



ANTON KARSTEL

FRANCHISE | JOHANNESBURG

Anton Karstel, *Wild thing* (installation detail), 2004, photographic installation of mounted photographs, 20 x 20cm each

When I went to see Anton Karstel's latest installations at Franchise, it was my first visit to the gallery's new premises. As I turned left, just after the ATM, and walked down a small passage, I came across a middle-aged couple dressed as though they had time on their hands. Their heads were squeezed through a door they'd just opened, their bodies still outside. They conferred, then turned, and smiled as they passed me. The door, still ajar, was unmarked, except for the artist's name and the title of his exhibition.

There was nothing inside the sealed-off room except a large photo-based installation on the floor and a small photograph on the wall. No artist's statement, no captions. No table with flowers. No gallerist sitting behind a computer. Not even a security guard. With no invitation to the uninitiated, it must be horribly disconcerting.

The first thing I did was walk the geography of the space, just to make sure I hadn't missed a human presence. Realising I was alone, and beginning to get a sense of Karstel's semiotic sharpness, I faced the installation on the floor. It's a composite photograph of a decommissioned Nyala police vehicle – side, top and side – clinically flayed and critically displayed on the floor like a decorative animal hide. But with the disorientating trace of its three-dimensionality, unlike any animal version.

Karstel's visual reconstruction obsesses over the details of the decaying yellow vehicle: shattered glass, faded paint, seeping rust, perished rubber. It's not quite life-size, but certainly is life-like. The sheer scale of the content makes a political reading unavoidable. It's a menacing reminder of the knife-edge between patrol and control. Each of the small photographic tiles that make up the whole offers a point-of-view ever so slightly different from the next, reinforced by a range of hues that reflect a month of early morning and late afternoon light.

In simultaneously fixating upon and relinquishing the promise of photographic realism, Karstel becomes the restless mapmaker determined to entice the viewer, not by the detail of topographical place, but rather by the promise of a series of spatial absences. For one, the representational act embodies a ferocious gutting that disarms the vehicle of its dimensional presence and violently relegates it to the increasingly invisible past. And the complete lack of art's designating details – here sometimes predictable to the initiated and mostly alienating to the uninitiated – makes for a series of (mis)readings and chance interactions that can only come of absence.

That flighty middle-aged couple testifies to one of the ways in which Karstel's approach can be quite limited. My circulation of the room, in search of the markers of administration, points to some of its possibilities. When I left the installation, I decided I had time for a quick espresso. However, paralysed by the whereabouts of the gallerist, I turned back and walked around the building. I came across a small side door with a temporary sign. I entered and immediately saw the table with flowers, the gallerist at her computer. Comforted, I turned and faced a raw brick wall.

Here was the second installation, blocking what would have been the traditional access to the flayed Nyala. Obviously raw on this side, seamlessly plastered and painted on the other, the wall seemed utterly suburban in its tensions: between seen and unseen views, between present and absent voices and sounds, between controlled and forced entry and exit. Like the Nyala itself, Karstel's wall begs the question: is it for me and my protection, or is it for someone else?

The answer depends on the space you inhabit, on your geographical proximity to the thing itself, which cuts to the heart of Karstel's conceptual play with space. I do wonder, though, whether this visual trick is quite enough, whether prior knowledge that the gallery's two-part presence had been sealed-off was not more disarming than Karstel himself.

■ Rory Bester