

Biographical Information

Every great piece of art raises a question and expresses a point of view. Whether it is overtly political or not, does not change the fact that society and culture are profoundly influenced by it. I have been brought up exposed to the relationship between the arts and politics. My father is a politician and my mom is a poet, so that in my heart art and politics collide. My outlook on life has been shaped by the numerous life-changing experiences that made me the person I am today. I am a self-driven citizen of the world, constantly challenging myself and pushing my limits to learn about international politics as well as political and social messages conveyed through art.

After fourteen years in a small, conservative town in the middle of Tunisia, I was obligated to move to the capital following my parents' divorce. Living in the cosmopolitan city, I started to develop a fascination for the visual and literary arts and learn both how to critique art, and to use art in critically analyzing political and cultural conditions in Tunisia and around the world. Tunisian society is still struggling to achieve a cultural balance between its Islamic heritage and Western influence. The impact of French colonialism is all-pervasive: I grew up speaking "Darja", a dialect that mixes Arabic and French. In colonial as well as post-colonial Tunisia, the debate has long raged as to who is entitled to represent national culture, in what language and under what circumstances. From the endless discussions between my mom and dad about whether art or politics is more important and from my own analysis of Tunisian contemporary art, I realized that art is essential in understanding the society and in comprehending the process of politicization.

My experience as a high school exchange student in Missouri opened a gateway onto the world, and was my first foray into self-exploration and testing my limits. In a remote little town in Midwest, US, I strove to become an ambassador of Tunisia. Since then I have worked hard to fulfill this aspiration. As the first student to bring the Tunisian flag into the Connecticut College community, I have done my best to honor it. As the co-founder of "Yalla Bina" (the Arabic club), the co-chair of "Atlas" (the international club), and the Arabic Language Fellow, I am bringing awareness about my culture, traditions and language while emphasizing the importance of diversity issues and of building the bridge between different cultures.

I am thrilled to be a student at Connecticut College and have all these opportunities, as well as CISLA, available to me. I have always wanted to acquire a liberal arts education and to have the freedom to tailor my academic path to fit my intellectual desires. The strict educational system in Tunisia that focused on hard sciences and consisted of passively receiving and accumulating information barely quenched my academic thirst. I am delighted by the very different educational atmosphere at Connecticut College. I have been lucky to build strong relationships with my professors who have truly been a great support inside and outside the classroom. They have pushed me intellectually and encouraged me to pursue my passions. I have decided to major in International Relations and Art History, and CISLA provides an excellent pathway in exploring the intersection between the arts and politics, particularly in post-apartheid South Africa.

Senior Integrative Project

My fascination with South Africa stems from the complex patterns that the intertwining of politics and culture produces. Since the first democratic elections in 1994, South Africa has traveled a rough road. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established in 1996 as an important element of nation building and the peace process. Reconciliation is a critical step in the establishment of solid democratic institutions, especially for regimes constructed after authoritarian or colonial rule.¹ The TRC was an effective strategy to bring to people's attention the sufferings of Apartheid's victims, and to conciliate them with the perpetrators. Despite the huge positive impact of the TRC, major issues such as racism were never reviewed or even mentioned in the course of the national hearings. The new government shifted the discourse attempting to build the concept of the "rainbow nation" or the "miracle" of South Africa. As Anne Coombes noted, however, it is essential to acknowledge the issues of race and segregation, so deeply entrenched in South African society. For this reason, deploying a wide range of visual culture contributed to the redefinition of the new "nation" and "identity".² Areas

¹ Ritual and the Politics of Reconciliation, p207

² History After Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa, chapter 6.

on which I focus include institutions that display works of contemporary South African artists and historic installations, both sites and museums that narrate and commemorate the democratization of the country.

In the last decade and a half, museum and gallery exhibitions of South African art have made clear the value of the visual arts in redefining culture preparing the way for justice and reconciliation. In doing preliminary research for this proposal, I have looked into artists as varied as Alexander Jane, Zwelethu Mthethwa³, Sandile Goje, and William Kentridge, each of whose work casts light on the multifaceted concerns of contemporary South Africa. I am most fascinated, though, by Kentridge⁴. His extraordinary body of work, which includes pieces that present a vision of the indignities and atrocities suffered during Apartheid, challenges both the citizens and authorities of South Africa to confront and exorcize the past. For its own part, the South African government has formulated a policy to construct public national museums on lands with historical significance for Apartheid as a means of confronting the past, facilitating reconciliation and fostering democracy in South Africa. The District Six museum in Cape Town is a site of nostalgia, through which the government wishes to give form to society's will to remember and forgive. Equally important is the construction of Museum Africa in Johannesburg in 1994, next to the Market Theatre and the Kippie's nightclub, both venues associated with anti-Apartheid activities and violent reprisals by the Apartheid government. Anne Coombes notes that the museum was established to "be a dynamic museum of the community where a diverse history and heritage of Southern Africa is explored and presented, to be an educational force for unity and reconciliation".⁵ In 2004, the Constitution Hill Court complex was built in Johannesburg on the site of the Old Fort Prison, where Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela had once been jailed. The complex, comprising court and administrative buildings as well as museum and display spaces, commemorated to the tenth anniversary of the constitution. Its growing collection of paintings, prints, fiber art and sculptures brings together art and justice in South Africa's

³ Studio 360 website, "New culture for a new South Africa."

⁴ "William Kentridge, Five Themes" exhibition

⁵ History After Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa, p175

most important public building promoting a civil society by encouraging civic responsibility and popular participation in the process of democracy.⁶

My proposed Senior Integrative project is an investigation of the role that museums such as District Six, Constitution Hill Court and Museum Africa have played in post-Apartheid South Africa in the construction of a new national identity. I am especially interested in two interrelated issues: first, tracking changes in contemporary art museum programming strategies over the last decade and a half, and second analyzing how works produced by politically conscious contemporary artists reflect and highlight for the museum-going audience the new political and social realities. I would also consider the role of the above-mentioned museums and historic sites in the larger cultural ecology of South Africa. In preparing the proposal, I have contacted Professor Steven Dubin of Columbia University, who mentioned several very interesting developments in the blurring of institutional boundaries in part because these museums operate on such shoestring budgets. I had a direct confirmation of this when I traveled to New York last weekend to visit one of three galleries operated by David Krut Arts Resources; the other two are in Johannesburg and Cape Town. I had the incredible good fortune of meeting the principle, David Krut. He kindly spoke to me about my project, explaining that "David Krut Art Resources is an alternative institution for educating the arts and it has been tremendously influential for ten years." Krut is collaborating with the directors of Constitution Hill in producing a documentary and publishing volumes on the complex, including *Art and Justice* and *Light on a Hill*. This collaboration raises many questions about how these institutions work together to further common aims.

Here on campus, I have been able to consult many members of the faculty who have freely offered a wide range of advice and contacts. Professor Barbara Zabel (Art History) gave me the brochure of the exhibition "South Africa Today, Contemporary South African Printmakers", held here at the College in October 2005. I later met with Professor Pamela Marks (Studio Art), who organized the show. She encouraged me to look into the activities of David Krut. Professor Christopher Steiner (Art History) provided me with contact information for specialists in South African art and museology. Among them are Professor Kim Miller (Wheaton College), and Professor Steven C.

⁶ The International Coalition of Sites of Conscience website

Dubin, author of *Transforming Museums: Mounting Queen Victoria in a Democratic South Africa*. I am engaged in email exchanges with them both and I am really excited by the interest that they have expressed in my project.

Internships

My ideal internship would be either at the Constitution Hill Court complex or with the David Krut gallery in Johannesburg. While working with curators at Constitution Hill, I would make time to review the content of the exhibitions and their relation to the institutional mission. I would also collect archival data in order to trace the change in museum strategies. Audience surveys would reveal the impact of the different programs offered by the museum.

Interning for David Krut would provide me with data and insight of a different sort. His Johannesburg gallery, opened in March 2007 to provide a venue for multimedia collaborations and experimentations amongst contemporary artists. When Mr. Krut and I talked about what an internship with him might involve, he suggested that I could help him document the work of the artists whose careers he has fostered for the last 20 years.

Study Abroad

Already in my first semester at Conn, I indulged my passion for absorbing foreign cultures and learning languages by starting Spanish, my fourth language. I am considering a program of study abroad in Buenos Aires at UBA University. The academic experience will serve at least two purposes: 1) To broaden the base of my SIP study in South Africa by expanding my knowledge of how the issue of reconciliation has been approached by Argentina's post-dictatorship government; 2) To give me to opportunity to examine the relationship between politically engaged artists and the process of democratization. I should also note that the South African TRC was essentially modeled on the Argentine Truth Commission for forced disappearances, and was established in 1983 to recognize human rights violations and injustices committed under the military regime.

Supportive courses

In order to build a sound foundation for my SIP project, I plan to take these four supporting courses:

- AHI 211 - AFRICAN ART: In this course, I will learn about the material culture of Africa and the African Diaspora. It will prepare me to understand better the social and other function of objects in their original context and as they are transformed through display in museums and galleries.
- AHI 263 - DEBATING MUSEUMS: With segments on topics including censorship, discrimination, racism, nationalism, repatriation of cultural property. This course will expand my knowledge of museological studies, preparing me to analyze the Constitution Hill Court and interpret its exhibition strategies.
- GOV 323 - SOUTH AFRICAN POLITICS: This course will scrutinize about the political economy of the apartheid system, as well as the consequences of this system for post-apartheid politics. I will acquire knowledge about the role of the TRC in the reconciliation process and in the democratization of South Africa.
- HIS 305 - AFRICA SINCE WORLD WAR II: This course examines the process of decolonialization and the legacies of the imperial experience in politics, economics, and society. Issues include neocolonialism, the fragility of states, democratization and the role of the military, racism and the apartheid regimes, and other issues facing contemporary Africa. It will give me the historical background to help me develop a well-rounded picture of South Africa and hence be able to reflect on the implications of the relations between the arts and politics.

Bibliography

-Coombes, Annie E. *History after Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003.

-"Constitution Hill." *International Coalition of Sites of Conscience*. Web. 15 Nov. 2010.
<http://www.sitesofconscience.org/sites/constitution-hill/en/>

-Ross, Marc H. "Ritual and the Politics of Reconciliation." *From Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation*. Ed. Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov. New York: Oxford UP, 2004.

-Kentridge, William, Mark Rosenthal, and Michael Auping. *William Kentridge: Five Themes*. San Francisco, CA: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2009.