

AFRICA: Artists Reflect on World Through Toys With A Difference

By Johan Eybers

JOHANNESBURG, Jun 30 (IPS) - It's not child's play to showcase "toys" made by artists reflecting on a changing world in African countries. Miniature construction vehicles from Malawi, next to a diminutive Nelson Mandela presiding over South Africa's first democratic parliament, jostle for space with the Belgian comic hero Tintin on safari in the Congo – all captured in carefully crafted wood.

The African Toy Shop sports a collection of the most unusual handmade toys from more than 20 African countries.

The owner, Greg Moran, spent five years travelling through Africa and three years building a network of toymakers. Based on a work ethic drawing on principles of fair trade, he now has two stores up and running in Johannesburg, the commercial hub of South Africa.

The African Toy Shop's assistants know the history of each toy. "The fans are especially fascinated by the stories and it is important for us to make people understand how much love and dedication go into the work," Moran told IPS.

All the toys are truly handmade as the artists do not have access to electricity or modern tools.

The wooden handmade toys are carved with the most basic tool imaginable, a pocket knife. And the colours are produced from roots found in nature.

One of the most popular toys, quirky-looking dolls called "shwe-shwe poppies", were designed by children who had to draw a picture of what their perfect doll looks like.

The dolls are now produced by newly employed women, based on cultural styles in South Africa with authentic fabrics, beads and other material.

The African Toy Shop's first supplier, 31-year-old Lekemu Seleman, was able to make enough money in six months from sales to the shop to build a new house. His toys are exact replicas of the construction vehicles that he saw building a new road near his rural village in Malawi.

Instead of hydraulics, he uses the friction of the wood to simulate the actions of the hydraulic system of the machine. The movements of the miniature toy model mirror those of the real thing perfectly.

Auguy Kakase is a toymaker from Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo who mainly supplies the shop with the Tintin range of toys. He is a big fan of Tintin, the controversial Belgian comic hero that has been criticised for racist and colonialist depictions of Africa.

When Kakase's girlfriend saw the half-completed wooden character in his house the first time, she took him for a maker of fetishes.

Moran had to do a lot of explaining when customers complained about the apparently racist undertones of one of Kakase's pieces that portrayed Tintin as the "saviour" of an African village.

"The irony was that it was done by an African man who is very proud of his work and a huge fan of Tintin. I got tired of explaining this to customers and in the end I took it down." Kakase produced a follow-up piece, showing Tintin bowing to an African king. "It was much better received," according to Moran.

Moran previously worked in public education on human rights, first for the Constitutional Assembly which wrote South Africa's first democratic constitution, and then for the South African Human Rights Commission, a body set up by the constitution of the country.

Given this background, he has based his business on principles of free trade and is a member of the Cooperation for Fair Trade in Africa (COFTA). COFTA members are expected to comply with 10 fair trade standards.

These include the creation of new markets for the toy makers; fair prices; equal rewards for women's work; the production of gender-neutral toys; and a safe and healthy working environment. His finances are also open to public scrutiny.

The principles form a necessary foundation, given the circumstances that some of the artists find themselves in. Because of desperation and lack of business skills, some were initially offering the shop products for as little as five rand (0.63 dollars) per item.

"They did not take their own labour into account. We had to work out prices according to

the value of the raw material and the amount of labour that was being put in," Moran told IPS.

When a toy sells well, the artist benefits. Samuel Baloi, one of the shop's most successful toymakers from Mozambique, got paid 70 rand (8.85 dollars) per toy when he started. He now receives 250 rand (31.62 dollars) for the same kind of toy.

Baloi received 25,000 rand (3,161 dollars) alone for toys that the shop bought from him in December last year.

His biggest battle at the moment, said Moran, is the South African public's unawareness of fair trade principles. They don't seem to understand that the high transport costs, the 50 percent advance and fair trade principles all affect the price.

"I am shocked when people proudly tell me that they bought the same toys that we have in the shop for ridiculous prices next to the road. What they don't seem to understand is that they are ripping these people off."

And it angers him that these customers expect to pay less for "these amazing handmade toys" than mass produced plastic toys from China that sells for similar prices in local toy shops.

"It's a constant battle since there is still this innate notion that anything from Africa must be cheap and that African people don't need money. It's so arrogant. It's racist."

The ones that do "get it", he said, are mostly overseas tourists and local collectors who have an appreciation for the workmanship of the "coolest toys in the world".

After opening the first shop a few years ago near Johannesburg's inner city and the second shop in February this year in a suburban part of the city, he is still subsidising the business. "If I knew then how difficult it would be I would have said no. It was the hardest business to start."

The first major problem for the shop was to keep stock levels consistently high. Moran recalled the nightmare when the shop opened with 50 toys and 90 percent of them were sold within one day.

“We panicked, since it takes the toymakers up to 10 days to produce one toy. We were suddenly hunting for toys only a week after we opened. It was chaos.” This was a learning curve and it took a great deal of planning to sort it out.

There were other lessons to be learnt. “When we first increased our orders, the artists went into a frenzy to try and mass produce. They became impatient and the quality went down.”

These days he first buys a few toys, placing a much smaller order -- even if the toys are popular with customers. The orders are then increased slowly.

Moran is also helping the toymakers to manage their production lines by training apprentices who can start off doing more repetitive and less complicated work.

“And I am proud that we sell something that gives kids and adults a positive image of Africans from the rest of the continent. Instead of hearing how they are ‘stealing our jobs’, people can look at the toys and see what amazing things they do,” he said with reference to recent xenophobic attacks by South Africans on nationals from other African states.

Moran’s vision is that the toymakers will be organised into cooperative businesses, supplying toys to an ever-growing world market. And that The African Toyshop will remain the leader in this market.