

curators' comment

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exhibition opens: Monday 29 July 2013

exhibiting artists:

Colleen Alborough; *Business suits*: print exhibition; Neville Petersen; Mia van Schalkwyk; Neill Wright; Ryan Wallis;

for more details on the artists' works, please read the texts on each artist's exhibition page.

key words:

anxiety; the Carlton Centre; city life; Jaun van Wyk; Johannesburg; mining; photography; spatiality; street healers; urban space;

Layers of Johannesburg

Johannesburg is fondly known by its citizens as Joburg, Joeys, Jozi and Egoli. But all these names have one main association ... the City of Gold, a place of pushing boundaries, with its own special history of affluence and hardship, sudden wealth and loss, tough heroes and rogues.

The extent of the gold supply hidden in the Witwatersrand had not been anticipated when the small gold rush town of Johannesburg sprung into life. But as more and more gold was discovered, Joburg grew to accommodate the influx of fortune-seekers. Today it is one of the few major cities in the world not situated close to any natural feature that could be considered life-sustaining, such as a river, a lake, the coast, even mountains or a fertile plain. The natural feature of Joburg was just the gold, hidden underground within the reef of the Witwatersrand.

The largest city in South Africa, Johannesburg was formally established in 1886. Although today it is South Africa's commercial and financial nucleus, it is a complex city of contrasts and contradictions, part first-world, part third, where the informal street life of hawkers is reflected in the sheets of glass that window the most sophisticated of buildings, and where sleek luxury cars do daily battle with ramshackle minibus taxis. And people throng everywhere, creating the buzz of Joburg.

In an article dealing with ways of understanding urban spaces, young architect Jaun van Wyk describes the idea of *spatiality*, which he says refers to "our mental perception of space; it is a construct rather than an entity ... the perceived characteristics of space: the void, the nothingness, the in between".

Joburg is like that, a city full of negative space - the space that surrounds the buildings and the people. And depending on one's perspective, this negative space may contain certain emotions: vibrancy, fear, belonging, harshness, and also nostalgia for the old-world sophistication of Joburg

alongside the in-your-face contemporary life of an African city. Anyone who has ever interacted in a significant way with Joburg brings their own associations to this urban space, and the artists in this current group of exhibitions have responded in different ways to different aspects of the city, and for different reasons.

Jaun van Wyk introduces another theory relating to the contemporary city: the idea that a city is made up of superimposed layers. He says that this overlapping of “disparate elements”, seemingly random, can give rise to new associations, and that “the act of superimposition can ... open the door to surprise and revelation. The successive stages of development in landscape and city [may be] conceived as separate layers that become superimposed over time: the more the layers the greater the complexity of the context.” He goes on to ask the question: how does one know “one’s relationship to such dislocated city parts.”

Curatorial decisions

In selecting the artists for this group of exhibitions, we kept these two principles in mind: the artist’s own experiential interaction with the spaces of the city; and the different layers of a new awareness that their work superimposes onto the complexity that is Joburg.

If we could look at Joburg as a conceptual laminate board: thin layers held together, each significant, for with one missing the tensions shift, they will peel apart and reconstitute in a different form. Equally, these artists’ works merge to form a conceptual laminate that creates a specifically- layered understanding of the uniqueness that is Joburg.

Joburg is a city about personalities, anecdotes and urban legend, so another aspect we introduced here was that of narrative. Some of the artists have created their own, while with others we have curated their shows into subtle storylines of our own making – curators’ licence! - that the viewer may or may not pick up.

Neville: industrial reminders

An important layer of the laminate is the mining industry because without it Joburg would not exist. Growing up on the East Rand, Neville Petersen’s early memories relate not only to the sight of the mines, but as importantly, to the communities that built up around them. But today almost 60% of gold mines have been declared unprofitable and are undergoing demolition. Neville sees beauty in the physicality of the industry’s tools of production – its mine shafts, headgear, winders – and has been driven to record this, partly out of his own deep appreciation for the machinery and partly because he feels it is an aspect of Joburg’s history that should be remembered. In the superb colours of Neville’s photographs, the negative spaces formed by the objects captured through his lens seem to glow with an other-worldly light.

Colleen: a 50-storey narrative

Colleen Alborough’s exploration of the planning and development of the iconic Carlton Centre complex is a natural extension of her creative preoccupation with Joburg. And it could open the door to further engagement with another layer of history: the architecture of Joburg, and the multiple

agendas behind the physical evolution of the city. In the 1960s and 70s, extensive building operations began to take place to modernise Joburg, and the 50-story Carlton Centre opened in 1973. Its top floor is known as the Top of Africa, and has a viewing deck that allows an uninterrupted view over Joburg and its surroundings – and over the intervening decades has become the core of the city, constantly reviewing its own corporality, witnessing the on-going superimposition of layers upon this city.

Robert: the rise and fall?

Robert Hodgins' satirical portrayal of his business suited gents offers a jaded comment on the layers of social dynamics underlying big business – and by extension, on the 'sins' of pride and arrogance. It seems as though the human race can't help itself, and throughout history different regimes have fallen victim to hubris. "Pride comes before a fall" goes the well-known proverb, and Joburg has seen its share of the rise and fall of not only individuals, but of seemingly firmly established social systems. And there is little mercy for the fallen. Maybe the recklessness accompanying that old Joburg gold rush mentality still lingers in the air.

Neill Wright: on the streets

And if big business appears corrupt, what of small business? Neill Wright examines the phenomenon of the street prophet, the street healer, offering success and fortune in all aspects of life: love, sex, money-making, acknowledgement ... it seems as though everyone wants the same, whether on the streets of Joburg or within its luxurious offices. Just that on the streets it's more blatant – or could one say, more honest? The layers of pasted posters – the products of the street prophets' strategies of self-promotion - cluttering the view in the streets, encroaching on the visual space of the city, bombard us: nothing subtle here. They are the visual source for much of Neill's work.

Mia: who is watching?

Mia van Schalkwyk experienced another significant layer of the Joburg laminate: personal fear and resulting anxiety. But what is anxiety? Andrew Brink describes anxiety as an unclear expectation of danger, the background of fear, its tensions causing a dislocation of the positive layers of life. The subtle shift of the centre point in someone's emotional compass may turn his or her life into an uncomfortable and distressing existence. Mia used three everyday life occurrences – walking in the street, showering and simply breathing – and re-examines them from the perspective of a young woman suffering from seemingly irrational attacks of extreme anxiety. But are they irrational? This individual response of a visitor from a small town raises questions about the unacknowledged daily psychological impact of city life.

Ryan: superimposing dreams

But when all is said and done, we come back to that iconic skyline, the view of postcards and tourist books. But it is so real to Joburgers. This city has been eternally seductive, offering the yellow brick road, the potential to fulfil dreams. Ryan Wallis has taken the image of this skyline and looked at Joburg from the perspective of a young man who grew up on its outskirts, seeing this view every day as he went about his business, always at a slight remove but continually inspired by it. This view of

Joburg, from the outside looking in, allows for the superimposition of dreams and concerns, and for the growth of ambitions and hope.

Different realities

And each of these artists has his or her own story of Joburg to tell. Apart from Mia, the artists are either Joburg born-and-bred, or have spent a significant part of their lives there. Likewise, we two curators have. As a Joburger, the city osmoses into your being. You exist with heightened senses, conscious constantly of the emotions provoked by its physical spaces, you are alert to danger and threat, aware of the layers of cultures, clashingly harmonious. Stressed? Maybe. Yet one glimpse of that skyline lifts the spirit. Only Mia, new in town as an adult, had no evolved defences and felt instantly to be under direct attack. Which in itself raises other questions ...?

sources

Reconfiguring and reconstructing lost urban spaces in post-apartheid South Africa through means of extrapolation | by Jaun van Wyk

<http://jaunvanwyk.com/post/25923655228/reconfiguring-and-reconstructing-lost-urban-spaces-in>

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