

LIFE

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Untouchable transcendents of time

● O'Flynn confronts viewers with large portraits of tattooed tribe

Mary Corrigan

People with inked designs covering their bodies say tattooing is addictive. Some say it is because of the adrenalin rush caused by the pain of a needle piercing their skin, others wax lyrical about the satisfaction of owning their bodies and marking their personality through permanent designs on their skin.

The psychic payoff is significant enough for tattoo shops to have become ubiquitous in malls in SA.

Artist Norman O'Flynn suggests tattoos function like the rings inside a tree trunk; they accumulate over time. Experience is selectively archived on the skin.

In his new exhibition, *Better and Better*, he confronts viewers with large portraits of a veritable tattooed tribe, *Timekeepers*.

This group appears to have transcended time. Like cartoon characters, they appear immortal; all svelte and good-looking without a wrinkle or belly roll in sight. Yet they have been through a lot: their bodies are covered with marks and designs. Apart from the usual clichéd tattoos – ranging from mermaids, roses and snakes to cute animals and bugs – there are countdown clocks and stylised motifs of explosions.

O'Flynn advances this veritable tribe as one haunted by impending violence, a doomsday cult. It would not be unreasonable to see them as us, a nation haunted by the violence of its history and high crime. They have survived the trauma and have in this way beaten time: the bombs attached to the countdown clocks, commemorated via tattoos on their bodies.

This is probably why they exude such attitude; they are in a way untouchable.

This is communicated via their confrontational stances; arms crossed, chests puffed out, gazing out at viewers. Their tattoos associate them with street-smart people such as bikers, rappers and gang members.

O'Flynn's *Timekeepers* might be criminals; like gang members in prison, they are covered from head to toe in tattoos and, significantly, wear scarves over their faces that hide their identities – perhaps to avoid cameras tracking them or perhaps because their world is



so polluted they must wear face masks to protect their health.

O'Flynn's distinctive tattooed portraits, which he has been generating for some time, leads viewers to wonder less about his subjects and more about where they come from. This is significant as he uses real people as subjects – alluded to in the first names used in the titles.

It is curious then that he conceals their identities by obscuring their faces and through his distinctive portraiture, which pushes them through what you could call the O'Flynn filter. This

is what joining a tribe or group does: it suppresses individuality and advances homogeneity.

The *Timekeepers* share similar tattoos and are a tribe united by the same values – or conditions. In expressing their allegiance via markings on their bodies rather than dress, there is a price in becoming a member – it is for life.

O'Flynn spent years painting superheroes. He claims it became torturous, but in the *Timekeepers*, he has created a new kind of superhero. The O'Flynn filter, which he is per-

fecting in this exhibition, turns his subjects – sometimes people he knows or strangers – into tough heroes or heroines.

He does not want to make serious art or take it too seriously – art-making provides him with a place to play with ideas.

You can never quite enter his fantasy world or the place that has molded his subjects; he does not place them in a context.

The *Timekeepers* are deeply embedded in a world consumed by design and symbols. They are branded in their entirety – not

even their fingers escape the all-encompassing culture of design.

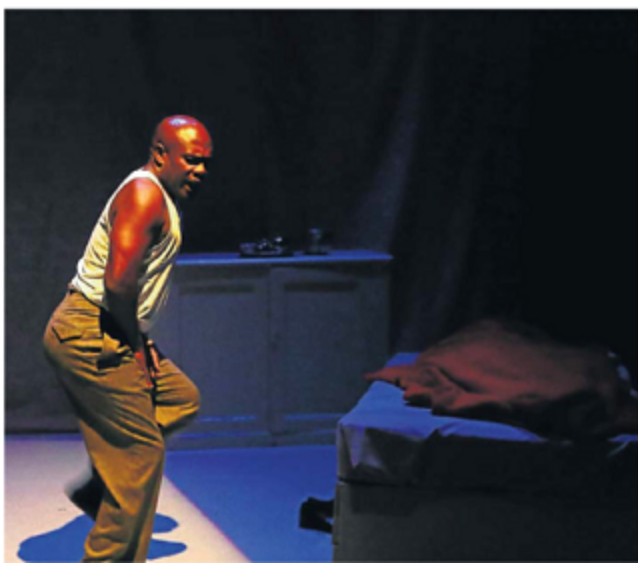
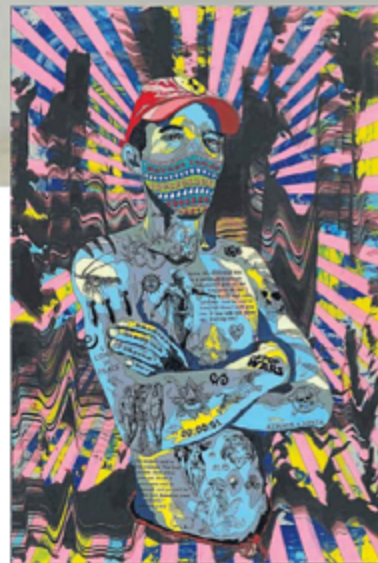
O'Flynn has extended his distinctive tattooed portraits beyond the picture frame and onto the walls of Worldart gallery. His tattoo design language covers the walls, floors and a door, highlighting the loss of identity of his subjects.

O'Flynn's design idyll is a tough place for an individual to exist – perhaps this is the doomsday that he alludes to through countdown clocks: the death of the self. His subjects are different but all look the same.

Perhaps what he delivers is a critique of art; visual languages have been exhausted leaving artists with no choice but to keep recirculating the same signs and symbols. The end of art – a notion philosophers have toyed with – could be the doomsday that artists are trying to survive. O'Flynn is doing a good job of it; he is perfecting his expression and extending it through new materials.

● *Better and Better* shows at Worldart gallery, Cape Town, until May 25.

Inked: Above: An installation at the exhibition. O'Flynn extends his tattoo language beyond the picture frame. Left: O'Flynn's *Timekeepers* are based on real subjects given the 'comic-hero' spin. /Supplied



THEATRE

Twala hits the stage in *The Suit*

Edward Tsumele

Seasoned actor Siyabonga Twala has appeared in almost every soapie on South African television, but insists that good acting happens on the stage.

He is playing the lead role of a taxi owner in Mzansi Magic's *Isibaya* and over the years, has had major roles in *Isidingo*, *Generations*, *Scandal* and *Rhythm City*, among others.

He is also on stage at the Market Theatre in the lead role of *Philemon* in *The Suit*, based on a short story by the late

compared to the money we bring in to channels," he says.

"We deserve to have shares in some of these productions because TV channels actually make a lot of money and the catalysts for that are good actors. Getting only salaries from production companies is just not enough.

"Acting on soapias has been cheapened by producers who are unwilling to pay actors what they deserve. Instead, they would rather have non-trained actors to play a role and pay them little money.

"This is, in a way, an extraordinary display of a lack

as being a good actor.

"The fact that when people meet you in the streets, they scream does not mean that you are a good actor. It simply means that you are on TV.

"To illustrate this, people will also scream when they meet a soccer player, not necessarily because he is a good player, but because he appears on TV."

Twala says some shows have been canned because of bad acting by so-called celebrity actors.

"I am not a celebrity, I am an actor and you will never see me attending every function in town to play some silly

couple whose marriage is in trouble. Although Maahe Ka-Ncube first played the role to critical acclaim, Twala says he is bringing his own unique style to the play.

"Audiences who might have seen it in the past must not expect the same thing. I am bringing in my own interpretation of the character. It is quite challenging though," Twala says.

Although at face value the play is about infidelity, it is also about how apartheid destroyed the social fabric of those living in Sophiatown, resulting in a number of social ills, such as

Theatre is celebrating his life and talent with a *Can Themba* season. In January, it staged *The House of Truth*, a piece of theatre about Themba's life penned by Siphiso Mahala, and had Maahe Ma-Ncube playing solo to critical acclaim.

The *House of Truth* is now on at the Soweto Theatre.

The *Suit* is directed by the Market Theatre's artistic director, James Ngcobo, who says the job is a dream but one that also brings sleepless nights.

This piece of theatre has been staged repeatedly because of its timeless message and was even made into a film starring