

LIFE

ACTIVE HEALTH • WORKING LIFE • BIG IDEAS • TRAVEL & FOOD • BOOKS & TECH • ART & ENTERTAINMENT

THE MONTHLY REVIEW

Art and the politics of innocence and guilt

● The dispute about a work by a convicted criminal on exhibition raises deep questions about the relationship between art, artists and society



MARK GEVISSER

All in a Day's Eye: The Politics of Innocence in the Javett Family Collection, and 101 Collecting Conversations: Signature Works of a Century, Javett Art Centre, University of Pretoria

A likeness Embodied: Representations of Sex Work, Library Foyer, University of the Western Cape. Presented by SWEAT and Women and Gender Studies, UWC.

If you enter the main library at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in the next few weeks, you will be confronted by the gazes of 10 dignified black women in lush portraits hung in the apertures around the central foyer. You would need to engage with the panels beneath to know that they are all sex-workers, some transgender; part of an exhibition by SWEAT, the Sex Workers' Education and Advocacy Taskforce, that includes a photographic self-documentation project.

Next to a photograph of herself leaning over two huge cooking pots on a tiny primus, the ample Noluthando Maphuma writes that this is her favourite image, "because I want the people to see that I am not a bad mother. I can cook for my family and I am still a member of my community".

A woman named Leonie engages in some self-critique: her least favourite photograph "clearly shows I am an amateur. It's also not centred, so it doesn't bring across what I wanted to actually capture: the people or the railway lines." I think she captures both, perfectly, in a way that expresses what I imagine to be her alienation and transience. Still, she loved the project: "I felt privileged being in control of the camera... as if I wielded some kind of power."

This is the paradox of art: Leonie wielded power with her camera in the SWEAT project, just as I do here with my pen. She tells her own story, but when she shows the work, she voluntarily relinquishes some of her agency to the viewer's interpretation – as do I by giving you, dear reader, these words. This paradox – or contract – is at the heart of a controversy now swirling in the SA art world; one that links the modest, somewhat homemade exhibition at UWC to another, in the grand new Javett Art Centre at Pretoria University.

The Javett Centre opened in October. After the footwear billionaire Jochen Zeitz and the property developer Louis Norval, Michael Javett – an eccentric former banker – has become the third collector to bequeath his name to a major art institution in SA.

Viewed from the street, the new museum is sober and

Hitting back:

Protests against murder accused Zwelethu Mthethwa were held at Iziko national art gallery in Cape Town museum in 2016. / SWEAT

unprepossessing, but its interiors have world-class specs, extraordinary volumes and masses of natural light. They are now filled with the centre director Christopher Till's 101 Collecting Conversations, a sort of "greatest hits of South African art" that with loaned work sets out to fulfil the institution's foundational premise: to educate young people about African art.

You will find one of almost everybody here: from Pieterneef to Kentridge; from Sekoto to

OF COURSE WE COULD HAVE IGNORED THE ZWELETHU, OR USED IT AS A DOORMAT, BUT WE FELT WE HAD TO USE IT NOW

Sibande. The juxtapositions are daring, sometimes inspired.

But to date, public attention has been focused on a small exhibition to the side, which explores "the politics of innocence" in a selection of 30 works from Javett's own collection. One of these is by Zwelethu Mthethwa, the artist convicted two years ago of kicking to death a sex-worker named Nokuphila Kumalo. Mthethwa is now doing time in Pollsmoor, and SWEAT feels strongly his work should not be exhibited at all.

Already, in 2016, in the midst of Mthethwa's trial, SWEAT's activism led to his work being removed from an exhibition at the National Gallery in Cape Town: if Oscar Pistorious was not allowed to compete at the Olympics under a SA flag while standing trial for Reeva Steenkamp, why should Mthethwa be allowed to exhibit at the National Gallery? So wrote a group of female artists who withdrew their work from the show.



Satire?: The 'Wedding Party' by Zwelethu Mthethwa at the Javett Art Centre. A SWEAT petition calls for the removal of the work from the All in a Day's Eye exhibition. / Alon Skuy

During his trial, the auction houses continued to trade Mthethwa's work, somewhat defiantly. But as soon as he was found guilty in early 2017, the market dropped him, and his work has disappeared from public life. Until now, when an internationally acclaimed SA curator named Gabi Ngcobo – contracted to curate the inaugural Javett collection exhibition – came across a Mthethwa painting in the family holdings.

Ngcobo's brief was to reinterpret the Javett collection. She decided to include Mthethwa's 1996 work, *The Wedding Party*, because it exposed "the patriarchal gesture and the performance of masculinity" that put the artist in jail, she explains on a wall label.

When SWEAT heard about this, the organisation demanded that Ngcobo remove the painting and launched a petition: "#StopCelebratingZwelethu Mthethwa". Ngcobo responded that this misunderstood her intentions: "Our point is that it should NOT be celebrated," and exhibiting it was "not a promotion of the work, but a deliberate, searing unmasking of it." Ngcobo agreed to rework the text of the

label (around Mthethwa's proclamations of innocence, in the face of CCTV evidence), but she refused to take down the work.

Others became involved. The artist Candice Breitz, who had led the earlier Iziko protest, removed her own work from 101 Collecting Conversations at the Javett. She asked others to do the same, but none did. Breitz is something of the feminist enfant terrible of the SA art scene, a brilliant practitioner – and an inveterate troublemaker.

In a series of Facebook posts, she accused Ngcobo, in effect, of being a useful idiot – putting the murderer's work back into currency so that collectors such as the Javetts could trade him again. Breitz insisted that she did not question Ngcobo's intentions – only her judgment: "If the family and community of Nokuphila Kumalo feel that it is much too soon for the artwork of Zwelethu Mthethwa to reappear on the walls of our country's most prestigious art institutions, we must hear their voices and give dignity to their objections."

In a published response, Ngcobo accused Breitz, without

naming her, of being a "white... armchair activist" undermining "the complexity of black women's lives" and "the possibilities for black women like ourselves to imagine and employ more complex and nuanced critical strategies beyond the trap of perpetuating polarising and divisive rhetoric." (Breitz lives in Germany, but had worked closely with SWEAT on her latest project, TLDR, now on exhibition in Berlin.)

Ngcobo flatly rejected the assertions by SWEAT and Breitz that it was too soon to exhibit Mthethwa because wounds were still too raw. In fact, if SWEAT and Breitz thought it particularly insensitive for the Javett to show Mthethwa in the aftermath of University of Cape Town student Uyinene Mrwetyana's murder and the national outpouring against gender-based violence, it had been Ngcobo's distress at the murder that had led her to decide to exhibit the painting in the first place. She did it to amplify the debate and to pull it into the museum, and the educational forums that would follow, she told me.

"Of course we could have

ignored the Zwelethu, or used it as a doormat, but we felt we had to use it now."

The conceptual notion of Ngcobo's exhibition is that there is no such thing as innocent beauty, least of all in SA art. The idea came from three paintings with daisies she found in the collection: an Alexis Preller, a Frieda Locke and a Pieter Hugo Naude.

"I became interested in the perceived innocence of it all, of this collection. I thought, 'everything has a story. These pretty flowers in Frieda Locke's vase come from the land, and the land has meaning.' So too, she felt, did Mthethwa's seemingly jaunty depiction of a wedding party.

Zwelethu Mthethwa is not innocent, whatever his protestations. But is *The Wedding Party* evidence of his murderous misogyny? And can an artwork itself be "guilty" – or be used to find its creator so?

The painting's focal point is a four-tiered wedding cake, with a miniature bride and groom on top. Dominating the frame is a transaction: the bride's father (or relative) shakes hands with the groom. He has been paid his cattle and he is giving away his chattel, the daughter in bridal white off to the right, sucking insouciantly on a bottle of Fanta.

Ngcobo reads this as evidence of Mthethwa's own toxic masculinity. But I see it differently, particularly when I read it in relation to other works I can find online from Mthethwa's "wedding series". All have a wedding cake at the centre, with that miniature bride and groom on top, and around each one is a scene of alienation, at odds with this idealised confection: a bad dream in one; a disconsolate dance in another; and here, a deal about the bride's life that marginalises her.

I keep returning to that Fanta bottle and the expression on the



Faces: Portraits of Gavin and Leonie, members of SWEAT at the original Iziko national gallery exhibition, I am what I am. / SWEAT

bride's face. Together with the broad, almost comical gestures of the painting (so at odds with Mthethwa's carefully precise photographic portraits), they tell me this painting is satire, and that the artist's intention, in 1996, was actually to critique the institution of marriage.

And so, while not for a moment excusing or justifying the artist's crime, I find myself reading his work against, rather than as evidence of, his later violent action.

The activist Sihle Motsa, supporting SWEAT's stance, points out that because "art is infamous for its tendency towards ambiguity, obscurity and its refusal to succumb to neat discursive outlines", *The Wedding Party* cannot do the job in the exhibition

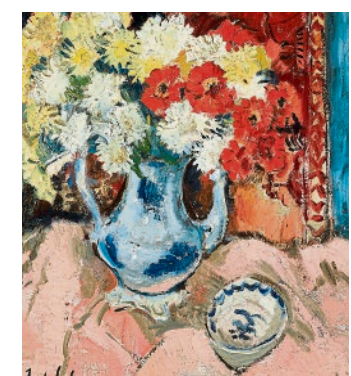
bride at the way her critics feel they can override her because she is a posh girl in a gallery rather than a sister working the streets.

This brings me back to the SWEAT exhibition at the UWC Library, and the sex-worker Leonie's comments that being "in control of the camera" afforded her "some kind of power". In recent years, there has been an explosion of cultural production involving SWEAT – such as Breitz's own work. Given the deprecations of sex-workers' lives, documented in all these projects, it will never be enough; certainly not until sex work is decriminalised and violence against all women in SA recedes.

In this context, the sound of SWEAT roaring is a glorious one because it represents some of the most marginalised people in our society claiming their space; taking control of (or at least having a say in what happens with) the camera. But still, as I pored over Leonie's moving assemblage of snapshots and writings at UWC, I was in my own body; exercising my own agency and applying my own judgment, making my own sense of the sex-worker-artist's words. That's the deal with art; what separates it from propaganda.

As I stood in front of Mthethwa's quite mediocre painting at the Javett, I thought of the reaction of the black writer Zadie Smith, in response to the call to exclude the work of a white US artist, Dana Schutz, from the 2017 Whitney Biennale, because it depicted the dead body of Emmet Till, the black victim of a 1955 lynching. The painting did not talk to her, Smith wrote in Harper's.

"This is always a risk in art. The solution remains as it has always been. Get out (of the gallery) or go deeper in (to the argument). Write a screed against it. Critique the hell out of it. Tear it to shreds in your review or paint another painting in response. But remove it? Destroy it? Instead, I turned from the painting, not offended, not especially shocked or moved, not even terribly engaged by it, and walked with the children to the next room."



From the land: Frieda Locke's 'Still Life with Flowers' on show at the Javett Centre. / Images courtesy of Javett Art Centre