

## PAINTING

# Now and the end

Is painting as an art form under threat? After visiting two galleries in Cape Town, Ashraf Jamal doesn't think so

**T**here has been much talk about the end of painting and the birth of new media, and yet painting is thriving. Indeed, of all art forms it still manages to compel us.

"There is an inner yearning that painting answers," writes the British art critic Matthew Collings. A practising painter himself, Collings is one of the leading champions of the form today. "I'm always surprised by the endlessness of painting, its depths, compared to the brittle, fast, amusing character of all that other stuff."

The "stuff" which Collings is dismissing is precisely the art which in these blithe, disposable days is assuming enormous traction — video, digital and performance art. However, firmly holding on to the value of painting, Collings notes that "the type of painting I find gripping is the type where you can say, 'well, the paint is everything here', regardless of what the subject matter is or what's known about what was going on in society at the time."

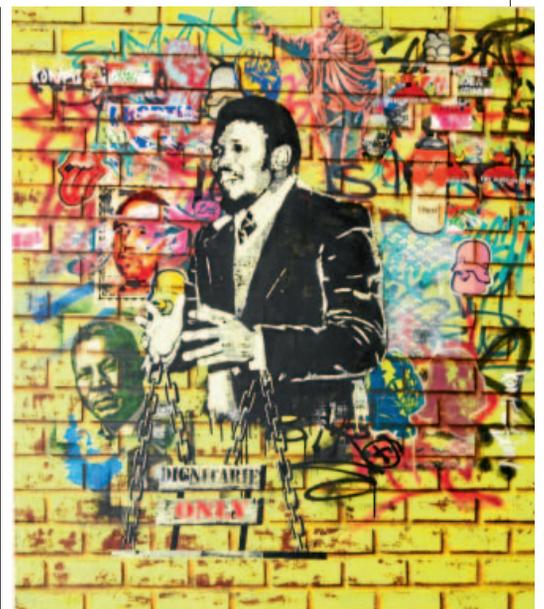
Clearly this is a purist stance, for what Collings seems to be advocating is "art for art's sake". What is disputable, however, is whether there has ever been a time when painting could declare its sovereign detachment from the world.

In response to this conundrum I decided to visit local painting exhibitions. My first stop was WorldArt, a niche gallery

on Church Street in Cape Town. A distinctively pop-based hub, WorldArt is home to the paintings of Khaya Witbooi, Dion Cupido and Kilmany-Jo Liversage.

What links these artists is their dealer, Charl Bezuidenhout, who recently returned from a Berlin arts workshop sponsored by the Goethe-Institut. A gallery with a high turnover, WorldArt caters to a global urban market inspired by pop culture. Indulgent when it comes to ephemera, colour, graffiti-inspired brushwork and iconic imagery, the artists and their buyers celebrate currency. Unperturbed by provenance — the consensual definition of artistic and monetary value — the makers and consumers of these works understand leverage only in the present tense.

That the pop megastar Beyoncé chose to



**Khaya Witbooi**  
**New Apartheid**



**Dion Cupido**  
**Untitled**

buy one of Cupido's paintings has certainly amplified the populist currency of WorldArt, for what is evident is that its artists are not so much inspired by a painterly tradition as by an ephemeral pop-driven tradition in which the remix and the mash-up are the defining tropes of The Now.

Witbooi, inspired by Steve Biko's call — "I write what I like" — uses the canvas as a surface for provocation, while Cupido, a hip-hop artist turned painter, is inspired by grafting his iconic portraits to a distinctively urban landscape.

Liversage, certainly the most luridly colourful painter of the three, situates her iconic images inside an electrified force-field of vivid drips and lacerations. If Cupido's paintings seem to reverberate subtly, then Liversage's pulsate noisily. All three artists, however, represent the distinctive facets of a media-driven urban street art.

What these works may mean retrospectively is difficult to declare. As Collings points out, it's "the buzz of instant con-



**Zander Blom**  
**Untitled**

temporaneity that turns us on, or that we believe turns us on, like drugs turn on people who have something that makes them anxious which they want to avoid." Collings' remark is a provocative one, forcing us to ask ourselves what we choose to invest in, and to what end. Distraction, it seems, is the deciding trigger. Unable to still ourselves, we choose cultural experiences which are designed to sustain our ephemeral hold on the world. "The pseudo-profundity and titillating freak-show shocks of contemporary art are our drugs," says Collings, "and what we want to avoid is humanity, seriousness, depth and feeling."

The rider is whether we can in fact return to the by now utopian dream of humanity, seriousness, depth and feeling. If Matisse is said to have created paintings designed to make a businessman restful on returning home and slipping into his slippers

**Kilmany-Jo Liversage**  
**Paramoura**



while sipping a cognac, then the art of today seems to be striving for something very different.

Consider Zander Blom's *New Paintings* at the Stevenson Gallery in Cape Town. If the canvases at WorldArt are inspired by iconic urban imagery, then Blom's paintings — vast empty canvases with strategically and abstemiously positioned dollops of paint — evoke a very different story.

In Blom's works it is the visceral matter of paint that counts, for what he offers us is not paint as a means through which to represent the world, but paint in and for itself.

Owing much to the austerity of high modernism, Blom's paintings are not triggers for pop-cultural storytelling but marooned reflections on the end of painting itself. Stripped of depth — other than the depth of paint-as-matter — they are, after Collings, "deliberately shallow and trivial", a means through which to explain how, quite literally, we have painted ourselves into a corner. Because, if we are to stick with Collings, then what Blom is doing is showing us "in a spirit of black humour or despairing glee our modern difference from the past, not our connection to it".

Blom has chosen to give us a vision of our world as one that is running on empty. The more playful yet engaged WorldArt artists remind us that at least we can continue to dance on the grave of painting, and have a lot of fun while doing so. ■

DINING

Season to taste



**Planet Restaurant at the Belmont Mount Nelson Hotel**  
**Best Restaurant in 2013**

After just one year in SA Restaurant Week — October 23 to November 2 — is hoping to double bookings to 10 000 seats, says sales manager Jonathan Ursem.

Restaurant Week allows diners to explore SA's best restaurants at R95 for lunch and R175 for dinner. Guests book online, and are encouraged to use social media to rate their experiences. Some really top-notch restaurants are given a star that allows them to add a R50 surcharge.

"Based on the feedback from restaurants and guests we are doing it again this year, and twice next year, in spring and autumn" says Ursem, who comes from the Netherlands.

Last year, in its first SA outing, Restaurant Week took place in 100 restaurants. This year participating restaurants include the Central One Bar & Restaurant at the Radisson Blu Gautrain Hotel, which last year won "Best Dish"; Planet at Cape Town's Belmont Mount Nelson Hotel ("Best Restaurant" in 2013); the Buitenverwachting Restau-

rant (Cape Town); Grande Provence (Franschhoek); the Bread & Wine Vineyard (Franschhoek); Bosman's (Paarl); Café 1999 (Durban); De Kloof (Pretoria); 96 Winery Road (Somerset West); Al Fiume (Pretoria); and many others.

Restaurant Week, run by DiningCity, emanates from a Dutch online dining guide, begun in 1998, that has grown into a series of events worldwide, says Ursem. Approximately 60 of these restaurants had at least one Michelin star. It was brought to SA by DiningCity SA director Tertius van Oosthuizen, who says he is "overwhelmed by the success of this year's booking".

Ursem says participating restaurants offer a set menu at a standard price, "so the chefs try to showcase their signature dishes, or do new dishes for the season." Last year 84% of the participating guests were new. □ Bookings are online only at [restaurantweek.co.za](http://restaurantweek.co.za), and opened on Tuesday, October 7. There is limited seating.

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MUSIC

Thanks for the failure

If he wasn't the lead vocalist and guitarist of American folk rock band The Lumineers, Wesley Schultz believes he'd probably be working in psychology in some way.

"My father was a psychologist and I naturally gravitated towards it," he says. "I was and still am fascinated by people and the things we do to cope with life," he said, in SA on the band's first tour here.

But music captivated him. His love began when he was a child, learning the words to all the songs his father played on the car stereo, and everything he heard on the radio. At 16, he began playing the guitar. "As soon as I began playing, I began writing songs of my own," he explains. "They weren't good songs, but that didn't matter"

Though Schultz and band co-founder Jeremiah Fraites (drums and percussion) grew up in the same town, they didn't really become friends until Schultz came back from college. "He was still in Ramsey (New Jersey), commuting to school, and three years younger," Schultz says. "A mutual friend insisted we play together, which we did eventually, dragging our feet the whole way."

From there, the band had what Schultz describes as a merry-go-round of third players come and go. "It wasn't until we moved from New York to Denver that we found Neyla [Pekarek, cello and vocals] through a Craigslist ad, and then Stelth [Ulvang, piano] and Ben [Wahamaki, bass] through the music scene out in Denver," he explains.

What does Schultz remember most from the first time he performed live? "The enormous fear," he says. "For a period of probably five years, for every day we had a show, I would have trouble sleeping and eating. I was wondering if I should be doing this, if this is how my

mind responds." But the process of playing and singing allowed him to get lost in the music and relax. "It was the only thing I'd ever experienced like that," he says. "Eventually I was able to get some confidence with it and that fear and anxiety only really happens about 10 minutes before we take the stage."

Even though the band toured relentlessly for a few years, Schultz remembers having no money. "We'd sleep on people's floors and couches; often people who were just at the show that night and offered us a place to stay," he recalls. "If we had money, we'd buy some groceries and make sandwiches on our laps in the minivan."

Schultz remembers believing in what they were doing, even when others didn't. "We'd go on a month-long tour around the country, and return to our jobs, bussing tables, and be [sort of] laughed at," he says. "One person asked, 'How'd the tour go?' and before I could answer, interrupted my response with, 'Couldn't have gone that well; you're back here, aren't you?'"

Tough experiences like this forced the band to be more honest with themselves about how good the music was, and about how much time they were devoting to their craft. "When you're spending 40 hours at a job you hate and 15 hours at music every week, it's not a recipe for success," Schultz says.

These setbacks also taught the band not to buy into the hype or into the feelings of failure. More than that, Schultz believes

that these challenges provided them with a greater conviction. "You have to develop a sense of what you think works and is good for you," he says. "Otherwise you're sunk."

And then, after 10 years that Schultz describes as wrought with failure and disappointment, came overnight success. Their "debut" album sold 3m copies and their single "Ho Hey" (which has had over 100m YouTube views) became a hit. "People think this is our first record but we've made a lot of music, a lot of different styles leading up to this, and played a ton of shows," he explains.

"So I'm thankful for all the setbacks. The benefit of failure is enormous."

Schultz is also thankful for several memorable experiences The Lumineers have had as a band. "We got to play Red Rocks [Amphitheatre] in Colorado with the Colorado Symphony Orchestra, which was a magical night," Schultz recalls. "There was [also] one show where the power went out in this small venue. We ended up just unplugging our instruments and playing the rest of the show without microphones or amplification."

Even though they've had many professional achievements in recent years, Schultz believes

that basing how you feel on album sales sets you up for a bad ride. "I think we're proud of a few things, like the perseverance involved in getting here," he says. "Another is that we're on Dualtone, a tiny label in the US that put us on the map [and] that believed in us like we did in them. They won an award recently for best label with five or fewer employees."

The Lumineers have generated some award buzz of their own, receiving nominations for Best New Artist and Best Americana Album at the 2013 Grammy Awards. What was this like? "It's not really something you understand [because] there are way too many bands and albums out there to sift through," Schultz says.

Though the band was one of a handful of artists asked to perform on the show that night, they didn't win. Best New Artist went to indie pop band Fun and Best Americana Album went to Bonnie Raitt's *Slipstream*. But Schultz doesn't seem fazed. "Two-time Grammy losers, The Lumineers," he jokes. "Has a nice ring to it."

The Lumineers perform at Cape Town's Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens on December 4 and 5 and at Johannesburg's Emmarentia Dam on December 6. Book at [Webticket](http://Webticket). Eugene Yiga



**Wesley Schultz and Jeremiah Fraites**  
**Album sales aren't the best way to measure your success**