

SOUTH AFRICA REPORT

EXILES' RETURN

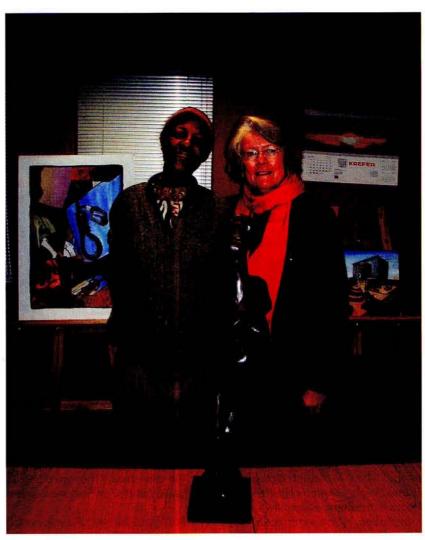
Spurred by a donation from a former Australian diplomat and collector, the Ifa Lethu Foundation today strives to repatriate "struggle-era" works by South Africa's largely self-taught black artists.

BY STEVEN C. DUBIN

SOUTH AFRICA UNDER apartheid was a place of secrets, lies, disinformation, cover-ups and censorship-along with pervasive physical and psychological trauma. But the establishment of democracy in 1994 has spawned the desire for healing, as well as attempts to recover whatever has been lost, be it tangible or intangible. On the artistic front, this means recuperating the visual landscape of that period-most notably, the work of black artists who by and large were shunned by local white audiences and institutions. The recovery initiative aims to enlarge our understanding of contemporaneous creative expressions, credit people whose accomplishments have been overlooked and establish a legacy for future generations (the so-called "born-frees"). It is a daunting task. But history is being rewritten in part through efforts by the Ifa Lethu ("Our Heritage") Foundation, which repatriates art taken out of the country by diplomats, journalists and other foreigners during the 1970s and '80s. Behind this undertaking lies a tale of past intrigue and present-day generosity.

The story goes back to a cheeky 23-year-old Australian on her first diplomatic posting, to Pretoria, in 1974. Diane Johnstone, while still a student, had demonstrated against a tour of the all-white South African Springboks rugby team to her country in 1971. To her horror, she arrived in South Africa at a time when it was not unusual to see police beat black people mercilessly in the streets. One of Johnstone's primary duties as Third Secretary was to supply political reportage, which could directly impact her government's policy-making. But the black townships were essentially off-limits to whites. The arts became her point of entry.

Johnstone was befriended by two American diplomats, Jock Covey and Frank Strovas, who had established their



Diane Johnstone with artist Michael Mmutle at the Ifa Lethu Foundation. Photo Carolyn Schoeman.

bona fides among local black activists by organizing multiracial jazz sessions. Many of the musicians were visual artists as well—musical themes are commonplace in the works produced then—and only six months into her assignment Johnstone organized an exhibition shown over a weekend in her apartment.

Pretoria's neighborhood of Sunnyside was then a white Afrikaner stronghold.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW
"Home and Away: A Return to the
South" at the Iziko Old Town House,
Greenmarket Square, Cape Town,
through Jan. 25, 2011.

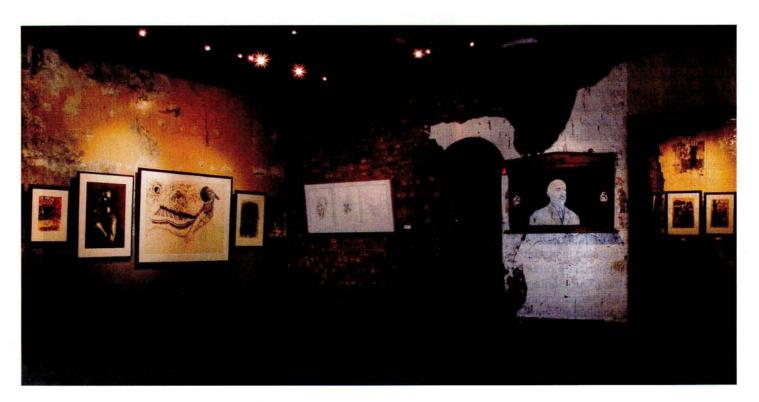
The racially mixed crowd attending Johnstone's event outraged her neighbors, who pressured the landlord to evict her. The young diplomat became a cause célèbre: a local newspaper headline trumpeted "Aussie Girl Told to Quit Blacks in Flat." Security police rifled through her belongings while she was at work, her lease was canceled, and her car and next home were bugged. She was shadowed and received death threats.

Johnstone became the go-to person for local black artists, musicians and activists after Covey left the country. And upon her own departure in 1976, she passed the baton to a newly out of the country, an episode featured in the film *Cry Freedom*.

Johnstone and Haigh jeopardized their jobs by what they did, but black artists risked even more: harassment, arrest and state-sanctioned violence. Jeff Mpataki, an acknowledged leader among these artists, once showed up at the Australian embassy after being severely beaten. Bloodied, with his face hideously swollen, he told Johnstone that he'd been interrogated by police about what he knew of her activities. He'd refused to cooperate with them. Despite such dangers, the artists continued their relationships with the diplomats, a meaningful link for them to the world outside

the politics of the art to being interested in the art itself as well."

Johnstone's first purchase was a semiabstract sculpture made from a railway tie by Ezekiel Madiba. Representing a woman, it appears, according to Johnstone, to meld African and modernist stylization. The artist had shown up unannounced at her door. His asking price? Seventy rand, the sum of his back rent (a bit more than \$70—not a substantial amount of money at the time, but not insignificant either). White South Africans had scant exposure to such work, perhaps precisely because, as Johnstone believes, it possesses tremendous power: "Whites had been



arrived fellow Australian diplomat, Bruce Haigh. He also organized athome exhibitions, which always turned into parties. Haigh reminisces: "In those days people danced the Bump. And we'd braai [grill] meat and drink a lot of beer. The artists, like all artists, loved music."1 On one occasion police blocked both ends of Haigh's street, checked visitors' passbooks and generally bullied his guests.2 Today he shrugs this off as absurd: "It just meant that it became a longer party; there was no way to go anywhere." Haigh was a friend of Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko and helped spirit the banned white journalist Donald Woods

the townships. "They were *tremendously* brave people," Johnstone declares.³

ART WAS INITIALLY a means to an end for Johnstone and Haigh: it gave them entrée into the political underground. But the art quickly proved to be irresistible in its own right. Both Australians bought pieces that they liked—some for their political message, others for their esthetic appeal. Johnstone recalls, "If you went to a [white-oriented] gallery like the Pretoria Art Museum, there were these very insipid landscapes and rather dull portraits. But this work [by nonwhite artists] was so vigorous. I moved from being interested just in

trained to see black South Africans as less than human, frankly. How could they possibly think that way any longer if they saw works like this? Not possible."

Johnstone eventually assembled a collection of 15 works; Haigh, 33. As they were posted elsewhere during their respective diplomatic careers—Kenya, Nepal, Southern Rhodesia, Indonesia, Pakistan—Johnstone and Haigh rehung their collections in each new locale. Illuminating the quotidian realms of South African work and leisure, this art revealed to people throughout the world both the horrors of life under apartheid and the humanity of the people who were its victims. As Johnstone



This spread, three views of the exhibition "Home and Away," 2010, showing (above) anti-apartheid posters, (below) "wearable art" designed by students, and (left) paintings and works on paper. Photos Anthea Pokroy.

observes, "Right in the midst of these townships, which were oppressed and locked away, there were these really talented individuals. And the message was that 'these people are like you."

At the close of the exhibition in her flat in 1974—a time when the stranglehold of apartheid made it difficult for anyone to imagine a fundamentally different future—the artists presented Johnstone with an untitled 1974 Hugh Nolutshungu painting. Showing an armless figure with a downcast face, it is inscribed with the simple words "Dedicated to a very courageous lady." Johnstone pledged then and there to give whatever art she acquired back to South Africa once the country enjoyed black majority rule. Since she did not expect that change to occur in her lifetime, she wrote the provision into her will. Johnstone told those gathered that evening, "I promise you that my collection will return, so that all the people of South Africa will see what you have achieved in these terrible times."

Of late, the repatriation of cultural property has become a hotly contested global issue. "Would you give back a pirate's chest of treasure?" asks Sipho Ndebele, a post-'60s "struggle-era"

artist who now teaches art to children under the auspices of the Ifa Lethu Foundation.⁴ But since the foundation's launch in 2005, individuals from 16 countries have voluntarily returned 310 artworks to South Africa. Ifa Lethu does not pay its donors. Yet, according to CEO Narissa Ramdhani, "The repatriation process has occurred without too much effort on our part because of our marketing strategies [such as hosting consular events in various countries]. People approach us without us having to find them."⁵

For all their munificence, donors even those who are philosophically committed to repatriation—sometimes find it difficult to relinquish art that has become entwined with their personal histories and identities. Ramdhani says "HOME AND AWAY," AN
EXHIBITION CURATED
BY CAROL BROWN AND
FEATURING ABOUT 85 WORKS,
DEBUTED LAST JUNE IN
A CENTURY-OLD PRISON
COMPLEX PERCHED ABOVE
JOHANNESBURG.

the main concern voiced by potential donors is that their artworks might be sold, should the foundation encounter financial difficulties. But that is legally precluded: the collection is held in trust for the people of South Africa, and works cannot be deaccessioned.

Johnstone transferred her collection to the Pretoria Art Museum on Freedom Day 2003.6 She and Haigh then mobilized a group of people to oversee repatriation efforts, drawing on networks they had maintained since working in South Africa. They enlisted, for example, anti-apartheid activist Mamphela Ramphele as well as Raymond Louw, a prominent journalist. Dirkie Offringa, chief curator of the Pretoria Art Museum, and journalist Tom Nevin became key players as well. Thus, after two years, Ifa Lethu was born. An NGO funded by the South African Department of Arts and Culture and corporate sponsors such as BHP Billiton (a global mining group), it preserves art and other forms of cultural heritage, promotes national reconciliation and helps create jobs. On June 14, 2010, it launched its first exhibition, "Home and Away: A Return to the South," featuring approximately 85 paintings, drawings, prints, posters and mixed-medium works



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selected by Carol Brown, a well-known South African curator and writer.⁷

THE IFA LETHU FOUNDATION wished to premiere "Home and Away" in a historically significant setting last June, when all eyes were drawn to South Africa during the World Cup. The choice was three rooms and a passageway in Johannesburg's Old Fort, part of a sprawling century-old prison complex perched above the city center. That particular penal institution was reserved for white male prisoners from 1893 to 1983; non-whites were confined in the adjoining Number Four, also known as the Native Prison, which holds the dubious distinction of having held Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela at different times. (Like many men of his generation, artist-teacher Ndebele can show you the cell that he once occupied there.) Today the entire site, designated the Constitution Hill heritage district, is home to the country's first constitutional court, constructed in part with bricks salvaged from various demolished buildings in the precinct.

The structure that served as the show's main exhibition space features an industrial roof braced by weathered timbers, as do several New York galleries. But any similarity ends there: layers of peeling paint and trails of ancient water stains mark the old plaster, eroded in many places to reveal the brick beneath. Pipes and archaic electrical outlets protrude from the walls; soot covers surfaces; and a metaltopped table and double sink trigger visions of unspeakable acts. One room is secured by a sturdy metal door, topped by a fanlight of sorts formed by a semicircle of sharp spikes. And an endless grid of barbed wire, hung overhead like a devilish set of box springs,

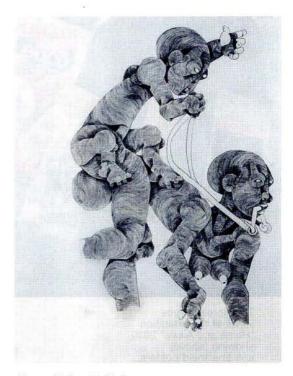
tops the concrete corridor that runs outdoors.

The Old Fort is a chilling place: on a winter's day, the interiors quickly numb your feet, and the cold penetrates your entire body. You can only imagine what it must have been like to be held as an inmate in these spaces that have never been heated. All in all, this is an architecture not just of confinement but of personal degradation.

Brown's curatorial brief was to highlight Ifa Lethu's collection, which includes works by such South African luminaries as Dumile



Feni, Lucky Sibiva, Gerard Sekoto, Thamsangwa (Thami) Mnyele and Durant Sihlali. (The foundation's holdings are all by male artists, reflecting the fact that, to this day, black women in South Africa gravitate overwhelmingly to traditional crafts rather than contemporary fine art.) But Brown decided to encompass a broader view of visual culture, including anti-apartheid posters digitally printed onto vinyl sheets and hung within the passageway; selections from the Art Against Apartheid collection, a global initiative started in 1983 by two artists, one French (Ernest Pignon-Ernest) and the other Spanish (Antonio Saura), to show solidarity with the South African struggle; and "wearable art" designed by students enrolled in one of Ifa Lethu's creative skills projects. The outfits were cordoned off in a room and suspended from the ceiling on wire



Above, Nathaniel (Nat) Ntwayakgosi Mokgosi: *Untitled 1*, 1973, pencil on paper, 49½ by 39¾ inches.

Left, Winston Churchill Masakeng Saoli: Untitled, n.d., mixed mediums, 241/8 by 131/2 inches.

mesh body forms. Swinging freely and lit both from within and above, they created ghostly presences in the historically fraught locale.

The Art Against Apartheid project had collected 80 works by international artists and had been exhibited in 40 countries. The pieces were eventually presented to the South African people, put on display in parliament in 1996 and subsequently archived at the Robben Island Museum Mayibuye Center at the University of the Western Cape in Cape Town. Brown's rationale for exhibiting part of that collection was twofold: the works had never received wide exposure within South Africa, and they provide an intriguing counterpoint to what South African artists were doing at the same time. Says Brown:

There were many people outside of South Africa who were commenting on the South African situation and were expressing solidarity with the struggle, who were imagining what South Africa was like. But South Africans never knew much . . . about [those activities] because of the cultural boycott. . . . Unless one was fairly privi-

leged, or in an academic environment, and could travel, you didn't really know what the tendencies were overseas, or what people were saying about us.⁸

For "Home and Away," now on tour after its Johannesburg launch, Brown has interspersed about 25 works from the Art Against Apartheid collection among 60 works from Ifa Lethu. In addition to performance and installation artist Pignon-Ernest, international names include Robert Rauschenberg, Saul Steinberg, Christian Boltanski, Roy Lichtenstein and Richard Hamilton. Brown notes that the foreign artists tended to focus on leaders such as Biko, Che Guevara and Nelson Mandela (whose image was illegal within South Africa for many years). "That was how it was being envisioned from overseas," she says. "That the hero was going to save South Africa. . . . Meanwhile, so was the ordinary man."

PRINTS AND DRAWINGS predominate in this show, since black artists generally had access to only the simplest and least expensive materials. A number of monochromatic lino prints reflect the style developed at the Evangelical Lutheran Church's rurally based Art and Craft Centre, founded in 1962 at Rorke's Drift, one of the only places in the country where black artists could receive formal art training—a situation that has been changing, albeit slowly, since the emergence of true democratic rule in 1994. Brown has loosely organized "Home and Away" around the following themes: Suffering and Conflict; Visions of Self/The Hero; The Body; Work, Leisure and Culture; Another Reality/Abstraction: Whose Land Is It?; and The Power of Words. She means these topics to be suggestive, not prescriptive, and recognizes that some works could be appropriate in multiple categories.

One of the revelations of "Home and Away" is that the South African works are far more passionate and visually arresting than those done by outsiders. South African artists, operating on home ground, had a distinct creative advantage; their works resonate with feeling and authenticity. The selections from Art Against Apartheid, on the other hand, strike a

false note. They seem either doctrinaire or socially detached—rote examples of First World esthetic experiments.

Brown made a considered decision to employ the term "struggle-era artworks" rather than "resistance art" or "township art." The resistance category is not applicable, because not all the drawings and paintings explicitly address political subjects. Many offer muted scenes, intimate slices of life. A boy plays his flute during a moment of reverie; workmen relax at lunchtime as a well-dressed woman strolls by; a woman silently reads a newspaper, an image that looks like it could have been produced by the Federal Arts Project (save for the title of her paper, the Soweto News, and the bravura name of the artist, Winston Churchill Masakeng Saoli); a shoemaker confidently plies his trade with a quiet dignity; and two women rendered in a style reminiscent of Alice Neel breastfeed their infants.

sure, township art confirmed the hoariest stereotypes held by whites in a treacly manner that Carol Brown dismisses as "big eyes, big mouths, and big hands." Prodigiously produced, and specifically targeting a white, touristy audience, township art distilled real conditions into caricatures. Yet not everyone dismisses it completely. Ndebele recalls, "It was a derogatory name, you know. 'Township art': it was not worthy of being exhibited. But the township was our life." And it's from that multilayered environment that many artists drew their inspiration.

Brown opts to present work that was made primarily for the artistic satisfaction of doing so, not simply for commercial purposes. The art in "Home and Away" is much more complex than what has generally been shown from this era. One standout is Fikile Magadlela's compelling chalkand-charcoal drawing Machine Horse II



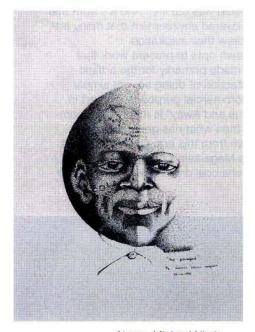
Fikile Magadlela: Machine Horse II, 1975, chalk and charcoal on paper, 203/4 by 303/8 inches.

Moreover, a majority of the pieces shown challenge the category of "township art," a catchall for work produced by black artists primarily until the rise of the Black Consciousness movement in the mid-'70s. Township art projected life in these segregated and impoverished realms as inherently tragic and pathetic. While these were tough places, to be

1975), which evokes the seductive power of the legendary Trojan Horse. On first glance, it is a highly stylized rendition of the animal, with a ramlike head and a body fortified by what appears to be armor and rivets. But study it, and you'll realize that the legs suggest the grip and magazine of an assault rifle and the tail could be a

trigger. In an era when the mere suggestion of defiance by a black person could be a punishable offense, this was a subtly subversive image.

Tellingly, three of the artworks depict a divided self. Nathaniel (Nat) Ntwayakgosi Mokgosi's untitled 1985 silkscreen features a delicate-looking child incongruously raising a clenched fist. According to Mokgosi, he was



Above, Michael Nkolo Maapola: Self Portrayed, 1975, pen on paper, 8½ by 7 inches.

Right, Dikobe Wa Mogale (Benedict) Martins: Apartheid Kills, 1974, pen and watercolor on paper, 30% by 203/4 inches.

reflecting on the student uprising in Soweto nearly a decade earlier, when thousands of black youths banded together to protest their inferior education, thereby inaugurating the final stage of the anti-apartheid struggle. One half of the child's body is missing. "The cooler side is cut off," Mokgosi explains. "I showed the anger." 10 Michael Nkolo Maapola's 1975 drawing Self Portrayed shows the artist's man-in-the-moon face split down the middle into dark and light halves. The pen-and-watercolor Apartheid Kills (1974) by Dikobe Wa Mogale (Benedict) Martins presents the back view of a human body entwined by a gigantic snake. One side

is skeletal, having been destroyed in apartheid's grip; the other still ripples with muscle, but who knows for how long? Fortunately, Martins himself did not succumb to such inhumanity; he became a member of parliament in the post-apartheid government.

A 1973-74 series of large, untitled pencil drawings by Mokgosi demonstrates a style practiced by other artists at the time and reflects a distinctive source of inspiration. Mokgosi's figures are spastic animal/ human hybrids whose body parts curl. stretch, braid and pile up in bizarre configurations.11 Hands and feet are bulbously twisted and gnarled like tuberous roots; figures strike out aggressively or piggyback upon one another. Asked why he created distorted bodies, Mokgosi responded, "Because our lives were diseased." In addition, his characters look like they have been flayed, exposing an intricate musculature; the density of his cross-hatching builds up such volume that the figures appear to be sculptural rather than simply two-dimensional.

Many of the works in "Home and Away" present individuals who appear to be heavily burdened, weary from the physical and moral gravity of their existential situations. But Magadlela's drawing *Melodious Journey through* Cosmos (1974) is a flight of fancy, featuring a cyborg whose backbone is a piano keyboard, gliding beyond the chaos of the everyday with its eyes closed. A hand reaches out to play the spine-instrument. Significantly, it is a black hand. Magadlela explained to Johnstone that this image reflects his vision of the future, his belief in the inevitability of majority rule.

The drawing also incorporates an orb in the upper left corner, a symbol that recurs in the work of various artists. The orb generally appears as an area of pure luminosity; several artists explained to Johnstone that this represents "the light on the hill." Notably, in the case of *Melodious Journey through Cosmos* the dark is eclipsing the light. In Johnstone's words, "This is a very political piece, but you need to know what he was trying to say"—namely that the future held growing promise for black Africans.

The inclusion of several paintings by Victor Gordon within the Ifa Lethu collection demonstrates the diversity of creative production during the apartheid years. Gordon is a white man of South African birth who, like many of his cohorts, chose exile—in this case, to Australia—over national military service. (He had completed one tour of duty and was soon to be called up again.) In

A Transposed Landscape (1989), he depicted what no black artist living in South Africa at the time would have dared to: a man of indistinct but nonwhite race lies dying in the street, blood oozing from his head and along the pavement-a vertiginous, abject image (after Manuel Alvarez Bravo's 1934 photograph Striking Worker, Assassinated) which can barely be contained within the frame.

REPRESENTING, literally, the return of the repressed, the Ifa Lethu cache offers a rich vein of material yet to be fully explored, and holds the potential to substantially expand our perceptions about South African art history. For example, Brown sees strong affinities between how the body was depicted under



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apartheid and how it is depicted amid the HIV/AIDS crisis today. She believes that artistic expression in the 1970s and '80s was a significant precursor to current practice: "If one looks at the show and examines the fractured body, the dismembered body, there are very many comparisons. . . . The dead body, as well as the Christ figure . . . has become a very strong symbol in AIDS activist art, as has been the case in protest and resistance art internationally."

Ifa Lethu has facilitated the repatria-

decades of oppression. Human rights advocacy is gradually superseding the recovery of art in Ifa Lethu's mission.

Many of the artists represented in the collection did not survive to enjoy this homecoming. Death came to many of them much too early through violence or accidents; now the stresses of exile, alcoholism, HIV/AIDS or simply age have taken many more. But in the words of Mokgosi, "I'm very proud and happy for the people who are seeing my work, so they can go on

> further, further to the other gento the catalogue for "Home and Away," he remarks, "[The works] will keep on rolling and going into books, and they'll be shown all around." the walls of the Old Fort, Victor Gordon reflects, "I couldn't conceive then that they would serve kids now and be able to educate

Haigh likewise emphasize the role that these artworks-which they relished seeing on their own walls but which could only have limited social impact there—may play in nation building. Haigh notes, "I think it's good that voungsters particularly can see what was happening, that there was a dynathey didn't roll over to apartheid. They actually were producing high quality works, and now they can be seen."

that is equal parts recompense and revelation, dramatizes the resolve and creativity of artists during the dismal, tyrannical years of apartheid. Moreover, it commemorates the remarkable altruism of individuals who have returned treasured possessions, and reveals great vision on the part of those who are the new stewards of this work. O

telling the story erations." Pointing Viewing his art on the needs of little people. And what could be better?"12

Johnstone and mism, that people didn't just give in and

"Home and Away: A Return to the South" debuted at the Old Fort, Constitution Hill, Indeed, "Home and Away," a show Johannesburg [June 1-Aug. 31]. It is now at the Iziko Old Town House, Greenmarket Square, Cape Town [Oct. 15, 2010-Jan. 25, 2011], and will travel to the Durban Art Gallery [Feb. 16-Apr. 15, 2011], with additional venues pending in the U.S. and Australia. STEVEN C. DUBIN is professor of arts

administration at Teachers College, Columbia University, New York. His book on South Africa's 21st-century culture wars is forthcoming from Jacana.

1 All Bruce Haigh statements from an

interview with the author, Johannesburg,

nonwhite were required to carry a dompas

(passbook) at all times, stipulating where they were entitled to be. Routinely stopped

by police, these residents were subject

to arrest if their documents were not in

precise order. The passbook system was bitterly contested—leading, for example,

to the infamous murder of at least 69 pro-

3 All Diane Johnstone statements from an

interview with the author, Johannesburg, June 16, 2010. 4 From Sipho Ndebele's

interview with the author, Johannesburg,

June 29, 2010. 5 All Narissa Ramdhani

lic holiday commemorating South Africa's

first nonracial democratic election, held

Apr. 27, 1994. 7 Johnstone's collection

loan from the museum to Ifa Lethu. The

foundation held a one-night exhibition in

in 1993. "Home and Away" is Ifa Lethu's

with the author, Johannesburg, June 14,

2010. The cultural boycott encompassed

a variety of initiatives undertaken by antiapartheid activists, primarily in Western Europe and the U.S., to prevent artists and

entertainers from traveling to or performing

by labor unions, prominent individuals and

in South Africa. These efforts, supported

government-related entities such as the United Nations, lasted from the mid-1950s

to 1991, and took place in tandem with

international instances of disinvestment

exclusion of the country's sports teams

and refusal to purchase a number of its

export goods. 9 Warren Siebrits argues

that artists such as Feni developed these stylized bodily exaggerations to dramatize

the impact of poverty and deprivation, but

that the technique became standardized

and stale; see his exhibition catalogue Art and Urbanisation: South Africa 1940-

1971, Johannesburg, Warren Siebrits Gallery, 2003. 10 From Nat Mokgosi's

interview with the author, Johannesburg, June 29, 2010. 11 See John Peffer's

wide-ranging discussion in the chapter

"Becoming Animal: The Tortured Body during Apartheid," in his Art and the End

of Apartheid, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2009, pp. 41-73. 12 From Victor Gordon's interview with the author,

Johannesburg, June 14, 2010.

in South African business operations,

Sandton, a Johannesburg suburb, in 2005. Johnstone and Haigh also displayed their

collections during Africa Week in Canberra

first professionally curated exhibition. 8 All Carol Brown statements from an interview

was shown at the Pretoria Art Museum in October 2004 and is now on permanent

statements from a telephone interview with the author, June 24, 2010. 6 A pub-

testors by police in Sharpeville in 1960.

June 16, 2010. 2 People classified as



Victor Gordon: A Transposed Landscape, 1989, oil on canvas, 783/4 by 873/4 inches. All photos this article courtesy Ifa Lethu Foundation.

tion of artworks but does not intend to become the ultimate repository for them. Foundation head Ramdhani hopes that a permanent home will be designated for the collection within five years, with the proviso that works remain on view to the general public. Several museums are courting the organization for this privilege. Meanwhile, Ifa Lethu has used the collection as the springboard for a broader range of activities. A van takes high-quality reproductions of the art to rural areas for educational outreach. Leaders aim to foster the next generation of creative workers through skills training and enterprise development. And Ramdhani strongly believes that a vital missing link in the country's heritage has been restored; she hopes that these artworks will help solidify a sense of pride among people still struggling from the debilitating consequences of