

M.O.L 23

DIS-FIGURATION

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This is a story about a painter and a sculptor, both Afrikaner, both obsessed with the erasure of the human figure. Anton Karstel's sold-out show at 131 A Gallery in Cape Town, inspired by the recent Olympics and sports manuals from the Apartheid era, perfectly conveys the artist's crux: he is both contemporary and a throwback, as preoccupied with the stain of Afrikaner history as he is with its utter obliteration in the present moment. Inexistence, and the crisis which comes with the sense that one has no place in the world, is at the epicentre of Karstel's vision. He does not tell us of his existential dread, he paints it. We see it in the gymnastic figures who populate his latest show – bending, reaching, stretching – in pursuit of some physical excellence while, at the same time, besieged by an inner fallibility.

This has always been Karstel's take on the world. This is why his paintings possess their allure – they draw us into the painter's crisis, encourages a familiarity. At no point does the painter seek to push his audience away or draw them into a moral dispute concerning Apartheid, rather, in both instances, one finds oneself in a tug-o-war with the artist. He unsettles one. This is literally the case. One cannot look at a Karstel painting without wrestling with one's conscience, or without struggling to compute the mangled bodies presented to one.

Karstel dis-figures the figure. Impasto is the technical term for how he paints – their thick layering of paint. But it is not the thick tactility of paint that only matters – paint as matter – but the psychological vortex the artist inhabits in their making. Karstel hurts. He ruins, despoils, breaks the world in front of him. It is not that the world is intact, he broken, but that in their interconnection we find breakage inescapable.





Above: Fig. 298(b), 2021, Oil on paper, 120 x 28cm
 Opposite Page: Fig. 331(d), 2021, Oil on paper, 20 x 15cm

There is a history behind this painterly technique, namely German Expressionism. The result of an existential crisis generated by the First World War – the ‘Great War’ – German Expressionism signalled the end of clarity in portraiture, the contamination of the palette of realism, the incursion of lurid and unearthly colours and shapes, the destruction of painting as a mirror of the consensually accepted world and the creation of a new and radical subjectivity.

That German Expressionism, or Expressionism more generally, remains with us is a sign not only of its durability but its continued relevance. If Karstel is the survivor of some form PTSD – and I’d hazard a guess he is – this has everything to do with the fact that we are in the throes of uncontrollable change. That his paintings have touched a nerve, his show sold-out, reveals the extent to which his crisis has a wider relevance. If paint matters for its own sake, in the case of Karstel one cannot ignore the fact that it also matters because his paintings mirror a vision of the world that is broken, distorted, and justly so.

The same can be said for the newest sculptures by Kobus La Grange, on show at SMAC in Stellenbosch and at PulseX in Johannesburg. In his wooden sculptures the figures are deliberately roughly hewn, as though torn from a block of wood by an angle-grinder. However, their reduced scale suggests more the use of a chisel. There is a strong human bond which La Grange generates – the sense that we are a part of a community of indefinable beings. Robert Musil’s *Man Without Qualities* springs to mind, some generic yet utterly peculiar human condition which we all share. As Musil notes, ‘Since the possession of qualities presupposes that one takes a certain pleasure in their reality, all this gives us a glimpse of how it may all of a sudden happen to someone who cannot summon up any sense of reality – even in relation to himself – that one day he appears to himself as a man without qualities’. It is this existential shift, this dread that ‘all of a sudden’ what we knew of our selves and the world stops making sense, that many fear. But there is no need, because this realisation is inevitable. This is Karstel and La Grange’s point.

If La Grange’s deliberate dis-figuration of the human form helps us to connect to the human condition, it is because his sculptures allow for an amorphous generality – the precise inverse of the hyper-definitional cult of the Selfie. Unlike Karstel, La Grange’s sculptures do not carry a weighty existential burden. Gravity exists, but there is a definite lightness in La Grange’s touch. Is this the case of a generational divide? Perhaps. What it certainly tells us is that there is no wholly unified Afrikaner condition. At no point does La Grange, as a young white male artist, feel superfluous or supplementary to South African life today. In fact, his culture is hybrid, despite the singularity of his cultural inheritance. His figures are fundamentally human; they are not defined by caste. If they are blackened, it is because La Grange is inspired by the tonal density this produces, and the way in which the grain shines through the darkness. This decision strikingly contrasts with Karstel’s preoccupation with whiteness – with white paint, its hypervisibility and its disappearance.

What both artists reveal, however, is a shared preoccupation with the erasure of definition, the unclarity of being. This project of erasure is also central to William Kentridge’s project, as it



KLG Black Columns, *man & woman*



Above: KLG Black Columns, *3 women*
Opposite Page: KLG Black Columns, *3 men*

is to Jacques Derrida's deconstructive project – sous rature – in which a word is cancelled yet remains visible. Why, because nothing ever truly disappears, because everything, good or bad, is latent. This is the creative and philosophical root of Karstel and La Grange's dis-figuring art. For them, nothing, today, is easily explicable. In fact, much is frustrating. We are largely frustrated. It is this stressed reaction which these artists, in different ways, draws out of us. What they remind us of is that there is no need to fear confusion, or doubt, or one's inability to make sense of the world. This is the nature of things right now, and why, consequently, it is unsurprising that a painter and a sculptor should choose to focus on dis-figuration.

What Karstel and La Grange do is subtract rather than abstract the world. Neither removes a face, wholly expels a body, rather, they work within the parameters of the body which they distend and subtract. If subtraction is key, it is because both seek to find what connects us instead of what separates us. The hyper-

definition of the Selfie – and the narcissism it endorses – is antithetical to their visions of the world. In the midst of brutalism, their brutality, there is tenderness. Most of all, what Karstel and La Grange remind us that despite our fragility, we remain strong.

Di-figuration, or disfigurement, is a balm and a strength. If it is unsurprising that German Expressionism has endured, it is because human beings move from crisis to crisis. It seems as though we neither evolve nor devolve, that we are stuck on repeat – Nietzsche's eternal return. The global re-emergence fascism, and the intolerance and inhumanity it enshrines, is proof of our appalling consistency. If Karstel and La Grange help us, it is because they have absorbed the vulnerability of being human, because they cast no judgement, because they choose to include us in the beauty-wonder-grotesquerie of being human.