

# Africa's space and place



**Omar Badsha's Dreams Deferred: Newly Elected ANC Leaders, Durban 1991 (2007)**

Over the past decade, artist and publisher Mario Piasarra has been an important and provocative voice on the local art scene, ceaselessly challenging a status quo that prioritises international schmoozing over regional engagement. As he notes on his Africa South Art Initiative website ([www.asai.co.za](http://www.asai.co.za)): "Thirteen years into democracy it [the South African National Gallery] has failed to ... reorientate its Eurocentric origins by neglecting to prioritise developing relationships with other African countries."

With **Africa South**, Piasarra sets out to practise what he preaches, curating a group exhibition that "privileges the perspectives of artists residing in the southernmost part of the continent" and "enacts broader questions of place".

The specific "enactments" of place Piasarra is talking about are apparent in the selection, which features artists often peripheral in local art discourses because of their "modernist", "populist" or "community oriented" practice. Ironically space and place also prove to be the weakness of the exhibition.

On the one hand, the limited range of the selection overshadows bigger ques-

tions about "evolving and overlapping geo-political identities" and makes it all too easy to dismiss the exhibition, as critic Robert Sloon chooses to in his *Art Heat* blog, as "tourist art that expresses an old and outdated concept of Africa South". At the same time the lack of subtlety in the arrangement of works in the space obscures some of the most provocative pieces on show — and, contrary to Sloon's opinion, the show does contain some superb, meaningful moments. Omar Badsha's photograph *Dreams Deferred: Newly Elected ANC Leaders, Durban 1991 (2007)* of the newly elected Mbeki, Zuma and Co is a case in point. Here place, space, time and territory confront each other in a silent play that speaks volumes about our contemporary place — who has it and how it is constructed. Elsewhere Garth Erasmus's "invented instruments" sound a challenge to Western constructs, Ernestine White's prints play out her place as an artist in between spaces and Donovan Ward's incinerated archives bear witness to the transitory nature of place. — *Miles Keylock*

**At the Association for Visual Arts until December 14**