



Images of Defiance: South African Resistance Posters of the 1980's

In times of revolutionary struggle the oppressed majority have sought to harness the means of communication to serve their needs and the cause of social change and justice. South Africa, as the recently published book, "Images of Defiance" reveals is no exception. This book brings together over 300 posters produced by groups and organisations which subscribe to the broad Congress Movement led by the ANC. The posters were selected from a collection of about 2000 gathered over the past ten years and currently held by the South African History Archives.

In his Foreword to the book, Nelson Mandela stresses the vital role posters will have to continue playing in a Democratic South Africa.

The book is divided into 7 sections each dealing with a specific terrain of struggle in South Africa. These areas include the posters produced in exile mainly drawn from the Medu Arts Ensemble; the internal political struggle waged by the UDF and

others; the labour movement; community and civic struggles; resistance against militarisation and repression; and finally posters dealing with culture and resistance.

"The posters in this book are not all necessarily fine examples of art, technique, imagery, or rhetoric. They are reflections of a people and a fight for justice, liberation and peace", say the editors responsible for putting the collection together.

In addition to the seven sections mentioned above the book also contains a valuable essay titled "Making Posters in South Africa" in which the history and process of local and exile poster-making are outlined.

It points out that although poster making has a long history in South Africa, popular resistance posters flourished in the 1980's with the formation of the Screen Training Project in Johannesburg and the Community Arts Project in Cape Town. Similar projects in other parts of the country followed.

Hundreds of activists gathered to mark the launch of "Images of Defiance: South African Resistance Posters of the 80's". Many of the activists present had not seen each other for years, with contact during the States of Emergency being very limited and under clandestine conditions. Nelson Mandela, Terror Lekota and Jay Naidoo - each representing a theme in the book - addressed the launch.

This is a lavish full colour publication which does full justice to the posters produced, mainly by silk-screen and desktop technology.

While it serves as a record of a portion of posters produced in the struggle against apartheid, it also offers readers the opportunity to study the aesthetics and symbolism which has dominated this communication.

In this regard the green, black and gold/yellow of the ANC and the yellow, red, and black of the UDF and Cosatu run through the posters.

Images depicting mass defiance and militancy in the form of crowds with raised fists or waving flags also recur. Many of the posters appear as relatively unskilled products.

This is largely due to them being produced from limited resources by activists with limited training.

It was felt that the quality of the final product was less important than ensuring that the communities have direct access and control of the posters they produced.

These posters, therefore embody the "perceptions, realities, and demands of the people who produced them." This is what makes the book an invaluable cultural document. ♦

- AWO