

It's not all glitz and glamour

# Celebrating women of Cape Town

MONIQUE DUVAL

Each year the Good Hope Centre buzzes with excitement as thousands of spectators gather to see the beautiful women of the Mother City take the ramp as they battle it out for the title of Spring Queen.

The Spring Queen Pageant, which started in the 1970s, was organised by the Southern African Clothing and Textile Workers' Union (SACTWU) and was aimed at highlighting local fashion design.

Female factory workers first take part in an in-house factory beauty pageant where each factory chooses their queen.

The queen then competes at the Spring Queen pageant, held at the Good Hope Centre, where groups of people come out to support their queen.

A new exhibition called *Spring Queen* by the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Centre for Curating the Archive at Hiddingh Campus explores the joys, complexities and everyday life of the women working in clothing factories around Cape Town who take part in the pageant.

The exhibition opened on Friday July 13 and will run until August.

But it's not all glitz and glamour as the pageant also tells the story about the "not so pretty side" of the

fashion industry. Curator Dr Siona O'Connell said the pageant was well known in Cape Town and said the stories of the women in the factories always intrigued her.

"As a young girl growing up in Cape Town, the harsh realities of apartheid were very real.

"The stories of these women always intrigued me because I think that so often when we buy clothing or even something as intimate as underwear, little thought is ever given to the women in the factory who made it.

"We almost don't realise that these garments tell a story. We always knew about the pageant and when I gave it more thought I realised here was a pageant that was almost 40 years old.

"When I first said I wanted to explore an exhibition on the pageant I found that not many people knew about it. I was more intrigued about these women and how they are connected through the pageant," she said.

Dr O'Connell said that besides the crowning, when the current queen crowned her successor, there was little to no interaction between the queens.

She said her team worked closely with Sactwu to source information on the pageant as well as reading newspaper articles.

But the interactions with former

queens were the most insightful.

"In May we held a workshop with former queens to listen to their stories. It was interesting to see that many of them had little or no interaction with other queens and at the workshop they spent lots of time reminiscing about their moment in the spotlight.

"For many women from the Cape Flats working in a factory was the only way they could earn an income.

"But during the pageant, they dressed up, had the most amazing hair and make-up and took to the stage. That was their moment where their harsh realities fell away.

"But the pageant is also a weird place where the lines of gender, age, physical appearance notions of beauty are blurred.

The exhibition consists of portraits of former queens, newspaper articles, dresses and photographs.

● *Spring Queen* is on show at the Iziko Bertram House Annexe Gallery on Hiddingh Campus in Orange Street until Friday August 24.

While the exhibition is currently open to the public, the official opening event will be held on Saturday July 28 at 11am and will be followed by an exhibition walkabout on Thursday August 2. For more information call 021 480 7153.



PICTURE: MOENEEB DALWAI

■ One of the dresses that forms part of the exhibition.

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By 2pm it's a different story. Cape Argus. Twice Daily.