

fine art

Banishing external influences

Liese van der Watt

On show in Pretoria

The awkward placement of what seemed to be a perfectly normal pillar, right in front of a doorway, startled quite a few visitors to last year's biennale show in Cape Town. Others, of course, didn't even notice and simply walked around it to enter the next room. Nearby, a TV monitor showed the four-day long process during which workers from the firm Murray and Roberts had built and painted the pillar in the architectural style of the National Gallery. The subtext of this work by Anton Karstel pointed to the arbitrary nature of that process which encodes certain kinds of labour into art, thus deeming it culturally significant, while excluding others.

Karstel's present solo exhibition of a series of smallish oil paintings at the Millennium Gallery in Pretoria seems disappointingly conventional after the

biennale installation. But that, one realises, is exactly the point of a show that continues to plead for a critical interaction with the practice of art.

In a space reminiscent of the modernist notion of the minimal "white cube" art gallery, Karstel has installed neat pairs of photographs and paintings. The photographs are reproduced from a book entitled *Wonderful South Africa*, published in the early 1940s and written for a colonial audience back "home". Each photograph has been copied, or rather translated by Karstel onto canvas in a limited range of monochrome oil colours. It is this process of aesthetic translation, seemingly innocent and disinterested, that forms the basis of inquiry of this show.

While one's gaze tends to travel swiftly over the smooth and shiny surface of the photographs, it is arrested and captured by the seductive colour and texture of the paint. The relation between the photograph and the painting ceases to be one of mimesis or of duplication — the painting estab-



Pointingly conventional: Anton Karstel's exhibition at the Millennium Gallery ends June 20

lishes an independent aestheticised unit, a self-contained world which modernist art critic Clement Greenberg described as "the integrity of the picture plane" in the late 1950s.

It is only after reading the captions to the photographs that one becomes aware of the charged socio-political subtext which informs the photographs, but which has, to a large extent, been banished from the paintings. Using a strategy of seduction and subsequent alienation (on reading the text), Karstel manages to demonstrate how the medium of oil paint often aestheticises, and in the process, depoliticises its subject matter.

It is not difficult then, to understand why, in an (arguably) post-colonial and post-modern world, painting has become unpopular due to its inability to engage with the complex realities of the day

and is accused of being a reactionary medium, belonging to the High art of European and American modernism.

Despite this cultural complicity of the medium, Karstel willfully chooses to work in oil on canvas. One realises that the focus of this exhibition is less on the overt and sometimes shocking racism of his source material, than it is on the act of painting.

He works consciously and critically within a specific artistic tradition, exposing its ideological structure. He calls all the paintings on his show *Untitled*. One last look at the text that accompanies the photographs make you shudder at the apathy which that word, so popular in modernist painting, manages to obscure.

Anton Karstel shows at the Millennium Gallery in Pretoria until June 20. Tel: (012) 46-8217