



Identity crisis: Anton Karstel poses a political problem in a show that isn't afraid to tackle the representation debate

Cross-dresser

Brenda Atkinson

Exhibition of the week

The invitation for **Too Close for Comfort** caused brows to wrinkle. No one in town had heard of female Ghanaian curator Azure Attah, nor could they speak knowledgeably of the five international artists whose work appeared on the show. The art cognoscenti were forced to wait for the secret "announcement" that would be made at the show's opening.

The minimalist exhibition was interesting, although the conceptual connection between the works — by an African-American, a white American feminist, a Pole, a Ghanaian, and a South African — seemed obscure. Azure Attah's text described the show as "responding to political and cultural fluctuations in the post-war era ... engaging art history, the body, representational conventions, and the gallery as sites of resistance".

Dazed and confused, we gathered for the announcement. Pretoria-based artist Anton Karstel smiled nervously as the truth was revealed: his was the hand that had crafted each work; he was the white Afrikaans male who had dared, for the moment, to enter the thorny terrain of identity politics and assume the identities of various cultural Others.

The stunned silence of the assembled guests made it difficult to ascertain whether they were amused or horrified. Postmodern theory may have triumphantly declared the death of the author, but in South Africa questions of cultural ownership continue to trouble the waters of democratic transformation. Visual artists in particular are having to honestly assess the potential political damage of their works. Pippa Skotnes has been publicly flogged for what was perceived by many as a deeply misguided exhibition on the Khoi San at the South African National Gallery last year; Okwui Enwezor, artistic director of this year's Johannesburg

Biennale, has criticised artists Candice Breitz and Minette Vari for making politically glib works that re-enact colonialist gestures.

As the ensuing debates have swung between personal conspiracy theory and professional concern, the role of the art critic has also come under scrutiny, most notably regarding the validity of the critic's role as political gatekeeper.

Karstel's deliberately provocative engagement with these issues begins to make grim and even sophisticated sense. *Too Close for Comfort* is both amused and very serious about its own agenda, which is "to induce a misidentification of cultural, racial, and gender signals", and to comment on the power of art-critical discourse to seduce viewers into believing that the images they see are authentic. Karstel's African-American persona, James Hilton, has made a colour cibachrome that "interrogates the representation of the Black subject" by confronting the viewer with "an image of the Black menace that has already taken shape in the collective imagination of middle-class white America".

American Mary Paterson is introduced as a kind of girls-only Annie Sprinkle, who has filmed a naked woman using a miniature replica of Brancusi's *Bird in Space* sculpture for auto-erotic satisfaction. By reducing one of the iconic works of the "patriarchal modernist project" to a dildo, Paterson "uses her body as a site to contest inequitable power relations".

If Karstel's explanatory texts are at times overwrought, they do find their target in terms of the opaque theoretical posing that often passes as profound conceptual art, as well as the language that surrounds and justifies the production of international biennales. Tongue-in-cheek and fingers crossed, he poses necessary questions about cultural censorship, the social and historical construction of identity and the problematics of political comfort-zones.

Too Close for Comfort is on show at the Rembrandt van Rijn Gallery until September 25