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Disaster looms for city gallery

Disaster looms for city gallery AT RISK: Valua are at risk due conditioning at the g being out of order. Picture: Danie van der Lith • NORMA WILDENBOER STAFF WRTIER A CRISIS is looming at the worldfamous William Humphreys Art Gallery Whag in Kimberley, considered to be one of the finest art museums in South Africa, with the gallery's priceless collection of artworks in jeopardy following a lack of maintenance on the facility's air conditioning system by the regional office of the Department of Public Works. Concern was yesterday raised about the looming catastrophe by Whag director Aim Pretorius, who said that the gallery's collection of thousands of artworks was under threat of damage and eventual destruction as a result of the facility's air conditioning system being out of order. Pretorius stated that it was imperative for the preservation of artworks that they be accommodated at a constant temperature 20 degrees Celsius, as well as constant relative humidity 55 percent, in order to prevent damage, but this has not been the case at the Whag, with the air conditioning system being dysfunctional for more than three years and completely out of order for more than a year. The upkeep and maintenance of this asset is a competency of the national Department of Public Works, according to the spokesperson for the Northern Cape Department of Roads and Public Works, Crystal Robertson. Pretorius added that numerous pleas to the Department of Public Works for the air conditioning system to be properly serviced, maintained and repaired during the last five years, and thus prevent damage to the art collection, which includes fragile works by 17th Century Dutch and Flemish Old Masters and European artworks and contemporary South African artworks of excellence in all mediums, had fallen on deaf ears. "The Whag is a national gallery, owned by the state. It is the competency of the Department of Public Works to attend to the main tenance and upkeep of the climate control systems, not only to ensure human comfort but most importantly to conserve the art collection. "The servicing and maintenance of the air conditioning has been neglected for the last three years, with the system becoming completely dysfunctional more than a year ago," Pretorius said. Procurement She added that the Department of Arts and Culture had indicated that it could provide capital works funding to the gallery, but procurement procedures were, however, complex and they needed to work together with the Department of Public Works, who are the custodians of the property and equipment. Pretorius also raised concern about the visitor experience at the gallery, with the inside of the facility becoming uncomfortably hot, especially during the recent heat waves, causing visitors to avoid coming to the facility or shortening their visit. "The Whag is a worldclass heritage institution that Kimberley is lucky to have, but the current situation could prove detrimental to its existence," Pretorius concluded. Grace Welsh, an oil painting conservator who has worked with the Whag collection for 25 years, said that not having a working air conditioning system for a collection as large as the one at the Whag was "catastrophic". "The air conditioning system maintains the stability of the condition of artworks. Individual pieces are made of different materials that can contract and expand as a result of fluctuations in not only temperature but also humidity. Keeping a

stable environment is a vital component in the preservation of artworks. Very dry and hot conditions can lead to cracking in wooden artefacts, as well as layers of paint on canvas. A working air conditioning system also prevents dust from settling on paintings," Welsh explained. She stressed the need for authorities to start focusing on conservation, rather than restoration, which is a highly specialised field, with experts charging high rates for this service. "Paintings should not undergo continual cleaning but rather this dirt needs to be filtered in a functional air conditioning system, thus preventing dirt from reaching the surfaces of the artworks." Welsh concluded: "To not have a functional air conditioning system for a collection of this volume and magnitude is truly catastrophic and it breaks my heart that this is allowed to happen. Conservation is always better than restoration. With an air conditioning system that is properly maintained damages will be minimal." Claire Jacobs, of the regional office of the Department of Public Works, indicated yesterday that media enquiries about the situation had been forwarded to their head office, who would provide an official response. This response is still being awaited.

Dimensions: