

Spirit of art that keeps Louis going

AND THE SMILE THAT AUGURS WELL FOR THE NEW SOUTH AFRICA

GARTH VERDAL

Louis Jansen van Vuuren had just returned from Paris and he was bubbling with *joie de vivre*.

With an expansive wave and smile, he walked towards me on UCT's Orange Street campus where we'd arranged to meet. Van Vuuren, who is senior lecturer in graphic art at the Michaelis School of Art, has his office and studio there.

But, to the general public he is probably better known as a painter and art administrator.

Recently, he was appointed chairperson of the Association for Visual Arts (AVA), a newly-formed association which is striving to play a vibrant and leading role in the promotion of art and cultural interaction in the Western Cape.

We settled down in his studio at a long glass-topped table littered with bric-a-brac, and a travel bag with airline tags attached to it.

Van Vuuren has curated the special exhibition, *Cognisance*, for the launch of AVA, which contains work by 35 artists.

Was curating more difficult than painting?

"Yes," he replied with feeling and a smile that seemed to stretch from ear to ear.

"The one comes naturally, but curating involves the difficulty of making choices of particular works while leaving out other excellent works."

He explained how he went about it.

"It's a personal thing, a personal selection from what ignites something in me. It's not the definitive show, but of works that have a spark."

Van Vuuren lolled back, clasped his hands behind his head, and swung a leg across a thigh.

Was he accused of being biased?

"Yes, indeed, but it's a question of people either heeding and taking advice or feeling one doesn't like their work because it's left out. But it's not about that, it's not personal on that level."

When curating *Cognisance* his guiding feeling was for work that "one recognises as typical of the region, even if it's as tenuous as an aspect, a philosophy, here."

The exhibition contains work by third-year and established artists.

"It's a *moer* of a *melange*," he



Keeping his spirit going: Louis Jansen van Vuuren, of the big smile

remarked with one of those ear-to-ear, big-mouthed smiles.

Van Vuuren said that although curating was more difficult than painting, it was "nice to have the

freedom" to put an exhibition together."

Visually one usually had a "reasonably free hand, within certain parameters" and he preferred

personally curated ones to those "by committee" because a certain quirkiness was lost.

Curating was also more difficult than painting because "one has to think a lot (not that painting is a mindless activity), find works that contrast, speak to one another – and that the public will like."

Van Vuuren rearranged his legs, smiled expansively and remarked, "And the people buy the *gewone* stuff so..."

He's hopeful, though, that "one can educate the people."

Had the changes in South Africa, the opening up internally and externally, energised the visual arts?

"Absolutely."

"You can almost see the pulse beating," he replied energetically, arms waving expansively, his eyes alive.

"Avenues and affinities have become real, and South African art is standing side by side, shoulder to shoulder with American and European."

"Unlike music, which needs time to fuse, there's a celebratory energy and confidence which keeps my spirit going."

And in a nation of philistines that's all important.