

South moves up top

This year's Design Indaba will try to define the South African aesthetic. **NADINE BOTHA** asks what that means and how it can be achieved

How would one define the South African aesthetic? We're not talking high art here, but local "flavour": the colloquial of our streets, the way we make television, fashion, our language and our food. Can there ever be a single South African design characteristic given that we are a country of multiple ethnicities and 11 official languages?

According to an exhibition launched at this year's Design Indaba, there is. Called *South*, the work on show will attempt to show a South

African aesthetic across the disciplines of advertising, design, art, architecture, music, film, performance, craft, jewellery, photography, fashion and new media. Included are 23 *South* legends and 32 competition finalists. All will be vying for iconic status.

"We're not that good at being proud of who we are as South Africans and we're always comparing ourselves with the West," says exhibition curator Mike Schalit. "Creativity is one of our strongest attributes — everything else is against us: where we are, budgets, politics and maybe even climate."

Schalit says that South African creativity "doesn't need budget. It needs resourcefulness, energy and passion, which we have a lot of. Now it's time to start thinking of it as an export."

Schalit is the founder and creative director of the Network BBDO advertising agency, considered to be one of the top 30 most awarded agencies in the world. He has been voted the country's top creative mind for the past 11 years. Included in the exhibition is

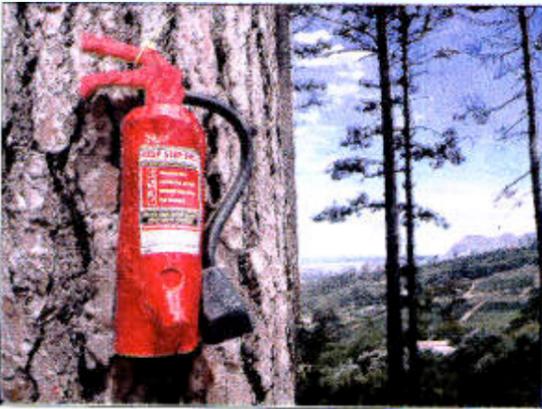
his Nedbank billboard that uses solar panels to power a rural school. Surely he is in a perfect position to define the South African aesthetic. But, he says humbly, "it's hard to put your finger on a [design] sense".

Yet he knows it's there. "When I first got into the business it was very Eurocentric," Schalit says. "But now there's a diverse young creativity coming through with a mishmash of languages and cultures."

Schalit says he wants to "work on" clients who still favour European suits, whom he feels lack local pride. "Clients buy the science of who they need to talk to but they don't always buy the science of how to talk to them," he says. "So they'll judge the work by their own standards when they aren't even the market."

The legends on the *South* exhibition serve as yardsticks and help to understand a quality deemed elusive. These are the creative icons that have championed what is believed to be uniquely South African, on a global scale, since 1994. They include ubiquitous items such as the South African flag, Zapiro's indicting political cartoons, the architecturally distinct Constitutional Court, Stoned Cherrie's taboo-popping Steve Biko T-shirt, the Kulula airline and Nando's national identity-forging advertisements.

There are more design-specific items, such as Amanda Laird Cherry's shweshwe dress suits, Garth Walker's *iJusi* magazines, Peet Pienaar's *Afro* magazine and Heath Nash's recycled plastic Leafball lights. Also on exhibition will be a contingent of conscientious solutions, such as the Playpump, the Hippo Roller and the award-winning condom applicator.



Delectable design (clockwise from top left): Heath Nash's recycled plastic Leafball lights, Nicola Polzman's Karoo blossom-shaped burglar bars, Doung Anwar Jahangeer's portable fold-up spaza, Porky Hefer's fire extinguisher carved from invader wood and Zapiro's *The Mandela Files*. Photo: Lisa Skinner

Design Indaba brought a competition component into the show, offering prizes ranging from R25 000 to R100 000 for local innovation. There were 163 entries from across the country, whittled down to the 35 finalists — these make up the second half of the exhibition. Schalit was assisted by product designer Tsai, known for his multi-award-winning Nested Bunkbeds, and *Design Indaba* magazine designer Brian Mtongana. The latter is known for his Cape-flavoured "Googlethu" T-shirt.

In judging the finalists Schalit says: "We kept going back to the idea that if this was going to be a provocative, interesting exhibition it should be

about ideas that excite."

It was through this process that Schalit believes he has contributed towards defining a South African aesthetic. "There were a number of themes that emerged," he says. South Africans apparently have a unique "application of creativity to problems". He cites architect Doung Anwar Jahangeer's portable fold-up spaza, Nicola Polzman's Karoo blossom-shaped burglar bars, Metro FM's anti-xenophobia media campaign and Ria Kraftt's Perspex birds designed to decorate electric fencing.

The pieces acknowledge how intractable South Africa's problems are, but designers have at least tried

to make them cheery.

Schalit highlights South Africa's power of turning a negative into a positive — and painting it with a smile. "There is a humour in the South African psyche, which is probably a coping mechanism and a release. It comes through in our creativity. It's refreshing because I think a lot of classic design has a stiff upper lip."

See the *South* exhibition at the Design Indaba Expo from February 27 to March 1 at Cape Town International Convention Centre. Entrance is R50 for full access to the expo, exhibition and fashion arena. Nadine Botha is the editor of *Design Indaba* magazine

