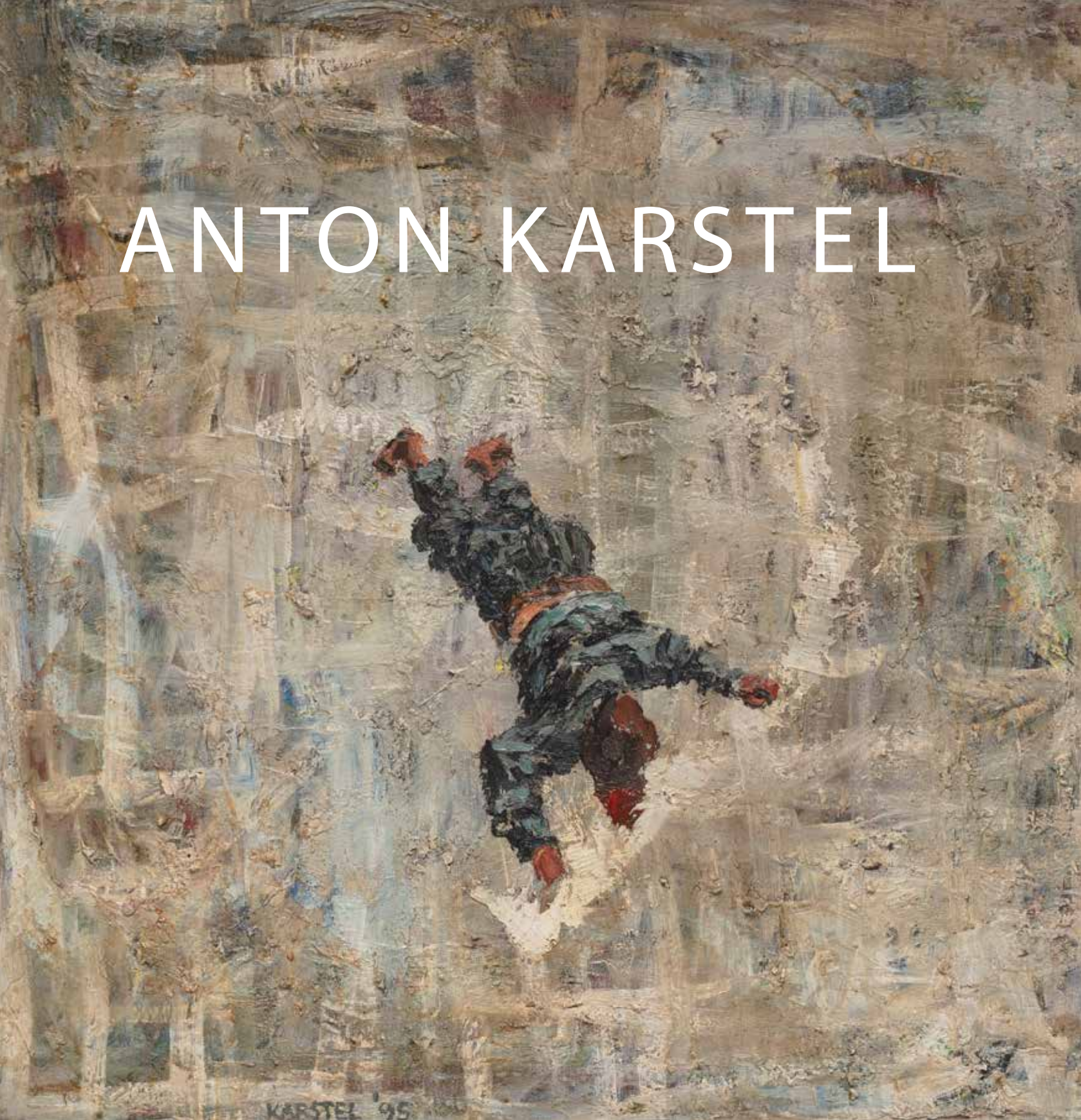


ANTON KARSTEL



KARSTEL 95

ANTON KARSTEL

1995 - 2018

Published to accompany the exhibition

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Pretoria Art Museum

14 October 2018 - 3 March 2019

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available at the South African Library

ISBN: 978-0-9814417-3-3

Book Design: Nicholas Hales
Printed and bound in South Africa



POST- ERGO ANTI -

Anton Karstel's exploration of South Africa's cyclical legacy of violence.

Lloyd Pollak & Isabella Kuijers

The painter makes real to others his innermost feelings about all that he cares for. A secret becomes known to everyone who views the picture through the intensity with which it is felt.
- Lucian Freud

In 1995, the corpse of Anton Karstel was buried in a shallow grave on the grounds of the Pretoria Art Museum by Anton Karstel. The funeral rites were short and to the point; the attendance was poor. The body, hands clasped in repose, is a concrete effigy which still lies parallel to the long single-storey building.

Amused by the way the notation of dates relating to exhibitions mirrors the obituary, Karstel enacted his 'self-burial'. Black and white photographs of the event drain the succinct concept of its wit and charm as the act of pseudo-suicide alludes to the heart-and-gut-wrenching sadness that permeates Karstel's work. Bloodletting and destruction are the keynotes of Karstel's oeuvre. Motifs of violence, death, fear and the erosion of social trust can be plotted from Karstel's earliest work during the apartheid era, to its violent repercussions and throughout South Africa's attempts to rebuild and rebrand itself.

It is appropriate then that 'ANTON KARSTEL 1995-2018', the artist's mid-career survey show which spans 23 years of his working life, be held at the Pretoria Art Museum.

Self-Burial (1995) stands out amidst Karstel's corpses, for there are many. In *Die Doodstoneel 'n Paar Minute Later* (1995), a clipping from the Afrikaans press is reinterpreted in Karstel's clotted oily hand. It shows three lifeless bodies lying haphazardly beside an open car. Karstel's initial sources of inspiration frequently derive from newspapers or photographs, imbued with the indefatigable ideology of their time. Through his re-rendering of these snippets of history they are infused with an indelible pungency and incisiveness.

Age has rendered the press clipping of the event faded and archival. The blood is a weak pink shadow beneath the blanched and dusty figures which themselves blend chromatically with the ground. In the painterly interpretation of the photograph Karstel replaces the newspaper's narrow chromatic range with vivid, keyed up colours in sculpturally plastic paint. The thrombotic intensity of the work turns the relaxed gallery visitor into a witness, experiencing the trauma, shock and a crisis of memory, as the event blurs and fragments into the past. This work and others, such as *Saint James Massacre* (2017) and *Vrees is die Enigste Emosie* (1995), disallow the emotional distancing of the seasoned news-consumer, making Karstel's message of aversion to violence as painful as it is salient. One cannot react cerebrally, only emotionally, to these works, because such paintings embody our most deep-seated human terrors with such vividness and ferocity. Conscious and subconscious dreads are stirred; mental alarm bells ring and a sense of perennial unease is activated.

In *Vrees is die Enigste Emosie*, the action appears helter-skelter before our eyes, disorientating viewers as we are thrust into a furious melee. Rough, raw and deliberately unfinished in appearance, the flurried squalls of churning brushwork spill out in all directions turning *Vrees is die Enigste Emosie* into a pure incarnation of terror. But whether the fear results from gangs, drugs, taxi warfare or service delivery protests the answer is never provided as the painting is less concerned with specificity, than with evoking a gut response. The fact that *Vrees is die Enigste Emosie* can so easily be read as relating to contemporary issues illustrates Karstel's insistence that violence begets violence, begets ever greater violence.

Die Doodstoneel 'n Paar Minute Later and *Saint James Massacre* also typify Karstel's use of tight cropping and foregrounding to claustrophobically constrain the viewer within the picture plane. This blinkered perspective becomes emblematic of our lack of agency or control over their content. This tactic and Karstel's haptic and viscous style of painting operates within a similar visual register as post-World War I works by Otto Dix and Max Beckmann. Karstel is aligned with their anti-war art insofar as he makes it his business to depict the horror of conflict. He does



The Source in the Afrikaans press / *Die Doodstoneel 'n Paar Minute Later* (1995)



Die Doodstoneel 'n Paar Minute Later, 1995, Oil on canvas, 38 x 45cm

so largely by countering the bravado and machismo of historical movements like Futurism, by infecting their symbology and ethos with the abject obsenity of violence.

Futurism expressed a lusty desire to 'glorify the hygiene of war - the only cure for the world' and proclaimed the splendour of the engine. In the Futurist Manifesto, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti declared that 'A racing automobile with its bonnet adorned with great tubes like serpents with explosive breath ... a roaring motor car which seems to run on machine-gun fire, is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace.' It tapped into the immemorial symbolism in which thoroughfares represent the path of life and cars, like any mode of transport, are associated with speed, advancement, modernity and progress.

Karstel's vehicles obstinately rebuke this reading of conquest and capacity. In *Kerkstraat-Born* (2015) that sense of forward movement is halted permanently as the charred metal skeleton and gaping bonnet are all that remain of the vehicle. *Protests in Wolseley* (2015) shows a toppled police van. It lies on its side, embodying the pitiful vulnerability of a beetle trapped on its back. In works such as these, the roads have become obstacle courses blocked by cars that no ignition key will ever turn again. In this state of anarchy, nothing including the city can function as it should, and the prevailing atmosphere is one of despair, desolation and impending doom. The recurrence of imagery depicting wreckage and waste signals despondency and resignation as to the state of the nation.



Kerkstraat-Born, 2015, Oil on canvas, 38 x 62cm



Saint James Massacre, 2017, Oil on canvas, 35 x 50cm



Die Motor Waarin 'n Swart Konstabel Van Bophuthatswana en 'n Burgerlike Verkool Het Toe Terroriste 'n Handgranaat Daarin Gegooi Het, 2015, Oil on canvas, 40 x 71cm



Protests in Wolseley, 2015, Oil on canvas, 40 x 60cm



Untitled, 1998, Oil on canvas,
39.5 x 47.5cm



Untitled, 1998, Oil on canvas,
38.5 x 50cm

The organs of the state are also perverted in this dystopian present as evidenced by the dented police car in *Untitled* (1998) that swerves off the road to block our path and our view. Its plasticky blue tarpaulin is pulled over the grate at the back, concealing its cargo of miscreants. And in *Untitled* (1998) a looming and ominous Casspir operated from behind tinted windows bulldozes towards the viewer. In this way Karstel uses cars as vehicles not only for themes of obstruction, breakdown and stagnation, but also of threat and corruption.

Die Lyke van Twee Mans (1995) depicts a single anonymous figure against a rutted slab of paint. The work is heavily layered, both in the sense that it consists of several successive strata of pigment, but additionally that each coat permits some glimpse into the remnants of the previous layer which enrich the meaning whilst investing it with added intrigue, exegetical depth and interpretive potential. The ambiguous disjuncture between the content and the title begs the question: Are we looking at a body lying on the ground from some high aerial vantage point located directly above it, or do we see it against a vertical background of crisscrossing lines as it hurtles past us in mid-air before crashing into the unseen ground beneath? Is this a matter of either/or? The pathos of the image of the dead body lying face downwards, lone and abandoned in a wasteland where no one comes to retrieve it, is conflated with the horrifying image of the living person plummeting to his death. This destabilized notion of content admits both options, a double vision in which the subject, like Schrödinger's cat, is at one and the same time, both alive and dead.

In a similar work, *Lyke in die Sneeu* (1995), the painting bestows a potent universality upon the central figure, who this time is clad in fatigues. The artist conflates him with the anonymous warrior commemorated in so many war memorials erected to the Unknown Soldier who, precisely because of his lack of identity, becomes representative in the national imagination of all those killed in warfare. Karstel's double body operates on a metaphoric level, and just as the dead soldier spread-eagled on the ground stands for the final defeat and collapse, so the image of the soldier tumbling into the void speaks of the massive loss of life and the futility of such a sacrifice. Not only does it sum up the past, it also prophesies a grim future.

Karstel's paintings rarely aim at creating the illusion of reality or the suspension of disbelief and they candidly avow their own artifice, revelling in the tactile wonders of oil on canvas. In *'n Groepie Swaksigtiges en Twee Blindes wat Rugby Speel* (2010), the flurried Auerbachian layers of pigment that depict the uniforms of the players, present such pronounced furrows and ridges that no one can mistake them for anything else but thick deposits of pigment applied with a tremulous,



Lyke in die Sneeu, 1995, Oil on canvas, 50 x 54.5cm

heavily loaded brush. Such crusts of pasty, agitato paint express intense subjectivity, and Karstel's paint application is used as a method of relaying emotions, whipping up tension and intrigue, and filtering the images through his own psychological lens. In Karstel's hand, the succulent richness of his medium either provides respite from the nihilistic content or deepens its affect. The emotional management of pigment speaks of a kind of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder which can cast an anhedonic pall over even the most seemingly blissful scenes.

Sport plays a fundamental role in the development of a traditionally virile male identity. Such overt masculinity has always been the Afrikaner ideal of manhood, and it is one promoted at schools, universities and clubs. Karstel presents the game at its most heroic by showing the two competing



*'n Groepie Swaksigtiges en Twee Blindes
wat Rugby Speel, 2010,
Oil on canvas, 60 x 70cm*

teams reaching upwards, jostling vigorously to catch the ball which has been kicked so high up that it remains far beyond their reach. Yet instead of lithe muscular limbs we are presented with sluggish weals of marshy jaundiced khaki, pinkish greys and bitter browns. It is as though we are seeing the scene through Vaseline-coated glasses, tear-soaked eyes or rain-streaked windows. It is as if the limbs are encased and held in place by the solid chunks of paint, permanently cementing them in position. Karstel's sky also emphasizes this paralysis. Instead of being blue, it is a vast tract of overcast grey. As our eyes skim upwards above the rooftops, so the pigment seems to cling to the picture plane and appears flush with the tussle of the players' straining bodies, clamping them into place, and impeding any movement. Air ceases to be mere emptiness. It crystallizes into a solid substance filling the intervals between the thrusting arms and heads, straitjacketing them in place. Similarly the ball remains mired in pigment. It will never fall, nor will the match ever end.

Similarly frozen in action, *The Young Men's Bodies Have Been Trained to Obey the Orders Given by the Mind* (2009) shows a gymnastic feat of agility and synchronization. These scenes are divested of joy and disfigured by the knowledge that these seemingly innocent youthful pursuits constituted a dangerous kind of conditioning. Rituals and processions such as these, aided nationalism by institutionalizing bonding activities while conveying the potency of the state and its father figures. The athletic dancers and gymnasts that populate Karstel's paintings bear an ardent resemblance to Hitler's 'Aryan' Germany. The figures are leaping, twirling specimens of eugenic success. Cementing these associations are the over-one-hundred-and-twenty paintings of flags oozing and fluttering above the Youth Day mass gymnastic displays. These are painted from 58 seconds



*The Young Men's Bodies Have Been Trained
to Obey the Orders Given by the Mind,
2009, Oil on canvas, 160 x 250cm*

of Kodak film footage shot by Karstel senior at the 1966 Five Year Celebration of the Republic under Verwoerd. The colours 'Oranje, Blanje, Blou' reveal themselves in the mucky silt. The memory of youth leagues of fascist-regimes-past lingers and the concept of the initiation of successive generations fills these images with carefully groomed foreboding. These jaded adult preoccupations prevent a reading that mirrors the carefree abandon of the sportsman. And Karstel's intense scepticism of the Afrikaner apartheid project throws the artist's identity as an Afrikaans man into turmoil.

A similar phenomenon occurs in *Relaxing in the Municipal Swimming Baths* (2010) which depicts a scene of recreation, young men and women swimming and diving at a public swimming pool. Yet Karstel never envelops his scenes in the bright glow and cheer of sunshine with all its suggestions of warmth, ease and comfort, nor are the skies ever cloudless and azure. Instead the area above the horizon line is painted in an indeterminate fashion producing a sour, curdled effect. And the surface of the water is the same grey as the paving. The mood is one of drab cheerlessness. All movement is arrested. The diver falters, his arms are akimbo and he seems to be tipping forward and losing his balance, but his torso and arms are surrounded by a nimbus of white pigment which appears so solid that he cannot break his way through it and plunge into the pool. Karstel's work is deeply political in its depiction of even the most seemingly quotidian episodes. This leisure scene, from the back page photograph in the 'Journal for Physical Education, Healthful



Youth Day
(Installation view), 2012

Living and Recreation', contains no people of colour reminding viewers of the normalcy of white predominance in aspirational publications in 1963.

Karstel's starting point is often his own life experience; the photographs his father took (while a teacher in physical education in Kimberley from the 1950s to mid-1960s and then as an Inspector of National Education in Pretoria from the mid-1960s to mid-1980s), the area in which he grew up as well as the books on the Karstel family bookshelf. In *Kerkraad NG Gemeente Lyttelton-oos* (2008), he paints a series of sixty-six portraits of members of the NG Church committee at his local parish. The combination of works, once installed, is a siege of grim faces that represent the staunch and unfaltering Afrikaner community. The faces of ordinary people; dispassionate, religious folk for whom there is strength in unity. The neon palette signals Karstel's reassessment of these pillars of the community. They are being examined as they are being painted. We cannot know if they have been found wanting as he lingers on the idiosyncratic humanity of each face.

Far beyond the mangled corpses and the jubilant youths, higher even than the stern church committee and the politicians, at the very seat of power are Karstel's *Prime Ministers*. These portraits of apartheid powerhouses are painted far larger than life and they exude the magnified potency of the patriarch. *Prime Minister (Verwoerd)* (2008) wears a porky self-satisfied expression and gazes at the viewer from piggy eyes, his forehead puckered in contemplation of the 'gevaars' facing the 'volk'. These works reproduce portraits of men we understand to have organized and



Relaxing in the Municipal Swimming Baths,
2010, Oil on canvas, 110 x 85cm



Kerkraad NG Gemeente Lyttelton-oos
(Installation view),
2008, Oil on canvas,
66 paintings - 63 x 42cm each

perpetuated a profoundly odious and immoral system. With each heavily-crusted brushstroke Karstel questions the absurdity of evil and the failure of empathy. Such close studies search for some clue in their physiognomy that could warn against inherent treachery.

In a portrait from the next year, *Prime Minister (Verwoerd)* (2009), the man's features blur into a more cartoonishly evil figure. His eyes migrate outwards and his skin glows gunmetal-grey giving him the sinister appearance of a hammerhead shark. And in many of the other works in this series Karstel intensifies his investigation by illuminating the faces with the harsh lighting of the interrogation chamber. Yet by scrutinizing these faces Karstel finds nothing that could predict the squalor, fear and pain they caused. The lack of an isolated origin of evilness is somehow more frightening than if there were a comic villain trait that could explain away their exceptionalism. Instead we find that evil is something universal, a natural bedfellow of fanaticism and belief. It is a historical irony that the cornerstone of the Pretoria Art Museum was laid by Verwoerd himself.



Prime Minister (Verwoerd), 2008, Oil on canvas, 90 x 67cm



Prime Minister (Verwoerd), 2009, Oil on canvas, 149 x 109.5cm

Lyttelton (2015) shows an aerial view of the grounds of the primary school (top right) and church (bottom left) that Karstel attended as a boy. They are down the road from where he grew up and practically adjacent to the Waterkloof Air Force Base. With this knowledge, the bird's-eye view mutates into the view of an aeroplane or a drone, an omniscient presence with the power to surveil or to destroy. The proximity of the spaces of learning and growth with the air force base ties together these; church, home, school and government, the elements that were fundamental to the formation of the individual identity under National Party rule.

Lyttelton is reminiscent of one of the earliest paintings to have such a godlike viewpoint in *Mine Craters at Albert Seen from an Aeroplane* (1918) by Richard Carline, a pilot in the First World War. Carline's work depicts damage near Albert on the Somme in France. British military lorries travel through arable land scarred by shell craters. Although *Lyttelton* is a picture of peaceful Pretoria



Cornerstone at the Pretoria Art Museum



Mine Craters at Albert Seen from an Aeroplane
(1918) by Richard Carline

suburbia, it has a crushing sense of aftermath. The damage, rather than overt and physical, is psychological.

Air Force Base Waterkloof (1996), in which Karstel methodically photographed the air base's perimeter wall similarly probes and questions concepts of 'normalcy' and 'home'. The monochromatic photographs together present tessellated rows of unyielding concrete with a lacy border of barbed wire and a close shaved lawn. The base appears insular and well defended. A sequence of events plays out during the course of Karstel photographing the air base wall. Strange Rorschach-shaped water stains on the wall indicate the beginning of a torrential downpour which halts the photography at image 24. Subsequent images show soaked walls and the dramatic appearance of a sinkhole (seemingly caused by the erosion of underlying dolomite rock). A flimsy ribbon of barrier tape keeps out two bemused onlookers. The gamut of images reintroduces Karstel's themes of stoppage, decay and eventual collapse.

Images such as *Kerkraad NG Gemeente Lyttelton-oos*, *Air Force Base Waterkloof*, *Lyttelton* and the *Prime Minister* paintings are inquiries into the lack of social trust and fear of those around us (as well as those above us). The content of Karstel's work is an interweaving of the personal with the political, showing how history entangles and ensnares us in repetitive cycles of outright violence or precarious peace at someone's expense.

Onlookers (2016) employs many of the key characteristics of Karstel's approach. The muted greys and dirty pinks of an International Modern Style apartment block occupies the full picture plane. The neglected-looking building, typical of central Johannesburg, or Hillbrow or Braamfontein, provides the viewer with no exit and no horizon. The suggestion of figures peer down from balconies. It is as if the viewer is embroiled in whatever they are watching. The title implies a lack of willingness to get involved - presumably out of fear or desensitization. Whether we are the victim or perpetrator, no one will come. There will be no retribution. The crime will go unpunished and the victims will remain hapless and unavenged. Conceptually the work places us directly within the conflict we might like to avoid. We are perpetrators. We are victims. We are onlookers. We are looking at a world in which all our most tenacious beliefs in life and morality have been undermined. We are staring into the void.

Krugersdorp-Bom (2015) is a scene of devastation and abandonment that induces a sense of desolation, hopelessness and nihilism. In 1988 bomb blasts at the Krugersdorp Magistrate's



Lyttelton, 2015, Oil on canvas, 170 x 170cm



Onlookers, 2016, Oil on canvas, 35 x 48cm

Court killed two army personnel and a civilian, and injured twenty more people. This painting is drawn from footage of the aftermath of the event. The figurative content in *Krugersdorp-Bom* is compounded by the dolorous colour scheme. The bleached palette, confined purely to nuances of brooding black and sullen grey, lends the scene a spectral quality that recall faded images of firebombed cities such as Hamburg and Dresden. Equivocal and indefinite, grey is the fence-sitter of the palette. It reflects the lack of action and movement, the doldrum-like stasis characteristic of Karstel's many becalmed compositions and their stock-still cast.

Krugersdorp-Bom is part of body of work exhibited in 2017 at the Association for Visual Arts (AVA), which show acts of resistance and aggression against the state in the 1980s. Karstel plucks the events from the list of statistics and party acronyms and grieves over the violence that pervaded South African life. His rendering of these deadly anti-apartheid attacks reinvests the events with a sediment of tragedy. The deaths and the traumas of the time are removed from an essentializing political narrative and quietly mourned.

The explosives paintings come from the same body of work and act as a visual glossary for works such as *Landmine Attack* (2017), *Kerkstraat-Bom* (2015), *Wimpy Bombing*, *Benoni Plaza* (2017) and *Johannesburg Park Station Bombing* (2017). The limpet mines, hand grenades and demolition charges are treated as objects in a still life, opulently incised in oil. Karstel envelopes these objects in a mellifluous glow as light plays on the painted metal. In the aftermath of the explosion Karstel's technique takes on the sensations of shock, fragmentation, tinnitus and blurred vision, whereas in these paintings the objects retain their solidity. These quiet studies pregnant with firepower, link wartime paraphernalia with ordinary South African life during apartheid.

Karstel's examination of the psychological repercussions of apartheid extends to its aftershocks. His jeremiad includes the unambiguous economic inequality and poverty. These are scrutinized in Karstel's *Property* series. A body of work that operates through comparison. The source images are of homes taken from the Property24 website and they demonstrate the range of lifestyles lived by South Africans. Property can be equated with our stake in the country. It represents capital and investment which in turn signify privilege, status, power and perhaps a certain immunity from danger. Works both titled *Property (Camps Bay)* (2014), show off luxurious homesteads in affluent neighbourhoods. One lavish mansion has a bright blue swimming pool with views of the mountain, another has a circular driveway ringing a five-tiered fountain and a monumental entrance ballasted by double storey columns. While *Property (Franschhoek)* (2016) is executed in



Demolition Charge, 2017, Oil on canvas, 40 x 25cm



Hand Grenade, 2017, Oil on canvas, 22 x 31cm



Hand Grenades, 2016, Oil on canvas, 35 x 35cm

soft caressing strokes demonstrating the chromatic accord of gentle greys, greens, grassy yellows, violets and creamy whites, so soft they seem to hallow the painting, giving it an elegiac tone. These homes and their glutinously-rendered likenesses in Franschhoek, Bishopscourt and Bantry Bay, are unattainable to the masses. Statistics South Africa placed the number of South Africans living in poverty at 30.4 million (55.5% of the population) in the last large-scale census in 2015. *Property (Springs)* (2014) and *Property (Atteridgeville)* (2014), RDP-style homes in low income areas, represent the other end of the spectrum.

The *Property* series is a strong statement against the sickening wealth disparity but it pits the us against ourselves as we too aspire to have more and to assimilate the trappings of wealth, making us complicit in the perpetuation of the status quo. In these works Karstel uses home ownership as a proxy for the many ways in which poverty inhibits the well-being and safety of our society. Underprivileged areas are frequently underserved by their municipalities, are more likely to be afflicted with gang violence and those living there must often travel long distances on unsafe public transport. Mass disempowerment as a direct result of our history and the continuing threat of violence has bred conditions where this violence is inured, where it is always a potential outcome, especially for those with little or nothing to lose.

Professor Ockert Stoltz en Jerry Goboza (1995) is of an image that tries to produce an impression of equality, racial harmony, friendship and reconciliation, and resoundingly fails to convince. In post-1994 South Africa, images of carefree whites and blacks enjoying themselves over a cool-drink, at a picnic or in a nightclub have become a staple in the repertoire of advertising. They continue to strike a false note, because the occasions they depict are exceptions rather than norms, which is to say that they fail to coincide with South Africans' actual lived experience of inter-racial contact - which is seldom blithe, carefree and unselfconscious. In this double portrait the two men stand together just as much as they stand apart. Professor Stoltz is impregnable in his self-assurance and dignity. He presents himself with pride and wears the stern and forbidding expression of the traditional Afrikaans patriarchy. The pose is neither natural nor relaxed. The left part of the esteemed professor's jacket parts in the breeze and its wide blue expanse makes it perfectly clear that there is no physical contact between their torsos. The hand Ockert extends over his neighbour's shoulder seems like an assertion of possession, rather than a gesture of warm amity. Jerry appears similarly ill at ease. His left arm remains concealed as it rests somewhere behind the professor's right shoulder. The action of touching seems inhibited and devoid of camaraderie.



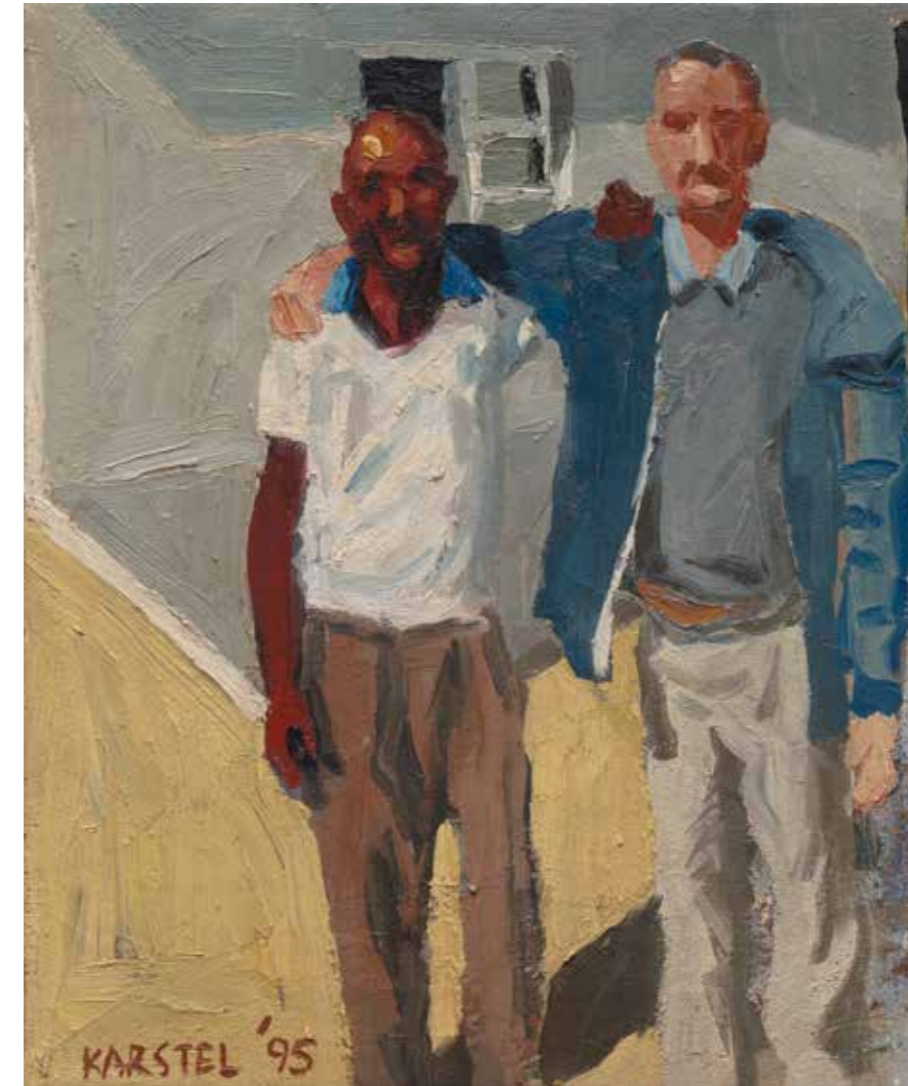
Property (Camps Bay), 2014, Oil on canvas, 29 x 42cm



Property (Springs), 2014, Oil on canvas, 26 x 35cm

That the work is placed next to *For Those Who Tried to Remove Bottles of Beer and Did Not Want to Listen* (1995), shows how quickly the uneasy alliance between Whites and People of Colour is shattered. This work depicts a white policeman manhandling a black youth who tried to take bottles of beer from around an overturned lorry.

Through his painting Karstel retells history, imbuing it with the confusion, elision, disorientation, hubris and trauma of first-hand experience. His oeuvre can be construed as a critical reflection on the history and aetiology of the Nationalist ascendancy. Although many of the works look back in time they carry with them the pressure of an imminent Pretoria thunderstorm. They are heavy with symbolic resistance against the state and populated by nightmarish iterations of violence. Working with a heavily loaded brush, he transfigures his photographic and historical source material by building up densely impastoed surfaces in which virtually all figurative detail melts into vibrating brushwork. By dissolving ideologically loaded stereotypes - the victorious athlete, the baton-wielding policeman, the black rioter setting a car ablaze - in thick webs of oil paint, Karstel draws special attention to them, and questions their truth and authority. His disfigurement of his subjects creates an irresolvable ambiguity about their truth. Karstel paints his reality as a numb and morbidly-fascinated witness. He examines his predecessors - through archives of films and photographs. He queries his ethnicity, his culture and his community, even finding the self to be a construction built of these and other influences. Ultimately exposing the importance of the lived experience of history to the formation of contemporary South African society.



'Prof' Ockert Stoltz en Jerry Gobosa,
1995, Oil on canvas, 42 x 31 cm

Towards a New Realism: The Political Paintings of Anton Karstel

By Matthew Blackman

To associate the word Realism with the work of Anton Karstel requires an explanation. To most, realism is simply a representation of what we are said to see in life. In this manner, it could be described as simply common sense. That is, it offers what most people agree on with regards to what the world looks like, or what is common to our senses. Within art this idea of realism dates back to Aristotle and his notion that art, and in particular Greek tragedy, is mimetic, or, as Shakespeare put in the words of Hamlet, that art 'holds a mirror up to nature.'

However, in an art historical and literary context Realism is something radically different. In the visual arts it is often said to have begun with two paintings in 1849 by Gustave Courbet, *The Stone Breakers* and *A Burial at Ornans*. In literature, it is argued, it started with a set of nineteenth-century novels in both France and Britain. In fact, as the literary critic Ian Watt argued in his *The Rise of the Novel*, the notion of Realism, what he called 'formal realism', dates back to the rise of the Bourgeois Capitalism in Europe at the turn of the eighteenth century. As art historian T.J. Clark in his influential book, *The Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*, stated: 'Courbet is influenced by Realism which is influenced by Positivism which is the product of Capitalist materialism.'¹

To a certain degree at the centre of this Realism lies Karl Marx and his observations on ideology. Marx's idea that our social world was constructed by the production of images created by the dominant class or group is both Realism's underlying trope and its source of critique. Realism is as Terry Eagleton put it 'saturated with certain ideological modes of perception, certain codified ways of interpreting reality.'² In plain and simple Marxist terms, art, in its Realist form, is a reflection of the social ideological structure of its times.

As the French structuralist Roland Barthes pointed out in *Mythologies*, (Realist) images have a complex relationship between the actual image and a series of socio-ideological ideas that can be ascribed to it. In his example of the photograph of the black soldier saluting on the front cover of the magazine *Paris Match* he says:

¹ Clark, T. (1999) *The Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*, p. 10

² Eagleton, T. (1989) *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, p. 25

*I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under the flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors.*³

What T.J. Clark suggested was that Realists, like Courbet, were in fact undermining the dominant ideology of their age. As he argued:

*A work of art may have ideology (in other words, those ideas, images, and values which are generally accepted, dominant) as its material, but it works that material; it gives it a new form and at certain moments that new form is in itself a subversion of ideology.*⁴

As Clark argued, by bringing working-class figures into his paintings, Courbet brought 'the image of the people into view'. An image that had, until then, been concealed by bourgeois capitalist ideology. Theorist from Lukacs, to Barthes, to Eagleton all noted that Realism can undermine a dominant ideology of a society but it, in many senses, replaces that with its own. All Realist works as Ian Watt suggests have a singular authored 'ethic' or set of values, whether it be that of bourgeois capitalism, Marxism, fascism or liberalism. As Kenneth Clark noted, Courbet's *The Stone Breakers* is 'the indispensable picture to all Marxist art-theorists.'⁵ Realism, as the repository of ideological expression, would of course split into two very different paths. One would lead to politically motivated protest or resistance art (in many ways begun by Courbet) and another that would head towards the slightly more disreputable movement of Social(ist) Realism and the direct and overt reflection of state ideology.

But what, one might ask, has this to do with the paintings of Anton Karstel? If one considers painters who have been included in the Realist movement from Courbet, to Sickert, to Bacon, to Freud, to Richter one might begin to draw certain formal and aesthetic parallels. But there is something far more profound than a painterly influence that connects him to the movement. Karstel is linked to Realism in the sense that he is aware of the ideological essences of the images that he chooses to paint from. This occurs most obviously in the (re) painted portraits of the apartheid prime ministers

³ Barthes, R. (1972) *Mythologies*, p. 115

⁴ Clark, T. (1999) *The Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*, p. 13

⁵ Clark, K. (1969) *Civilization: A Personal View*, p. 339

from DF Malan to PW Botha. Furthermore, as Christi van der Westhuizen points out, Karstel has used source images from the journals *Vigor* and *Liggaamsopvoeding* which were overt attempts by Afrikaner nationalism to prescribe 'how white bodies should be disciplined'.⁶ All of these images in their original form were attempts to create and reflect the singular ideological voice of the Afrikaner 'volk' or 'nation'. In this sense, they are a form of Realism.

Like Gerhard Richter's paintings of the images of Nazis, Karstel's paintings such as the *Youth Day* (2012) installation, *Fig. 884(b)* (2005) and *Prime Minister (Botha)* (2009) can be thought of as a historical archive of this Realism. But here one must begin to raise some important distinctions in Karstel's work. Richter's work has a mnemonic quality that seeks, according to some critics, to offer social remembrance of the ideology of Nazism in a German state suffering from an amnesia about its National Socialist past. In this regard Karstel seems to propose something distinctly different. Karstel is not suggesting, by the selection of images he chooses to paint from, that they have been forgotten by a country unwilling to remember its fascist past. If the images behind the paintings such as the prime ministers or even the killing of members of the AWB in *Die Doodstoneel 'n Paar Minute Later* (1995) are forgotten, they are not done so because of a willingness on the part of the state to forget them. Incompetence, corruption and a failing education system may have led to a certain amount of socio-historical amnesia but this is not one of Karstel's motivations for painting. Instead Karstel seems to enter into a private realm, the realm of individual personal memory.

Having grown up under apartheid many of the images he paints from were simply those that surrounded a white Afrikaner growing up before 1994. Of course paintings like *Morning Service and Flag-raising* (2010) and *Relaxing in the Municipal Swimming Baths* (2010) display not only a quotidian scene of apartheid life, but also the ideological voice of the apartheid system: white citizens faithfully observing the ritual of flag raising, white citizens relaxing in a municipal homogeneous family setting. Not only do these images reference a lived life but also that life's ideological construction. Their presentation is, in some senses, a representation of an everyday world that many whites inhabited. But they also signify (in the Barthesian sense) the notion of the 'civilised', segregated white existence of Afrikaner nationalism.

Like in Richter's work there is something deeply provocative about these paintings. But Karstel's

⁶ Van der Westhuizen, C. (2009) 'Meaty Heads and the Disciplining of Bodies', in Van Zyl, M. (ed.) (2009) *Anton Karstel: Paintings and Photographic Installations (1989 – 2009)*, p. 24

intention is distinct from both Richter's and Courbet's in that he is not trying, in the words of T.J. Clark, to bring the excluded or the forgotten 'into view'. Nor, as some have suggested, is he attempting to negate or entirely discredit the ideology of Afrikaner nationalism. The fact that the main features of these paintings are a (re)presentation of the form of the ideological voice of apartheid suggests something different. Under the impasto, the smeared and dappled brush strokes and the changed palette, is an image. An image that was purposefully presented as an ideological expression of the supposed singular Afrikaans voice, the voice of the 'volk', its affiliation to the flag, its presentation of the white body and the family, and its political leaders.

The question then is twofold. First, what is Karstel doing by introducing these into a gallery or art museum space? And secondly, what does his rendering of the image through his painting technique do to the original? As theorists like R.G. Collingwood and Arthur C. Danto suggest there is an important distinction between a public portrait hanging in a bureaucratic office and that of a painting hanging in an art gallery. As Danto argues, in his 1964 essay 'The Artworld', paintings and images may be similar (in fact they may be identical) but the institution that they hang in requires the viewer to ask distinctively different aesthetic, personal and historical questions about them.

In their original form the images were part of a complex system of what Collingwood referred to as a ritualized 'emotion'. Or as others might put it they directed the people's social and political emotional life. These images hung in bureaucratic offices, they were published in journals and were images of Afrikaner ritualised life which attempted to display examples of the society of a unified and observant volk. Much the same can be said of the paintings titled *Kerkraad NG Gemeente Lyttelton-oos* (2008), which were, in their originals, a representation of a group of 'European' citizens joining together in a community to help uphold the values of their society. But clearly Karstel is not introducing these paintings as such. As Van der Westhuizen has argued with regards to the portraits of the prime ministers, there is something 'meaty', one could say putrid, that his handling of the paint creates. In them one gets a simultaneous sense of repulsion and aesthetic attraction that a painter like Francis Bacon manages to achieve.

These two ideas are Karstel's point of departure from Realism. In many ways his work does not enter into the field of direct political expression. He is an artist not an activist. His paintings are not polemical statements about identity politics, nor are they acts of direct political resistance art. Instead these paintings offer not only the image of an ideology but also the voice of an individual artist who has been as much a participant of Afrikaner modes and values as he has

been a dissenter of them. With Karstel's inclusion of the apartheid image as the basis of many of his paintings there is an acceptance of the roll of a 'participant-bystander'. A mode not far from Albert Camus's notion of 'judge-penitent' in his novella *The Fall*. In this manner Karstel's works are not a pure form of resistance, they do not uphold a singular ideology of their own like Courbet's, there is no claim to know better, no moral high-ground taken. The works simply stand as a form of witnessing and testament to a South African history, mediated by the voice of the individual artist who lived through it.

In this sense Karstel's paintings are polyphonic, or what the Russian philosopher and theorist Mikhail Bakhtin referred to as 'dialogic'. That is, they contain the voices of at least two positions; that of the ideology of the society and that of the individual. As Bakhtin suggests, an image or a word has no singular meaning, because each voice that uses it or each eye that encounters it, overlays its meaning with qualifications and distinctive values. This is precisely what Karstel's act of painting achieves. As Bakhtin says, the signifier such as a word or an image:

is entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgments and accents... [As such it] enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group: and all this may crucially shape discourse, may leave a trace in all its semantic layers, may complicate its expression and influence its entire stylistic profile.⁷

That is to say, that Karstel's rendering of images from apartheid South Africa (and indeed the other images he chooses to paint) brings to them a voice, a perspective, a point of view distinct from its original, while at the same time referencing the residue of its original ideological intention. Karstel offers up what Bakhtin would refer to as the 'Janus-faced' nature of ideology. That is, the distinction between the state's fixed normative ideological meaning and the random and effusive meaning that it generates in the eyes and in the lived experience of the individual.

⁷ Bakhtin, M. (2014) *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, p. 276

Bakhtin would go further in his theory of the modern artwork, suggesting that it is a repository of various and contesting voices. The singular (what he called 'monologic') voice of the ideology of the state are, his argument goes, undermined by the plurality of voices of that society. In a sense this is where Karstel's paintings offer up their politics, or, as Bakhtin would argue, their realism. The Afrikaner nationalist ideological voice is undermined by the 'voice' of Karstel in his palette and the application of paint. His paintings are historical, they often bear the history of apartheid and South Africa, but they are distorted from an ideological narrative by the voice of the individual who has been a participant-bystander and witness. This, Bakhtin suggests, is realism properly so called. Reality and truth, he argued, is never held in one mouth, it exists in the tension of opposing and centrifugal voices. It exists, as Albert Camus once put it, "between 'yes' and 'no'". Karstel accepts his own interpellation in the society he was part of. He does not raise himself to the position of activist but rather acts as witness. In doing this he offers his work as testament to a constructed ideological world but complicates it by adding the presence of the individual's voice.

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Pretoria Art Museum

14 October 2018 - 3 March 2019



Ephraim
1995
Cardboard, soil
and cement cast



Anton Karstel, 1995 - 2018
Installation view, Pretoria Art Museum



Anton Karstel, 1995 - 2018
Installation view, Pretoria Art Museum



Anatomie van die Hart
1994
Oil on canvas
90 x 157cm



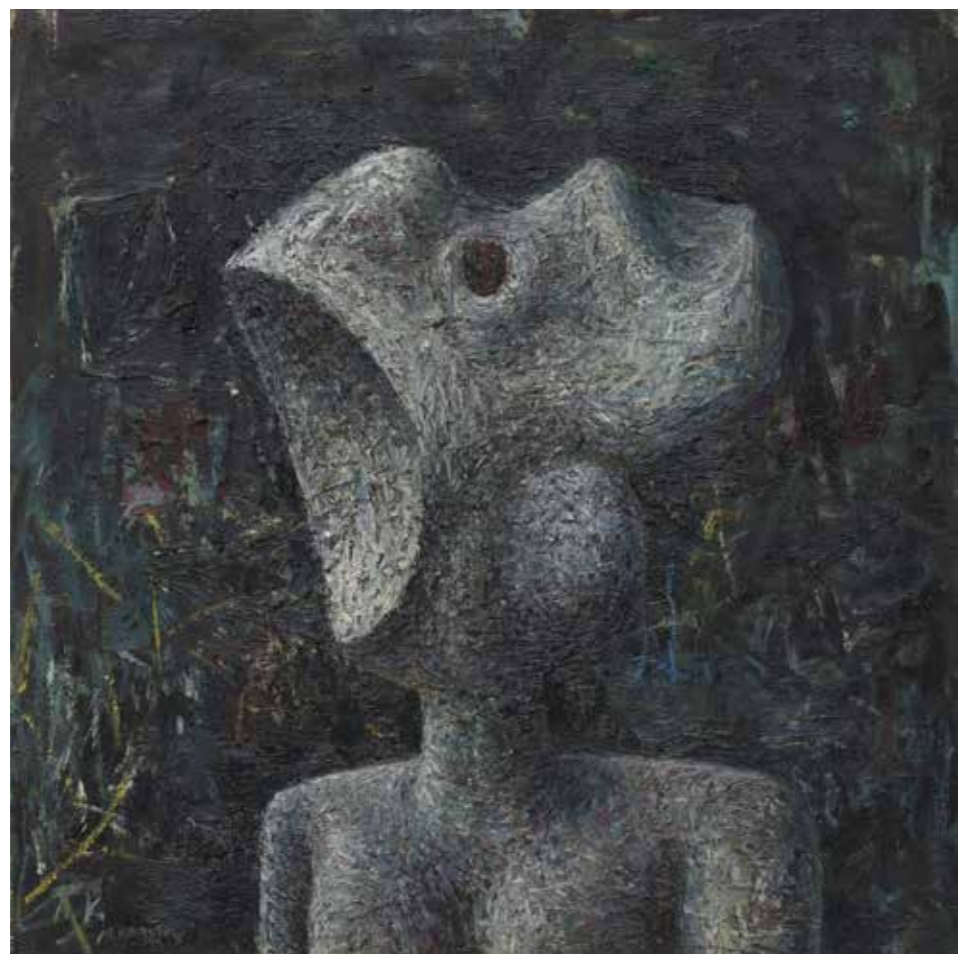
Untitled
1989
Oil on canvas
41 x 58.5cm



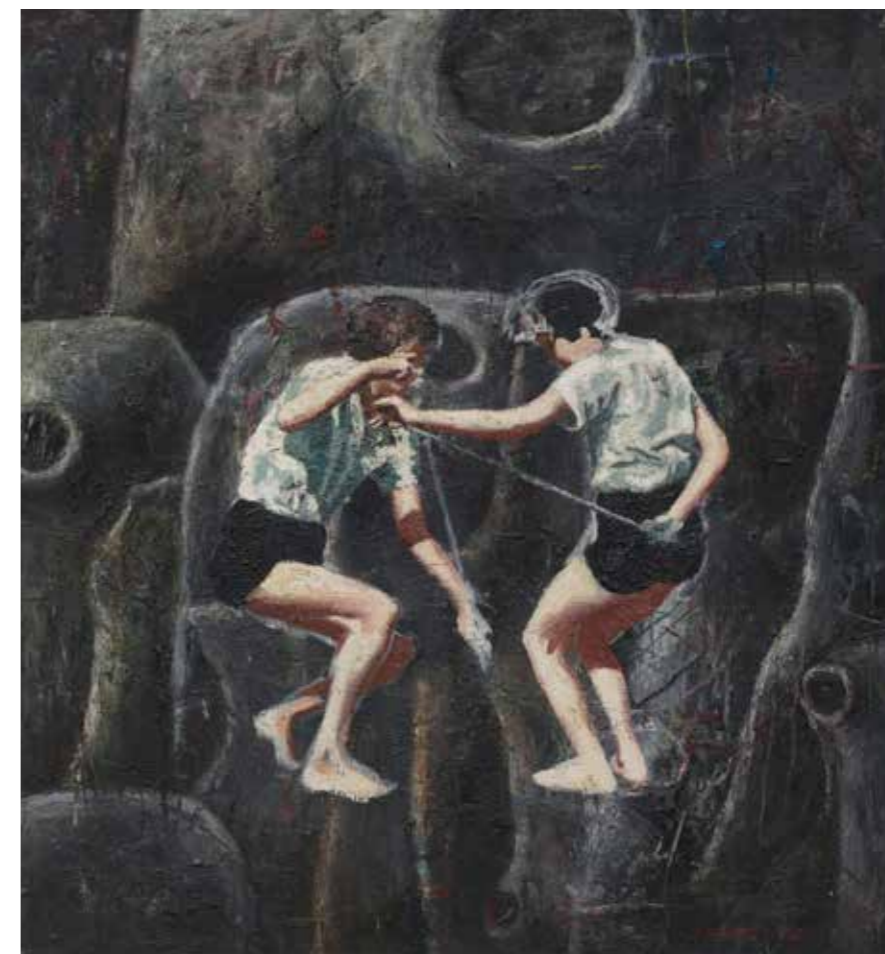
Tiny Teeny and the Pigly Wigly
1994
Oil on canvas
42.5 x 60.5cm



Bunny
1995
Oil on canvas
58.5 x 60cm



Untitled
1992
Oil on canvas
80 x 80cm



Voorgestelde Bedrywighede vir Standerd IV
1992
Oil on canvas
84 x 79cm



Untitled
1991
Oil on canvas
115 x 84.5cm



Untitled
circa 1990
Oil on canvas
92 x 77cm



Untitled
circa 1989
Oil on canvas
69.5 x 49cm



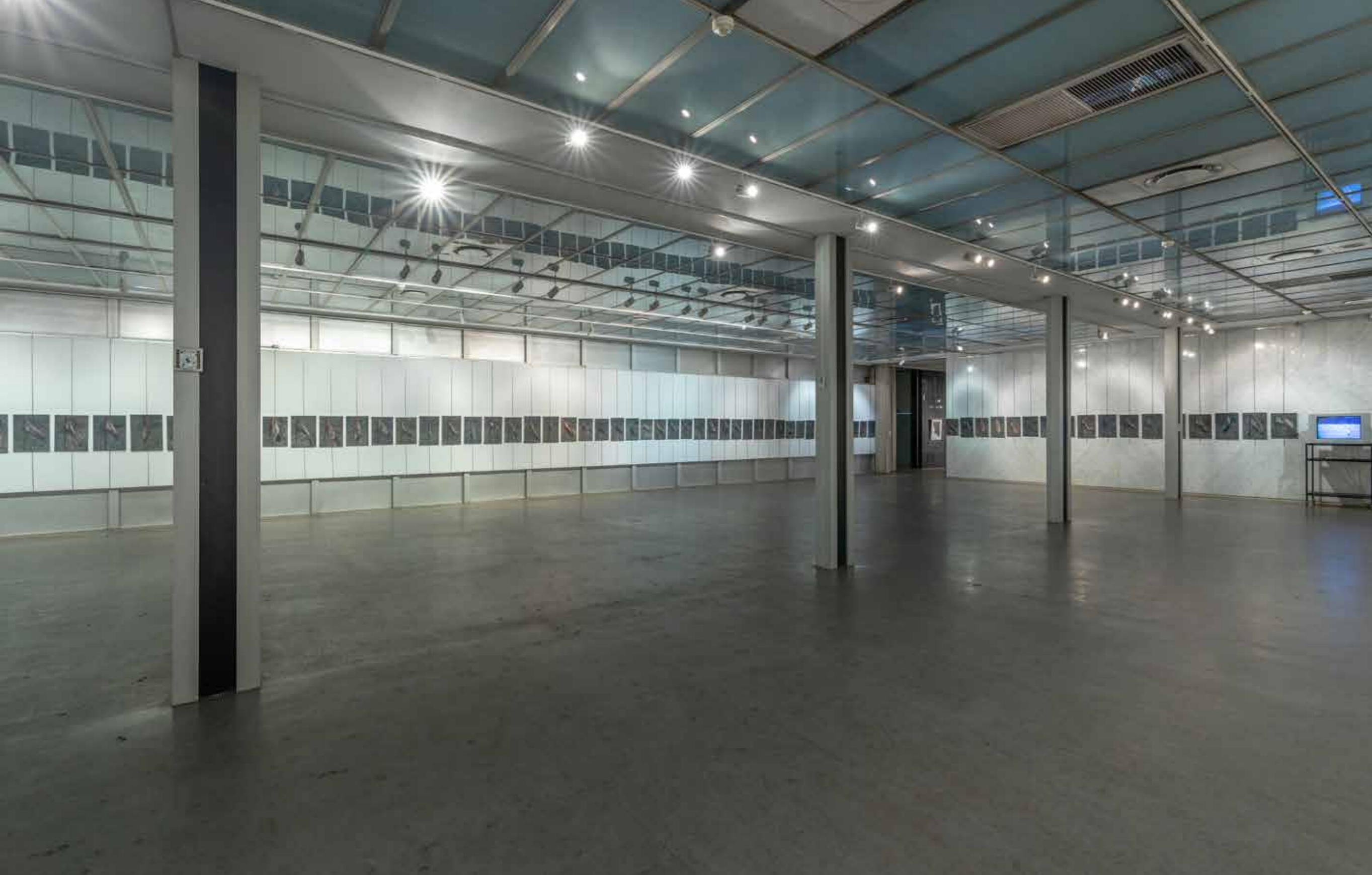
Untitled
1995
Oil on canvas
41.5 x 32cm



Untitled
1989
Oil on canvas
61 x 89cm



Untitled
1989
Oil on canvas
63 x 54cm



Anton Karstel, 1995 - 2018
Installation view, Pretoria Art Museum



Youth Day (Installation view)
2012



Untitled (Youth Day)
2012
Oil on canvas
53 x 38cm



Youth Day (Installation view)
2012



Untitled (Youth Day)
2012
Oil on canvas
57 x 38cm



Anton Karstel, 1995 - 2018
Installation view, Pretoria Art Museum



Anton Karstel, 1995 - 2018
Installation view, Pretoria Art Museum



Untitled
2010
Oil on canvas
78 x 105cm



'n Groepie Swaksigtiges en Twee Blindes wat Rugby Speel
2010
Oil on canvas
60 x 70cm



Relaxing in the Municipal Swimming Baths
2010
Oil on canvas
110 x 85cm



Morning Service and Flag-raising
2010
Oil on canvas
90 x 110cm



Blindes en Swaksigtiges Wat Krieket Speel
2010
Oil on canvas
55 x 42cm



Anton Karstel, 1995 - 2018
Installation view, Pretoria Art Museum



Prime Minister (Verwoerd)
2009
Oil on canvas
149 x 109.5cm



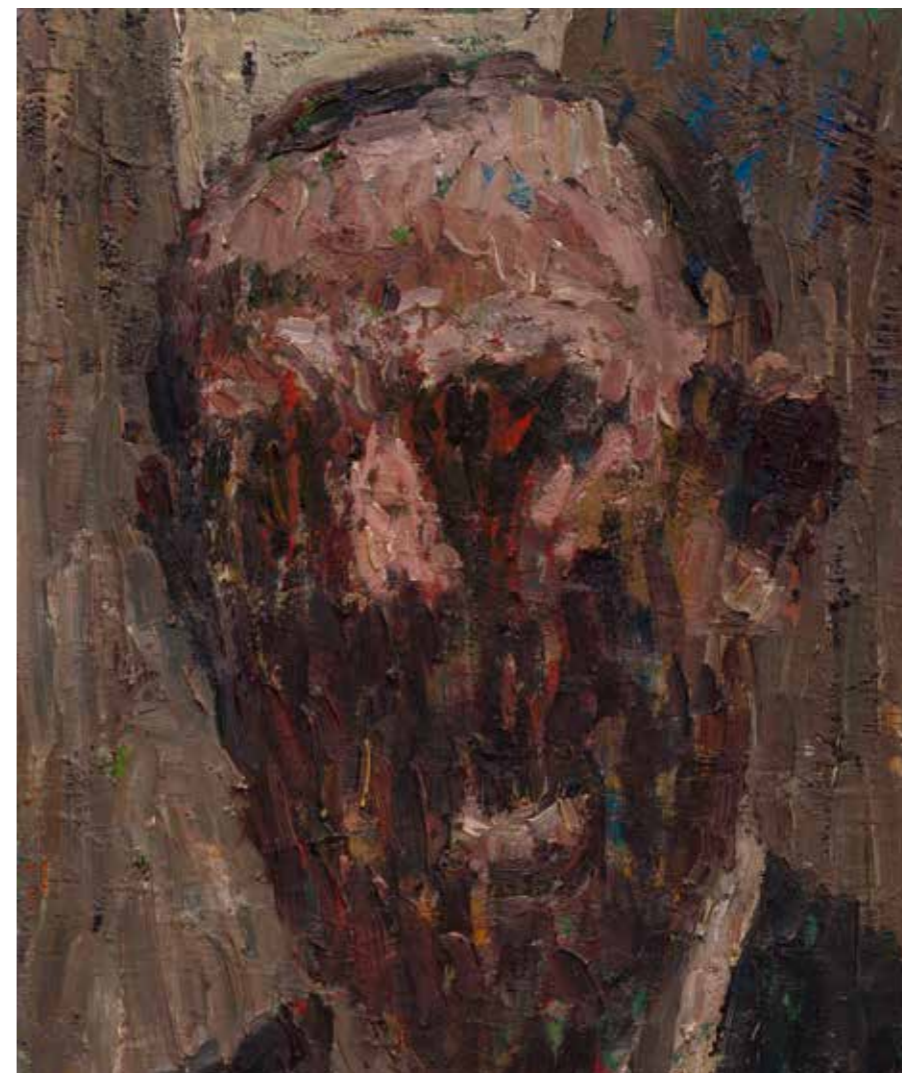
Anton Karstel, 1995 - 2018
Installation view, Pretoria Art Museum



Prime Minister (Verwoerd)
2008
Oil on canvas
70 x 52cm



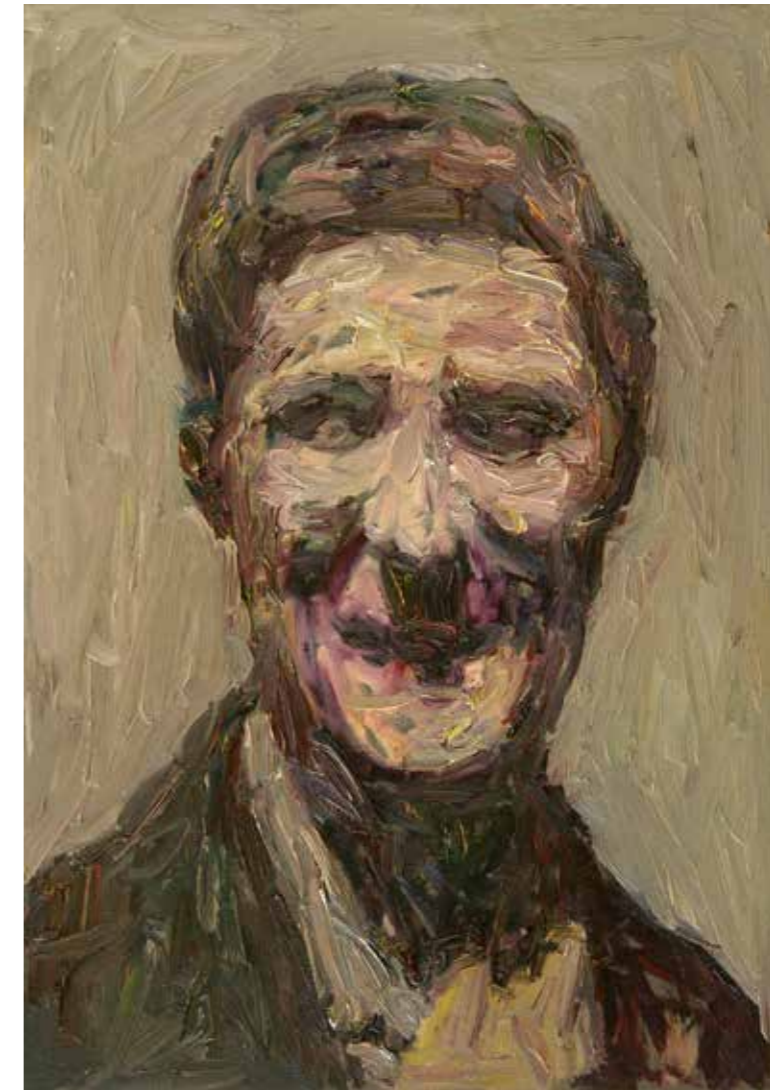
Prime Minister (Botha)
2009
Oil on canvas
74.5 x 63cm



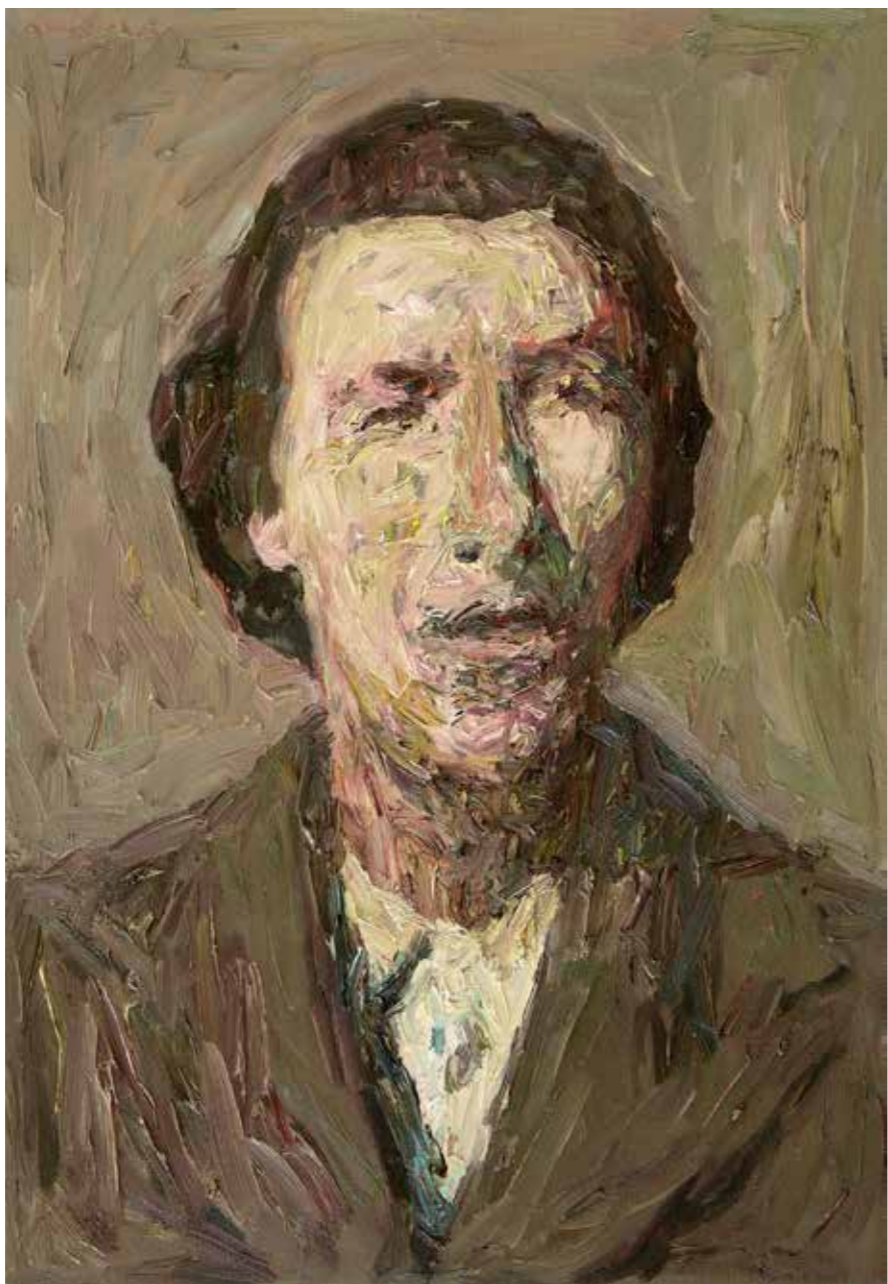
Prime Minister (Vorster)
2008
Oil on canvas
69 x 53cm



Anton Karstel, 1995 - 2018
Installation view, Pretoria Art Museum



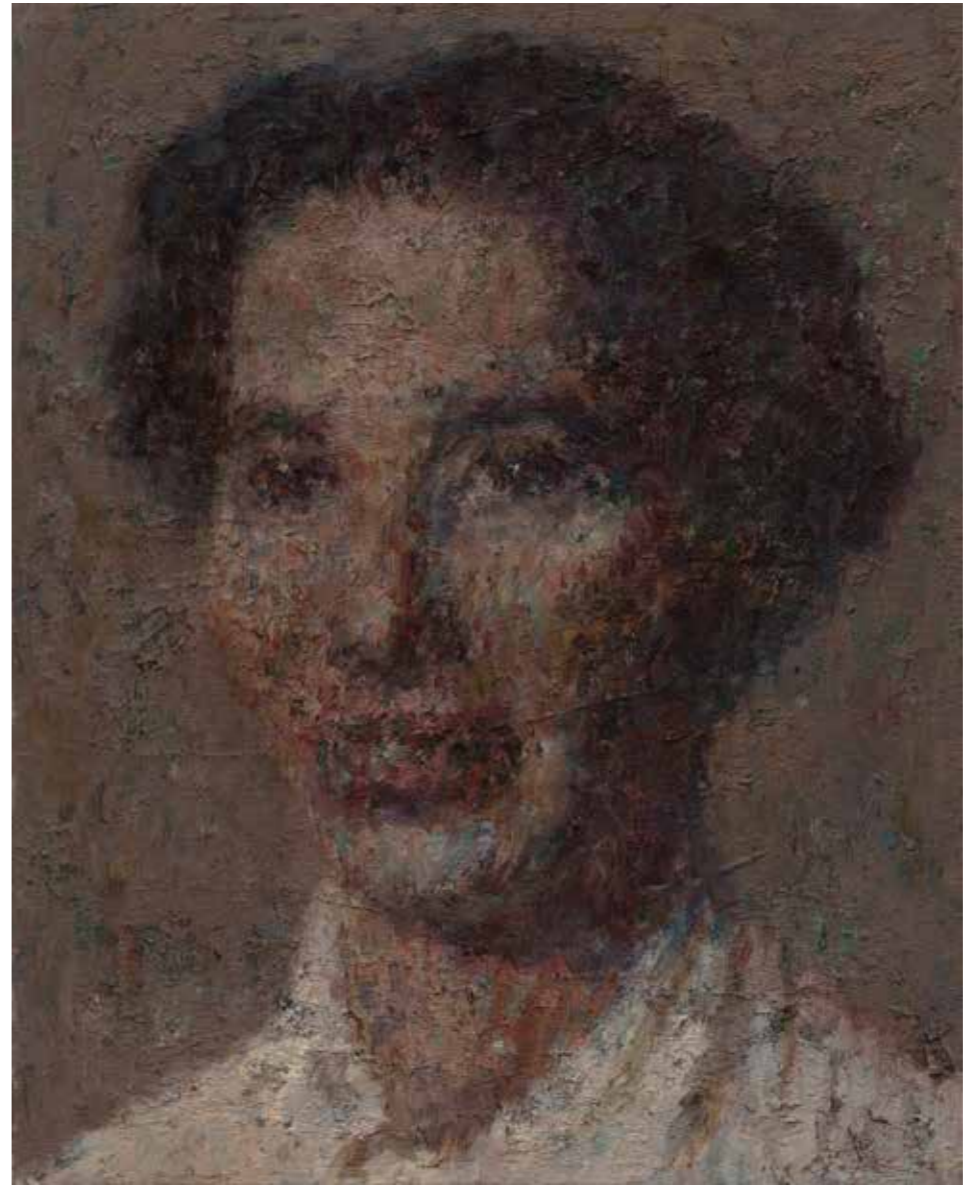
Miss. Blaxland
2010
Oil on canvas
78 x 54cm



Miss Hoffa
2010
Oil on canvas
78 x 54cm



Mrs. Marge Pickerill
2007
Oil on canvas
75 x 62cm



Mej. Gilda Hoffman
2006
Oil on canvas
54 x 44cm



Anton Karstel, 1995 - 2018
Installation view, Pretoria Art Museum



Fig. 534
2005
Oil on canvas
64.5 x 60.5cm



Fig. 884(b)
2005
Oil on canvas
54 x 71cm



Fig. 446(c)
2005
Oil on canvas
57 x 50.5cm



Fig. 448(c)
1997
Oil on canvas
41 x 36cm

Untitled (Glaube und Schönheit)
2013
Oil on canvas
57 x 39cm



Liggaamlike Opvoeding en die Kleuter
1995
Oil on canvas
41.5 x 34cm



Happy Education
1995
Oil on canvas
37 x 54cm



Selina Baloyi and Maria Hlabathi
1995
Oil on canvas
47 x 53cm



Mission Schools in Basutoland
1992
Oil on canvas
20 x 15cm



*Wie Gaan Bereid Wees Om Met Bal en
Al Onder Stof Geloop Te Word?*
1994
Oil on canvas
40 x 50cm



At Work in the Royal Mint
1994
Oil on canvas
38.5 x 50cm



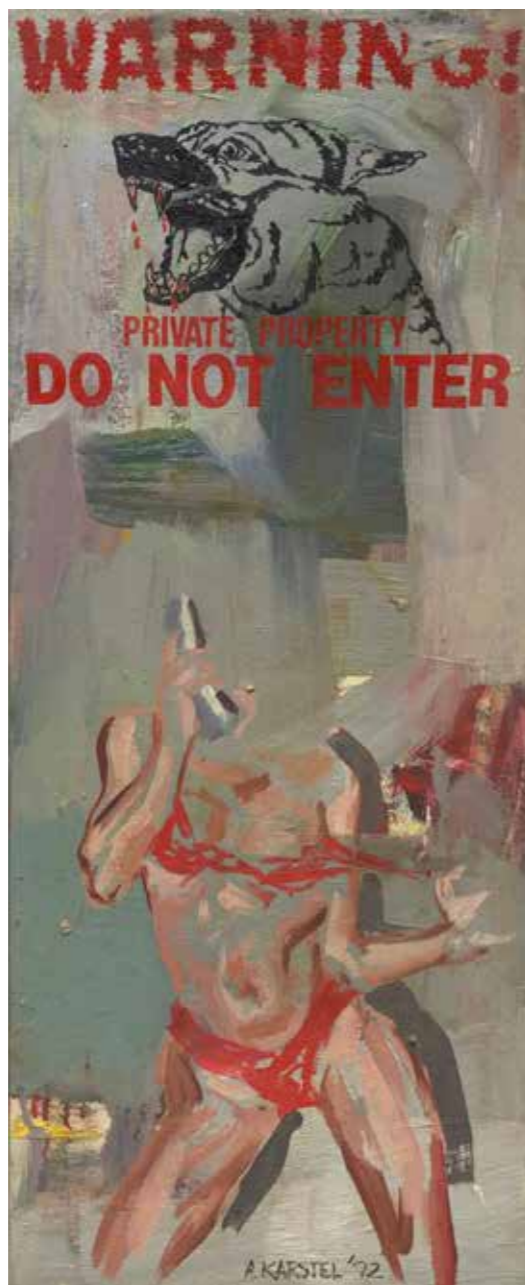
Hello Baby
1992
Oil and industrial paint on canvas
44.5 x 65cm



Hendrik Verwoerd se Dood
1994
Oil on canvas
29.5 x 34.5cm



Op Pad Kerkhof Toe
1995
Oil on canvas
30.5 x 35.5cm



*Warning Private Property,
Do Not Enter*
1992
Oil on canvas
70 x 28.5cm



Made in China
1993
Oil on canvas
91 x 37cm



Die Lyke van Twee Mans
1995
Oil on canvas
72.5 x 80cm



*'n Slagoffer Waar Hy Deur die
Aanvallers Doodgeskiet is*
1995
Oil on canvas
43 x 26.5cm



Anton Karstel, 1995 - 2018
Installation view, Pretoria Art Museum



The Mine Blacksmith
1994
Oil on canvas
39.5 x 33.5cm



A Disused Railway Truck at which a Roaring Trade is Driven
1994
Oil on canvas
35 x 42cm



*Natives Who Turned Out to Greet
the First Car Seen in the Kalahari Desert*
1997
Oil on canvas
40.5 x 28.5cm



It's Rather More Likely There's a Kid
1994
Oil on canvas
24 x 32cm



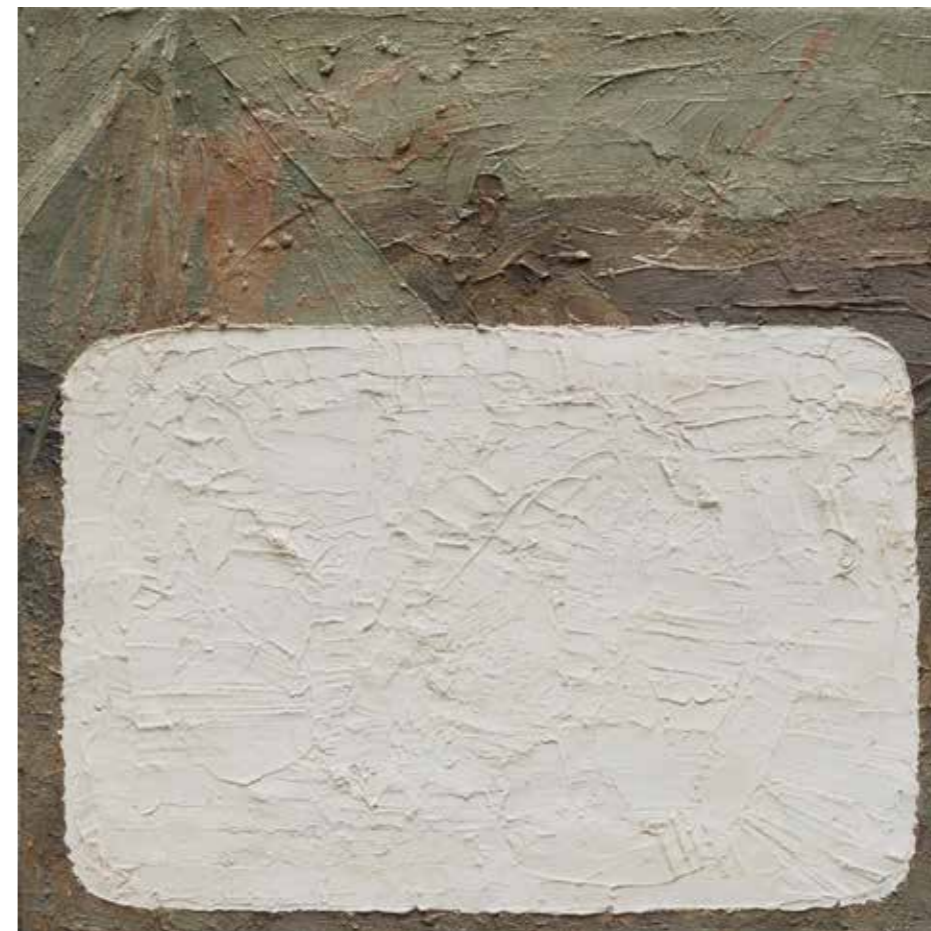
Wounded Soldier Going on Board Hospital Ship
'Trojan', East London
1994
Oil on canvas
26 x 32.5cm



Earth to Earth
1994
Oil on canvas
34.5 x 36cm



Commander of Bmatt
1995
Oil on canvas
47.5 x 27.5cm



A Square Meal on the Level
1995
Oil on canvas
30 x 30cm



An Old Brandy Still
1999
Oil on canvas
52 x 43cm



Springbok Fontein Reduction Works
1999
Oil on canvas
30 x 50.5cm



Broken Hill (Wonderful South Africa)
2004
Oil on canvas
47 x 74cm



The Wealth of a Town (Wonderful South Africa)
1998
Oil on canvas
40 x 70cm



Soldiers of Khama (Wonderful South Africa)

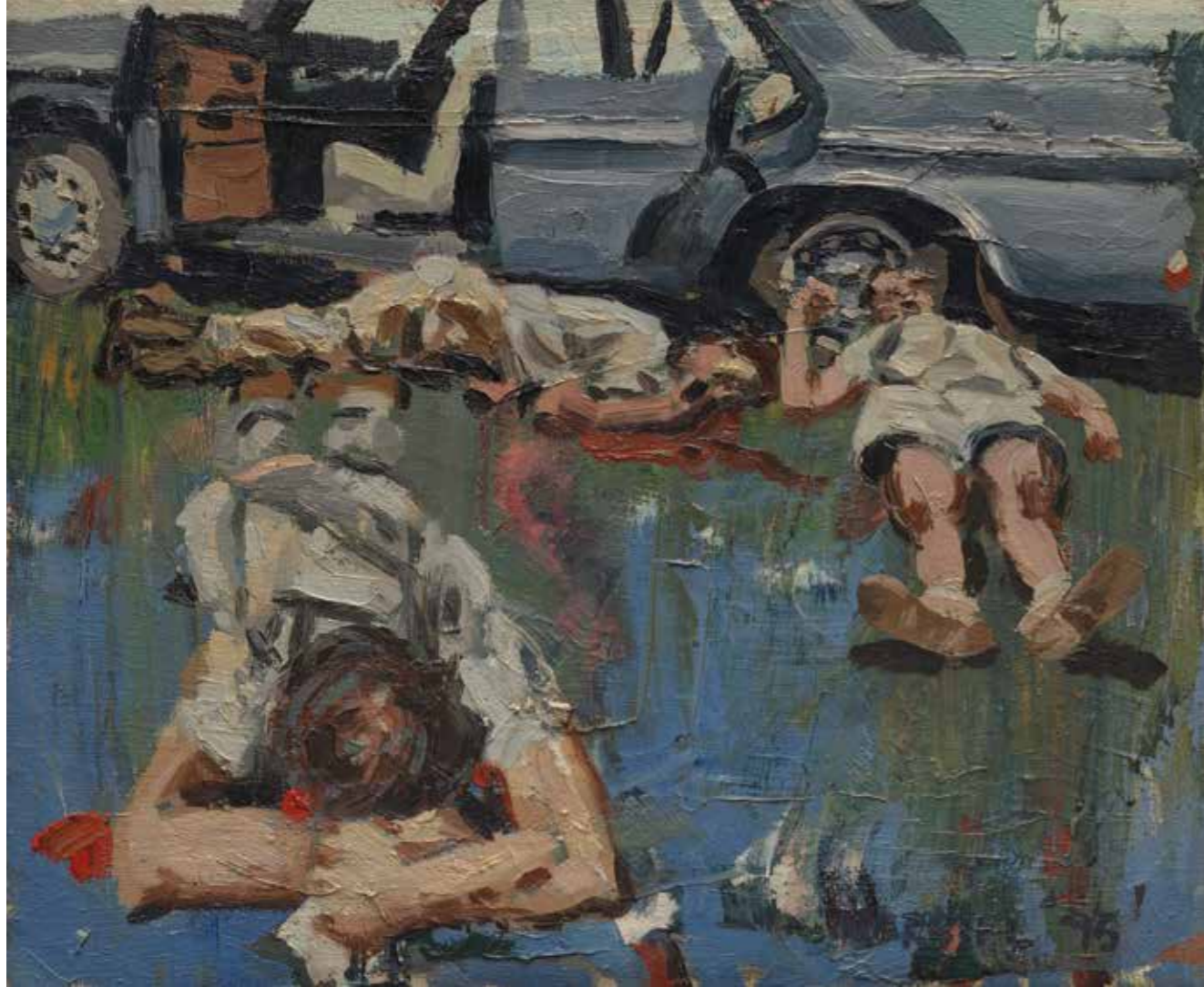
1998

Oil on canvas

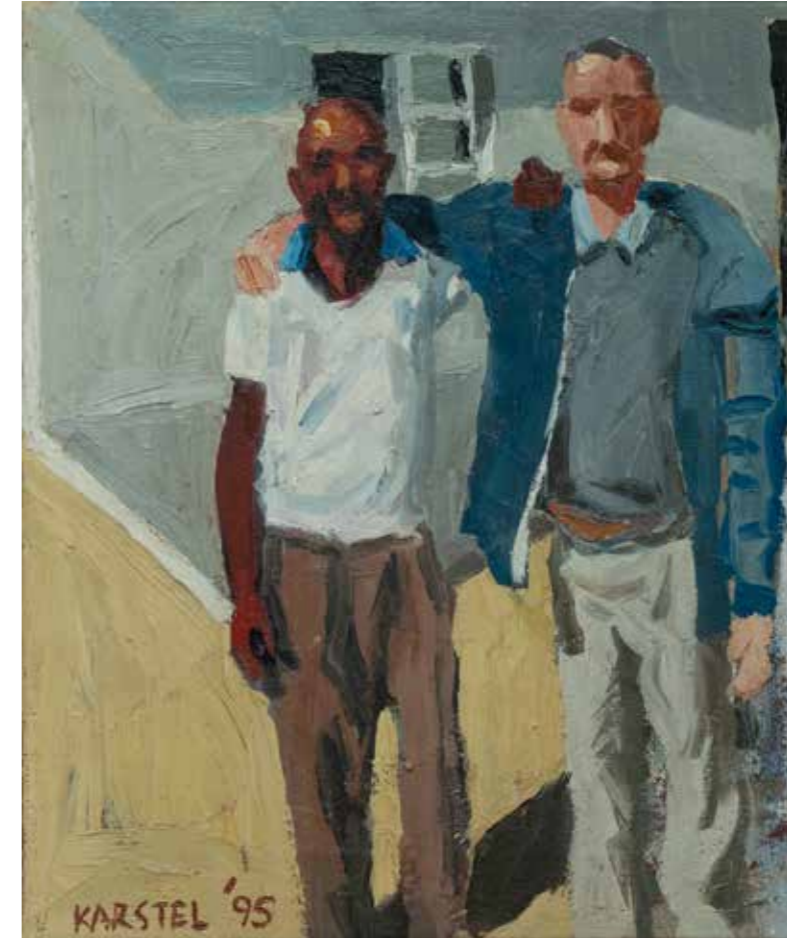
35 x 46cm



Anton Karstel, 1995 - 2018
Installation view, Pretoria Art Museum



Die Doodstoneel 'n Paar Minute Later
1995
Oil on canvas
38 x 45cm



'Prof' Ockert Stoltz en Jerry Gobosa
1995
Oil on canvas
42 x 31cm



*For Those Who Tried to Remove Bottles of Beer
and Did Not Want to Listen*
1995
Oil on canvas
43 x 50cm



Untitled
1998
Oil on canvas
39.5 x 47.5cm

Weermag Herstel Wet en Orde
1995
Oil on canvas
48.5 x 35cm



*'n Groep Rou Oorlog-Rekrute Besig
om Voete te Stamp*
1995
Oil on canvas
34.5 x 37cm

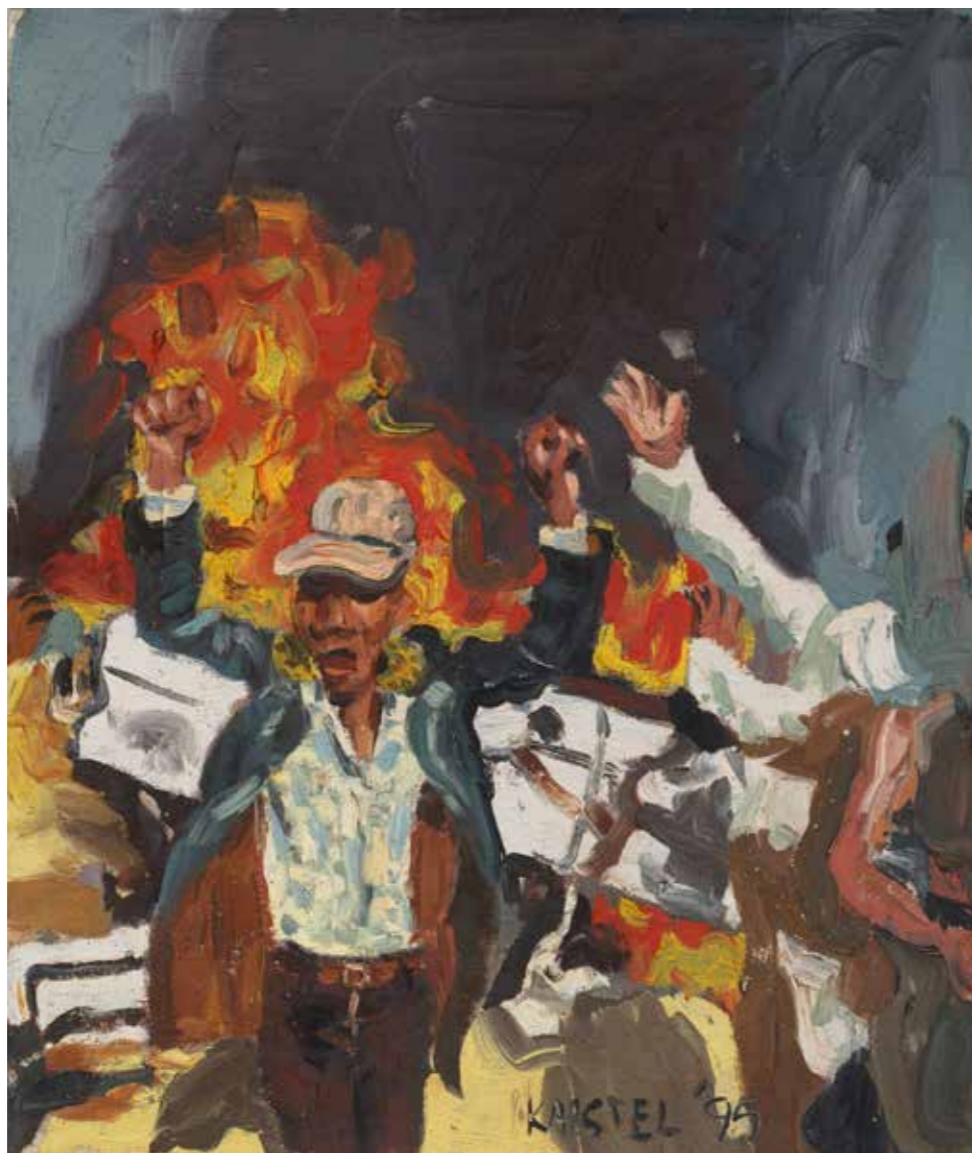


Union Blues
1995
Oil on canvas
28.5 x 34cm



Small Business Success
1995
Oil on canvas
46 x 34.5cm

Youths Vent Their Anger
1995
Oil on canvas
49.5 x 42cm



Vrees is die Enigste Emosie
1995
Oil on canvas
24 x 35.5cm



Scuffle
1995
Oil on canvas
35 x 48.5cm



*Tempers Flare as Policemen and
Protestors Struggle*
1995
Oil on canvas
32 x 43cm



U May Have Won... a Big Phone Bill
1992
Oil on canvas
62 x 80cm



Willie en Salomé te Nederduits Gereformeerd
1992
Oil on canvas
54.5 x 63.5cm



Anton Karstel, 1995 - 2018
Installation view, Pretoria Art Museum



Protests in Wolseley
2015
Oil on canvas
40 x 60cm



Untitled
1998
Oil on canvas
38.5 x 50cm



*Die Motor Waarin 'n Swart Konstabel Van Bophuthatswana en
'n Burgerlike Verkool Het Toe Terroriste 'n Handgranaat Daarin
Gegooi Het*
2015
Oil on canvas
40 x 71cm



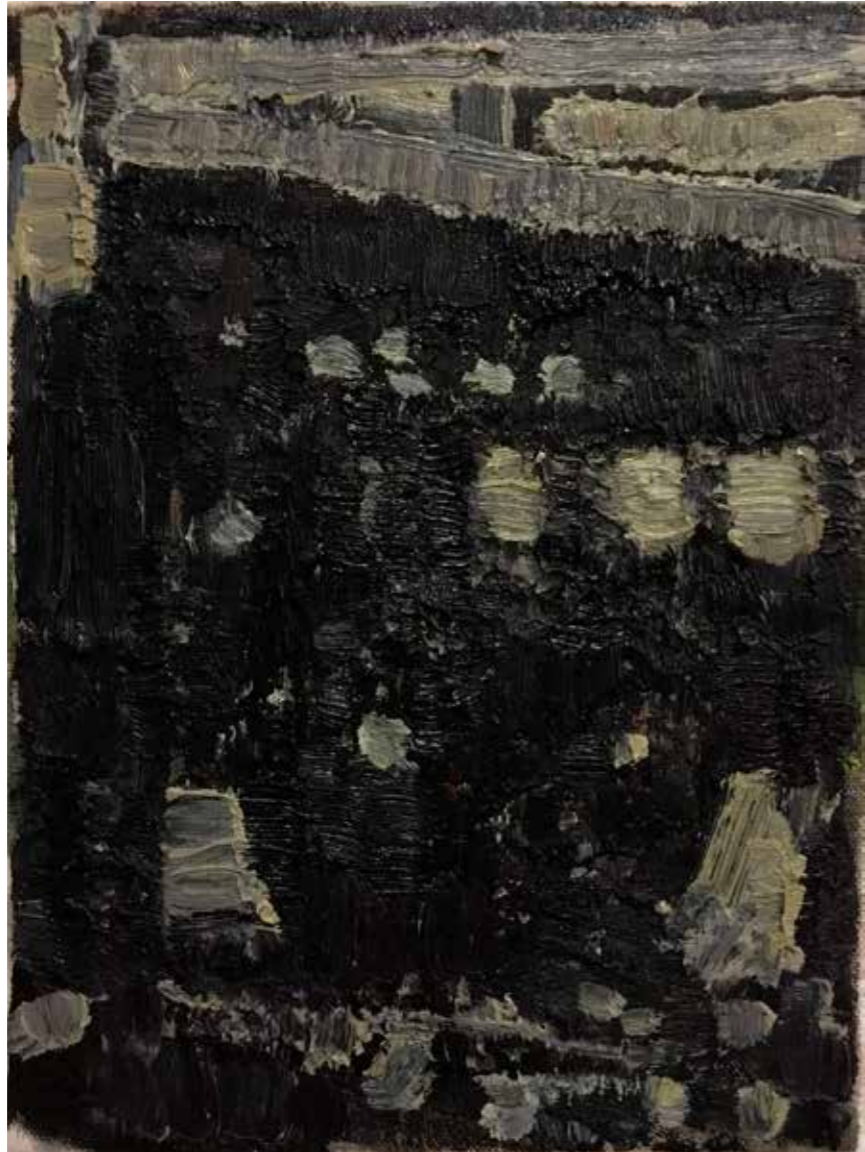
Landmine Attack
2017
Oil on canvas
30 x 40cm



Wrecked
1995
Oil on canvas
25 x 33.5cm



Mago's Bar Car Bomb
2017
Oil on canvas
28 x 35.5cm



*Johannesburg Park
Station Bombing*
2017
Oil on canvas
30.5 x 23cm



Mago's Bar Car Bomb
2017
Oil on canvas
30 x 45cm



Wimpy Bombing, Benoni Plaza
2017
Oil on canvas
40 x 50cm



Krugersdorp-Born
2015
Oil on canvas
38 x 64.5cm



Kerkstraat-Bom
2015
Oil on canvas
38 x 62cm



Kerkstraat-Bom
2015
Oil on canvas
38 x 62cm



Kerkstraat-Bom
2017
Oil on canvas
28 x 36cm



Hand Grenades
2016
Oil on canvas
35 x 35cm



Anton Karstel, 1995 - 2018
Installation view, Pretoria Art Museum



Limpet Mine
2017
Oil on canvas
35 x 25cm



Landmine
2017
Oil on canvas
35 x 45cm



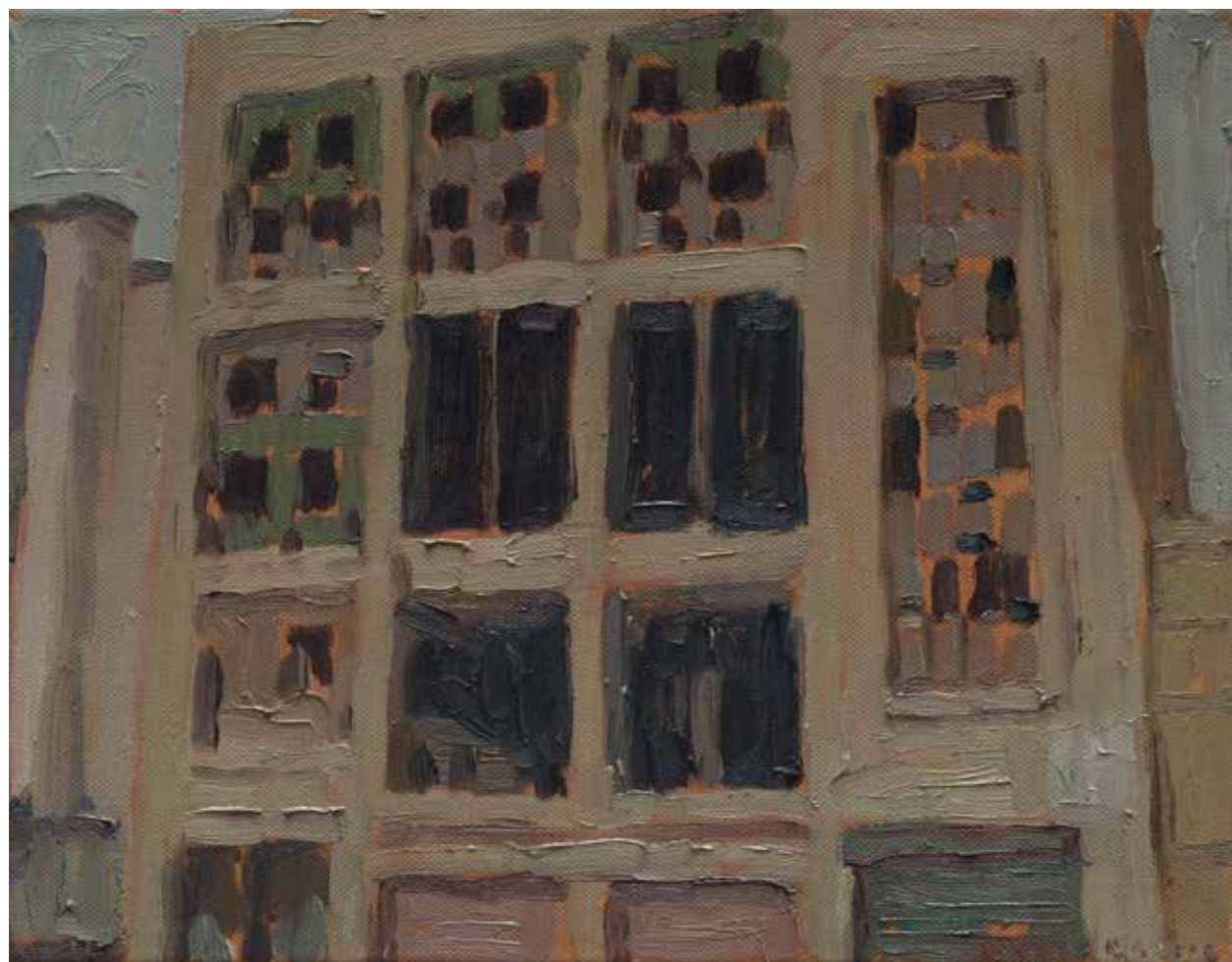
Hand Grenade
2017
Oil on canvas
22 x 31cm



Limpet Mine at an Electrical Substation
2017
Oil on canvas
25 x 30cm



Onlookers
2016
Oil on canvas
35 x 48cm



Property (Johannesburg Central)
2014
Oil on canvas
28 x 36cm



Untitled
2016
Oil on canvas
35 x 40cm



*Die Verlate Plaashuis Waar Mnr. Johannes Prinsloo
Gemartel en Wreed Vermoor is*
1995
Oil on canvas
25 x 32cm



Property (Atteridgeville)
2014
Oil on canvas
28 x 35.5cm



Property (Franschhoek)
2016
Oil on canvas
28 x 36cm



Property (Hyde Park)
2016
Oil on canvas
30 x 40cm



Property (Rustenburg)
2016
Oil on canvas
25.5 x 35.5cm



Property (Brandfort)
2014
Oil on canvas
25 x 36cm

BIOGRAPHY

b. Pretoria 1968, South Africa

BA(FA) University of Pretoria 1990

MA(FA) University of Pretoria 1995

Selected solo exhibitions

- 2017 Proses, Patroon en Strategie, Association for Visual Arts, Cape Town
- 2014 Property, Faith & Beauty, and Other Recent Paintings, SMAC Art Gallery, Stellenbosch
- 2012 Youth Day, SMAC Art Gallery, Cape Town
- 2010 Nirox Project Space, Johannesburg
- 2009 Paintings and Photographic Installations (1989-2009), SMAC Art Gallery, Stellenbosch
- 2008 Kerkraad NG Gemeente Lyttelton-oos, Joao Ferreira Fine Art, Cape Town
- 2004 Wild Thing, Franchise, Johannesburg
108314N, Pretoria Art Museum, Pretoria
- 2003 Trail-blaze, Association for Visual Arts, Cape Town
- 2001 Extract, Joao Ferreira Fine Art, Cape Town
- 1998 Wonderful South Africa, Millennium Gallery, Pretoria
Pol-aesthetic, Civic Gallery, Johannesburg
- 1997 Too Close for Comfort, The Rembrandt Van Rijn Gallery, Johannesburg

Selected group exhibitions

- 2015 Trek: Following Journeys, SMAC Art Gallery, Cape Town
The Claims of the Land, Association for Visual Arts, Cape Town
(In) The Nature of Things, Hermanus FynArts Festival, Old Synagogue Building, Hermanus
- 2014 Origin and the Present Age, Dachau Palace, Dachau, Germany
- 2012 PAINT I: Contemporary South African Painting 2002 - 2012, SMAC Art Gallery, Cape Town
Our Fathers, Association for Visual Arts, Cape Town
- 2010 Hearts and Minds, Hall Street Gallery, Savannah, USA
TWENTY: South African Sculpture of the Past Two Decades, Nirox Sculpture Park, Gauteng
- 2009 Strengths and Convictions: The Life and Times of South Africa's Nobel Peace Prize Laureates, National Gallery, Cape Town

- 2002 Once Were Painters (KKNK), Oudshoorn
- 1997 Graft (Second Johannesburg Biennale), National Gallery, Cape Town
Purple and Green, Pretoria Art Museum, Pretoria
- 1996 Earth and Everything, Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol, UK
The Way West, Newtown Galleries, Johannesburg
- 1995 Springtime in Chile, Museo de Arte Contemporaneo, Santiago, Chile
Brown and Green, Pretoria Art Museum, Pretoria
Laager, Africus Biennale (fringe), Newtown, Johannesburg
- 1993 Real Art, ICA, Johannesburg

