

A challenging experience

EXHIBITION: *Brown and Green*
VENUE: Pretoria Art Museum
DATES: Until September 30

MUFFIN STEVENS

CONGRATULATIONS to the Pretoria Art Museum on getting rid of the cobwebs, packing away the old paintings and filling its galleries with three contemporary exhibitions simultaneously. This has caused quite a stir and drawn unprecedented numbers of viewers to the museum. Both *New Signatures* and *Masters and Protégée* are good shows, the latter of excellent drawings by SA artists. But it is *Brown and Green* that is the most controversial exhibition. Exhibited are works that are challenging and radical, as well as others that are conceptually clichéd or unnecessarily obscure.

Curated by Abrie Fourie, it concentrates on installations, concept-objects and alternatives to traditional art forms such as painting or drawing. This is not new: the approach dominated the Johannesburg Biennale and is current internationally. It can be seen as part of an on-going Dada spirit, an avant-garde tendency, in certain of the art of the 20th century. Such work is always provocative.

The entire back gallery has been cleared of its Volschenks and Oorders, as well as all screens, so firstly one is aware of the space of the museum in a different way. The challenging works reinforce this fresh experience. Many of the objects and installations, certainly the more accessible of them, comment on the site itself, the museum as a kind of arena where art is contested and constructed. They make one aware of museums as part of a system that identifies, sanctifies and attributes value to certain works.

Werner Vermeulen for example shows video cassettes marked with the names of famous SA artists: Coert Steynberg and the like. He implies that the mass media and the record of the work eventually replaces the actual artefact. So also van Wouws are draped in dustcloths, and Villas wrapped in glad-wrap. Paintings, old and probably valuable, stand stacked, faces to the wall. They are in a sense defaced. That the museum allowed its premises and its possessions to be used to produce a critique of itself makes it a collaborator in these installations.

Fourie has built a shelter of master paintings. Commenting on homelessness, the work questions the collecting of valuable paintings rather than building houses. More interestingly, these Boonzaiers, Wennings and Pierneefs, when removed from the sanctuary of the museum walls, change in some way. They become ordinary objects rather than artworks, they look rather dull and pedestrian. Their value is shown to arise from cultural agreement rather than from any indisputable aesthetic quality.

Sally Shaubin's *Museum Workers* is a series of photographs of the museum staff in their homes. This interesting glimpse into the lives of real people implies that museums are not hallowed halls filled with masterpieces, but institutions run by people. They too are participants in art-making.



Another type of work on the exhibition seems to want to be invisible, to deny our visual focus by avoiding looking like art, and thus denying the process which most of us define as art: the artist's product looked at by the viewer. Anton Karstel rests a briefcase against a wall. If one does not notice the label, or is not told that this is an artwork, one does not "see" the work. Such a gesture mocks the permanent object which most viewers expect of art, the artistry, craftsmanship, labour or "work" of art. Minette Vari moves closest to absolute invisibility. She has placed very slightly altered postcards in the museum shop, amongst the "real" postcards. It is almost impossible to distinguish the real art from the real postcard. This work attacks, or seeks to radically alter, the very notion of art.

Vari has also placed a huge billboard in the park showing herself, discreetly nude, altered to look like a black woman. This can be read as a comment on race. Despite its size, it too becomes almost invisible as an artwork because of its resemblance to glossy advertising.

Anton Karstel provides the most extreme, as well as tantalising, challenges to our definitions of art. His objects have been loaned from the police museum. A foetus and a severed hand in formaldehyde, police-car



Pictures: LEE WARREN

Creating a stir: Karl Gietl's *Bone, Plastic Suite* (left) and Wayne Barker's *Can Art Stand Alone* seen through the police car door window arranged by Anton Karstel (above).

doors penetrated by bullets, home-made firearms: these objects exert a lurid fascination. One looks long, avidly reads the explanatory texts, yet in no way do they become art, not by the wildest stretching of the term. They are, and resolutely remain, non-aesthetic objects. Here the artist becomes invisible. He constructs nothing, suggests nothing, controls nothing. All reactions and interpretations are left entirely to the viewer. Do you find meaning? Do you see this as art? Taking no sides, the artist, or as he prefers to be called, the instigator, sets up enormous conflict for the viewer.

Not all the pieces on this show are quite so anti-aesthetic or anti-expressionist as the above. Marlaine Tosoni's *Pretoria Women's Club* is a witty juxtaposition of old-fashioned photographs of club members with cupcakes strung from the ceiling. There is a visual ordering and use of metaphor that is in some ways concerned with aesthetics, albeit in unexpected ways. This applies also to her collaborative installation with Joseph Mzondo, in which stone carvings share a crazy meeting with gingerbread men. Andreas Schonfeldt's installation in the interior pool of the museum also shows expressionist concerns, in this case in allowing the viewer sensory experiences that have been stripped away from the more cerebral works. I recommend that you put on the galoshes, enter the pool to sit on the bench, watch the mirror and video, and experience the museum in a way you never thought you would.