

# SACRED STAINS

Norman O'Flynn brings the medieval church genre right up to date. By **Ashraf Jamal**

**T**HERE'S something very special about inner-city pedestrian hubs on a sunny day and Church Street in Cape Town is no exception, with its open-air eateries, Afro-bling curio stores, bric-a-brac stands and art dealerships. Among the latter is Worldart Gallery, one of South Africa's leading pop art dealerships. Run by Charl Bezuidenhout, it features the likes of Kilmany-Jo Liversage, Dion Cupido and Khaya Witbooi. Now it is also Norman O'Flynn's turn to shine.

Last time we spoke at his Sunset Beach studio O'Flynn loaned me a pair of shorts so I could take a dip in the Atlantic. This time I'm getting a permanent gift — one of the dayglo "bombs" he is screwing to the gallery wall. Despite the pretty, cartoonish nature of the bombs, the show is all about blitzkriegs — the bombing of Dresden and Hiroshima and the stranglehold of terror gripping Europe right now.

In keeping with the zeitgeist of Worldart, O'Flynn's solo show, billed as *The Good, the Bad, and the "Boom"*, is anything but parochial. Instead O'Flynn seeks to remind us how global terror has eerily become the new normal.

He was in London participating in a group show sponsored by the Department of Trade and Industry at the time of the Belgium terror attacks, and like everyone else he was glued to the TV.

"Fear", says O'Flynn, "has become a commodity." With the escalation in urban terror "advertising spikes, insurance gets bigger". And if destruction and terror is big business, what is all the more disturbing for O'Flynn is that it generates a new kind of porn in which "threat becomes visual candy".

The relationship between horror and art is nothing new, but what fascinates him is the extent to which art as a kind of psychic porn, "a red alert", generates its own sub-culture.

And here pop art, a global barometer of populist taste, has a lot to answer for. One need only think of the paintings of Roy Lichtenstein and the Marvel comics that he and Hollywood have exploited. O'Flynn reflects on the latest Superman film, in which Henry Cavill plays the superhero, who is portrayed as Christ the Redeemer.

The flipside of fear is a hankering for redemption; we are addicted to the bipolar thrill of agony and ecstasy. And what O'Flynn has bracingly understood is that we want the frisson of this divide neatly packaged — in news reportage and in our art. Which is why binaries — zeros and ones — are dominant in his reverse glass



HOLY TERROR: 'New Gods', by Norman O'Flynn

paintings, why every work comes with a timeline, a countdown, and why his masked figures are billed as "timekeepers".

One could describe the artworks, glaringly inspired by comic strips, as apocalyptic, but O'Flynn is no nihilist. Rather, after the great Palestinian humanist, Edward Said, O'Flynn is a "pessoptimist". "It's a sad thing when aspiration is f\*\*\*ed," he says, blaming "media hype" for the toxic cynicism he sees everywhere. "Where do we go to worship now?"

As O'Flynn arranges his wall of plunging dayglo bombs, and expresses his yearning for the world to just "be nice", I'm struck by a stained-glass painting that has assumed centre stage. Clearly, while O'Flynn wants to show us the depth of our despair and confusion, he also wants us to hold onto the irony of Superman as Redeemer.

Titled *New Gods*, the stained-glass work features one of O'Flynn's many masked and tattooed figures. The trick lies in the medium. Stained glass, historically, was

**This is the work of someone who chooses to put out the fire with petrol**

used by the church to "illuminate the illiterate masses". Today the church has radically morphed but illumination, whatever its shape and form, remains the defining drug. Reverential and trashy, O'Flynn's altar piece — made by Fanus Boshoff, an artisan who makes massive altar pieces for Catholic churches in the townships — is an astute capture of what O'Flynn calls our "contemporary-changey" world.

His show is just that — contemporary-changey, volatile and pulped. While the works look good — the scale is on-point, the colours screamingly loud — they generate a certain gnawing static. This is not pop art as something cool but the work of someone who chooses to put out the fire with petrol.

"Be nice," O'Flynn says. "Be nice." **LS**

● Norman O'Flynn's *'The Good, the Bad, and the "Boom!"* is on at Worldart Gallery in Cape Town until May 26

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## LETTERS

### ONE MAN'S PORN IS ANOTHER MAN'S ART

I HAVE not yet been to see the SEX exhibition at Stevenson Gallery, but I read Oliver Roberts's review "No, I have a headache" (May 15) with some amusement as well as some slight annoyance. The objective of a reviewer of anything is to voice his or her own opinion and I fully applaud Mr Roberts's right to damn the event because it did not stoke his personal artistic fires, but I imagine a few readers will have taken exception to his discomfort and disgust at the depiction of sex in all its many and varied forms. Some might very well find higher meaning in these things. I'll go and check it out for myself. Like I say, to etch his own. — Alan S Randall



Artu Peatoo's 'Butch', 2015, cans, polymer clay, fibreglass, water pump