

Business Day

'My Joburg' artist wins Basel prize

Jul 11, 2013 | Christina Kennedy

South African artist Wa Lehlere is on 'a project of discovery', writes Christina Kennedy

KEMANG Wa Lehlere, one of the South African contemporary art world's fastest-rising young stars, has added an important international prize to his string of local accolades — the Baloise Art Prize at this year's Art Basel art fair in Switzerland.

Johannesburg-based Wa Lehlere was one of two emerging artists awarded this sought-after prize, worth Sf30,000 each (about R325,000) during the city's annual art fair last month.

His work was being presented as part of the Stevenson Gallery's showcase; some of the pieces will be acquired by the art fair to donate to European museums.

Last year, Wa Lehlere was the winner of the Tollman Award for the Visual Arts and previously received the Spier Contemporary Award and the MTN New Contemporaries Art Award. He is not yet 30 but has already exhibited widely locally and abroad, in solo and group shows, and has benefited from residencies in New York and Switzerland.

He is having a busy year, having been part of the contingent of local artists at the South African Pavilion, curated by the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, at the 55th Venice Biennale at the end of May (two years ago, he participated in the Lyon Biennale). He adapted existing work for site-specific performances in public spaces around the picturesque Italian city.

He is now taking part in the My Joburg group show at La Maison Rouge in Paris, alongside the likes of Jane Alexander, William Kentridge and Steven Cohen, before heading to New York for a performance at the New Museum in Manhattan as part of his work for the Centre for Historical Re-enactments in Johannesburg, of which he is a co-founder.

Wa Lehlere's work excavates notions of collective and personal memory and explores the "mythology" of South African history through a variety of media, from ink drawings and video installations to giant murals and performances executed on site, with the emphasis on revealing and erasing text and pictures. He remains fascinated by how history is written and how it excludes certain narratives.

The work that made such a splash in Switzerland is a continuation and development of these themes, and was described by the Basel jury as "establish(ing) a link between the trauma and myths of SA's past and contemporary social issues. Wa Lehlere's works may be read as an archive, which demonstrates the process of forgetting and, like a collage, simultaneously opens avenues to new narratives that encourage multiple interpretations".

While on his art travels, he has been immersing himself in the many new trends displayed by his modern and contemporary art peers.

"There are too many to mention.... Travelling outside of South Africa is always a project of discovery."

Originally from Gugulethu in Cape Town and a co-founder of the Gugulethu artists' collective, he agrees that art awards such as the Baloise prize help artists to earn a sustainable living and to focus on creating rather than hustling for money.

"I am a slow thinker, especially when afforded the time to think," he admits, "and I feel this is what such a prize has allowed."