctly, appropriately and effectively?

The artist as a social activist aims to raise awareness and to be the catalyst for critical thinking and hopefully serious reflection. One would hope that such reflection would go further than the intellectual, to contributing meaningfully to active and responsible citizenship of the individual. This exhibition provides us with such an opportunity.

Ann uses the monument of our Three Chiefs, to urge us to reflect on whom we are, from where we have come; the space, which we currently occupy as modern-day Botswana and whether we are comfortable with whom we are becoming. All these are constituent parts of the *image* which is Botswana.

Who tells our stories?

The official story:

The Brand Botswana Department of BEDIA states on its website, that through branding, it seeks to enable Botswana

to :

Define and express its vision to the world.

Position itself as a destination of choice for local residents, investors, tourists, traders, tour operators and the media.

Highlight the countries offerings in the areas of tourism, investment, export, culture and heritage and governance to audiences.

Create and maintain a defined, consistent and single identity to effectively differentiate itself in the global market.

What seems clear is that for effective branding of Botswana, we need to be assured that we have clear self-awareness of our history, our present and our vision for the future.

The North Korean story:

The statues of our three Chiefs were produced by North Korean craftsmen, who, inevitably perhaps, grafted their own sorry onto ours. Kentse Bogatsu alludes to a view that their physiognomy is not reflective of our Tswana physique. Did we abdicate our right to tell our story to others? If so, through whose symbols is it told? (Power in statues in countries with a socialist history is easily recognizable from their poses and style.)

Who should have the responsibility of telling our stories?

So what is our story?

The HIStory story

The three Chiefs represent a significant event in the history of Botswana. As we all know, in 1885, we were declared a British Protectorate, following their request to not be put under the control of the British South Africa Company. Cecil John Rhodes, who had dreamt of 'turning the map of Africa red from Cape to Cairo' had set his sites on this land. The three Chiefs were historical socio-political activists, lobbying not only those in Government, through Chamberlain, but also the British Society through civil society action of the Church (The London Missionary Society which would ironically, stand in the way of the marriage between Seretse Khama and Ruth Williams in 1948), temperance groups, anti-slavery, groups as well as businesses which feared a backlash should there be a war, resulting from the matter. As we know, the Chiefs also appealed to Queen Victoria. Amongst their requests were:

The independence of Bechuanaland should be preserved.

Bechuanaland should remain a protectorate directly under the Queen.

Their lands should not be sold.

Liquor drinking should be prohibited in their areas.

As Ann states in her catalogue, the values, which underpin the actions of the Three Chiefs, were ***courage, integrity and steadfastness***. That was then, what is now?

What is our present story?

The contemporary story.

The five Ds, representative of the official signposts for the values of modern Botswana. Democracy, Development, Discipline, Delivery and Dignity. **Botho** is a value, which underpins what it means to be truly human. Does contemporary Botswana reflect where we want to be, as a people and as a peoples? Do we truly accept the different cultures and life experiences which make up our contemporary story or stories?

(Basarwa/San are often used to advertise Botswana tourism. Can we say that they are truly treated with *botho* as members of our society?)

In closing I wish to draw your attention to the fact that in the 1980s, in a very different Southern Africa, there were a group of artists who too, were social activists. They too were focused on asking questions. They asked questions about the value of their society and how the political dispensation unfairly favoured one group over others. They paid the price for these questions, for their work as social activists, with their lives. On 14 June 1985, (27 years ago

tomorrow), fourteen people were murdered in Gaborone by the South African Defence Force of apartheid South Africa.

Their voices may have been silenced but their contributions to social enquiry have not. They continue today, here, in this exhibition. Ann has invited us to take a hard look at ourselves. She does not tell us our story but holds up a mirror for us to see the different parts of our story. It is here for all to see but the question is,

'How do we choose to actively engage with it?'

'Is it possible to change the ugliness of inequality and poverty into a space where we all strive, in our own individual ways, in our own lives, to make a positive contribution to our world?'

Do we share the vision that our forefathers had for us, a vision of self-worth, of integrity, of steadfastness?

Do we too have the courage to do the right thing, to be clear about core values and live them, in the face of growing materialism in Botswana society? How do we market ourselves, without selling all, including our integrity and our core values themselves?