

# From The Macadam To The Milky Way:

‘Street Level,’ Group Exhibition Curated By Andrew Lamprecht At Worldart, Cape Town, South Africa

By Lloyd Pollak

‘Street Level’ is a curious but fascinating exercise consisting of works by painters and photographers who fall under the rubric of ‘urban contemporary,’ a term that refers to fine art imagery inspired by the far cruder, rawer ‘street art’ of graffiti – aerosol murals, stickers, spray gun scribbles, blow torch blackening and guerrilla art. Curator Andrew Lamprecht investigates the interface between the marks that ‘genuine’ street artists leave upon urban spaces and the impact that such transformed cityscapes make upon fully accredited ‘fine artists.’ Here, street art has been subjected to a process of aesthetic refinement that makes it far more visually engaging, without sacrificing its in-your-face immediacy or the urgency of its political message.

One of the dangers of curating any exhibition is that some images may be such visual dynamite that they simply send everything else flying off the wall. This is almost what happens at ‘Street Level.’ As soon as you enter the gallery, your eyes jump out of their sockets and adhere leech-like to the acrylic surfaces of Khaya Witbooi’s *Cell Phone Blocking* (2015). After that, almost everything seems tame by comparison. Such is the toxic effect of the true showstopper, the veritable barn-stormer.

The dominant image in Witbooi’s painting is of that loathsome buffoon, President Zuma, beaming and oozing bonhomie as he plays the role of an entertainer, wooing the public with an electric guitar – but any attempt to charm us is foiled by that terrifyingly predatory crocodile

smile. Yet another Zuma (in beetroot rather than brown) occurs knitting beneath him, like some benign *Ouma* (‘granny’). There are passages of leopard skin design that, in African culture, allude to the king of predators and its aggression, strength and guile. These traits also apply here to the two odious twin Zuma’s who are surrounded by, but unfortunately not buried beneath, what look like torn collage elements impeccably simulated in paint. Passages of pattern rub shoulders with fragments of comic characters, the image of the Cecil John Rhodes’ statue, Chappies bubble gum wrappers, a huge Roy Lichtenstein brushstroke artfully manipulated so as to form the word ‘pap,’ which in the sense of food, is precisely what Zuma denies the poorer segments of the population.

Witbooi piles up icons, graffiti, words and references to Grace Jones, Keith Haring (like Basquiat, one of the pioneers who first took street art into the gallery) and the stencilled image of Albert Luthuli, whose high ideals Zuma so spectacularly betrayed. All this suggests a splodgy hodgepodge, but the farrago of many different images of different size in different styles, different media and different colours are all harmoniously combined in a masterful composition.

Other visual onslaughts – only somewhat less accusatory in tone and confrontational in impact – are Khaya Witbooi’s *Remember Marikana* (2015) and Kilmany-Jo Liversage’s *Her name was Nokuphila Kumalo* (2015). *Remember Marikana*



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depicts Mgcineni Naki, aka ‘Mambusch’, a prominent strike leader at Marikana. Like many of the other paintings in this show, it is harshly critical of recent political events and the government and police force’s inept handling of them.

A golden effigy of ‘Mambusch,’ his head ironically haloed by the South African Police Force Badge, dominates *Remember Marikana*. ‘Mambusch’ became something of a folk hero and martyr, devoted to passive resistance and peaceful negotiation, who ironically became one of the many victims of the massacre. *Her name was Nokuphila Kumalo* is Kilmany-Jo Liversage’s tribute to the sex-worker allegedly murdered by Zwelethu Mthethwa. It draws attention to the fact that she was never named, always referred to as ‘the prostitute’ murdered by the ‘distinguished’ South African painter and photographer. The work highlights the warped moral values of the media who pay the alleged murderer such flattering attentions, while his hapless victim is simply dismissed as a whore, a nameless figure, undeserving of attention or sympathy despite supposedly being stamped to death by the dandified artist’s impeccable imported Italian footwear.

Nokuphila’s portrait remains as veiled and anonymous as her non-existent media identity. Only the area from her neck to her nose is recognisable, and the areas above and below are overlaid with the carefully stenciled words “Her name was Nokuphila

Kumalo,” graffiti scrawls and layers of paint. To the right there are allusions to the Woodstock streets that were the site of her murder. The runs and trails of paint seem to stand for the tears unshed by journalists and the public, but not by Nokuphila’s grief-stricken mother.

Dion Cupido’s *Untitled* (2015) is a far more reticent image in which delicate areas of the most loosely brushed impasto float over mists and blushes of spray paint, graffitied loops, swirls and Abstract Expressionist drips. Bold lettering, flashes and hand-written words only serve to emphasise the ethereality of the painterly surface. The slogans “she doesn’t want to be saved” and “the end is not far” seem to allude to the figure of Saartjie Baartman; as over-publicised a victim of history as Marie Antoinette, but far less callipygous.

By comparison, Svea Josephy’s works seem exactly what they are – the inedible fruit of the sterile groves of Academe. Josephy is a Michaelis lecturer in Photography who here revives the almost forgotten photographic process of the cyanotype. In two of her works, *Blueprint: settlement 1* and *11>* (2015), she puts it in the service of imagery, portraying the ground plan of an informal settlement (an idea that turned into true magic in the brush of the artist Kobus Van Bosch three years earlier). Josephy underlines the crowding and lack of space in a laudable attempt to bring home the discomforts of living in such an environment.

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- 01 Dion Cupido, *Untitled*, 2015. Mixed media on canvas, 180 x 160cm.
- 02 Katlego Tlabela, *68*, 2014. Digital Photographs on hahnemuhle paper, 45 x 64cm, Ed 1/1. All images courtesy of Worldart, Cape Town.

The work is undeniably worthy, but it has the visual punch of a dishrag, stimulates no thought, and captures neither the imagination nor the memory, like the desiccated art of so many Michaelis academicians. This is the sole exception to an otherwise memorable exhibition that also includes virtuoso photography by Katlego Tiabela (2014) and David Lurie (2014).

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*‘Street Level’ ran from 4 – 29 June 2015 at Worldart Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.*