

Artists work for better So. Africa

By Karen Schwartz

A photograph of an uprising in a black South African township hangs on the wall of their apartment. Beneath the photo hangs a nine foot mural of the same picture. The frenzy and anguish of the charcoal figures moves through the paper into the room. You feel their presence near you.

This is the art work of two Brookline residents, Kim Berman and Jo-Anne Green. Both born and educated in South Africa, the two came to Boston in 1983.

A Moral Responsibility

Ask them if they are artists or activists and the response seems em-

barassingly obvious. "As a South African and as an artist I cannot separate art from life," says Berman.

"In South Africa one is overwhelmingly surrounded by the immoral social and political injustices of apartheid, and by the degradation of a people not permitted to express their pain or outrage."

She continues, "I feel a political responsibility to try to communicate, through art, my experience as a white South African, in a way that might evoke some thought or awareness of a torn country, and a people in agony."

Berman first began to blend her artwork with politics while she was attending a university in South Africa. She says she decided that with every-

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Kim Berman (left) and Jo-Anne Green in front of their mural: *People Are Dying in Soweto and They're Not Always Sick.*

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thing that was going on around her, she could not be a "flower painter."

She began to take photographs of the graffiti in the townships, and to make photo etchings as a kind of documentary. When she first arrived in this country she noticed the graffiti on New York's Soho walls which she found to be, "a whole different kind of thing altogether. It dealt with color and texture and marks that had no specific direction. There was no message."

As a result, Berman explains, she began, for the first time, to put color into her work. "It was all very symbolic of my dealing with American culture. I felt lost with it, I started [thinking] back to South Africa for my material. Using the news—things that were important to me," she explained.

Green, on the other hand, does most of her work in color. "I attempt to express, through my imagery and the various paint surfaces used, not merely an awareness of, but a contempt and outrage toward the cruel, immoral and inhuman policies of the whites who govern my country."

Underground Activities

Berman was back in Africa last summer. While she was visiting, a state-of-emergency was declared by the government. She explains that her younger sister is very active in the anti-apartheid movement, and as a result, her sister had to go into hiding. She says, "We were being followed, the phone was being tapped, we had to meet secretly, it was a very scary experience."

Her work, however, is acceptable in South Africa. "Art is not regarded in any way as a threat to the state. They virtually ignore visual artists—even if the work is political, outspoken or critical of apartheid."

She believes that this is mainly because, "art has a very elite audience in galleries and that is not going to mobilize people into action." Still, she

says that while she was there, there were very few artists who were dealing with political subject matter.

As for South Africa, "I miss it and I'd like to be there," she explains.

South African Attitudes

Green says that most people in South Africa deal with the matter of apartheid by "denial—that's how most South Africans have survived the morality of apartheid." She feels that there is an "absolute denial that there will be any change at all."

"The alternatives to their lifestyle are so overwhelming that they don't want to know about it," she continues, "They can't face the future; they can't face it under black rule—they can't face leaving and changing their lifestyle, their standard of living."

Berman disagrees and says that "people are preparing for change, but because of censorship, it's very easy for people not to know what is going on."

Green explains that South Africans become very defensive when they hear anyone in the West criticizing their country. She claims they "defend themselves and their system by saying it's no better any place else." She admits that unlike Berman's family, apartheid was never a subject of discussion in her home while she was growing up, and that even now, her family in South Africa seems uninformed about events in their country because of the governmental censorship of information and news.

The Purpose to it All

Berman says that it is frustrating being here and having people "not understand what is happening." As a result, her work is becoming, "more specific" almost "narrative."

She says, "I think because of my need to communicate what is going on in my country I have to do it in an obvious way. I would like people to alter their level of consciousness or awareness about what is going on in South Africa when they see my work."

She describes it as "an alternative response to how the media portrays what South Africa is about. It's not a journalistic photograph, it has an emotional impact as well..."

"It's a country in a lot of pain, I'm trying to present my interpretation of that," Berman explained.

Green on the other hand, feels that when work becomes specific, "it suffers as art." She acknowledges that it "depends how much you want your art to act as propoganda."

She describes her work as "metaphoric," and continues to explain that "I don't want to lose the aesthetics of art. I want the work to be strong and have a strong visual impact on the viewer. To leave a lasting impression... not something they'll walk away from and forget like a newspaper."

"Hopefully it will provoke thought, and if it provokes action, that's even better."

Green continues, "sometimes we have a dilemma—how politicized can our art become without losing its integrity?"

Getting the Message to the People

Berman and Green both agree that they can only hope to achieve so much through their art work. As a result, they are becoming more involved with other activities.

They are currently helping to organize a two day symposium at the

Massachusetts College of Art, entitled, "Politics, Culture, and the struggle for Liberation: the Situation in South Africa" which will be held on November 12 and 13."

Also on November 12, at 8 p.m., Tuft's University will host a cultural panel made up of speakers from the symposium. It is called "Born in the RSA" and will include: Barney Simon, playwright and director; Dennis Brutus, poet; Paul Stopforth, painter; Guy Berger, journalist; and Neville Chonoo, writer.

Green is also curating an art show to coincide with the symposium. Paul Stopforth and Guy Berger will speak at the reception which will be held on November 15. The show is called the "Evils of Power" and will be held at Southeastern Massachusetts University.

Berman's work will be part of a joint show from November 10 to December 8, which will be held in the North Hall Gallery at the Mass. College of Art.

The two artists are working together to finish the giant mural on their wall. It will be shown together with the works of two black South African artists at a show in New York.

"There has to be a collaboration between artists," Green explains, "it is very important to teach people and artists to work together and not to have their egos get in the way of the end result."