

Complex painting intrigues

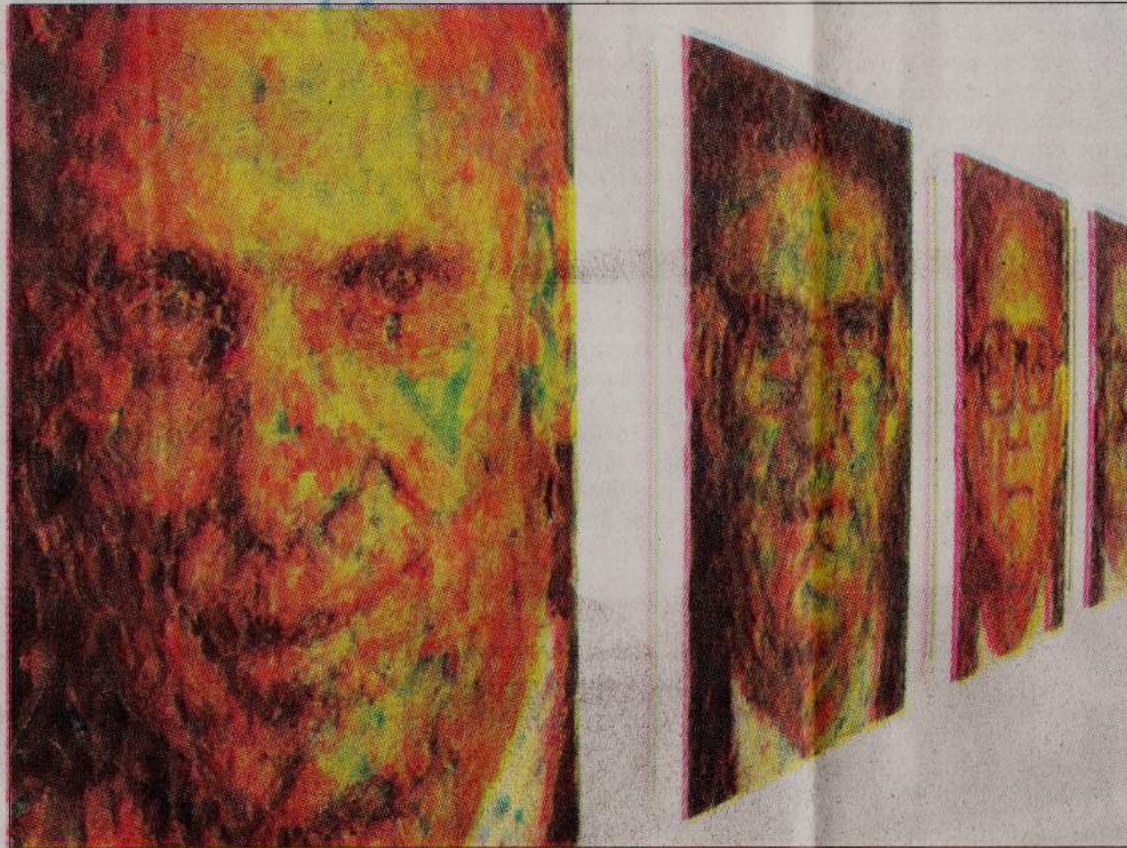
Exhibition: **ANTON KARSTEL** at João Ferreira Gallery until March 29. **MELVYN MINNAAR** reviews

ANTON KARSTEL is a formidable painter, and one who operates inventively at a contemporary cutting edge.

He mesmerises viewers with an ability to create imagery that slips in and out of fixed visual comprehension and hard-and-fast narration, all the while honouring the solidity and uniqueness of the age-old medium.

These are pictures that can only be done in his chosen medium. Using oil on canvas in little brush quivers of paint, he builds up shifty, shifting visuals that you need to negotiate and decode. The images seem to change all the time, as you become deeper and deeper involved in the process of looking.

Karstel has mastered the intrigue of visual suggestion, and there is more to the formal, squared images that face us. His paintings seem to suggest a world and story way beyond that which we view directly, and he captures the



MESMERISING: An installation view of Anton Karstel's members of the 1988 NG church council.

viewer's imagination. In this quite funky exhibition, he has orchestrated that stratagem with great finesse. The paint-

ings are presented not as individual pieces as such, but as relentless, similarly sized and executed pictures in a cool,

collected 'white-cube' installation. It becomes a loaded ambience thing, begging the viewer's attention.

Karstel has painted portraits of members of the 1988 church council of the NG Church Lyttelton East in the Afrikaner heartland of Pretoria. Some 65 pictures were reproduced from a photo album that reflect the hefty, but fading days of apartheid.

A kind of pointless memorialisation of the stern-faced "broeders" and "susters", Karstel's skilful avoidance of irony evokes instead a curious empathy. What surely would otherwise read as resurrecting ghosts of the bad, out-of-focus past, these to-be-forgotten characters have an air of melancholy in this, their formal gallery line-up.

Karstel's deft handling of paint and the over-painting that builds up layer upon layer constructs complex personas from the flat faces which seem, at times, to be lit up with skeletal x-rays or ectoplasm. It is as if these pious people's histories come alive as you step back from the close-up blur.

From a technical point of view, it is a show-stopper. The exhibition is bold in its emotional impact and cerebral resonance. Don't miss this.