

OPINION / COLUMNISTS

HALF ART

CHRIS THURMAN: Lesotho invasion under Mandela remembered

The centrepiece of The Island exhibition is a film entitled Invasion, based on eyewitness accounts of SA's military occupation of Lesotho

17 MARCH 2017 - 06:01 by CHRIS THURMAN



Bullied. Still image from the film Invasion (Simon Cush, 2016), based on witness accounts of SA's military occupation of Lesotho in 1998. Picture: SUPPLIED

Stevenson Johannesburg is one of the most dramatically situated art galleries in SA. The building in which it occupies the ground floor, 62Juta Street, is hardly an architectural masterpiece.

Once you are inside, the view through the big plate-glass windows of its front façade is not exactly beautiful. But this is Braamfontein – and that means there is always something interesting to see.

BLPremium
Need to stay informed?

Subscribe from R120 per month to get the best of Business Day, the Financial Mail, Business Times, RDM and more, along with perks such as exclusive Financial Times content.



MOST READ

1. PETER BRUCE: Finally, the anti-Zuma camp moves
OPINION / BRUCE'S LIST
2. CARTOON: Ramaphosa makes his move
CARTOON

Stevenson's corner of Juta Street is, for the most part, a tranquil and tree-lined spot. Look south and your eyes are drawn skywards to the apex of the Nelson Mandela Bridge. That, however, is where the urban reverie ends. Across the road from the gallery are the headquarters of rubbish-removal company Pikitup.

You know when you hear news headlines about striking Pikitup workers? That's where they are. Protest action is a regular feature of life in Braamfontein.

Students from Wits University have been known to take to the streets in disciplined formation, although this tradition was tainted during the #FeesMustFall conflict in 2016.

Marches to or from Cosatu House are not uncommon, as are swathes of red EFF berets. The Constitutional Court is nearby. And, as I discovered this week while visiting the gallery, there is also a district office of the Department of Basic Education in the vicinity.

That, it transpired, was the explanation for the throngs of schoolchildren crossing the bridge and heading north (at the time of writing, details of the pupils' complaints against the department remain sketchy).

I wanted to imagine they were on their way to catch a matinee at the Joburg Theatre. But as the stream of pupils continued unabated, it became clear that there were more of them than could be accommodated in a 1,000-seater auditorium. And they were not in a holiday mood.

It was 3pm; the protesting pupils had finished school for the day and there was no need to rehash the "education before liberation" versus "liberation through education" debate.

But I did have an overwhelming urge to rush into the street and call as many children as could fit into the gallery. Here, I wanted to say, was a story they would not find in their textbooks; here was knowledge they would not acquire through their state-endorsed syllabus.

3. LETTER: Jumping to conclusion
OPINION / LETTERS
4. Secret ballot scares off a bully mentality
OPINION
5. EDITORIAL: Optimum deal way off optimal
OPINION / EDITORIALS



Here was a place, a people and a piece of history – or, rather, an episode written out of history – about which I myself was largely ignorant.

The centrepiece of the exhibition on display at Stevenson, Simon Gush's *The Island*, is a film entitled *Invasion*, based on eyewitness accounts of SA's military occupation of Lesotho in 1998.

Almost no one remembers this now, but it was one of the most controversial aspects of the Nelson Mandela presidency: ostensibly under the aegis of the Southern African Development Community and at the invitation of Lesotho's Prime Minister, Pakalitha Mosisili, who feared that a coup was imminent (after he had been accused of rigging elections), SA dispatched 600 soldiers across the border.

The Lesotho defence force boasted more than three times that number, and although the South Africans had superior fire power, they met with strong resistance. Some 60 people were killed – including civilians – and although SA emerged dominant, perceptions of the country as a regional bully were reinforced. There was rioting in Maseru. The episode was and is a sobering reminder that, among the many legacies of apartheid, the ANC government also inherited the mantle of colonial power from the National Party.

Gush's work emphasises the exploitative dynamics of the diplomatic agreements and economic ties between SA and Lesotho. Paradoxically, he notes, "the landlocked Lesotho exports water to SA in return for royalties"; extending the metaphor, he also asserts that "many leave its shores, in the long tradition of migrant labour, to the South African mines and factories".

Gush's evocative photographs of Lesotho's Katse and Mohale dams, which are so vital to SA's water supply, are matched by images of the country's limited industrial and manufacturing activities, most of them foreign-owned.

There is a sense of desolation at odds with natural beauty: the "island nation" is imprisoned by, or at best beholden to, the dry South African sea that surrounds it.

MORE FROM CHRIS THURMAN

CHRIS THURMAN: TREASURE TO BE FOUND IN