

Unisa 'Staff/Stuff' Art Exhibition

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The Unisa 'Staff/Stuff' Art Exhibition took place from 19 June to 6 July 2012 at the new premises of the Unisa Art Gallery in the *Kgorong* building. The exhibition commendably showcased the fine artists associated with Unisa's Department of Art History, Visual Arts and Musicology. The artists included, amongst others, Lisa Allen, Celia de Villiers, Frikkie Eksteen, Lawrence Lemaona, Nathani Lüneburg, Gwen Miller, Bongani Mkhonza, Justice Mokoena, Frikkie Potgieter, Karin Preller, Robyn Sassen and Cate Terblanche. The inclusion of such a large number of artists was equally matched by the number of works displayed by each artist. The sheer immensity of the artworks, which almost all exuded a high calibre of conceptually innovative skill, was a fundamental feature of the exhibition. This distinctive feature was further accentuated by *Kgorong* being well suited to the display of large exhibitions – its design can accommodate various sizes and mediums of artworks, without compromising on the specific requirements of each. To mention every single artwork would run the risk of only providing a catalogue entry

of each. Therefore a number of works are singled out for inclusion in this review.

Gwen Miller (2012) underscores that the 21st century is marked by scientific advances and mechanisms that provide us with prosperity, power and protection, for the purpose of creating a faultless world. In our unrelenting strive for such an existence, she states, the very same mechanisms that promise utopian hopes have inadvertently led us to a world fraught with the fear of chemical leaks, disaster and death on a scale of apocalyptic proportions (Miller 2012). Radiation exposure and contamination after the Fukushima catastrophe have led to world-wide panic over the safety of nuclear energy, while South Africa faces the reality of acid-mine drainage and ecosystem pollution. Such realities and fears are embodied in Miller's series of works titled *Spill 1, 2 & 3* (2011–2012) (1). In this series she deliberates on the hazards of waste and exposure to contamination by depicting stains, pollution or smog. Miller's use of pipes and stains is in contrast to our highly technologised cities' promulgations of their inhabitants being immersed in a matrix of connections and wireless zones of seamless WiFi hotspots for global access and connectivity via the Internet. Such representations evade the raw backbones of the city – its wires, pipes and the 'circuitry' of waste water, sewerage and electricity – all of which hold the ubiquitous intimations of toxic threat. Thus, representations of the



1 Gwen Miller, *Spill 1, 2 & 3* (2011–2012). Mixed media: Ultrachrome inks on canvases, oils, alkyd and varnish, dimensions variable. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

technologically interfaced metropolis (Gandy 2005:38) come at the expense of signifying the tangible, physical reality of the city – its underbelly of entwined piping and conduits. In this regard, Miller's portrayal of pipes as oozing, inorganic orifices provides a critical reflection of the trope of the technologised city as a luminous metropolis of screens, interfaces and simulacra. In this way she provides a counter-narrative to the trope, and figures it rather as a 'flawed system through which contamination and degeneration develop' (Miller 2012).

Miller's artwork also outlines a fundamental myopia in our contemporary existence – a blind-spot that is best articulated by Luce Irigaray (1993:187) who states that 'the developments in technology subject us to such harsh ordeals that we are threatened with physical and mental annihilation. We have neither the time nor the leisure to think, however much spare time we are given, and we are endlessly negligent, forgetful, distracted.' By presenting her artwork over three canvases the viewer does not have the comfort of disregarding or overlooking the prowling perils of present-day existence, but is instead barraged out of inattentiveness. As such, Miller's artwork allows the viewer to 'be a little forewarned and able to make some objective decisions, however small' (Irigaray 1993:186) regarding mankind's existence in technologised cities.

Miller's *Key to the Family* (2011) ⁽²⁾ is a hinged container with drawers containing chronologically taken samples of hair collected from her twin boys over a period of 13 years (1998–2011). For Miller (2012), this artwork acts as an archive of memory. Her use of hair as a medium for memory is akin to a Victorian practice: Victorian mothers kept locks of their children's hair in scrapbooks and albums as well as in jewellery and parlour decorations (Miller 2008:164). Apart from memory, the artwork is also a metaphor for nostalgia.

For Miller (2012), the work represents a recollection of a mother's tender grooming of her children. Yet this is not just a simple act of reminiscence, but one which oscillates towards a sense of loss. This movement in the direction of bereavement commences at the very moment when the hair is cut. Such cut locks of hair can, under the right conditions, last for thousands of years, whereas the body cannot. Thus, the locks are a form of *memento mori* as they remind one of the anticipated absence of the body (Holm 2004:140).

Miller's use of hair as an interchangeable and fluctuating symbol for memory and loss is exemplarily executed, but further readings based on the physical properties of hair are also implied. Hair, through chemical or microscopic analysis, can offer an account of an individual's state of health and also records the presence of exposure to any toxic substances. In this regard, hair holds a history of an individual's nourishment and environmental context. Owing to the fact that the hair in the artwork comes from children, their sustenance and sheltered



2 Gwen Miller, *Key to the Family* (2011). Hardboard and wood case. Perspex, paper, hair and paint. 152 x 48 x 23.5 cm. Unisa Art Collection. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

environment are primarily dependent on the mother. Accordingly, the artwork can be regarded as an homage to the nourishment, care and devotion mothers offer their children. In other words, the rearing of children is reliant on the nurturing and nourishment they receive from their mothers, and that record is evident in the hair. Thus, hair can be seen as a testament to the intimate bond between selfless mother and dependent child. Overall, Miller presents a considerable collection of works that are defined by a profound exploration and personal expression of her specific lines of inquiry.

Frikkie Eksteen's *Deleted Scene* (2012) (3) is a tableau of seemingly identical men in various states of concealment behind the bands of horizontal blinds. The bands move from a dense concentration on the left-hand-side to a relatively sparse concentration on the right-hand-side, where the bands appear more as clear-cut vectors. Through the use of bands the viewer does not figure as a voyeur but rather as an observer, standing before a line-



3 Frikkie Eksteen, *Deleted Scene* (2012). Oil, spray paint and inkjet print on canvas, 210 x 164 cm. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

up of suspects. This role actively encourages the viewer to search for any distinctive facial features in the male figures, in order to determine whether the men are all, indeed, identical. The viewer finds that the male figures are displayed in an array of poses, but that the poses are all struck by the same subject. In this regard, the painting bears traces reminiscent of the photographs of Eadweard Muybridge, which capture the movement and repetition of a moving body over chronologically sequenced images. For Eksteen (2012), though, the interest lies not in capturing movement but in creating and representing an ambiguous subject for portraiture. Through computer imaging and morphing, Eksteen develops reference material, or, more aptly, a genealogy of numerous characters for his paintings. The intention here is to subvert the conventions of portrait painting being associated with the likeness and idiosyncrasies of actual people (Eksteen 2012).

Eksteen's (1012) work can also be discussed in relation to a questioning of a number of other myths and traditions associated with portraiture painting, namely its relationship to power and the stylistic signature of the artist. However, further readings are opened up by the exhibition being held in the wake of the furore surrounding Brett Murray's *The Spear* (2012). In the section that follows, this author is of the opinion that Eksteen's inclusion of several penises in his painting can be read in a subversive manner that destabilises any phallic connotations of the penis.

Commenting on the mass hysteria, throngs of protest and cacophony of public debate following Murray's stylistic representation of a penis on a Leninesque-looking Jacob Zuma, Kendell Geers (2012) asks: 'What is it about the penis that strikes fear into the hearts of men? What is it about the dick ... that makes presidents weep and a nation scream? Every man has one, flaccid or not, and yet the mere mention of the proverbial python sends a grown man's blood racing to his head.'

One possible reason for the penis inciting terror and filling viewers with trepidation is that it may run the risk of no longer being equated with the phallus. This is not just an idle threat but completely warranted, as the penis lacks the proportions and properties of the phallus. Although the penis is incommensurable with the phallus, the 'dominant fiction' – the representational system through which society figures consensus – is based on the conflation of the penis with the phallus (Silverman 1992:30, 41). In maintaining this fiction, patriarchy upholds phallic privileges being consigned to men alone. In order to sustain the dominant fiction, to preserve the phallic identification of hegemonic masculinity, representations of the penis are enveloped in taboos and iconoclasm. In such acts of banning, masculinity remains entrenched in the phallic properties of power, strength and control. In cognisance of this line of reasoning, not only is the representation of the penis subversive by breaking taboos, but its very representation has the potential to challenge phallic privilege by displaying the disjuncture between the penis and phallus (Mathes 2000; Nixon 2000).

From the above discussion, Eksteen's representations of the penis can be argued to represent an attempt to dislodge it from phallic qualities, and as such offers it as a counter-patriarchal object (Nixon 2000). This reading is based on a number of formalist elements in Eksteen's painting. First, the painting consists only of a single individual in a number of poses. What has not been depicted is a background or setting to stage the male nudity. Settings and props are necessary for the depiction of male nudes, as the penis alone cannot exemplify the phallus. This means that in representations of male nudity it is the predominance of prosthetic devices, rather than the penis, that embodies the phallus (Jones 2002:192; Segal 1990:89; Walters 1978:297). By providing neither a suitable stage nor prosthetic devices, the male nudes in Eksteen's painting are removed from pre-authorised meanings and conventional significations which clothe the penis as a phallus. Second, the horizontal blinds and vectors serve to fragment the penis from the body. This leads the viewer to perceive the penis as segregated from its anatomical context, which can be seen as an attempt to deliberately separate the penis from



4 Nathani Lüneburg, *Dreaming of home* (2008). Stop-frame animation, full colour, 1920 x 1080 HD format, 3 minutes. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

the being – an anatomical sign that reinforces an impermeable border between sexualities, genders and bodies; and as a cultural marker that ensures male rights and privilege (Stephens 2004:89–90). Furthermore, the rendering of the *penis*-as-fragment subverts the phallic ideals of coherence and unity, and thus prevents the penis from being read as a phallic symbol (Nixon 2000).

Without the props and prosthesis and by fragmenting the penis from the body, the penis is severed from phallic connotations that serve to block it from being merely a penis. In this way, Eksteen challenges conventional tropes governing the representations of the penis that ensure phallic readings. In sum, Eksteen presents the penis as an organ rather than a symbol that is embedded and assigned meaning associated with virility; an organ rather than a motif of anxiety and insecurity; and an organ that is inconsequential to phallic identification.

In the video artwork, *Dreaming of home* (2008) (4), Nathani Lüneburg depicts a sleeping woman while a number of hybrid creatures, reminiscent of surrealist imaginings, lurk and ominously loiter on top of her. For Lüneburg (2012) the artwork portrays how her memory fails to represent the actual truth following an experience of personal trauma. Such traumatic memories are depicted in the artwork as hybrid creatures. These creatures may be surreal in representation, but they bear a striking resemblance to the look and position of a devious incubus mounting a woman in slumber. An incubus resting on a female is notably recorded in Henry Fuseli's oil painting *The Nightmare* (1781) and in its later (1802) rendition. In the Fuseli paintings, the incubus causes the sleeping women to have nightmares. In this respect, it is possible to argue that the incubus-like figures in Lüneburg's work serve as a suitable motif for indicating how traumatic memories distort reality and cause anxiety, stress and nervousness. However, a notable distinction between Lüneburg and Fuseli's work is that Fuseli indicates the effect the nightmare has on the woman – her body is physically responsive to the stimuli originating in the dream world. In contrast to Fuseli's depiction of the women as receptive to the influence of the incubus, the female figure in Lüneburg's artwork remains primarily unmoved and unchanged. This can be interpreted as Lüneburg attempting to stand

firm and defend herself against the effects of the trauma. Overall, the video artwork shows an awareness of the subject of memory, dreaming and trauma in art history, while providing a uniquely subjective meditation on her own personal exploration of the subject.

T(his) Shirt (2011) by Justice Mokoena is a monumental monoprint of a t-shirt that is meticulously and intricately rendered to reveal every crease, fold, stitch and seam. Mokoena (2012) describes the work as exploring his grief following the death of his father. In this regard, Mokoena's rendering of the t-shirt can be seen as part of the material and visual culture of death and mourning. Not only is the t-shirt's monumental scale connotative of memorials, but its highly detailed depiction lends the artwork a weightiness which is indicative of tombstones. Mokoena's grief is, however, not solely related to the death of his father, but also his absence while Mokoena was growing up. Mokoena (2012) therefore describes the artwork as a metaphor for grief arising from both death and absence. This is notable in that it allows the artwork to move from a private grieving (Mokoena mourning the death of his father) to the viewer sharing in Mokoena's lament over absent fathers. In South Africa, most men are seen to be jarringly uninterested in their children (Morrell and Richter 2006:2). This claim is made explicit in the fact that many men reject their role as fathers by denying paternity or outright abandoning their children (Morrell & Richter? > 2006:14). 'Absent fathers' are not unique to South Africa – it is a worldwide phenomenon. Susan Faludi (2000:375, 484) charts the absence or vanishing of fathers in the West as occurring in the wake of World War II, and notes that it has resulted in several generations of men anguishing over paternal abandonment. In such a zeitgeist of spectral fatherhood (Faludi 2000:597), Mokoena's work reads as a memorial for the aching sadness and grief of men who grew up fatherless. Mokoena effectively encodes the grief of his father's death while also decoding the collective injustice felt by countless men with missing and/or absent fathers.

In several works, namely *Chris and tennis partner, 1950s* (1999) (5) and *Jack, Pieter and Chris, Kruger Park, 1950s* (2008) (6), Karin Preller produced paintings that appear to be based on personal photographs. In her works she not only duplicates the subjects in



5 Karin Preller, *Chris and tennis partner, 1950s* (1999). Oil on canvas, 103 x 105 cm. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

6 Karin Preller, *Jack, Pieter and Chris, Kruger Park, 1950s* (2008). Oil on canvas, 83 x 108 cm. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

the photographs, but also the formal qualities of photographic representations: blurred imagery, cropped compositions and a smooth surface (Neihaus 2012:6). By reproducing the formal qualities of photographs she is able to examine Walter Benjamin's earlier conception of the aura. In its first formation, Benjamin (1980:209) defines aura as 'a strange web of time and space: the unique appearance of a distance, however close at hand'. Benjamin in this sense articulates how photographs are interpreted through times and spaces other than those recorded in the images. In this way, the viewer superimposes his/her own context onto the image, thereby undermining its claims to an essential truth or universal meaning (McInnes 2008:18). This is clearly evident in the viewer's reaction to the paintings. Those who view Preller's paintings do not respond by asking for further information or enquiring after the identities of the subjects recorded. Rather, the elements in the image that strike or wound us, their very *punctum*, are their indistinctness from our very own photo albums. If we had merely seen the original photographs we would not necessarily have responded by recognising the aura. Instead, we would run the risk of being positioned as voyeurs, while the work would risk being categorised as spectacle. However, by reproducing the photograph as a painting, Preller introduces into the images the introspection, slow contemplation and temporality associated with paintings. As a result, the viewer is able to reflect on how Preller's images are strikingly similar to his/her

very own photographs, and s/he is encouraged to interpret the images according to personal experiences, context and subjectivity.

Collateral damage (2012) by Bongani Mkhonza is a near identical copy of the old R10 note. However, the viewer is jolted out of any complacency by the glaringly obvious dehorned rhino on the front of the note. What appears in the absence of the horn is an acid-red seeping wound that bears connotations of blood. Yet, the wound is also the same colour as the marker-pen inscription that reads '\$16 304' bracketed around the now-missing horn. This may be read as a literal rendering of the term 'blood money' – the large sum of money hired poachers are paid for the illegal dehorning of rhinos. However, the work also offers deeper levels of meaning through its very title and the replacement of the wording 'South African Reserve Bank' with 'Chinese Reserve Bank'. These markers may refer to rhinos as the unintended victims of South Africa's ailing economy and the government's attempts to resuscitate it through bilateral agreements. South Africa has joined the association of emerging economies known as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa). Although BRICS aims to encourage commercial, political and cultural cooperation between its member states, questions have surfaced of late regarding South Africa's lack of agency by conforming to Chinese interests. In this sense, Mkhonza positions China as key role player in interrogating the sharp rise in incidents of rhino poaching: Have rhinos

fallen victim to the rising Chinese middle-class which now has sufficient disposable income to remedy impotence? Will the South African government clamp down on the illegal trading of rhino horn if it means jeopardising trade relations? Mkhonza succinctly queries our loss of rhinos as stemming from the rise of potent super-powers such as China, while questioning the value of our 'currency' to defend our human rights and our wildlife.

'Staff/Stuff' fascinated the viewers with its array and quality of works, as well as the advanced conceptual and specialist skills of the artists. The impeccable articulation of complex ideas pertaining to the nature of art, current affairs and the interrogation of personal memories and experiences, is synonymous with the exhibition.

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