

City slicker



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FINE ART

In **Extract** the young Cape Town-based artist Anton Karstel presents a series of eight large oil paintings based upon late 19th- and early 20th-century archival photographs of Cape Town, Johannesburg and Port Elizabeth.

The richly textured and warmly coloured canvasses that he has produced play with the notion of artwork and image in a 21st-century age by displaying a complex painterly reinterpretation of flat photographic space. By literally "brushing against the grain" of the archive (to use the concept of Walter Benjamin) Kar-

stel uses each stroke of paint to unlock encoded meaning within typical historical photographs of the city.

An exciting marriage of technique and subject matter takes place: the photographic image is fragmented into particles of paint, applied in an almost pointillist manner. These individual slivers of colour form (sometimes at great distances as in St George's Street, Cape Town) a unified recoding of the original: now suffused with light, warmth and vitality.

The effect is not unlike that of a Byzantine mosaic with individual cubes of coloured stone combining in an iridescent and somewhat mysterious display. A superficial response may be to compare Karstel's style with Impressionism but this seems all wrong; his light, with its subtle amber and opalescent shades does not incline the viewer to take the analogy beyond that of a slight



Archival: A detail from Adderley Street, Cape Town, by Anton Karstel

similarity in brush technique. Stronger historical links can be drawn with the work of the 17th-century landscape painter Claude Lorraine. The characteristic cityscapes of this painter with their rich, magnetic sunsets are echoed in Karstel's works. Claude's fascination with the city of the past and

its latent failings is also worthy of note in the present context.

Formal elements — massive urban structures represented through small fragmented brushstrokes in gorgeous deep golden hues — invest the canvasses with an ambivalent and somewhat melancholic air. It is as if Karstel wishes to rewrite the grey, seemingly neutral *fin-de-siècle* photographic archives of a century ago within a post-colonial context at the turn of a new century.

Like the stylistically similar canvasses of British artist Walter Sickert, Karstel's canvasses belie a certain unease with the subject matter he is addressing. His 19th-century cityscapes do not evoke a warm golden summer as much as an image of a past world locked in amber.

Through the work of contemporary historians such as Charles van Onselen, Vivian Bickford-Smith, Milton Shain and Timothy Keegan the 19th century South African urban environment can never again be seen as a genteel site of polite liberal exchange but as the metropolitan heart of prejudice. Through the tension inherent in painting from

archival photographs and the characteristic, somewhat strange perspective and angles of this type of historical document we are confronted with contradictory portrayals that offer rich interpretative possibilities.

With subject matter such as a horse-drawn wagon rushing through a flooded Adderley Street (three of the canvasses are of flooded streets) alongside the "stock" images of bustling commercial thoroughfares complete with trams and horse-drawn cabs, Karstel unveils a view of the city in crisis and turmoil adjacent to a city burgeoning. The city is presented as a place of opportunity and loss; of stability and inundation.

Karstel has made a courageous commitment to painting in the 21st century with a sophisticated and distinctly contemporary body of work raising issues of post-colonial representation through archival documents reworked through the painter's eye and brush.

Extract is showing at the João Ferreira Fine Art, 80 Hout Street, Cape Town, Tel: (021) 423 5403, until March 31