

{ ART }

KHAYA Witbooi is readying six large canvases at Greatmore Studios in Woodstock, Cape Town.

The familiar South African icons are on display. Here's Zuma weaving his notorious private residence out of sheep's wool. There's unimpeachable Biko, reminding us to write what we like.

Biko's mantra is a street artist's wet dream. In one of his paintings, Witbooi mixes the sentiment with a Khoisan figure wielding a spray can.

There's a wry humour at work. Two of the canvases are for *Paint Matters*, a group show at the Barnard Gallery, where Witbooi will exhibit alongside Asha Zero. The other four are for the Joburg Art Fair, where Witbooi will exhibit together with



PIC: DALE YUDELMAN

fellow World Art artists Dion Cupido and Kilmany-Jo Liversage.

I'd recently gone clubbing with Witbooi at All Nations, a strobe-lit disco in a revamped office block in Salt River. Sometimes we bump into each other in Observatory, or sit down for drinks at Ganesh, a low-key bar where Berlin, Barcelona, and Gugs meet. It's a "creative space" where Witbooi feels most "relaxed" and no one tries to "extract info".

Greatmore Studios also suits him. "It's a place where people feel comfortable ... everywhere else is so stiff and hostile for becoming artists."

Given his growing international clientele, he's hardly a "becoming artist". But Greatmore is the perfect home for a range of rising artists who see themselves as coming from the street, and who see canvases as "portable murals".

Hailing from Uitenhage in the Eastern Cape, Witbooi moved to Cape Town in 2001 to escape the prospect of working in the local Volkswagen assembly plant. Based in Joe Slovo township, he earned his keep as a griller for McDonald's — he has the burn scars to prove it —



MASH-UP: 'Invader' by Khaya Witbooi

moth to a flame, was picked up by Charl Bezuidenhout of World Art and promptly sold. It bore all the signature markings of his style: a pop-punk-political smorgasbord of styles or "accents"; an "animated cult-trash mash-up", as Matthew Cannon puts it. Witbooi's paintings evoke a world thoroughly caught between the local and the global.

While representative of an "urban art" movement, Witbooi is very much his own person. "I don't like blending," he says. There is certainly something distinctive about the precision of his dress, his predilection for denim bow-ties and his formality of comportment, which all give him an otherworldly and retro quality.

In his studio, I spot the ubiquitous bow-tie stationed above a pocket Bible. Witbooi has never lapsed from his Christian roots. Every Sunday he leaves Observatory

His work is a challenge to 'systems you can't oppose'

for Joe Slovo, where he gathers with other members of his chosen church, Assembly of God. It is remarkable to think upon just how Witbooi reconciles a belief in an absolute in the midst of tackling the contradictions of a cut-throat art world, let alone a realpolitik that defies belief.

While his work is certainly a challenge to "robots, androids" or "systems you can't oppose", it is the artist's "softer touch" that comes to the fore. There is nothing aggressive in his work; even his portrait of Mandela with bunny ears and bow-tie is not intended as sacrilegious; rather, in the spirit of *Donnie Darko*, it challenges misguided propriety and taste, namely the recent furor about the bunny in Mandela's sculpted ear.

Witbooi is an exemplar of a new moment in SA art — one blithely entangled in the greater world, yet attuned to the challenges of the present local moment. His pop sensibility splices the mall and the township, the iconic and the politically current, and, lest we forget, Darth Vader and the Storm Troopers. It captures a society on a roll, while still learning to be honest about what it is becoming. **LS**

POP SMART

Khaya Witbooi nails a new & eclectic moment in South African art, writes **Ashraf Jamal**

before shifting to Pick n Pay, where he dealt with stock, packed the fridges and logged expiry dates.

His first break in the art field was as a freelance illustrator for the Cape Argus, where he worked in-between flipping burgers and determining whether food was *vrot*. But he knew the work wasn't for

him. "I always knew I was an artist," he says. "I didn't want to depend on briefs or interpret anyone else's vision."

It was only in 2010 that his career kicked off. Following "a dry spell" in Pretoria, Witbooi returned to Cape Town where, with Ayanda Mabulu, Zolani Siphungela and

Loyiso Mkize, he trawled the city's galleries in search of a gap. Frustrated, Witbooi instinctively knew he would have to shrug off the "gloom" in his head.

"Gloom pushes people away," he says. "People are attracted to colour, to things that feel softer."

His first painting, titled *Like a*

{ VIEWPOINT }



The Conch

PATRICK BULGER

Crew cut, and be quick!

I'm that person who spends two bucks to save one, and then still thinks, "What a deal!" Recently, to part with just R50 on the grudge purchase of a haircut, I came away with more than I had bargained for. Or less.

Because, as I sat having my crowning glory snipped by the barber of Bertrams, some punk was busy stealing my car from where I'd parked it outside.

Samson has ropes of hair cut and gets away with a few weeks of enforced celibacy; I have a trim, at most, and I'm parted from two decades of motorised infamy.

Still, I doubted my eyes. I walked back to the barber shop and out again, hoping my earlier walk had been a ghastly flashback. What can replace that icy feeling when you first realise your conveyance is no

more? Well, staring long and hard, afterwards, at that bare rectangle of parking is just as good.

You linger where the car once was, savouring the full lousiness of the moment, but you realise you look odd, gawking at an empty space. And the last thing I wanted, then, was to be arrested for loitering, especially on a Friday.

Immediately, I dreaded having to deal with car people (salesmen, after-sales blokes, financial types). But that was nothing alongside the realisation that my golf clubs, ever ready to shoot a big number, were in the boot. So now the Toyota, and the driver, were gone.

Like the condemned man, I made my one phone call. On a whim, really, I realised that even if I didn't have much airtime, I had the number of the satellite-track-

ing company that relieves me of several hundred rands a month. (Grudge purchase, phone me back!) In fact, I had been meaning to call them to begin unbundling myself from their service, in the interests of further economy.

I wasn't convinced anymore that my car was still being monitored by them at all, because the all-important plastic item they supply you with had broken off my key ring, so I had never been that sure where it was. The result was that the satellite bunch had started calling me and SMSing me a lot, asking if I was alright, which I wasn't, but what could they do about it?

So to stop being harassed with care, I had simply put the plastic thing in the car's ashtray, which ended the calls, at least. And forgot about it, until that day.

Resigned to disappointment, I called them anyway and, as I suspected, our call was to be recorded for quality purposes. My exasperation was of the highest quality, as we spoke and I began the long walk home, navigating the Mogadishu that is a Joburg pavement.

Soon, the phone rang again, and the car had been found, abandoned in Diepkloof, Soweto. Days later, when I got it back from the police pound, the golf clubs were indeed gone. Fat loss, I thought: I had already bought a bargain second-hand set, which was a great saving, and my score had improved, too.

Change my barber, and not risk having my car stolen again? No chance. There's no place in Joburg you can get as close a shave at that price. I'm already looking forward to walking there the next time. **LS**