

'Shield and Spear' documentary examines post-Apartheid arts

The documentary, 'Shield and Spear', screening at Durban International Film Festival, is directed, written and shot by Petter Ringbom, a New York-based director of documentary and narrative films.

It examines post-apartheid South Africa through its exuberant, provocative and sometimes fractious arts community.

In May 2012, a six-foot-tall painting ignited a firestorm of controversy in South Africa when the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg mounted an exhibit of artist Brett Murray's politically inspired work. The show included 'The Spear', a cheeky portrait of scandal-plagued South African president Jacob Zuma, which prompted a landmark lawsuit, death threats against the artist and massive street protests.



The passionate debate surrounding the painting inspired filmmaker Petter Ringbom to explore South Africa's community of artists in his feature-length documentary. Coming exactly 20 years after the country's historic first democratic elections in 1994, it explores a constellation of stories about art, music, identity, race and freedom of expression in South Africa by examining the lives and work of a diverse group of artists.

From bustling international metropolises such as Cape Town and Johannesburg to the traditional townships of Soweto and Khayelitsha, Ringbom observes what it means to be an artist in a fledgling democracy and finds the indomitable creative urge burning brightly. In cafes, clubs and galleries, and at all levels of society, politically charged words and imagery fill the rooms and the streets of South Africa, and spill over onto the international stage.

"In an innately conservative country, which still bears the scars of almost a half-century of apartheid, the brutal state-sponsored system of racial segregation, we discover that everyone-black, white or coloured, Afrikaans or English speaker, affluent or poor-is struggling to find their place in the new South Africa." says Ringbom.

Wide array of artists

He interviews a wide array of visual artists, designers and musicians, starting with Murray, whose provocative portrait launched the filmmaker's odyssey. A renowned social satirist, Murray, has addressed issues of race and politics in his work since the early 1980s. Art lovers worldwide collect his work, including rapper and hip-hop impresario P. Diddy. Murray recounts with some disbelief the furore that his exhibition created as the ANC sued to have the painting removed from the show, and others called for burning the painting and even public stoning of the artist. The 'Spear' became a symbol of the deep divisions that remain in the country's cultural landscape.

In his film, Ringbom highlights the volatile fault lines that still zigzag across boundaries of race, economics, gender, class and sexual orientation while also celebrating the joy of the creative life in a 'Rainbow Nation'.

His subjects have transformed their hard-fought freedoms into highly personal, nuanced and complex commentary that they hope will alter the future of their young democracy. Many are involved in activism that aims to bring about social and political change in big and small ways.

"We didn't get here because someone was good to us," says Siyabonga Mthembu, the charismatic front man of The Brother Moves On, a performance art ensemble and band based in Johannesburg. "We got here because we fought for something. That is what Mandela kept trying to say. His whole thing that he was stressing was that you need to take ownership."



Visual history

Ringbom also profiles photographer and activist Zanele Muholi, whose art documents the lives of the LGBT community in South Africa, which is often ostracised and lives in constant danger of violence. Her work has been exhibited in Europe and North America as well as in Africa. In 2013, Muholi won the Index Freedom of Expression Award for Arts, an honour for which the Russian collective, Pussy Riot, were also nominated.

"I do what I do to present a visual history that speaks to us and to inform generations to come," she says. "I'd be lying to you if I said I was just taking photographs for fun. Photography is not a hobby to me. Photography is about politics. Whatever I am producing is to make sure that I push the political agenda. I'm paving the way for the next person who comes after me."

In addition to creating sensitive portraits of gay and transgendered men and women, she has founded Inkanyiso ("one who brings illumination"), an organisation dedicated to exposing the multitude of hate crimes against women and the LGBT community that are ignored by the government and mainstream media. "We document our history and provide a platform for LGBT individuals to tell their stories without being judged."



Focused artists

Other interviews with contemporary South Africa's innovative artists, designers and musicians includes musicians BLK JKS, Gazelle, Yolanda Fyrus, Fokofpolisiekar and design collective the Smarteez, with appearances by Ferial Haffajee, DJ Invizable, Motèl Mari and more.

The executive producers are Marquise Stillwell and Christophe Charlier. Producers are Alysa Nahmias and Ringbom. Ringbom edits the film. It will be screened on 21 July 21 at 8.30pm at Suncoast CineCentre, 22 July 22 at 4pm (free screening) at the Elangeni Hotel and on 27 July at 2pm at the Elizabeth Sneddon Theatre.

For more information about the Durban International Film Festival, go to www.durbanfilmfest.co.za.

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>