

Pretoria through the looking glass

FINE ART: Ruth Sack

THERE is a feeling of danger coursing through the exhibition **Brown and Green**, at the Pretoria Art Museum. Exploring, as most of us now do, issues of identity, history and culture, what is unexpected is the strength of its darkly transgressive energy.

The transgressional nature of this exhibition has everything to do with its context. It is about Pretoria, and specifically the Pretoria Art Museum. Just as the "edge" of the recent *Scurvy Show* needed the Cape Town Castle to make its meaning, so too is this place and its history as much an exhibit on the show as are the objects.

The objects, mostly "unmediated", bring with them their own biographies. Together they form inexplicable narratives — like the riveting map-piece by Thomas Barry, and Wayne Barker's assemblage (one of his better works) which leaves one with a hovering anxiety, like a half-remembered nightmare.

Beyond anxiety are Anton Karstel's objects, on loan from the forensic science museum along with their semi-literate texts. Standing there, one reels past shock (a million memories of TV footage replay in one's head) through to aesthetic pleasure (after all, these things imitate art — imitate Alborough, Hirst, Burroughs, don't they?)

Pat Mautloa, with extraordinarily effective simplicity, frames a Pierneef painting with a "window" of corrugated iron, so that one observes the view of tree and veld from inside the kind of shack that Pierneef would never have admitted into his cleansed world. The effect is truly subversive.

The contextually-based nature of the exhibition is both its power and its weakness. Produced mostly by artists from Pretoria, there is heat and energy generated from within. One senses its authenticity, its necessity, its criticality. On the other hand, a few of the works seem entirely dependent on this context for any frisson they may have: billboard-size photographs of nude black/white women and a mixed-race couple, an installation on the Pretoria Women's Club — do these achieve more than a nose-thumbing? The billboard images, huge and celebratory, are beautiful; the Women's Club is just as polite and genteel as the women themselves. No more.