



## Anton Karstel

Pretoria Art Museum | Pretoria

Cape Town-based artist Anton Karstel is well known as a painter, and a superb one at that, although he is somewhat critically neglected in the contemporary South African art world, dominated as it is by conceptualism and a concurrent neglect of painting. Is it for this reason that his latest exhibition is an installation of some 320 photographic prints, all exactly the same size and format, winding the length of the walls of the Pretoria Art Museum and reflecting, in their uniformity and repetition, its modernist architecture?

You can take away the painting but you cannot take away the painterliness. Karstel's paintings are deeply concerned with surface and colour, and so are these photographs. The surfaces are seemingly abstract and beautifully subtle: vague, soft, blurry, with grainy areas and shadowy edges, while the colour ranges are pastel: yellows and fawns, beige, golden pink, cooler greys, blues and greenish azure. They seem, at first view, to be aerial or satellite shots of landmasses, great seas and bays, sandbars, misty edges of continents, sun catching shallow waters. Given the number of images, one then picks up (or imposes) patterns, so then there is the possibility of something cyclical: seasons, weather, climate changes or the light at different times of day.

Too romantic a reading? Well, are they microscopic views, interior rather than exterior, enlargements of the fluids, blobs and smears on a slide, some sort of human, plant or animal matter? Possibly, but then there is the history of painting itself. They remind one of Monet's many views of sunlight on Rouen cathedral, or, too abstract for that, of the surfaces of Helen Frankenthaler

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or Morris Louis, dissected, atomised and mechanised into myriad smaller parts through contemporary technology. It is their light and colour that set up these connections to impressionism, abstract expressionism or, indeed, Karstel's own paintings with their shimmering and layered threads of paint.

Obviously Karstel is fully aware of all these potential associations, and his intention is to keep the works open-ended, or even to encourage misreadings. He does not reveal the actual process in a written explication. It remains absent or even hidden, unless, like me, you talk to the artist. So, many viewers will never know the actual process, which involved Karstel travelling from Cape Town to Port Elizabeth, following a police van and photographing its worn and peeling paint. Why the journey? This was the only van that had this particular weathering, probably because it was often parked near the sea. The exhibition title, *108314N*, gives nothing away but is in fact the serial number of the vehicle. Variations in the many images are due not just to the layers of paint on the van, to changing climate and times of day, but also to variations of camera angle, focus and movement, artistic or technological decisions which transform the object.

Knowing this, the work takes on quite different meanings, and becomes topical, more loaded with references to both the old South Africa with its ubiquitous police presence, and to more recent crime and violence. The associations with landmasses now shift to refer to policing of borders, systems of control of territory and state bureaucracy. At the same time, it remains difficult to reconcile the aesthetic quality of the surfaces with the banal utility of the police van.

Karstel's strategy is a poststructuralist play with potential but never final meanings and a conscious choice of ambiguity. The artwork is a network of potential meanings and absence, rather than an object allowing closure and presence. Much contemporary art thus invites multiple interpretations and, while I miss the sheer visual thrill of Karstel's paintings, he certainly plays this game well. Looking at art like this, what you seek is what you get.

**Ingrid Stevens**

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Anton Karstel,  
*108314N*, 2004,  
installation view,  
Pretoria Art Museum