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Mandela's red Merc, strike become art

Aug 26, 2015 | Zipo-Zenkosi Ncokazi

An exhibition that deals with labour relations at East London's Mercedes-Benz plant in 1990 will open on Friday at the Ann Bryant Art Gallery.



HISTORY RECONSTRUCTED: An exhibition titled Red which deals with labour relations at the East London Mercedes Benz plant in 1990, is on display at the Ann Bryant Art Gallery for the next six weeks. Seen here is artist Simon Gush

Photograph by: STEPHANIE LLOYD, Daily Dispatch

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Red is an exhibition by Johannesburg artist Simon Gush and has previously been on display in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Grahamstown. It will run in East London until September 30.

Speaking to the Daily Dispatch on Tuesday, one of the organisers, Gary Minkley, said that when Nelson Mandela was released from prison in 1990 after serving 27 years in jail, workers at the West Bank plant decided to pay tribute to him by building a Mercedes-Benz sedan during unpaid overtime.

Later that same year, there was a sleep-in strike that lasted for nine weeks, causing the plant to shut down.

“The exhibition presents speculative reconstructions of the car body, the uniforms strikers wore and the beds they made from material in the factory during the sleep-in,” said Minkley, who is the South African Research Chairs Initiative (SARChI) chairman in social change based at the University of Fort Hare.

“The car has been dismantled and the various parts will be displayed in different areas of the gallery, with the main body being displayed outside.”

Minkley said the exhibition was associated with the 2015 African Critical Inquiry Programme (ACIP) workshop titled *Red Assembly: Time and Work*, which revolves around the question of how art can be used in presenting history.

“Normally when one is looking for information on a historical event old newspapers, books and magazine cuttings are always the first options.

“So the participants of the workshop – which includes artists, curators, philosophers and historians – will explore art, its production and its intent,” he said.

Over the next two days, invited participants will present their thoughts on the subject during a workshop that will only be open to the public at 4pm on Friday.

“Red will act as a point of reference to facilitate debate on how the meaning and issues of politics, society, art and aesthetics converge with each other,” Minkley said.

The workshop is being run in partnership with the Centre for Humanities Research (CHR) at the University of Cape Town and the Interdisciplinary Centre for Global Change (ICGC) at the University of Minnesota.

Gush said a documentary film produced in collaboration with South African playwright and actor James Cairns would also be shown.

“The documentary is central to the exhibition as it tells the story of the 1990 events through interviews with representatives from management and labour. These are juxtaposed with video footage of present-day East London.” – *Daily Dispatch*

Gush said the exhibition was first shown last year in Johannesburg and had received positive reviews. — *RDM News Wire*, ziphon@dispatch.co.za

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