



DIGNITY RESTORED: Anton Karstel has created a work of quiet contemplation in *Sorting Diamonds*

Art brings history into the light

WONDERFUL South Africa is the title of a book that artist Anton Karstel found kicking around his parents' home in Pretoria.

Published in the 40s by Associated Newspapers, the special empire edition book is a guided tour of South Africa, using black and white photographs and captions.

And it is these photographs which have become the starting point for Karstel's exhibition, *Wonderful South Africa*, which is on show at the Millennium Gallery in Groenkloof, Pretoria.

The photographs in the book are stark and remote, the captions lugubrious. And, in keeping with the spirit of the times, there is a lot of emphasis on the country's mineral wealth and absolutely none on the local population.

Karstel has recreated a series of the photographs in oils and has matched them to blow-ups of the originals. It is a fabulous exercise that demonstrates very simply how seductive painting is.

It is the book, however, that illustrates how the local people were treated as little more than tools; they were the means to extract the gold and diamonds that lay beneath the surface.

White labour, the authors of the

book cheerfully acknowledge, was far too expensive to be used in mining operations, but "it is in the nature of the native to work for less money".

Now, 55 years later, this is mind-boggling stuff and the British Empire did exceptionally well out of it all.

In 1933, £26-million worth of diamonds was exported from South Africa. In today's terms, allowing for inflation, exchange rates and so on, this translates to a staggering R59-billion.

Karstel has painted the scenes of dusty mining operations, half hidden in forlorn places in the veld, in delicately bleached colours — ochres and greys and sage greens.

The all-white Millennium Gallery is suffused with colour. The paintings, their texture and surface are completely beguiling. Until, of course, you read the text on the accompanying images.

Sorting Diamonds is a painting of two men working side by side in a sorting office. They wear striped shirts and are bent over trays of diamonds. Behind them light pours in through an old-fashioned sash window and catches their bowed heads.

In this painting, Karstel has used

deep steely blues and umbers, and the work is an object of contemplation, serenity and quiet.

But read the caption on the original: "Native boys seen here sorting small stones," it drones.

"In the old days, hundreds of thousands of pounds were lost annually through theft by Kaffirs. To hide his haul effectively, a Kaffir would even go to the length of swallowing the stones.

"Today there is comparatively little diamond stealing. Even so, in the mines, native workers are given a purgative when they come off after work."

And this was material that was intended to — and probably did — impress hundreds of tourists in its day.

Karstel is deeply interested in the role the act of painting plays in art. Clearly, it beautifies and aestheticises as it goes along.

Even subjects like those in *Wonderful South Africa* can, in the right hands, be made to appear wonderfully seductive and desirable.

Not that Karstel would dream of suggesting we abandon painting, nor does he naively believe art can solve social problems. All he suggests is we maintain a critical awareness.

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