

THE CASE OF THE SPEAR

The events around Brett Murray's painting are part of a long history of iconoclasm writes **DAVID FREEDBERG**

Censorship and iconoclasm are two of the most powerful expressions of contempt for images. They testify – graphically and eloquently – to the power of the very effects they seek to annul. Throughout history people have sought to suppress, mutilate or destroy images. In some cases the assaults have been political, in others pathological. Often a current of concern about the sensual and sexual power of images underlies the efforts at their elimination or suppression of an image. The recent events surrounding Brett Murray's *The Spear*, his satirical portrait of President Jacob Zuma, form part of this long history – though rarely has an effort at official censorship been followed so predictably by an act of iconoclasm. Based on Viktor Ivanov's iconic image of Lenin, Brett Murray's *The Spear* shows Zuma gazing prophetically to the future. He stretches his arm out towards tWfirst glance it seems authoritative and leaderly enough for the president of South Africa. But then one notices: his trousers are unzipped, and from his open fly hangs a penis. The painting was put on display on 10 May 2012 in an exhibition at the Goodman Gallery entitled *Hail to the Thief II*. This title was a clear reference to the widespread perception of corruption in the government and at the highest levels of the ANC. As for the picture itself, there could be little doubt that it alluded to the president's apparently exuberant sexuality. Painted just before his marriage to his sixth wife, the work surely referred to his well-known history of polygamy, seduction and alleged rape. At his 2006 trial for raping the young HIV-positive daughter of an old ANC comrade of his, Zuma insisted that the sex was consensual and that by showering after sex he had minimised the risk of contracting HIV. In response, the cartoonist Zapiro drew several cartoons showing Zuma with a shower growing out of his head that roused ire in official ANC circles. Now, hearing of the threats to censor Murray's painting, he produced a cartoon based on *The Spear*, this time with a shower in place of the penis. But it was the painting itself that aroused the fiercest controversy.

Things moved swiftly. No one could have doubted the satirical intention of the painting. As every South African knew, its title alluded to the military wing of the ANC, *Umkhonto we Sizwe* ('Spear of the Nation'). It was bound to be incendiary, and was immediately perceived as such. The ANC reacted by seeking a court injunction to have the picture removed from display at the Goodman Gallery and from the website of *City Press*. While politicians, political spokespersons and ministers, both of government and religion, insisted that art should not be allowed to insult people with impunity, most artists – of all colours – felt that the ANC's action went too far. The basis of the lawsuit was that it violated the dignity of the president and his office, as well as the government, the ANC and all Africans. Zuma's own affidavit claimed that it impugned his dignity "in the eyes of all who see it". He said that he felt personally offended and violated. Members of the cabinet made public announcements against the painting. The Minister of Public Works declared the picture sadistic, an insult not only to the president but also to millions of South Africans. The leader of one of South Africa's largest Baptist churches said that the artist deserved to be stoned to death. He had insulted the entire nation. He did not understand the culture of the majority of South Africans. Matters threatened to become dangerous. The ANC's call to ban *City Press* was eerily reminiscent of the old days of apartheid, in which censorship and bannings were a regular element of repression. Piles of *City Press* were burned, recalling the book burnings that have often accompanied censorship in the past, from the Reformation to the Nazi period and after. Such events have frequently been a violent and visually spectacular prelude to iconoclasm. To many South Africans, and certainly to visitors to the country (who can hardly have failed to note the controversy), the ANC's reaction seemed excessive. Some not well acquainted with the sensibilities at stake might have thought that the ANC and its supporters in this matter should



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Brett Murray, *The Spear* (defaced), 2012, oil on canvas, 185 x 140cm. Photo: Anthea Pokroy

ABOVE
Fallen statue of Lenin next to the Mogoșoaia Palace, Bucharest, 2010. Photo: Ferran Cornelià (Wikicommons)

have ignored the picture entirely, and allowed it to enjoy its temporary notoriety before letting it sink into oblivion. Or its target (and his allies) could have made some coolly dismissive remark, like Canadian premier Stephen Harper's aides who, when confronted with a picture of their boss showing him in a nude pose with a dog at his feet, said that he was really a cat man. But this would have been a naïve reaction. It would have been to fail to see the full implications of the case, or of current South African realities. It would have comprehended neither the racist connotations of the work nor its political potential. The fact that *The Spear* was a work of art, it was frequently said, did not, could not and ought not to protect it. Although the public emphasis was on the assault on the president's dignity (which many claimed should trump freedom of expression), what better way to gain support for Zuma than to insert this case into the whole history of racist prejudices about black male sexuality? The furor

arose – conveniently enough – at a time when Zuma’s status within the ANC and outside it was beginning to decline. It was starting to look as if he might not even receive the internal ANC vote as candidate for the upcoming presidential election. The picture was allowed to become – was made to become – the trigger for an outpouring of support for the ever-more unpopular president. And this was done on the basis of an aspect of the picture’s potential range of reference that anyone in South Africa might have anticipated, but which few could have imagined would be so expertly manipulated. A clever – and cleverly dismissive – response might have been that at least he wasn’t shown with a small organ. Instead the painting was held to perpetuate the age-old prejudice about the sexual appetites of black males. The controversy thus went beyond a satire on the president’s sexual behavior and an alleged affront to his official and personal dignity. The picture was turned into a colonialist, racist defamation of all black people – “a violation of the black body by racist South Africans over the centuries,” added the Minister of Education. Demonstrators appeared outside the court with posters to this effect. Brett Murray, once a fierce critic of the apartheid regime, was demonised as a racist. Many asserted that no white man would ever be portrayed that way. Freedom of expression, newly enshrined in South Africa’s constitution, had to give way to respect for the president or for black culture (where the nude male organ is always to be covered, and where respect for one’s elders excludes such pornographic forms of representation, and so on). Thousands of women protested the picture as well, although a number of black women to whom I spoke felt that the satire was entirely merited, that it was high time that the president’s behavior be exposed for what it was: fundamentally sexist and disrespectful of women.

When it was suggested that a satirical image of Zuma did not constitute an insult to a whole race, this was dismissed as either racist itself, or as somehow buying into the whole ancient prejudice of kaffir sexuality, or just insensitive to the racial divide that the picture threatened to open up again. Gillian Schutte wrote that, “The point is that this is not the president’s penis. It is the grotesquely huge Black male ‘dick-ness’ that resides somewhere in the deep collective consciousness of the White psyche – a primal and savage ‘dick-ness’ that was entrenched about 500 years ago as a White supremacist plot ... [it suggests that] this, is the essential ‘nature’ of the Black man, because, although in a suit, the unzipped dick confirms his failure to gain access to ‘culture.’” Many old friends wrote to me to this effect. Cabinet members and then many others referred to the case of Saartjie Baartman, the Khoisan woman who was exhibited in London and Paris at the beginning of the nineteenth century for her steatopygia, and suggested that Zuma was being treated in the same way.

And so the ANC lawsuit became “a matter of great national importance”; as one of the judges on the case declared – just as the ministers of religion and politics had already anticipated when they turned the insult to Zuma into an insult to an entire nation.

Once more a painting stood for a vast political and sexual issue. Rarely have a picture and an iconoclastic attack on it been so rich with such implications, and rarely have they so coincided in a single work. What do we allow to art and what to politics? Are they ever separable? Clearly not. But what gives way? What yields to what?

What do we grant to freedom of expression, and what to personal dignity, especially when such fundamental rights seem to be at odds with one another? As always, the question of limits was raised. The Secretary-General of the ANC asserted that while people had the right to criticise the government, there had to be limits. The Minister of Justice implied that if the picture was indeed a work of art, the insult was even greater.

In the case of Robert Mapplethorpe’s 1980 photograph *Man in a Polyester Suit* (which Murray was presumably also thinking of when he painted *The Spear*), similar questions were raised about the relationship between art and racism, art and obscenity. When legal efforts were made to charge the Contemporary Art Center in Cincinnati and its curator for showing this and other images by Mapplethorpe, they failed precisely on the grounds of the work’s artistic status. All of this points to the possibility that in the end Murray’s painting will also endure as a work of art – a political one, if nothing else, just as its artist intended. On Tuesday 22 May 2012, I was giving a lecture entitled *Iconoclasm Past and Present* at the University of Stellenbosch. I had been asked to speak about this subject – which I had spent much of my life researching – in the context of recent assaults on public art in Stellenbosch. What took me by surprise was that many students had written in the social media and the press, not to condemn these assaults, as one might have expected, but to condone them. The students seemed to believe that public art infringed on both public and private boundaries, and that the proper place for art was in museums – safely, one might say. These were not overtly political issues, but arose from old assumptions about the nature of art. The assaults on the Stellenbosch artworks testified

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to fears about the presence and sensuality of art, and its frequently alarming vitality. As always, of course, these fears remained pretty much unspoken.

In this context, I decided that it would not be inopportune to discuss the Zuma portrait. The matter was about to go to trial. The ANC was redoubling its pressure on the Goodman Gallery and *City Press* to withdraw the image. The disturbances around the courthouse and in front of the Goodman Gallery and elsewhere were growing more agitated. Charges of racism multiplied, and increased in vehemence. The matter of freedom of expression receded into

the background as the point was made, ever more heatedly, that if art was insulting, it should not be tolerated. I pointed out that, as in the past, efforts at censorship could well lead directly to iconoclasm (though I noted that many acts of censorship were themselves tantamount to iconoclasm, in their efforts to mutilate, erase or destroy offensive images or parts of images.) As I sat down a student jumped up, waving her telephone and saying that as I was speaking Murray’s painting had been attacked and mutilated. What happened that day is now well known. It was a quiet morning at the Gallery when a white man in an elegant suit entered the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg, calmly took out a paintbrush and a small pot of red paint, and put a giant cross over Zuma’s penis and another over his face. A staff member asked him what he was doing. It all seemed to happen in slow, even dignified, motion. As an air of puzzlement rather than agitation settled over the scene, a much younger black man came in and, before anyone could react, daubed heavy black paint over the picture. A security guard quickly moved in, handcuffed him, headbutted him, and whipped him upside down. This was much rougher treatment than met the white man – a fact that was noted swiftly enough – who was then arrested as well.

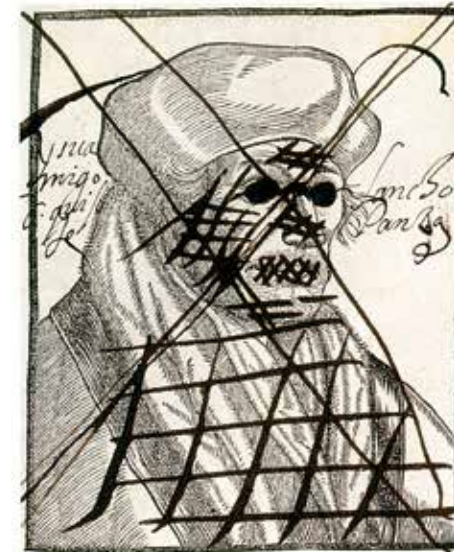
Both were let out on bail soon enough. Barend la Grange, a fifty-eight-year-old Afrikaner, stated that it was important that a white man show resistance to the racism implied by the picture, while Louie Mabokela, a young taxi-driver from Limpopo, said that he came from an artistic family and wanted to see the picture. Many of the opponents of the picture jumped on the convenient bandwagon set in motion, declaring that something so pornographic could not possibly constitute art, and thus deserved its fate – the second oldest iconoclastic cry of all. The first, of course, is embodied both in the Second Commandment of the Jewish and Christian religions, and in the Islamic Hadith – namely that one should not have images at all. Image-making is the prerogative of God. Mere humans should not make them, in the Jewish and Christian case because they are idolatrous (any figurative image risks being worshipped, especially dangerous if the God is a jealous one), in the Islamic case because only God is capable of investing images (including human beings, poorer images of himself) with life and liveliness. Such positions are not just theological. They encapsulate in the most profound ways the basis for the fear of images: that they are somehow alive, that they contain within them a force, a form of vitality that transcends their pure materiality. From the earliest times, a fundamental iconoclastic motivation is to make as clear as possible that something that seems a living representative of what is shown in an image, is nothing more than a form on a piece of wood or stone. One destroys it – or erases its eyes, or removes its limbs – to show that it is powerless, that it cannot see or move or affect us in any of the ways that sight or movement imply.

The notion that images are nothing more than pieces of wood and stone was a consistent anti-image argument during the great periods of Byzantine iconoclasm in the seventh and eighth centuries, and returned with vehemence during the Protestant revolution – particularly in its Calvinist form – in the Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

But another version of the perception that images are somehow alive, despite the fact of representation, had manifested itself even earlier. The notion of actual presence in mere

RIGHT
Dirk van Delen, *Iconoclasts in a Church*, 1630, oil on panel, 50 x 67cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (Wikicommons)

BELOW
Image of Erasmus defaced and censored by the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*



representation is a very old one. The ancient Romans held it as a matter of political doctrine that where the image of the emperor was, there too was the emperor. You had to respect the image of the emperor as if the emperor himself were actually present. It is almost as if the opponents of Murray’s picture clung to this ancient doctrine, at the same time as believing that a merely satirical representation was in fact a breathing and pornographic one. Such suspicions about the status of images also underlay medieval concerns about grotesques and other forms of imagery regarded as inappropriate. But it was during the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation that they reached fever pitch, and that censorship and iconoclasm merged most

often. For example, both official and amateur censors often crossed out the eyes or whole face of Erasmus, the wisest of religious thinkers during the sixteenth century, on the grounds that he was either too Protestant or too Catholic (in fact, despite his insistence on reform and change within the official church, he never went over to the other side). The *Index of Prohibited Books* was set up, which either banned unapproved literature or recommended censorship. Book burnings followed. Images were banned, just like books. Throughout Europe, attacks were launched on images because they were either idolatrous, or too licentious, or both. (Already in the eighth century, Pope Gregory the Great had classical statues thrown into the Tiber, because they were the idolatrous gods of pagan antiquity, or because they were too licentious – usually nude statues of female gods, of course.) The echo, in the Murray saga, of past cases of censorship, and the censorship that leads directly to iconoclasm, could not be more striking. And as so often in earlier episodes, iconoclasm reflects – or masks – major cultural divides.

The varieties of iconoclasm are many, the motives disparate, but all, in one way or another, relate to the *fear* of the body, the body that somehow lurks in representation. This lies at the basis of the political fear of images as well as the sexual one (the image is not just invested with life, but with carnality – especially but not only in the case of images of women). In the French Revolution the images of the old order were torn down, once vivid but now dead tokens of the monarchy; similarly in the destruction of the statues of the Tsars during the Russian Revolution. The power of the rulers went along with their images. At the far end of that revolution, the overturning of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989 was accompanied everywhere by the overturning

of images of Stalin and Lenin; the same fate met statues of Mao in China. More recent instances are not easy to miss: the pulling down of statues of the Shah of Iran in 1979 and those of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003. Two years earlier, the great Buddhas of Bamiyan – idolatrous representatives, for the Taliban, of another religion – had been blown up. And then there are what seem to be purely pathological assaults on images, such as those on Rembrandt’s *Nightwatch* in Amsterdam in 1975, on the great Rembrandts in Kassel in 1977, and the 1982 attack on Barnett Newman’s *Who’s Afraid of Red Yellow and Blue IV*. In the latter case, however, it does seem as if the title alone may have provoked the iconoclast to show that he was precisely *not* afraid (indeed he attacked the picture with the very bar used to keep visitors at a distance, as if to demonstrate that no one, least of all he, need be afraid of a mere painting, and that if one hit it, it wouldn’t strike back). But in all of this, motives are never clear – just as in the case of the mutilation of *The Spear*. Often the motive is to draw attention to oneself or to a political cause. Here the political may well overlap with the pathological, of course, or with the sexual. When Mary Richardson attacked Velázquez’s *Roqueby Venus* in 1914 she declared that her aim was to draw attention to Mrs Pankhurst and her suffragist cause. Many years later she said that she did not like the way male viewers “gaped at it all day long.” This entanglement of motives for an attack on an image may well also have prevailed in the case of *The Spear* – but perhaps even more complicatedly so.

Every powerful image rouses deep emotions. They do so not just because of what or who they symbolise, but also because of the degree to which they involve the viewer’s body and feelings. They draw tears easily. The fact that the ANC’s lawyer burst into tears on the first day of

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Caves near the Buddhas of Bamiyan.
Photo: Tracy Hunter (Wikicommons)

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Thirty-foot tall bronze sculptures of Saddam Hussein on the grounds of the Republican Palace in the International Zone, Baghdad. The sculptures once sat atop the palace towers but were removed following the overthrow of the regime.
Photo: taken during Operation Iraqi Freedom by Jim Gordon, CIV (Wikicommons)



the hearing against the picture was surely not only attributable to the judicial tensions of the day or the legal complexities of the case. One of the first issues raised by the iconoclastic assaults on *The Spear* was whether they were spontaneous or organised, whether the individuals who seemed to be solely motivated by hostility to the image were in fact set up to attack it. "It was spontaneous on both their parts. They both just happened to be here at the same time," said Mabokela's lawyer. The issue is as old as iconoclasm itself. When Protestant rioters stormed into Antwerp cathedral on the night of 21 August 1566, the fury and destruction seemed to be a spontaneous outburst of popular anger against images. For years historians debated this, but finally it has been agreed that the attacks were orchestrated and planned by astute political figures who knew how to mobilise popular support. After all, the basic fears and emotions images so often arouse are easily aligned, as I've tried to suggest, with political motives. In 2003 I wrote an article for the *Wall Street Journal* about the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Firdos Square in Baghdad. In it I jumped to a conclusion that will not surprise readers. I wrote about the event in terms of popular hostility towards the symbol of a hated ruler. I described the ways in which even a mute image of wood and stone (as the Reformation iconoclasts always referred to images of art) could be insulted as if it were a living body, as if the hated leader were somehow inherent in it, and that by destroying it one somehow destroyed the leader himself. Then I discovered that the whole event had been orchestrated by US Marines. I had failed to learn from my own study of older cases of hostility to images that such episodes are not always the product of spontaneous outbursts of rage. So too in the case of *The Spear*. In this instance, however, it was attacked not because it showed a hated leader, but because it supposedly insulted him and the whole nation he represented, indeed the whole race of blacks. In any event, whether the attacks were spontaneous or organised, the entire brouhaha had substantial benefits for a leader who was losing political traction. No wonder that the actions of the iconoclasts should here too have met with considerable approval.



One can debate at length the degree to which freedom of expression should give way to respect for human dignity; whether *presidential* dignity is more or less fragile than *ordinary* human dignity; at what point a satire on the president's sexual history turns into the perpetuation of ancient racist and colonial prejudices; whether the best way to overcome such prejudice is to acknowledge how little sense it makes in the modern world, and therefore to ignore it; whether a work of art should be suppressed in the interests of managing social unrest; whether *City Press* editor Ferial Haffajee was justified, in light of the perceived threat to public safety and the fear that the work (however unjustifiably) fed into ancient prejudices that still festered, in suppressing a work that she had for some time supported. What is clear is that the fate of *The Spear* forms part of a long history of fear and antipathy to images, as well as testifying to an acknowledgement of their powers. The age-old emotions it stirred up mobilised thousands of people. But in a reversal of the old view that an assault on an image is an assault on the person it represents, the metaphorical attack on Zuma (in the form of a painting) led to an attack on the painting itself. In an age of supposed freedom of expression, and one that is reputedly tolerant of art, the assaults on *The Spear* – whether verbal or actual – clearly defined the limits of toleration. The great lesson of this episode, however, is the need to acknowledge how deeply art touches the core of our personal and social existence, even at a time when it is often

asserted that art is irrelevant, that art makes nothing happen, that it is solely constituted by its philosophical status. Philosophically disenfranchised it may still be, but politically disenfranchised it must never become.

Mabokela laid charges against the guards who handcuffed him, and the Gallery closed for an unspecified time.

The editor of *City Press* apologised to one of Zuma's daughters, and removed the picture from the paper's website.

The Committee of Young Communists said that the defacing of the portrait was people's justice, and that the attackers should be awarded the Order of Ikhamanga – usually reserved for excellence in the arts, journalism and sport – for bravery.

The spokesperson for the ANC and the owner of the Gallery met to announce that the ANC would withdraw its case if the Gallery agreed not to display *The Spear* any longer.

The case was referred to the Film and Publications Board, which decided to prohibit access to the picture to children under the age of sixteen, and to have it accompanied by an advisory warning. An appeal is under way.

A lawsuit has been initiated against Zapiro for his cartoons of Zuma, and will be heard in October.

"The row has been good for business at the Gallery," noted *The Guardian*. How much the value of the work rises, even in its damaged state, remains to be seen.

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