

A GIFTED PAINTER OF URBAN SCENE

# Past charms glow over brutal present

**EXTRACT** – new work by Anton Karstel, João Ferreira Fine Art, 80 Hout Street, Cape Town. (021) 423-5403. Until March 31. LLOYD POLLAK reviews.

**O**LD photographs indicate that at the turn of the century, South Africa's principal urban centres possessed an architectural uniformity and stately charm that has since been ruthlessly obliterated by the great ugliness that overtook our cities from the 1950s onwards.

Anton Karstel provides us with potently evocative, richly atmospheric glimpses of the vanished glories of urban Edwardiana when scale was human and architecture gracious.

He resurrects the majestic classical porticoes, columns, friezes, pediments and balustrades which once embellished our streets, and bathes the cityscape in a romantic golden light. Colour dissolves into a monochrome-gilded flush. Fevered brushwork gives rise to such shimmer and vibration, the image appears to deliquesce, and the cityscape hovers on the verge of dissolution like some mirage hanging in the desert air.

Black-and-white topographical photographs dating from 1900 to 1920 were the source of Karstel's views of Cape Town,

Johannesburg and Port Elizabeth at the turn of the 20th century.

At that period, our cities asserted a strangely European appearance, and – with their trees and rows of carriages – they even prompt vague reminiscence of the Parisian boulevards of Monet, Caillebotte and Pissarro.

Like the Impressionists, Karstel's paintings convey an acute sense of the city as a voracious living organism.

Shuddering patterns of brushstrokes also recall similar dynamic tendencies in the work of the futurists – Boccioni, Balla, Carrá, and Russolo. As the paintings are exercises in tonal luminism, they naturally remind one of the work of early 20th-century photographers. The photogravures of Langdon Coburn and Stieglitz, too, rely on zooming Bucking Bronco perspectives, and capsize all particulars in misty indistinctness and hazy light.

Like Karstel, all these artists sought to capture the momentary, and convey the vitality of city life. The difference is that they believed in the future, in progress and technology. Karstel's cloyingly lovely paintings address the failures of 20th-century millenarianism, and vividly remind us of our disappointed hopes. They possess

elegiac overtones and project an undertow of yearning, absence and irretrievable loss.

Not only has everyone that we glimpse in the painting entitled Main Street, Port Elizabeth, long since gone to their grave, but the couth urban fabric has ceded to rude brutalist high-rise. Port Elizabeth (as in the city as opposed to the painting) has not just changed, it is another town. Seen with the benefit of hindsight, the city's energies of self-renewal seem far too urgent and thrusting to provide us with any illusion of continuity.

The city becomes phantasmal, and the shaded façades and lengthening shadows impart a forlorn mystery to the scene.

The artist possesses a superb sense of texture and he uses paint to build up a crumbly friable surface like that of a worn sponge. To rid his paintings of the static quality inherent in the original photographs, Karstel underpainted his canvases such as Adderley Street, Cape Town, with violent directional strokes and, even though some of these have been covered up by the architecture, they nonetheless peep through and impart an explosive energy to the work. The canvas appears to seethe like vigorously boiling treacle.

In the painting entitled St George's Street, Cape Town, Karstel employs such thick, heavy, dense *impasto*, the picture surface resembles a shaggy rug, and the pigment stands proud in loose tufts, threads and snarls. The ridges and splinters of paint create surging rhythmic currents which shove forwards, push to the sides and drag into depth like a backwash.

When seen close to, the image disintegrates into free expressive brushwork and creates an impressive effect of dynamic abstract relief.

Karstel's painterly visions of yesteryear exude a melancholy and haunting poetry that indicate that this young artist is the country's most gifted laureate of the urban scene.

*Starlight Classics* Wednesday  
21 March  
6 pm

CAPE PHILHARMONIC

VERGELEGEN WINE FARM, SOMERSET WEST

TICKETS AT TICKETWEB

In the event of rain, the concert will take place on Thursday 22 March, 7pm

DANCE CREW  
MAYNARDVILLE  
OPEN AIR THEATRE

Sun 18 Preview, 6:30 pm

21, 23, 24 March 7:30 pm

*Things That Go Bump, Man*

*Into Machine & Café Rosita*

24 March 9:30 AM

*The Sorcerer From Space &*

*Barby And The Robot Man*

Booking at Computicket