



KHAYA WITBOOI

MY PEOPLE, LET PHARAOH GO WORLDART

LEFT Khaya Witbooi, *Common ground II (Opposites attract)*, 2014. Oil and spray paint on canvas, 150 x 130 cm. Courtesy of Worldart

Like the majority of Greatmore Studios-based Khaya Witbooi's work in recent years, each of the six paintings features a central figure accompanied by multiple smaller elements. However, these elements are now predominantly comprised of skillfully stencilled panels of images running to the canvas edge, including Coke bottles, comic book sound effects, and Warhol's soup cans remade as spray paint cans. There's Marilyn, here's Betty Boop, and Steve Biko and Miriam Makeba in red berets, as well as plenty of grenades and explosions. Plus a Rorschach-testy depiction of the artist's own face above the word 'MOCK'.

The animated cult-trash mash-up, in lurid-yet-sludgy colours borrowed from propaganda posters, inevitably impels the viewer into the sombre tones and bulky, metallic stillness of the central figures – although you may soon pop back to the stencilling in search of light relief, depending on whether Mickey Mouse is your idea of fun.

Certainly, at the show's opening at Worldart on the first Thursday in April, many enthusiasts shuddered and reversed when they clocked the menace of the three paintings hanging on the gallery's left-hand wall. Lots of them did return later, albeit more gingerly.

The big man in the middle picture, *Invader*, is Darth Vader, or his helmet fused with a headless, unarmed (hence two-fisted) version of the Jan van Riebeeck statue on the Heerengracht. The protagonist of the work to the right, *Below the law*,

is Lady Justice walking a tightrope, but her double-balancing act isn't going well, considering her blindfold, the slackness of the rope, and the black gloop spilling from her scales. Does Witbooi want her to fall, since even she shouldn't be above the law? Hard to tell.

Looming largest in the third picture, *SA... loot*, is a member of the police force (or army, or are they inseparable?), dutifully holding a gloved hand to his head: an upside-down Voortrekker Monument. The Pharaonic altar's arched windows are his sagging, vacuous eyes, and its heavy Art Deco crown forms a monstrous mouth that echoes Darth van Riebeeck's nasty vocoder.

In the painting facing the entrance, *Common ground II (Opposites attract)*, the same head tops another famous statue, or one of the plethora of statues worldwide modelled on the shot of Nelson Mandela leaving prison with a raised fist. Power to the people then, but who has it today?

Mounted a right angle away is *Umshini wam III*, the latest in a series exploring the fact that a machine doesn't need to be a gun to be a deadly weapon. The nucleus is a fighter plane crossed with a sewing machine, which, like all of Witbooi's centrepieces, was finally brushed-treated to camouflage its oily appearance after a painstaking process involving taping, sketching, cutting, texturing with translucent paste, sanding and painting.

The picture evokes the business of globalisation and the sweatshop exploitation it trades on. It (potentially) gives insight into

the excessive 'foreign' iconography in the exhibition too, and a locational connotation of its so-called 'street art' component, as the brightest part of this work is a patch of Lucky Star tin labels, which are sometimes used *en masse* as wallpaper inside township shacks.

Contrastingly, the picture by the door is an outsider of sorts. Titled *Madiva*, it's a faux-mural of Mandela's face wearing a quizzical expression, lipstick, bunny ears, and a clownish bowtie. It has a few stencils and tags, but more faded blue paint that effectively projects the main image – which, despite its ostensibly controversial aspects, provided the First Thursdays punters with a refuge from the triple threat opposite, for a while anyway. Aply, this representation of the epitome of institutionalized commodification sold instantly.

Khaya Witbooi deserves props for producing (and selling) highly substantial art from a distinctly non-elitist standpoint. It's good that his aims are honourable, since the inersive, subversive criticisms and/or questions and/or conflations and/or contradictions within his output create tension that also resonates enduringly in the minds of those who see it, even if they don't want it to. To quote Witbooi: "South Africa is not moving forward... If we buy into the belief that things are okay, we aren't getting any closer to a solution."

MATTHEW CANNON