

# Art in America

INTERNATIONAL • REVIEW

## EXHIBITION REVIEWS

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Anton Kannemeyer: *Very Very Good*, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 63 by 68 $\frac{7}{8}$  inches; at Jack Shainman.

### ANTON KANNEMEYER JACK SHAINMAN

When, in 1992, Anton Kannemeyer and Conrad Botes began publishing *Bitterkomix*—the underground comic books written mainly in their native language, Afrikaans—they had a clear target for their biting satire, for apartheid had not yet entirely fallen in South Africa. *Bitterkomix* was a huge hit—revelatory, even liberating for many young South Africans. Then rainbow democracy was born, and truth and reconciliation warily accomplished; Kannemeyer moved into murkier struggles, and, eventually, from books to walls.

The master “Boer punk,” as he’s been called, coldly holds up a mirror to the failure of good liberal intentions, mainly regarding race and crime. At Shainman, Kannemeyer showed large- and medium-scale paintings, works on paper and collages—21 pieces altogether, mostly from 2011, combining vividly discomfiting comiclike images and text. Nearly all depict queasy encounters between whites and blacks. Especially broad in its satire are the confrontations of a balding, middle-aged Tintin character—frequently sweating with anxiety—and a black minstrel type with

big red lips and googly eyes. In *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, a small work on paper, Tintin dreams in bed, while the minstrel has materialized, naked and shocked-looking, on an animal rug. Tables are turned in the 63-inch-square canvas *Some Kind of Boo-Boo*, in which three minstrel doctors diagnose Tintin, who lies sweating on a gurney. In *Very Very Good*, a white artist (Kannemeyer’s self-portrait, I was told) critiques a distressed-looking minstrel-like student, assuring him in a speech bubble that really, he **does** like the work, and not just because the student is black.

While some works are Africa-specific, depicting politicians or events unfamiliar to audiences here, others directly implicate Americans—*B Is for the Beauty of Military Life* (2011), for example, which shows a blond female soldier making the thumbs-up gesture of Abu Ghraib above a battered man (Kannemeyer, in the thick of it again). Kannemeyer scales up beautifully; you can imagine these images working just fine in books, but large they are effective in a different way, and are oddly reminiscent of paintings by John Wesley or even Kerry James Marshall.

My favorite works, though, were three

small, tidy collages laden with emotional contradiction. Here Kannemeyer juxtaposes news clippings about violent events with gleaming ads and his own very beautiful, less comical, drawings of politicians or heroes. In these, formal orderliness belies a content of economic and social breakdown, much as in the larger works cheery colors sublimate violence of a more psychological nature. I imagine Kannemeyer’s work would be tough to live with, its message the darker for all the pretty packaging.

—Faye Hirsch



Friday, 22 June 2012

# N is for Nightmare

## *The dark art of Anton Kannemeyer*

By **Colin Liddell**



*How much 'racism' is needed to achieve 'equality'?*

*To accompany Andy Nowicki's excerpt from his forthcoming in-depth article on South Africa, I am republishing in full an interview with the South African artist, Anton Kannemeyer. This was originally published in the Quarterly review and excerpted here at Alternative Right in 2010.*

Kannemeyer is a South African print artist and cartoonist whose work has commented on the racial and political tensions of Apartheid and post-Apartheid South Africa.

Starting from a conventional liberal position, detesting Apartheid, rejecting his Boer heritage, and welcoming the "New South Africa," his art has gradually evolved into something darker and more complex as disturbing trends become increasingly apparent in the so-called "Rainbow Nation."

LIDDELL: Why did you focus on print art as your main means of artistic expression?

KANNEMEYER: My father is a South African writer (mainly Afrikaans literary criticism), so from a young age I had this idea that I want to publish, or at least make books. As a student I started an art magazine in our department (it only ran two issues: 1990 & '91), but my main aim was to publish a comic magazine. My friend Conrad Botes (who I met as a first year art student in 1988) and I started drawing comics in 1989 together, and in 1992 we published our collected work in a magazine called *Bitterkomix I*. As we knew a black & white magazine wouldn't make much of an impact on its own, we made large silkscreen prints (in colour) of many of the images in the comic. They were quite popular and often exhibited. It also gave the magazine a point of sale (we struggled initially to get the magazine in bookshops, but when sales were consistent that was not such a big problem anymore). Eventually we would also screenprint book covers (never more than 150), but these were always limited and I guess more like an "art object" than anything else.

LIDDELL: Looking at the *Bitterkomix* series, one of the things that stands out is the way you constantly poked fun at the old sexually-repressed Presbyterian Afrikaner morality, but also mix in a load of racial issues with scenes of interracial sex – almost always a Black man with a White woman. In *Bitterkomix*, Blacks seem to represent an idea of sexual power and liberation, but this is also mixed with a heavy dose of irony that creates a sense of degradation. It seems you are equating sexual repression with Apartheid and associating the idea of sexual promiscuity with the "New South Africa."

KANNEMEYER: The use (or repeated use) of Black men as sexually potent was mainly to piss off White men. I guess in most instances our work was directed at the White Afrikaner (the language was also mostly Afrikaans, albeit a kind of crude slang), and, in this sense and context, iconoclastic. And yes, things have changed. I like your comment about the "irony that creates a sense of degradation." Generally I would not equate the "New South Africa" with a sexual openness (even though now I may say what I want without being persecuted). Sex is still very much a taboo, especially in the Black communities. And to finally get to your question: I see myself as a satirist and therefore mostly critical of those in power (both political and economical power). My use of explicit sexual situations in the comics like *Gif: Afrikaner Sekskomix* (1994) were mostly metaphorical, criticizing conservative Afrikaans values. The impact of that work, however, made me understand how you can grab an audience's attention visually, and simultaneously undermine that initial visual impact with either language, juxtaposition or other devices. Lately there has been a shift in my work (the last 3 years or so) – and I have been focusing mainly on politics and race.

LIDDELL: How true are the *Joe Dog* stories? I was looking at "Whatever you do, stay out of prison in South Africa," about gang rapes in prison, including an instance of interracial rape in which a white farmer held overnight in a cell for a minor offence was raped by a gang of fourteen blacks who drowned out his screams by singing the ANC anthem *Umshini wami, mshini wami!* (Please Bring My Machine Gun). I also wondered why the White victim has inverted commas around 'Mr.'

KANNEMEYER: My 'true stories' are normally quite accurate. In the case of "Prison in Africa" the incidents are based on info found in local newspapers. The 'Mr' in inverted commas referred to something that I now realize would not be picked up by an international audience: if the victim would have been a black man, the press would not have placed 'Mr' before his name. As the press is not allowed anymore to identify people by race, there are other subtleties in the text one relies on to in fact determine race.

LIDDELL: I get the feeling that in your work, the sexual aspect is also used to symbolize changing power relations, namely the 'feminization' of the former 'masculine' White ruling class. Maybe it's because your work is actually so political in this way (using a perfect metaphor in sex) that you unfairly got dismissed by some as a purveyor of "crude pornographic depictions."

KANNEMEYER: You're right, as a child I felt a huge resentment towards white patriarchs, and in the new South Africa these men have been despised by all for quite a while now (and they're the least likely to be employed as well in government institutions). This of course gave me many reasons to celebrate (the irony, of course, being that I'm also just a white male.) And I'm not too concerned about being dismissed "unfairly as a conveyor of porn" – I've had a lot of support in the media, especially from women! And your comment about the 'sexual content of the work being about power' is quite correct.

LIDDELL: As you indicate, your position in the new South Africa has strong ambiguities – resentment against the Afrikaner patriarchs from whom you stem. Where is your identity at? Are you 'post-racial' or is your identity based on something else?

KANNEMEYER: I'm not sure about this. I lived in Germany for 2 years when I was 18 years old (my mother, who is Dutch, remarried a German) and I was desperately unhappy there. Back in South Africa (I returned to study) I felt at home, happy and driven because of the turmoil on political and social levels, I guess. Life here is/was meaningful because I felt my work had an impact. But lately I enjoy working in other countries (I have a lot of professional connections in Germany and France especially), but my partner is pretty tied up with her family here. I'm not sure that I'm 'post-racial' (it sounds like such a grand statement). When I was teaching though, especially in Johannesburg (where there were about 70% Black students), I felt 'post-racial': I was just trying to get a good job done. The moment I came back to the Cape (I taught at Stellenbosch University) where Black students only constituted about 12-15% of the student body, I started feeling weird again. And everybody in my department was so painfully politically correct it almost crippled their logic or behaviour. Lots of hypocrisy among liberals, but I'm sure you are aware of that. But, in the end, I guess I don't see myself as an Afrikaner anymore – I still prefer writing in Afrikaans, but most of my friends are, and virtually all my work is in English. Also, I don't read Afrikaans or watch Afrikaans TV or anything Afrikaans (I don't go to Afrikaans cultural festivals anymore – my God, they are annoying!). I really don't know what constitutes a South African to be honest: and in that sense I guess some South Africans are a bit "post-racial". I do sometimes watch cricket: whether it's a black, Indian,

white or 'coloured' (mixed race) sportsman, there are no differences. They just need to perform. That's the only way I get a sense of nationality - through sports.

LIDDELL: One way to gauge someone's true identity is by the kind of people they associate with in their free time. In your case what kind of picture does this give?

KANNEMEYER: Yes, my partner (or girlfriend) and I have two very young children now and I sort of feel that I do not associate with anyone anymore – it's just work and children. But my best friends are all very close to and interested in all sorts of alternative culture. Are you trying to determine whether my friends are black, white or coloured?

LIDDELL: Yes because the real test of a multiracial society is the degree to which race is "forgotten." Your generation is living the multiracial experiment. How is it going? And, yes, at your own level of whom you feel comfortable associating with, are you effectively post racial? Or do things like work and family enable you to avoid facing this issue too directly?

KANNEMEYER: No, in one way or another one has to face this issue. I have some black friends – two guys who are quite close in regards to their taste in music and interests in visual arts etc. The one guy, who died recently by drowning, was my brother's best friend. But that's not a lot. What has occurred, from a very different angle however, is that our daughter has made some black friends at school, and now we do see their parents socially. One of her friends' mothers turned out to be my partner's gynaecologist, which is quite funny: a while ago I made a painting called *Black Gynaecologist*, which was quite popular: unthinkable that a white woman should have a black gynaecologist, but there you have it: our reality! The thing is that our Black gynaecologist and her Nigerian husband are looking to emigrate to Australia or somewhere – who knows, maybe we'll end up with a white gynaecologist again.

LIDDELL: I'd like to ask about the *Alphabet Series*. With its deadpan humour, it's one of the things you're best known for. Some of the pieces, like *N is for Nightmare* (house with decapitation), remind me of Hergé's Tintin cartoons – nice, clean draughtsmanship and stereotypical Blacks. Why did you choose this Tintin-esque style?

KANNEMEYER: The stylistic reference to Hergé's Tintin can be traced back to my *Bitterkomix* work – I started using it when I made comics of myself at a very young age. At the time (as a young child before I turned 12) Tintin was the only comic I knew, and the style just seemed perfect to open that window back into (especially) my pre-pubescent years. I used the clarity of his style, but added a dark shadow-like atmosphere which seemed quite truthful to me, quite depressing. The use of the stereotypical Black has several functions, one being that I did see all black people (who I didn't know) at that age as looking the same. In the case of the *N is for Nightmare* series (there are in fact seven pieces in the series, part of the "bigger" Alphabet series), I wanted to accentuate this fear of hordes of faceless "Blacks" attacking White dwellings (and maybe affluent Black houses) – always situated in typical South African middle class suburbs.

LIDDELL: The way you exaggerate this fear in these cartoons feels satirical, as if you are mocking it as ridiculous and out of proportion. But isn't fear, by its very nature an exaggerated state? Also, in view of the disparities in wealth and the social and racial divisions in South Africa, and the experience of much of late 20th century Africa – from the Mau Mau, the expulsion of the Ugandan Asians, the massacres in the Belgian Congo, the campaigns against the White farmers in Zimbabwe, and of course the genocide in Rwanda, etc., etc., might not these fears of "faceless mobs" be completely understandable?

KANNEMEYER: Sure, these fears are perfectly grounded. In fact, we had a series of very violent break-ins in the street where I live a year ago: these gangs would simply smash the front door in and steal as much as they can before the armed response would reply. And in both cases (in our street) the families were held at gunpoint until the guys left. I was very afraid of waking up in the middle of the night with a front door being smashed down. But I think one problem is that white people think they're the only victims in South Africa (oh God they feel really sorry for themselves). The other thing has to do with ownership and entitlement: many white people think they've worked really hard for what they've got and that it's really unfair that they're being victimized. And yes, it's a complex issue: in a "normal" first world country the government will protect you – in South Africa (when white people complain – especially about "service delivery") you're branded a racist. It's a very interesting time (but it has been since I started studying). I made a painting recently of a white woman about to be raped by four Black guys; she shouts at her husband: "These historically disadvantaged men want to rape me!" Now once again there are real situations like this out there – but the issue I'm addressing is something else though. I use this fear to address something else. Regarding this, I found an excellent quote by Tony Hoagland: "To really get at the subject of race, chances are, is going to require some unattractive, tricky self-expression, something adequate to

the paradoxical complexities of privilege, shame, and resentment. To speak in a voice equal to reality in this case will mean the loss of observer-immunity status, will mean admitting that one is not on the sidelines of our racial realities, but actually in the tangled middle of them. Nobody is going to look good." (from *Real Sofistikashun: Essays on Poetry and Craft*, 2006.) I know that I approach the subject from a satirical perspective, but your question (a good one, by the way) tries to get behind/underneath the "visual" figure of speech.

LIDDELL: I'd like to ask you about the dramatic murder of Eugene Terre'blanche, whose death touches upon so many of the areas approached in your art. Terre'blanche is the kind of patriarchal Afrikaner figure that you grew up despising. How do you feel about his death? Any theories or views?

KANNEMEYER: I don't have much sympathy with Terre'blanche - he was a violent man and yes, pretty much the embodiment of everything I despised as a kid and a young grown-up (and, I guess, a "proper grown-up"). I do think the murder was political in nature (even though the media says it was about money) and a result of Julius Malema's endorsement of the "Kill the Boer" song. What is interesting now is that we had similar problems in 1994: Blacks were shouting "one settler, one bullet" and more or less exactly the same angst and issues regarding race are still with us. A lot of people said we had come a long way since Apartheid, but the exact same issues are still the most explosive today. I find it extremely interesting that someone like Malema, who is clearly uneducated and one of the bluntest pencils on the political landscape, can have such a major political impact in South Africa. He accuses the whites for everything that's wrong in SA today, even though the ANC has now been in power for 16 years. What he's doing is very transparent, and I must say he and Zuma look more and more like copies of Amin, Mobutu and Mugabe...

LIDDELL: I always thought that Terre'blanche was the kind of joke figure that made satire pointless – a caricature of White nationalism that served to discredit the very ideas he espoused. I am thinking here of the three-legged swastika, military fatigues, and even his name which invokes "eugenics" and "white land." Did he make your job as a satirist hard by existing as a satire on himself? And isn't this also true of many of the other figures in the South African political landscape?

KANNEMEYER: You're right: it's difficult to satirise him. Even his actual death is satirical – it's bizarre. He's my work come to life, but probably better than I could have executed. At the moment he and Malema are the two extremes on the SA political landscape: the irony is that both of them represent(ed) far right extremism.

LIDDELL: The way he died is evocative of the fears that your art often touches on. Is it about unresolved issues of economic inequality (as opposed to economic justice, which is a different issue), or a nebulous mood of racial hatred that can easily find a focus?

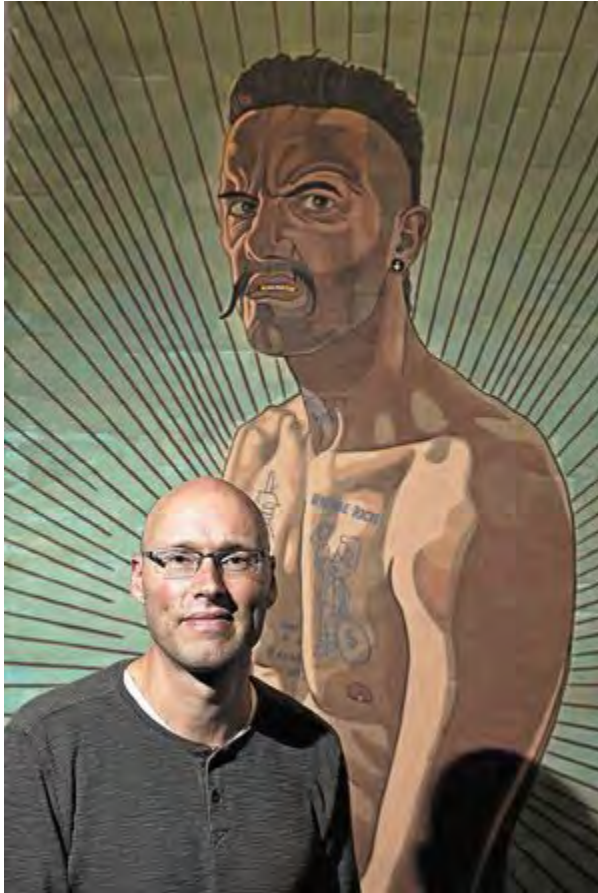
KANNEMEYER: Apparently a white Boer is killed every 18 hours in South Africa. These statistics are not released by the police, but by the action groups set up by farmers themselves. I must say, now that the ANC has shown us where they're heading, now that even the secretary-general of the Communist party is driving a million-rand Mercedes Benz, I'm very worried about the future of South Africa. Also, I'm quite surprised by the "nebulous" racial hatred in SA – I know I'm politically naive, but it slowly dawned on me (in the last 5 years or so) just exactly how racist people still are. Even Mbeki is a racist – he was supposed to be our intellectual leader, you know, an enlightened leftie. You were talking about "post-racism": maybe that's the privilege of the upper middle classes and the rich. Especially the privilege of those in white countries. South Africa was supposed to be this country where a miracle happened – I must say there are so many white liberals who are so disillusioned with the ANC, it's in fact rather funny. So: no, I do not see Terre'blanche's death as an isolated incident, and yes, it's about race and class: and I do not know, with the current education system in South Africa (a senior Black professor at UCT said recently that education is now worse for Blacks than what it was under the Apartheid regime), where this will end.

LIDDELL: Are you planning any artistic response to Terre'blanche's murder?

KANNEMEYER: I hope so – I don't force anything. Hopefully a lateral solution will arrive soon. I don't think like a political cartoonist, and I do not do this kind of work on a deadline.

## THE BIG INTERVIEW: What doctors ordered

Tymon Smith | 08 June, 2012 00:02



SELF-MADE MEN: Anton Kannemeyer, artist and Bitterkomix creator, with his portrait of rapper Ninja from Die Antwoord

**Image by:** Picture: LAUREN MULLIGAN

**If you Google Anton Kannemeyer, the third suggestion offered by the search engine is "Anton Kannemeyer racist".**

The founder of Bitterkomix, creator of the persona of Joe Dog and of the art series Papa in Afrika and the Alphabet of Democracy, has often produced work that makes people uncomfortable about race, politics and white identity in post-apartheid South Africa. Despite this, no one has hauled him in front of the Film and Publication Board and slapped an age restriction on any of his exhibitions.

He's certainly not a racist, but when you challenge middle-class complacency and questions of race in a country as divided by the topics as ours, it's an easy tag to pin on him. In person, Kannemeyer is a gentle, earnest and quietly humorous presence, as far removed from his Joe Dog alter ego as Joe Dog is from the artist himself.

In a month in which the subject of offence in art has sparked such wide-ranging and angry debate, it is ironic that the new exhibition of one of the country's most controversial and challenging artists at first might seem a departure. But for those who know his work, it is a logical progression.

As Kannemeyer says to me while we walk through Paintings and Prints for Doctors and Dentists at the Stevenson Gallery in Braamfontein: "It may strike some people as quite odd that I exhibit these things after I've done Papa in Afrika and the Alphabet of Democracy and just focused on political works, but this work is very natural to me, and I think if anyone has followed what I've been doing over the last 10 years they will get it.

"People may think everything is super-personal, and it is in a way, but on the other hand they have to understand I'm a visual communicator, which means I'm not obsessed with navel-gazing, I'm interested in bringing an idea across.

"You work from your own experience. What I found drawing comics is that you could draw something supposedly autobiographical and do unique things with it, and it didn't have to absolutely draw on your personal experience, and people would eat it up as being real and then, of course, get offended."

Sparked by his doctor's suggestion that he pay in art instead of cash, the exhibition consists of a series of landscapes, portraits, personal drawings and paintings, some of which you could imagine meeting the approval of the wives of doctors and dentists, as acceptable for their living rooms.

Others (a large portrait of Ninja from Die Antwoord, for example) would be approved only by the more risqué. None is nearly as in-your-face and challenging as work found in previous exhibitions.

Also present is the ghostly presence of the artist's father, Afrikaans literary critic JC Kannemeyer, who died in December and with whom the artist had a fraught relationship. Beautifully executed and finely observed etchings of the Swartberg Pass in the Karoo are also pictures of an area the elder Kannemeyer always told his son he should visit. This adds another dimension to them, creating a meeting between landscape and memory.

As for the portraits of Ninja and Yolandi Visser from Die Antwoord, Kannemeyer explains: "[They're] people I find interesting and people I think are visually interesting. Conrad Botes [his Bitterkomix partner] and I were in Reunion and I played him Doos Dronk by Die Antwoord and I said to him, 'If there ever was a Bitterkomix song this is it'. Then Ninja phoned me and asked if I wanted to do the video for the song - out of the blue - and

I almost fell on my back. The other thing I realised is that Ninja and I had sources in common - David Lynch, Liberatore, Jodorowsky. People criticise them for not being real and being a construct, but everything is a construct. Joe Dog is a construct, the way I work is a construct."

The only penis to be seen in this exhibition is Kannemeyer's own. A self-portrait shows the artist naked taking a picture of the viewer. It was made in response to David Goldblatt's request to photograph the artist nude.

It is in the final section of the exhibition, across from smaller-scale portraits of Antjie Krog and Ninja, that you find the works with a hint of political satire, in a large-scale series of paintings titled *Splendid Dwellings*. These show seemingly perfect suburban homes underlined by a question from the Stendhal novel *The Red and the Black*, "How can anyone be so unhappy in such a splendid dwelling?"

Of course, as Kannemeyer's take on the answer shows, you can be unhappy in a splendid dwelling, especially if that dwelling is an apartheid-era suburban home cleaned and landscaped by people who can never live there and there is an unnerving sense of the depressing, suicidal atmosphere of life in the 'burbs that carries no hint of nostalgia or escape.

Seen within the context of Kannemeyer's larger body of work, *Paintings and Prints* fits in with the autobiographical work that has been part of everything and highlights his technical skills.

Those who go to Kannemeyer's exhibitions looking for a kick in the balls and a little spit in their faces should wait for a coming *Bitterkomix* - and be thankful the ANC's Jackson Mthembu doesn't read Afrikaans counter-culture magazines.

As the interview ends Kannemeyer reflects on the space he occupies in the cracks between the comic and fine art worlds: "I think the big difference is money. In the comic world there's absolutely no money and in the fine art world there's a hell of a lot of money, and that creates a thing where whenever I go to a comic festival I'm surrounded by really nice people, but when I go to art fairs I'm surrounded by people who are cut-throat." I leave him to await the arrival of the art crowd and think he'll survive just fine.

- *Paintings and Prints for Doctors and Dentists* is on until June 29



## Exhibition Review: Yuskavage and Kannemeyer

*Posted on November 2, 2011*



Lisa Yuskavage. "Outskirts." 2011. Oil on linen.

Two of the more provocative painting shows currently on view in Chelsea, those of Lisa Yuskavage at David Zwirner and Anton Kannemeyer at Jack Shainman, seem at first to have little in common. Yet Yuskavage's sex-hungry girls and Kannemeyer's direct illustrational take on post-colonial fallout in Africa share more than the unsettling nature of their subject matter. Both Yuskavage and Kannemeyer are highly conceptual painters: their ideas precede the execution of their work. In an open-source art world in which imagery and styles are borrowed freely, the choices each painter makes about visual language expose the benefits and pitfalls of such an approach to painting.

Those who know Yuskavage's work will find themselves in familiar territory. In the half-dozen or so paintings on view, the painter's pink fleshy nudes occupy center stage in fantastical acidic landscapes. Leaning, sitting, kneeling, squatting and lying on each other, cushions, a bench, and on verdant hills, their flesh pressing into these various means of support, Yuskavage's girls are the objects of desire as presented by the standard porn rag. They are posed in such a way to let oversized breasts swing free, vaginas part, and, in one case, an anus play host to a bouquet of flowers. Some look at us directly. Those who interact with each other do so not out of mutual interest, but for the benefit of a third-party audience. They are the embodiment of sexual availability.

What separates this work from pornography, those images that will never enjoy pride of place on Zwirner's walls? The answer should lie in the successful marriage of Yuskavage's paint handling with her subject, thus creating a tension between the highbrow and the low.

Marked by easy facility, bold color, and fast and loose brushwork, Yuskavage's work is commonly understood to be "painterly." The reality is that this method of working is little more than an illustrational style of its own. True painterly language is developed hand in hand with an artist's developing objectives. Thus did the Impressionists pioneer a style that reduced objects to the optical registration of their chromatic parts, Cezanne redefine the use of line and planes in an attempt to depict the phenomenon of perception, and the Cubists develop a language that sought to contain the essence of things by rendering them as the sum of their variously perceived parts.

Something we've lost in the contemporary art world is the chief criterion by which a work of art used to be understood: as an aesthetic object that holds its own meaning. Unmoored in our critical thinking, we have largely reverted to a juvenile understanding of painting in which the aforementioned "painterly" style is equated with sophistication. It is this misunderstanding of the language of paint that has given painters like Yuskavage their moment in the sun.



Lisa Yuskavage. "Triptych." 2011. Oil on linen.

Reliant upon her work's ability to embody the tradition of painting, but aware that her language has precluded it from doing so, Yuskavage finds herself in a bind. In an implicit acknowledgement of such, she has resorted to the ultimate hedge on her bet, filling her works with innumerable art-historical references. The girls come from Courbet, by way of Balthus. The landscapes, Northern Renaissance and Hudson River inspired vistas, take their single chromatic note from Peter Halley or Wolf Kahn. Secondary figures, taken from Courbet, Chardin, and Caspar David Friedrich, populate the scenes. The massive Triptych, the largest painting on view, cribs its central crotch shot from Courbet's *Woman With White Stockings* or Duchamp's *Etant Donnes*. The landscape could be Bellini: a vast flat plane that leads back to an improbable cluster of hills. As for the source of the stern peasant women who watch from afar, take your pick between Homer's *Americans*, Gauguin's *Bretons* and Malevich's *Russians*. Rather than propping up the painter's art-historical bona fides, of which much have been made (a blurb on the show in

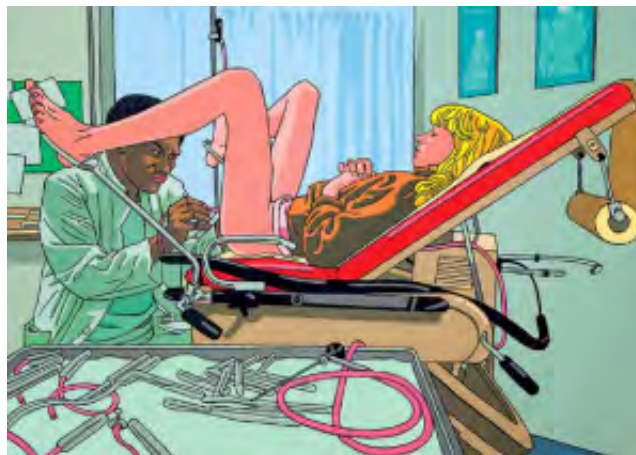
*The New Yorker* references Vermeer, Pontormo and Manet as touchstones), the glut of references becomes self-defeating. The works reveal themselves to be mere illustrations, defusing the sought after tension between art and smut, sophistication and obscenity.



Anton Kannemeyer. "A Black Woman." 2011. Lithograph.

The work of South African Anton Kannemeyer, on view at Jack Shainman, is notable for an entirely different visual language. Offering an unflinching take on the violent legacy of colonialism, Kannemeyer's work lives or dies by his tuning of variously employed illustrational styles to the right pitch. He's not always successful in doing so. One large painting, *B is for the Beauty of Military Life*, is a flat comic rendering of an Abu Ghraib prison abuse photograph, in which a smiling American soldier flashes a thumbs-up as she poses with the corpse of a murdered detainee. A look at the original reveals layers of horror that Kannemeyer's comic loses in translation.

In other works, however, he's found effective language for his desired critique. A number of Herge-inspired paintings take the Belgian's *ligne claire* style, using it to turn paternalistic notions of the benefits of imperialism (espoused in such books as *Tintin in the Congo*), squarely on their head. In *Very Very Good*, a white man stands behind a stereotypical Herge-inspired black man who is seated at his painting easel, brushes in hand. Leaning in with a smug smile, he offers this pronouncement of the work: "Oh, no! I'm not just saying it because you're black. I think it's really very, very good." In such works, Kannemeyer's ability to lay bare the implicit absurdity of political correctness lies in his deft appropriation of blatantly stereotypical imagery.



Anton Kannemeyer. "Black Gynecologist." 2008. Acrylic on canvas.

*Black Gynecologist*, a large, brightly illustrated canvas, shows the doctor in question working between the stirrup-spread legs of a white woman. Is the look on his face one of necessary concentration, or of barely contained anger fostered by centuries of subjugation? The ambiguous answer to this question is particularly jarring in relation to the crisp illustrational style of the painting. Kannemeyer's conceit works in such cases where his language is in tune with his ideas.

In the end, both Yuskavage and Kannemeyer tell us something about our relationship to conceptual painting. Yuskavage, understood by many as an exemplar of painterly mastery, masks her conceptual approach behind the veneer of style. The results speak for themselves. Kannemeyer's work, on much clearer conceptual ground, is far more successful in its employment of appropriated style.

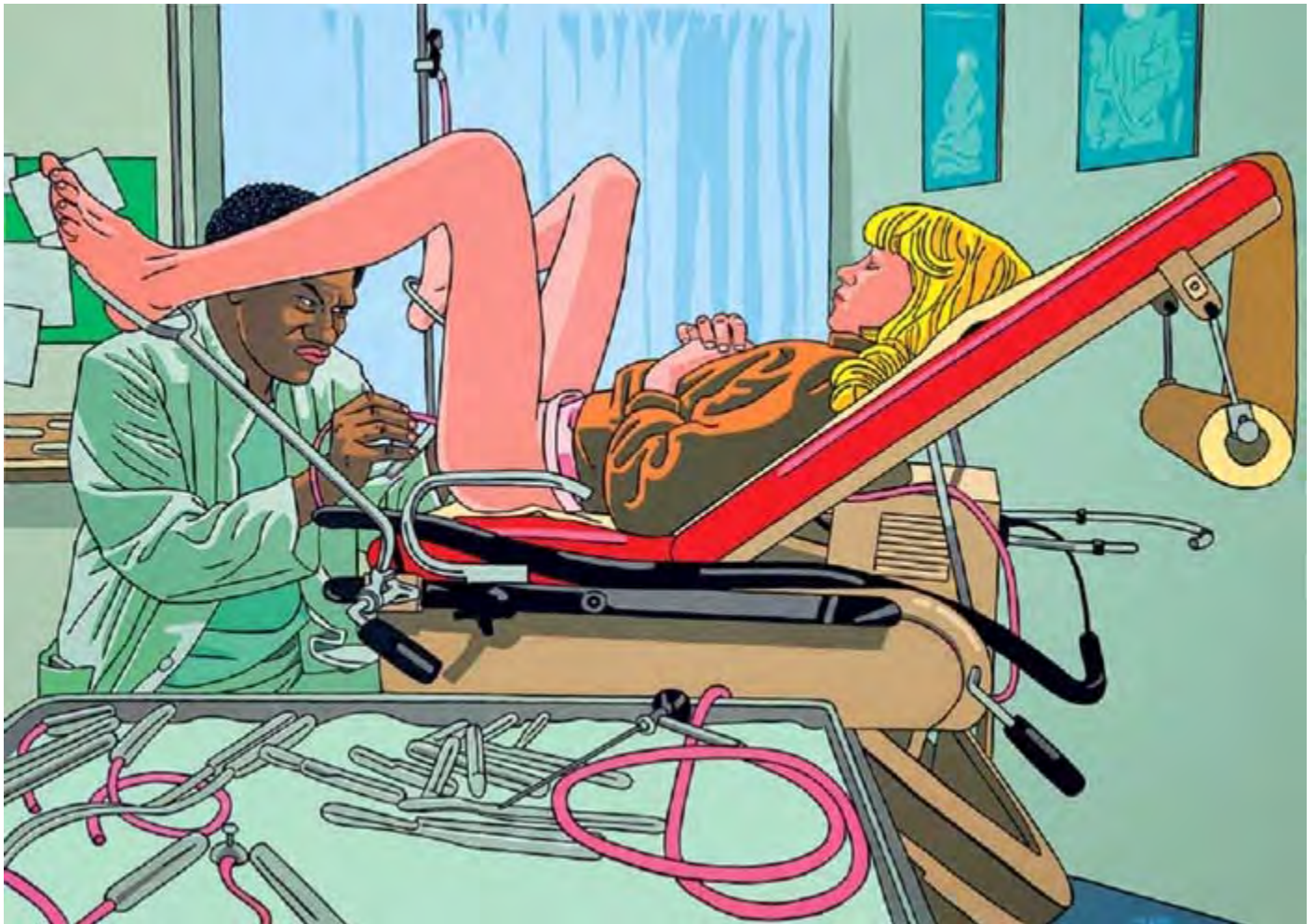
Posted in: *Exhibition Reviews* (<https://observart.wordpress.com/category/exhibition-reviews/>)

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## Race, on the Examining Table

The Daily Pic: Anton Kannemeyer paints in black and white.

By Blake Gopnik  
October 31, 2011



*Why do we notice this image? (Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, NY)*

*"Black Gynecologist," a 2008 painting by the white South African Anton Kannemeyer, from his solo show at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York.*

Most of Kannemeyer's paintings deal with politics and race relations simply, brazenly. (A diptych called "White People Are Going to Burn" shows Caucasian men burning meat on the grill, and getting sun burnt.) This picture strikes me as much more subtle, however. There ought not to be anything special about it: A doctor examines his patient; he's black, she's white. It could be the illustration for an eighth-grade health text. But the true state of race relations, even in an enlightened art world, remains so vexed that the painting seems peculiarly charged.

## WHAT A (SELF) PORTRAIT CAN DO Picturing South Africa in New York

**GARY SCHNEIDER: *HANDPRINT PORTRAITS, JOHANNESBURG*** DAVID KRUT PROJECTS |  
SEPTEMBER 8 – OCTOBER 22, 2011

**ANTON KANNEMEYER: *AFTER THE BARBARIANS***  
JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY | OCTOBER 13 – NOVEMBER 12, 2011

At first glance, Gary Schneider's ink prints on canvas look like satellite images—mottled with whorls of light and fields of charcoal black, they recall photographs of our planet at night, or Hubble snapshots of distant nebulae. But no, they are contact prints of the hands of South African artists, enlarged to a monumental scale. Looking over these handprints on an October afternoon, Schneider remarks that their milky surfaces have been compared to Victorian ectoplasmic photographs, but he doesn't press the idea that there is anything mystical at work here. In his assessment, these images hold power because they are unique signatures, unaltered impressions left by remarkable people.



**Nsala, of the district of Wala, looking at the severed hand and foot of his five-year-old daughter, Boali, a victim of the Anglo-Belgian India Rubber Company militia.**

Anton Kannemeyer, "Nsala, of the District of Wala," 2011. Acrylic on canvas. 66 7/8 x 92 3/8".

Schneider's HandPrint series grew from the South African-born photographer's recent visit to Johannesburg. While mounting an exhibition there in 2011, he began a freewheeling portrait of the local arts community by collecting handprints from the painters, photographers, craftspeople, and activists he encountered. He often took impressions from

artists he had never met before, getting to know them only through the intimate darkroom process involved in his photogram technique. The project built such momentum that, upon returning to New York (his home since 1977), Schneider immediately made plans to return to South Africa for more samples—and so the Krut show feels like a work-in-progress that will soon appear in a much grander form.

But while the principal aim of the handprint project is to craft a portrait of Jo'burg's artists, whom Schneider found uniquely industrious and solitary, the series also creates a portrait of the artist himself. The complex textures of Schneider's prints speak to his obsession with minute detail, the delicate touch with which he digitally picks out every ridge of skin. Palmistry comes to mind—it is as if he is searching each wrinkle for clues about his subjects, for evidence of a connection between their work and their bodies. The prints also illustrate the artist's drive to record his encounters—this recent series represents only a small fraction of the similar handprints he has collected since 1996, charting years of experience, commemorating family, friends, and colleagues. They do not simply record individuals, they chart vast human networks connected by commonalities known only to the artist. To examine Schneider's handprints is to catch a glimpse of the way he processes the world around him.

There is something mesmerizing about these prints. At first, they look nearly identical to one another, and it is tempting to breeze past them all once you have examined the first. But then nuances begin to emerge—here a set of fingertips blazes white, as if smashed into the paper; here fog covers a palm's center, indicating its heat—the individuality of each impression, and the artist behind it, slowly becomes clear. Standing in front of “Senzeni Marasela” (2011), an unexpectedly delicate handprint made by a notoriously uncompromising woman artist, Schneider expresses hope that his prints will inspire New Yorkers to look carefully, and use his images as a small window onto a community parallel to our own.

When it comes to portraits of South Africa, few artists create a more unflattering picture than Anton Kannemeyer, best known for his Tintin-inspired explorations of racial stereotypes. Take for example his larger-than-life acrylic on canvas, “Some Kind of Boo-Boo” (2010), in which three jet-black, red-lipped doctors deliberate incompetently while their white patient sinks lower on his gurney. “A tummy ache?” one doctor suggests. On the same wall in the gallery, in “Very, Very Good” (2010), a white art instructor tells his befuddled black student, “Oh, no! I'm not just saying it because you're black. I think it's really very, very good.” These paintings riff off of offensive perceptions of blacks, while portraying white men as long suffering martyrs. As critic Douglas Haddow remarks in an *Ion Magazine* interview, there are generally two reactions to these caricatures: that they are cynical and racist, or that they are subversive critiques of racism and political correctness. If the latter is true, Kannemeyer's portraits are clever indictments of the hypocritical whites he depicts, who wear masks of tolerance while privately maintaining delusions of superiority.

But Kannemeyer's caricatures do not just point fingers at others. Many of the white characters depicted in his recent exhibition, especially the painting instructor, bear a striking resemblance to the artist himself, who taught students of all races for many years before his emergence on the gallery scene. His paintings are not simply assessments of ambient racial tension, but self-portraits exploring his own place in the equation. For this reason, it does little good to declare Kannemeyer part of the problem when it comes to race relations—after all, his work begins with that assumption, and ponders what to do from there.

This is not to say that Kannemeyer's work focuses entirely on his own experience. Many of his images address the darker moments of Africa's past, appropriating and reworking forgotten images as reminders of colonial violence. In “Nsala, of the District of Wala” (2011) a man stares (as the caption notes) “at the severed hand and foot of his five-year-old daughter, Boali, a victim of the Anglo-Belgian India Rubber Company militia.” According to Kannemeyer, this acrylic painting borrows its composition from one of the many shocking photographs that provoked international criticism of Belgium's brutal rubber-harvesting practices in Congo in the 1800s—but he has made key changes. The image has been polished and updated, placing the father in fresh clothes on a spotless modern veranda, and the whole scene is picked out in bold lines, on a pop-art-scale canvas. Yes, this painting does depict a century-old injustice, but its contemporary look gives a sense of pointed urgency, as if the brutal scene were taking place right now. Kannemeyer cracks jokes and pontificate about his own part in the history of racial strife—but he also he creates images that make us look at ourselves, listen to our laughter, and question the role we play, as well.

# HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

## White Male Artists Get Introspective in South Africa

by Claire Breukel on August 4, 2011

When Apartheid was abolished in 1991, probably the worst thing to be symbolically in South Africa at the time was a white male, as it embodied everything associated with being the oppressor. To be clear, the “oppressed” encompassed just about everyone who had been previously disadvantaged (the term was later updated to “historically disadvantaged”). In the case of Apartheid, the term encompassed all black African, Indian, Colored (a term for a specific cultural group of people in South Africa) and Asian-South Africans, as well as the female gender at large. Basically, the term included a pretty large chunk of the population that, in truth, encompassed almost everyone aside from the white male.



Anton Kannemeyer, "Very Very Good" (2010), Courtesy Michael Stevenson gallery  
*Bitterkomix*, a publication by Anton Kannemeyer and Conrad Botes



With the abolishment of Apartheid came a number of important more subtle shifts. One was a shift in general consciousness and with this the need to facilitate a previously unheard and under-represented voice. Local art institutions, interestingly, shifted the focus of their programs to better accommodate artists from previously/historically disadvantaged backgrounds, ensuring that the voices previously silenced received a dedicated platform. Given the country's troubled history this was a perfectly logical shift. Its also meant, however, that white male artists now found themselves excluded — collateral damage as a result of an adjustment period, so to speak. This cross-section of artists on the periphery of programming now became the marginalized group, at least until such time as things normalized.

This shift ignited a very interesting time for creativity with many artists responding to identities in flux. Much like the rap-rave band, Die Antwoord, which explores the underbelly of South Africa's Afrikaans subculture, artists became more self-reflexive creating work that depicted themselves as “outcasts.”

One such artist is Anton Kannemeyer, whose drawings and characters evoke *The Adventures of Tintin* comic book series, which coincidentally began with the first volume, *Tin Tin in Congo*, being published in 1931. Kannemeyer's works riff on the strong colonialist overtone of these comics and are thick with satire. At first glance Kannemeyer's obvious colonial



references can be misperceived as being overtly racist, however through his subversive use of racial stereotypes and by placing himself within his images, he makes the irony of the dialogue very apparent. In "Very Very Good" Kannemeyer depicts himself as the "white artist" condescendingly praising a "black artist." By placing himself as the villain — an ill-equipped and oblivious white liberal — Kannemeyer assumes personal responsibility and thus by implicating himself helps place the viewer at ease, allowing them to analyze their own behavior. By inserting himself in the work, Kannemeyer draws attention specifically to his characters prejudicial behavior, and through this irony, is able to focus his critique.

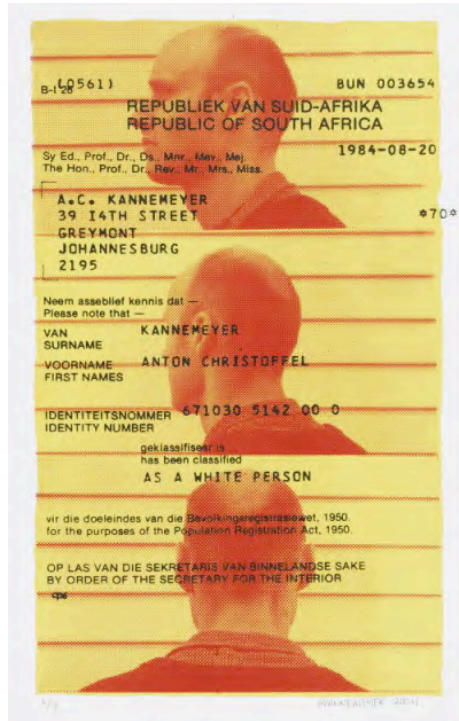
Kannemeyer is also co-creator of *Bittercomix*, a series of comic books with fellow South African artist Conrad Botes, where he similarly inserts, and implicated, himself. His character, Joe Dog (translation from Afrikaans pronunciation it means You Dog), allows Kannemeyer to speak about and act out all of the issues stereotypically tied into surrounding the identity of a mainstream Afrikaaner, from rebelling against authority to expressing latent sexual desires.

Another South African artist who investigates this identity in flux is Cameron Platter. However unlike Kannemeyer, Platter has chosen not to explore themes of race and identity from his own vantage point. Instead, Platter appropriates a series of characters that are fictional and otherworldly. Crocodile cowboys, zebra aliens from out of space and pimp cats explore issues, ideas and fantasies that reflect life in contemporary South Africa. His drawings, sculptures and video work also appropriate the mediums and techniques inherent to traditional African art practice, for example the linocut and woodcarvings, and recontextualize them into contemporary subject matter. Despite his appropriation of characters and technique, Platters work still retains an autobiographical overtone. However, unlike Kannemeyer, he opts to keep his racial categorization out of his work. He explains, "To be honest, I consider myself a person, artist and commentator first, and would *probably* be making the same work if I were a black transsexual. For me, being a white man is simply the card I was dealt."

Both artists are receiving international acclaim for their work and are currently featured in the MoMA exhibition *Impressions from South Africa, 1965 to Now* in Manhattan. They also both represented by galleries in Cape Town, Anton Kannemeyer by Michael Stevenson gallery and Cameron Platter by Whatiftheworld Gallery. Both are also preparing for solo exhibitions abroad; Anton Kannemeyer will be featured at New York's Jack Shainman Gallery this October and Cameron Platter is making work for his solo exhibition at Hilger gallery in Vienna, Austria in April 2012.

This international acclaim is well deserved. Despite their different approach to addressing and repurposing their racial categorization, they share the uncanny ability to be self-reflective and responsive, and this makes their work relevant, interrogative and honest.

NOTES FROM A TRANSFORMING DEMOCRACY: SOUTH  
AFRICAN PRINTS MAY 6TH, 2011  
SARAH KIRK HANLEY



*Installation view of "Impressions from South Africa: 1965 to Now" at The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo by Jason Mandella. / Anton Kannemeyer (South African, born 1967), "A White Person," 2004. Screenprint. Composition: 22 3/16 × 13 11/16" (56.3 × 34.8 cm).*

As interest in William Kentridge's work has grown over the past decade, so has interest in South African art as a whole. Printmaking is a central component of the cultural landscape in this country and it is an important form of expression for many of its artists. In general, South African printmaking is characterized by political and emotional honesty and a refreshing fidelity to the technical roots of the medium. Kentridge, of course, is a prolific printmaker (see the November 2010 post of this column), as are Conrad Botes, Norman Catherine, Robert Hodgins, **Anton Kannemeyer**, Cameron Platter, **Claudette Schreuders**, Diane Victor, and Ernestine White, to name a few. The work of these and other artists, who are well known in their homeland, have begun to garner increased attention in the U.S. recently, appearing in art fairs and featured in solo exhibitions at major galleries and museums.

Several exhibitions this year have introduced a wider American audience to the vital printmaking scene in South Africa. Most visible and comprehensive among these is *Impressions from South Africa: 1965 to Now*, a group exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art on view through August 14. Earlier this spring, Boston University hosted dual exhibitions in honor of the 25th anniversary of Caversham Press, the first professional printmaking workshop in South Africa. At the same time, the Falconer Gallery, Grinnell College, Grinnell, Iowa, launched the first major solo exhibition of Diane Victor's work in this country – an auspicious introduction to this important artist who is becoming better known to an international audience. In March and early April, David Krut Projects mounted "Contemporary South African Prints: DKW and I-Jusi," a retrospective of I-Jusi magazine (an underground art 'zine dedicated to South African identity and politics, founded in 1994), and David Krut Workshop, a professional printmaking studio established in Johannesburg in 2002. Later this fall, Jack Shainman Gallery will host a solo exhibition of **Anton Kannemeyer's** work.

The MoMA exhibition now on view provides "a representative, quality cross-section of contemporary printmaking activities in South Africa over the last five decades," as described by exhibition curator Judith Hecker, Assistant Curator in the Department of Prints and Illustrated Books in a recent e-mail interview with the author. Drawn from the museum's collection, the exhibition and accompanying catalogue provide critical insight to role of printmaking in South African culture and politics, presented in terms of the country's recent massive political changes from an apartheid-ruled state to an evolving democracy. In addition to a scholarly essay by Hecker, the accompanying catalogue provides further information and bibliographic citations on each of the artists, collectives, organizations, and workshops represented. It also includes contextualizing photographs and a timeline of printmaking, cultural, and political events.

The exhibition was inspired by Hecker's previous work with William Kentridge's prints (she contributed to the recent traveling exhibition *William Kentridge: Five Themes* and authored a related publication titled *William Kentridge: Trace; Prints from the Museum of Modern Art*) and prompted by a curatorial initiative to "expand the museum's holdings to better represent the breadth of printmaking activities in South Africa" (Hecker in a recent e-mail interview with the author). The first South African artist to enter the print collection was Azaria Mbatha in 1967 but she was the sole representative until the department began to acquire Kentridge's work in earnest in the 1990s. *Impressions from South Africa: 1965 to Now* (and the museum's holdings) were developed over a period of six years; in preparation, Hecker traveled to South Africa for extended periods in 2004 and 2007. As noted in her introduction, this is not the first scholarly examination of the topic (preceded by *Printmaking in a Transforming South Africa*, 1997, and *Rorke's Drift: Empowering Prints; Twenty Years of Printmaking in South Africa*, 2004, both by Philippa Hobbs and Elizabeth Rankin). However, it is the first to be made widely available to a U.S. and international audience, by virtue of MoMA's visitorship and following.

The exhibition and its accompanying catalogue are divided into five categories, four of which are technique-based – the final category, *Postapartheid: New Directions*, shows the openness and experimentation that characterizes recent print production. Due to the nature of the exhibition, artists are generally represented by only one or a handful of works – therefore, it is best understood as a starting point for exploration. In Hecker's words, "The show, and our holdings, do not aim to be complete or definitive... it reflects

a work in progress; we plan to continue to acquire works by South African artists” (e-mail interview).

The first section focuses on the favored status of linocut amongst South African artists, a tradition that began during apartheid. As discussed by Hecker, its ease of use, affordability, and accessibility made it a natural choice for the community workshops and non-profit art schools that served black artists, who were attracted to its stark graphic power. Early practitioners included Azaria Mbatha, John Muafangejo, Dan Rkogoathe, and Charles Nkosi, many of whom were involved in the Black Consciousness Movement founded by Steve Biko. Their work centered around “themes of ancestry, religion, and liberation” (Hecker, *Impressions from South Africa: 1965 to Now* [New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2011], 12).

In the early 1990s, the country moved through intense political protest and international political pressure into a peaceable – though contentious – conversion to a democratic nation. *Meeting of Two Cultures* (1993), a linocut by Sandile Goje, summarizes the spirit of reconciliation that characterized this period. The image shows two biomorphic homes shaking hands: the structure on the left is in the style of the Xhosa people (who were the original inhabitants of the area), at right is a home characteristic of the European ruling class. The linocut section of the exhibition also includes recent prints of stunning technical achievement by William Kentridge, Vuyile C. Voyiya, Cameron Platter, and others. These are less intensely political in their subject matter, though still grounded in the recent history of the nation.

The second area of the exhibition examines the role of posters in mobilizing the citizenry during the peak years of anti-apartheid protest in the 1980s. Underground organizations such as Medu Art Ensemble (formed by exiles in Botswana), United Democratic Front, Save the Press Campaign, and Gardens Media Project produced bold printed materials in response to harsh legislation enacted by the government that were posted or distributed in the streets.

Intaglio prints comprise the third section of the exhibition. A technically challenging process, the equipment and training necessary for intaglio printing usually necessitates collaboration with a master printer. Caversham Press (now Caversham Centre), founded in 1985 by Malcolm Christian, was the country’s first professional printmaking workshop to provide this service. Robert Hodgins, Deborah Bell, Norman Catherine, Mmapula Mmakgoba Helen Sebidi, and William Kentridge were among the first to be invited to work at Caversham Press. The nation was embroiled in deep political strife at the time and the situation was reflected in a majority of the work produced. Norman Catherine’s *Witch Hunt*, a hand-colored drypoint from 1988, captures the intense and violent presence of military forces in the streets.

In the early 1990s, Caversham changed its name and expanded its mission to provide training and resources to emerging artists and the community. (A dual retrospective and group exhibition of work produced at Caversham over the past 25 years was hosted earlier this year by Boston University College of Fine Arts.) Caversham was joined by several other professional presses over the following decade – including The Artists’ Press, White River; Hard Ground Printmakers Workshop; David Krut Workshop; and Fine Line Press, Rhodes University – making the techniques of intaglio and lithography more available to artists in South Africa.

Also on view in this section are a selection of eight prints by Diane Victor, who has recently garnered well-deserved international attention for her exquisite allegorical intaglios and drawings that mine the psychological ramifications of the nation's history of apartheid. The works on view at MoMA are from her ongoing *Disasters of Peace* series. Like Goya's famed *Disasters of War* series, upon which they are based, this ongoing series of prints calls attention to human atrocities in an allegorical format.

Earlier this year, Victor was the subject of a major solo exhibition at the Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College, Grinnell, Iowa – her first in the U.S. (Grinnell College also played an important role in promoting Kentridge's graphic work in this country.) The exhibition, *Of Fables and Folly: Diane Victor, Recent Work*, curated by Kay Wilson, covered the past ten years of the artist's production and featured several intaglio prints, including the *Disasters of Peace* and *Birth of a Nation* series, as well as a number of drawings, some of which were created specifically for this installation. *Birth of a Nation*, a series of ten drypoints completed last year, is an extended allegorical commentary on the legacy of colonial power in South Africa (additional images and further discussion available on the David Krut Projects website). The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue (downloadable pdf [here](#)) with an essay by Jacki McInnes, a South African artist, curator, and writer, who astutely discusses Victor's "searing, uncompromising, and unremitting response" to the severe inequities that are still apparent in her native land.

As seen in the Grinnell exhibition, Victor's has developed two signature drawing techniques that produce haunting effects in service to her artistic vision. Victor's "stain drawings," in which she applies controlled areas of charcoal staining to drawn figures, either evoke the fragility of the body or the corruption of power, depending upon Victor's intention. Likewise, the fluidity of her "smoke portraits," which she produces through manipulation of the carbon by-product of a burning candle, convey a startling and ghostly humanity to the native peoples of South Africa that are her subject (many of whom are prisoners awaiting trial). This technique is extremely delicate and can be destroyed with the slightest contact – a parallel to the transience of human life and individual destiny that she finds particularly satisfying (images are available on the David Krut projects website). In September of 2010, Victor completed a residency at the Center for Contemporary Printmaking in Norwalk, Connecticut, where she was able to translate her smoke drawing technique into intaglio form for the first time with the assistance of Master Printer Anthony Kirk (one example pictured at top). She also completed three drypoints there that are currently in the process of being editioned.

Returning to the exhibition at MoMA, the intaglio section is followed by an area devoted to the use of photographic source material in prints. The works on view demonstrate a range of approaches, from straightforward documentary to manipulated imagery, most of which address social and political issues. To create *For Thirty Years Next to His Heart*, 1990, Sue Williamson scanned each page of an individual's passbook — an "icon of apartheid," (Williamson as quoted in Hecker, 17) that served as an identification document similar to a visa. Non-white citizens were required to carry one at all times and present it to officials upon request; records of employment and location changes were inscribed within. Passbook laws were repealed in 1986, but the owner of this example continued to carry his for several years, out of habit and as a measure of imagined security. Nearby, **Anton Kannemeyer's** *A White Person*, 2004, shows the flip side of these regulations – in this work, the artist enlarged the simple identification card that confirmed his status as a white person (who was therefore free to come and go as

he pleased), superimposed over three photographs of his head at different angles that resemble mug shots.

The closing section of the MoMA exhibition is dedicated to new directions in printmaking by South African artists. As the political climate has cooled somewhat, so has the intensity of political expression in art. Though some artists remain overtly grounded in political issues and critiques of government, others refer to the nation's past and present obliquely, or not at all. *Bitterkomix*, an underground art comic founded in 1992 by Corad Botes (a.k.a. Konradski) and **Anton Kannemeyer** (a.k.a. Joe Dog), employs the graphic novel form to satirize various aspects of South African government and culture. (*Bitterkomix 14* and *Bitterkomix 15* can be previewed on Google books – please note that some strips are in Afrikaans and/or contain explicit material). Cameron Platter — who works in sculpture, film, and digital printmaking — combines traditional South African cultural influences (including folklore, linocut, and woodcarving) with the visual language of street life to create playfully provocative commentary on contemporary life in his homeland. Ernestine White — a printmaker and curator who lived in the United States from ages 11 to 26 and trained at the Tamarind Institute in New Mexico (see the October 2010 post for this column) — explores issues of identity and belonging in her experimental prints, some of which are presented in wall installations; recent work has focused on child abuse and children's rights issues. In contrast to the above artists, sculptor and printmaker **Claudette Schreuders** creates doll-like figures that seem to be involved in quiet dramas of a personal nature. Though traditional African art is an occasional referent in her work, the focus is on creating psychologically suggestive scenes. Likewise, Paul Edmunds works in a minimalist and formal vein that is quite removed from the harsh political and social history of South Africa, though it is grounded in the material culture of his country.

As seen in recent museum and gallery exhibitions, international and American art audiences are eager for a deeper exploration and understanding of the prodigious printmaking activity in South Africa over the past several decades. From traditional linocuts to contemporary digital satire, the universe of South African prints provides a wealth of compelling work for the curious. The proliferation of print workshops and professional training schools ensure a rich and varied future for print production in South Africa, which will surely continue to evolve as the nation matures and settles into its status as a free nation.

## Anton Kannemeyer

by Douglas Haddow

### “WHITE FRIGHT”

Some satirists gently prod society with a pointed finger. Others are more severe, slapping their subjects across the face with the backhand of ridicule and then gouging their eyes with scornful fingers.

Anton Kannemeyer, aka “Joe Dog”, invites his target to gently rest their head within the vice of familiarity, squeezing its jaws shut until everything hidden away spills inside out.

The results are often terrible, funny, and viciously comic. Kannemeyer developed his style while co-editor of *Bitterkomix*; a South African cult comic magazine that was founded in 1992 and has insulted and dismantled South African politics ever since.

Kannemeyer built a reputation on his machete-sharp wit and aesthetic versatility. In 2010, he published a collection of work under the title *Papa in Afrika* in which he flawlessly imitated the style of Hergé and repositioned the beloved Tintin as a symbol of colonialist violence.

These days, Kannemeyer is collaborating with fellow Afrikaners Die Antwoord, and preparing for a solo gallery show at the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York City. He has a new book out, *The Alphabet of Democracy* – “an A to Z guide to the absurdities of life in the democratic South Africa.”

ION caught up with him recently from his laptop in Cape Town and talked about the state of pretty much everything.





### What do you make of the recent spike in popularity of South African pop culture?

I'm not sure why South African pop culture has suddenly become quite a thing internationally. Firstly, I guess, it took a bit of time since the end of apartheid and cultural isolation to get standards on a par with what's happening internationally. The one thing that Neil Blomkamp, Die Antwoord and myself have in common is Afrikaans, and the Afrikaners are an interesting bunch. On the one hand you have a large conservative group, on the other you have those (like us) who have rejected Afrikaner culture and traditions. I think the break with our culture is traumatic and severe, and therefore it's normally an all-or-nothing kind of situation. To give you an anecdote (and I do this to explain, even though I don't think you'll understand it really, you'll probably consider it an isolated incident, but it isn't, there are many!):

I remember I had a drawing lecturer at university who was English – I really liked him; he was witty, articulate and very critical of Apartheid. I soon started to work on my Bitterkomix series and in 1994 we made a very explicit sex comic that looked at taboos and fears in Afrikaner culture. I remember he asked if he could buy a copy from me, then returned it the next day and NEVER spoke to me again. At that stage I was a part-time lecturer (doing my MA) and he just ignored me. What I realized was that I had overstepped a certain boundary with him, maybe something about decency or a moral standard that he couldn't accept. This I found to be quite typical in South Africa: white English speakers generally came from a liberal background, which always kept them more or less in that position – there was a lot to reject and fight, but not as much as Afrikaners had to reject and fight.

I think once Afrikaners start rejecting, they'll go all the way. There are quite a few examples, like Breyten Breytenbach, who was a poet, but eventually he tried to plant a bomb. Anyway, this does not explain why South African pop culture has become interesting...



**I think I get what you're saying, that this break with the culture allows Afrikaners to get an entirely new perspective. Which also speaks to your work – how it can engage on a purely visual level, but also belongs to a specific South African political context that most people aren't familiar with. If there is one thing the average Canuck should know about South African politics, what is it?**

Generally speaking, I think the South African political scene is quite a complex one. We have 11 official languages, and that should be an indication of the complexity of the political situation. Before the fall of Apartheid only white people had the right to vote. These white people were (and still are) divided into two linguistic/cultural groups: Afrikaans and English. It's common knowledge that the Afrikaners had the political power since 1949 and the English had the economic power since, well, since the Anglo Boer war in 1899. Needless to say, the white English speakers benefited handsomely from Apartheid, even though most of them always claimed to be "liberal" and critical of Apartheid. Since 1994 (the first democratic elections in SA) the ANC has been the dominant party, consisting mostly of Xhosa-speakers, like Nelson Mandela, and Zulu speakers, such as our current president Jacob Zuma. The various ethnic groups are of course spread across the country, but the Xhosas are originally from the Eastern Cape, and the Zulus from KwaZulu Natal. Cape Town, where I live, has a large group of coloured (mixed-race) people. To give you an idea of numbers, I would say that the white population consists of about 10% of all South Africans, the coloured population about 5% and more than 80% of all South Africans are black. There is also a substantial Indian population, and then various other minority groups.



**One of the most arresting aspects of your work is how you approach horrendously complicated topics with a simple, satirical comic style. What do you like about working in the comic aesthetic?**

I think that a comic style allows one to easily access stereotypes, which is important if you're a satirist. The simpler the image becomes, the clearer it is for the viewer to read the image. The problem, however, is that the image may look simple, but the message is often complex. It so happens that a lot of people, especially visual illiterates, may think they understand the image because it's drawn in an accessible comic style, but the meaning may be ambiguous or hidden. This often leads to misinterpretations and controversy. In Alphabet I have used the black stereotype, or "blackface," less often than in Pappa in Afrika, so you'll find more "realism" in the Alphabet series. But it still uses a lot of comic devices. Another reason would simply be that I come from a comic background – I used to draw comics primarily.

**And in some instances you'll have a "blackface" character and a more realistic character occupying the same frame, as in "This is how it works." What is the significance of this contrast?**

Personally I don't think this is one of my stronger works. It's probably interpreted as if I'm siding with the "round" character (the realistic guy) and I'm saying that the stereotype is the bad one ripping the "worker" off – and therefore he deserves to look like a stereotype. This was a bit obvious, and although I am personally outraged by the greediness of many politicians across Africa, I do not want to be a moral crusader on behalf of the poor. I believe this to be dishonest, and as a satirist it's problematic to jump on a moral high horse – as if I'm not complicit at all (and here I'm not talking about racism, I'm talking about a deep-seated sense of guilt and of course the fact that I'm white – so I cannot appropriate the position of the black worker.) I think this is very important in my work, to show my complicity, to check and recheck my own fears and prejudices.

**What sort of reactions have you received from the South African political establishment, if any?**

I don't think my work has had much impact on the political establishment. Unlike Zapiro, our most famous political and editorial cartoonist, my work is primarily seen in art galleries and not in newspapers. Therefore I'm probably preaching to the converted, although I do get a lot of flak from white liberals, and occasionally black liberals.

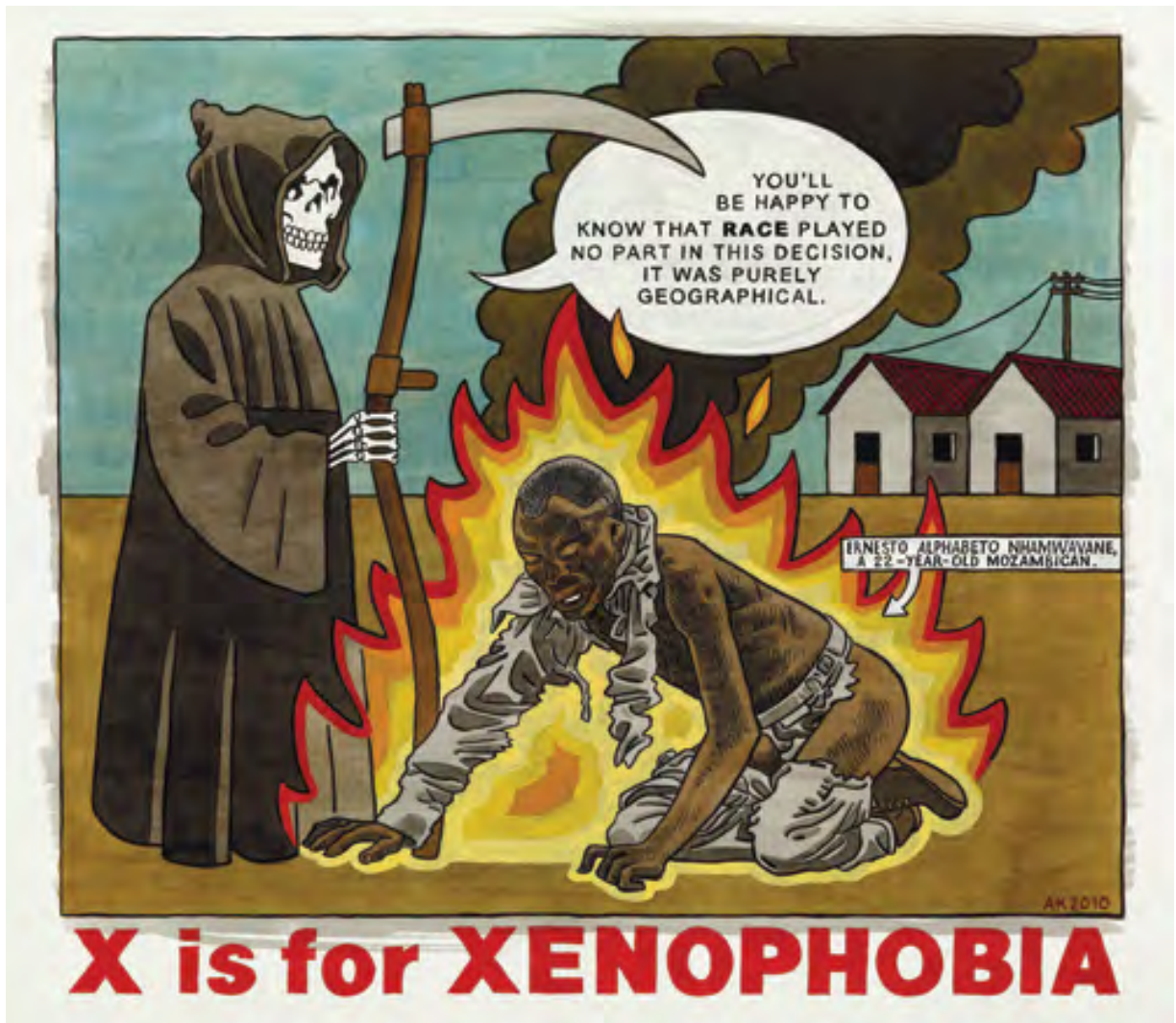
**I think you would provoke a fair amount of Canadian liberals as well, as talk of race or racial politics is a rare occurrence in Canada, the prevailing self-image being one of multicultural harmony. If a Canadian were to produce a similar style of dark, challenging racial satire, the artist would probably be brought in front a human rights tribunal for disrupting the peace, which begs the question – is it necessary to create art capable of provoking discomfort?**

I think this has to do with the way I approach my work. I feel strongly that my perspective should be as unique as possible, and maybe therefore I also don't always address the most obvious situations or incidents. I'm programmed to make work that makes people uncomfortable; to a large extent that's the aim. I want people to think about my work. I'll never be satisfied with a mediocre response. I want them to be angry and hate it, or feel the opposite and love it. Personally, I feel the Alphabet series to be a bit more moderate, and at the moment it looks like it's doing very well in South Africa, meaning, the reviews and sales are all very positive. Which is rather weird for me – I'm moving into the mainstream it seems... The racial harmony in Canada sounds a bit unreal... My experience is that racism is everywhere. But I have never been to Canada, so I can't tell!

**Following that up, there seem to be two primary reactions to your work – either that it's a subversive critique of bigotry and political correctness, or, that it's cynical and racist. Both readings boil down to where you, personally, sit on the spectrum of "progressive" politics. But it feels like these two readings are inseparable when it comes to the subject matter. My question being, is it necessary to indulge racism in order to examine it?**

Firstly, I think the work should read as an investigation of race and a critique of racism. It's satire. Also, I think in terms of a body of work, isolated parts could be misinterpreted as being racist. I can understand that, but it's like taking one panel from a comic and criticizing it independently – which is wrong. I mean, you wouldn't take a paragraph from a novel and then try to prove the writer is a racist on that basis – you would read the novel as a whole. Pappa in Afrika has many jarring juxtapositions, jumping from realist imagery to very iconic imagery – and that's very deliberate. And it should be read as a whole. My political position should be irrelevant and the work should stand on its own, reading as a body of work that attacks white people and white interference in Africa firstly. If it doesn't, I have failed as an artist. If it only depends on me saying afterwards "hey, I'm actually anti-racist," it's not enough.

The main problem with my approach is that I'm not following current PC-protocol, and that's why white liberals are angry with me. Regarding the actual question: I have made a lot of work looking closely at race, and I found that reducing the image(s) to stereotypes deals most directly with the problems I'm addressing. The one thing I tried to do in Pappa was to create a white stereotype as well. It's a black vs. white or white vs. black realm that I deal with and stereotypes are the most effective. It's also common knowledge that stereotypes form part of the satirist's armoury. I am aware, and this is of course very ironic, that I'm "indulging" racism as I'm examining it. I don't think this is a necessity, but it certainly helped to clarify a particular body of work.



You mention how you deliberately jump between realist imagery and iconic imagery – this is interesting as I find some of your work to have a very journalistic feel to it. For example, the Cursed Paradise series, various pieces from *Alphabet of Democracy* in which you frame politicians next to statements they've made, and works like *Boy Soldiers* in which you quote journalists verbatim. Would you say that there is a documentary component to your more realistic work?

Certainly! I remember when I first saw Fernando Bryce's work and I thought "Wow! It's amazing that someone can do this!" I think the problem with recent African history is that there are not enough books out there. I was looking in Strand in New York for historical books on 20th century Africa and there was maybe a single, half-empty shelf reserved for all of African history. There were shelves and shelves of books on the Holocaust in the same section. They even piled them up in the corridors to accommodate them all.

A visual history of 20th century Africa is even less available. You have several on tourism in Africa, beautiful books on animals and so forth, but nothing with a visual history. "Why is this?" I thought. Is no one interested? Are white people too ashamed of the legacy of slavery and the plundering of Africa? So in a sense I thought that the documentary aspect is crucial, although it's very fragmented and selective.

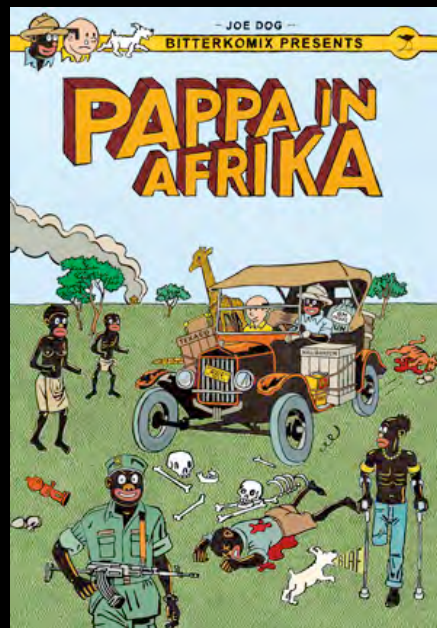
**So is *Alphabet of Democracy* intended to serve as something of a historical text?**

I started the *Alphabet* series when I read several pieces on Bitterkomix in the media commenting on the fact that Bitterkomix gives a good account of the transition between Apartheid South Africa and the new South Africa. I thought that I'd make an extended work dealing with this change of power. The selection of images and ideas are all very random from my scrapbooks, focusing mainly on things that I find interesting. So in a sense it's a bit of a personal account, and if it becomes of any historical significance I'll be delighted.

## Just 'cause you feel it doesn't mean it's there

KHWEZI GULE - Aug 23 2010 17:54

Is Anton Kannemeyer's new Bitterkomix collection, *Pappa in Afrika*, flagrantly racist or is it a lament for a continent ravaged by centuries of colonial rule?



The narrow gap between tintin and Anton Kannemeyer -- An edited extract from danie Marais's postscript to *Pappa in Afrika*

Anton Kannemeyer is not racist. Like many South Africans and, in particular, recovering Afrikaners, he is caught up in a world that does not make sense. Not that apartheid made much sense. Eighteen years ago he joined forces with Conrad Botes to create Bitterkomix and boerepunk. Their abrasive humour ensured that the chink in the armour of Afrikaner nationalism developed into a gaping hole, a this should be seen as a progressive development.

I am less tempted these days to believe the outlandish claims by artists and critics that art is necessarily revolutionary, but if the Bitterkomix generation did convince some young men that apartheid was not worth dying and killing for, it was certainly a good thing. Whether that brand of acerbic humour is striking the right note today requires further reflection.

In Kannemeyer's recently published *Pappa in Afrika*, an image titled *Liberals* (2010) is a retake of Zapiro's *Rape of Justice*, except that in Kannemeyer's version a "coon" is slitting the throat of a man one presumes is one of Kannemeyer's alter egos. The alter egos populate the comic book. The rape victim screams: "Do something, Harold! These historically disadvantaged men want to rape me!"

The relationship between Zapiro's cartoon and Kannemeyer's is quite obvious, but with a few significant differences. Zapiro's is a bit more literal in the sense that Zuma was accused and acquitted of rape charges, whereas Kannemeyer's perpetrators are anonymous "coons". Second, Zapiro's victim is the mythological figure of Lady Justice in the form of a black woman. This is what sets Zapiro's work apart from Kannemeyer's in that the whiteness of the victim is a direct comment on the fears of whites generally, a theme elucidated in JM Coetzee's *Disgrace*.



But the two cartoons are similar in a more fundamental way, in that criminality and deviant behaviour are directly identified with black masculinity. Zapiro's may be a bit more blunt than Kannemeyer's more tongue-in-cheek approach. That there are no women and white perpetrators in Zapiro's *Rape of Justice* is also telling. There is no Jesse Duarte and there is no Carl Niehaus -- both of whom were Zuma supporters.

Although the treatment of the subject is different, white fear lies at the heart of both Zapiro's and Kannemeyer's work. But white fear is nothing new. It is what sustained and made apartheid possible in the first place.

Apartheid, in both its ideological and administrative manifestations, made one's place in the world quite clear; social roles were narrowly defined. For many South Africans, both white and black, it seemed the world had turned upside-down in the post-apartheid era. Even during Nelson Mandela's presidency people across the colour divide were struggling to come to terms with a Constitution that gave women equal rights and increased protection for children and minors.

The perceived loss of power and identity that came with both political and, to some extent, economic changes has left white South Africans, in particular, with feelings of insecurity. On one end of the spectrum there are those who are preparing for war in paramilitary training camps and on the other you have cynical liberals who are constantly making buffoons of current leaders.

There is no doubt we are living in a country of excess. There is pervasive violence and rampant corruption and artists and journalists cannot be blamed for pointing out these horrors. But a number of traps are set against these crusaders of truth and justice. These are the tendency to reduce the African experience to a kind of pathology, the temptation of African exceptionalism, the equation of transgression with progressive politics and the blind spot of their own privilege.



African-American feminist bell hooks is also useful here for having coined the term white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy, which is even more instructive than simply to label someone as racist. It is also insightful for emphasising the connections and interdependence between these social forces that are often spoken about in exclusive terms. It is possible to critique not only the surface of Kannemeyer's imagery, but also the underlying network of attitudes that underscores his art.

To a large extent the reasons negative images of Africa continue to be peddled not only by the right but also by liberals and so-called progressives is that they are compelling because they bear some resemblance to the truth and they have been internalised in our psyche and popular imagination. There are so many black and white South Africans who see immigrants from other African countries as being parasitic on South African "success", which suggests that it is difficult or near impossible for South Africans to imagine that people from other African countries have anything to offer and that visiting or working in those countries can be anything but traumatic.

The first and most obvious temptation is to suppose that the only response people can and should have to colonial violence is murder and rape. The notion that oppressed people can have novel and even non-violent responses to racial violence is a trap that even progressive movements seem unable to escape from. In the rhetoric of films such as *Birth of a Nation*, this endemic violence is a sign not of colonial violence but of a less developed, uncivilised psyche.



Furthermore, post-independence kleptocracy and corruption are alternately seen by leftists as necessary and inevitable consequences of unequal power and capitalist exploitation and, by those on the right, as necessary and inevitable consequences of the loss of the steady hand of the colonial master. In some cases it is evidence that the African subject is inert to modernity. In either case the anomaly of misrule and bad governance are assumed to be conditions from which Africans can hardly escape.

In this way the historical-materialist analysis that purports to be more politically aware than the essentialist notions of African experiences also has the tendency to pathologise African subjects as nothing more than prisoners of history and violence. Unfortunately for all their political savvy and attempts to be critical, these assumptions maintain that the cartoons of people like Kannemeyer are unable to subvert.

In the concluding pages of Adam Horschild's *Leopold's Ghost*, the author raises questions of what motivated the groundswell of criticism of Leopold's excesses in the Congo and why similar excesses by other European powers, not only in other parts of Africa but also in the colonised world generally, did not elicit similar outrage. In the attempt to answer the question he notes that the movement for change in the Congo came on the back of the abolitionist movement. Paternalism and philanthropy in protecting defenceless Africans against the Arab slave trade gave King Leopold II a pretext to enter the Congo and to turn it into his personal fiefdom.

The idea that there is something special about Africa, even though putting a finger on exactly what that thing is often proves illusory, does not prevent people from insisting that it is there.



It is difficult to look at the excesses that continue to bedevil the continent and not come to the conclusion that there is something seriously wrong here. But it seems that it is equally difficult for us to acknowledge that there are millions of Africans who travel to other countries -- not as refugees but as businessmen and women, tourists and scholars. It is also difficult to imagine that there are generations of Africans who have never experienced war, famine or a coup d'etat, or that there are millions of Africans that enjoy a middle-class existence.

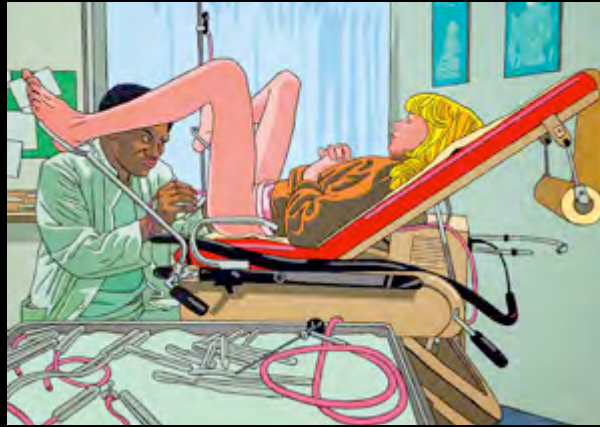
One of the questions that *Pappa in Afrika* raises is whether art that is somehow transgressive or subversive necessarily implies progressive politics. *Pappa in Afrika* is awash with imagery of African atrocities, the buffoonery of its leaders (Idi Amin appears a number of times) and corruption, but also the complicity of the West. In the world of art, as in the world of political and social satire, evidence that the audience is offended is seen as affirmation that the medicine is working.

Courting controversy and notoriety has become the stock in trade of artists of the post-1994 era. This is especially true of white male artists. Challenging political correctness has been their rallying cry. Such notoriety has been interpreted as a sign of genius in itself without really interrogating the content of the work. Among these have been people such as Kendell Geers, Brett Murray and, more recently, collectives such as Avant Car Guard. But there is a reason we don't go around calling people "kikes" and "kaffirs" in the street, even if it is done in the name of humour. But if some infantile artists do just that, we are supposed to say they are not racist.

In the accompanying essay in *Pappa in Afrika*, Danie Marais makes a spirited argument that Kannemeyer is in fact exposing white fears and the racism that inspires them. And the implication here is that, because he is making fun of or "exposing" these fears, he can't be racist. Whether his use of racial stereotypes, subversive as it might be, is sufficiently removed from its source to make it transformative is a question we have to ask Kannemeyer. Personally, I am not convinced that they are.



In an interview with the *Sunday Times*, Zapiro, in defence of his *Rape of Justice* cartoon, claims he is not racist because his record in the anti-apartheid struggle “speaks for itself”. If we say that struggle leaders are to be held accountable for what they are doing now and that their struggle credentials are of little consequence, then by the same token we should hold Kannemeyer and Zapiro to the same standard.



In his postscript Marais makes the claim that Kannemeyer’s work should be welcome because the issue of race is one that is not openly discussed in South Africa. This is true, but talk of race and racism has consequences. In an economy in which wealth and privilege are still heavily in favour of whites, there are dire consequences for “race talk” for black people. But it is easy to talk about race as long as you do not mention that attaining social justice also means the necessary pain of having to give up wealth and privilege.

It is not that Kannemeyer is ignorant of the privilege that comes with being white. But acknowledging one’s privilege is not the same thing as acknowledging the responsibility that goes with it. In a world in which artistic freedom and creativity are rightly valued above the instrumentalisation of the arts, “responsibility” is a dirty word. I am the last person to advocate that an artist’s creativity ought to be stifled in favour of political correctness, but that is not to say one ought to celebrate the cynicism of arrogant and intransigent products of racial privilege.

It is not only on the level of race that I find *Pappa in Afrika* reprehensible. In one of two works, titled *Thank You, Black Angel*, a black angel gives the artist a blowjob. Whether they are intended to be subversive or simply funny, much of the imagery is condescending. So what if the black people, men and women, in Kannemeyer’s cartoons lack agency and when they have any they act as agents of disaster -- and then serve only to populate white fears and Kannemeyer’s fantasies?

It does not matter that they are offensive. It certainly does not matter that he dredges up a host of racist imagery and stereotypes. Indeed we are supposed to look and laugh -- because “Anton Kannemeyer is not racist”.

*Khwezi Gule was formerly the curator of contemporary collections at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. He is now chief curator at Hector Pieterse Memorial. Pappa in Afrika is published by Jacana Media*

# TIMES LIVE

## Parting Shot: Untitled (Pirates) 2010

### The Photographer: Anton Kannemeyer

May 2, 2010 12:04 AM | By Sean O'Toole



So what is Anton Kannemeyer getting at in this 152 x 184cm ink and acrylic cartoon disguised as a painting, currently on display at Cape Town's Michael Stevenson gallery?

"I feel that my work is satirical in nature and therefore I aim to offend," the artist told an audience gathered at the gallery to hear him, photographer Zanele Muholi and visiting US artist Glenn Ligon talk about their work, displayed in adjoining rooms. "I aim to stimulate debate."

Debate about what exactly? Being white. Throughout his explanation of his strategies as an artist, Kannemeyer – a tall, lean, bespectacled figure, his head clean-shaven – fell back on the expression "coming from a white perspective" to contextualise his interest in "opening up debate surrounding race".

The expression "open up" has two meanings. One implies the process of becoming more communicative. The other denotes something more violent, to begin shooting. In a manner of speaking "AK" – a term of endearment used by Muholi to refer to Kannemeyer – achieves a bit of both: violent communication.

"From my perspective, I feel that empathy fails as a strategy to address such an emotionally complex issue as race," he stated. "I feel that in my work there is a willingness to offend and I think instead of becoming racist it actually frees the issues up. It allows us to start talking about them."

"But is it productive?" wondered a member of the audience. "Doesn't it paralyse or jeopardize a situation?"

"If I feel a work will create a reaction, it makes me want to make the work," replied Kannemeyer. "If people are offended or excited about it, I think it is a positive thing because then, obviously, to a certain degree, the work has succeeded."

Some latitude here might help. In a 2006 Harper's article on the anti-Islamic Danish cartoon, US cartoonist Art Spiegelman, a visual provocateur and self-described "devout coward", stated: "Cartoons, even hateful ones, are symptoms of a disease, not the cause." Understanding them, not repressing them, is the ultimate goal."

## Stripped Bare



Satire is in the eye of the beholder. The most cutting political satire, if misread, risks cutting both ways and appearing to endorse the very things it set out to assault. Might resurrecting ugly racist imagery to condemn racism also serve to perpetuate that visual poison and feed prejudices further? Or can a postmodern rereading give it added potency to shock and shame? These questions

cannot have escaped Anton Kannemeyer, a white cartoonist-provocateur from South Africa who has been fierce and fearless in skewering his homeland's politicians and bigots and the broader legacy of colonialism since 1992. That year, Kannemeyer and pal Conrad Botes were students at Stellenbosch University and together started *Bitterkomix*, the sort of uncensored, truly underground anthology which, under the oppressive apartheid regime, could only be privately printed and circulated discreetly. Assuming the pen name Joe Dog (which sounds like 'you dog' in Afrikaans), Kannemeyer looked beyond South Africa, a nation with little comics tradition of its own, and began referencing Americans Crumb and Clowes and Europeans Hergé and Moebius.

For example, in this issue's strip, *Pappa and the Black Hands*, he reinterprets an old, environmentally incorrect 'comedy' hunting scene from Hergé's *Tintin in the Congo*, the second book in the series, from 1931, when the country was a Belgian colony. Kannemeyer ages the boy reporter into a balding, black-haired father figure and blacks up Snowy. Whereas Tintin keeps shooting at what he thinks is a single 'indestructible' antelope, only to find that he has killed a whole herd, Kannemeyer's Pappa slays not one but nine black Africans, before strolling off with a sackful of their severed hands. Beneath the outrage in his racially and sexually challenging work runs a dark autobiographical current, the 'bitter' in *Bitterkomix*. Beaten by his 'papa' as a boy, Kannemeyer lays into the indoctrination of white superiority, conformity, masculinity, puritanism, the whole middle-class Afrikaans culture which he was raised on and rejected. In a 1999 story, 'Why Bitterkomix', he explains, teeth clenched, 'In retrospect, I guess I must thank these people for my fucked-up childhood. They gave me inspiration and taught me empathy. But I will always run away from them. I will never stop.' Living in today's democratic 'Rainbow Nation', Kannemeyer sees no reason to stop antagonising anyone, no matter what colour, who abuses power.

words PAUL GRAVETT

# The New York Times

## Art in Review

By KEN JOHNSON  
Published: May 9, 2008

ANTON KANNEMEYER

The Haunt of Fears

*Jack Shainman*

*513 West 20th Street, Chelsea*

*Through May 17*



Anton Kannemeyer is the gifted, white South African creator of fearlessly satiric comic books. A 40-year-old Cape Town resident, he is widely known as an editor of *Bittercomix*, a magazine he founded with the artist Conrad Botes in 1992. Mr. Kannemeyer's most appealing works are comics made under the pseudonym Joe Dog, which expertly imitate the style of Hergé's comics starring Tintin, the boy adventurer and world-roving personification of Western colonialism.

The beauty of Mr. Kannemeyer's work is in the jarringly funny contrast between its cheerful, seemingly innocent style and its reflection of the hideous underbelly of South African politics and society. The exhibition features paintings on paper from a series in which each piece represents a letter of the alphabet. "N is for nightmare" depicts a presumably white person's peaceful, suburban home with circular vignettes representing two black men, one brandishing a spear and the other a machete, and a black woman serving a white man's head on a platter.

A Tintin-style painting for a *Bittercomix* cover shows a happy white man on safari in an antique car driven by a black servant. The car is filled with boxes labeled Texaco and Halliburton. As a machine-gun-toting black soldier stands guard, and poor black natives with amputated limbs look on, the car rolls across a plain littered with skeletons and pools of blood. In these and many other works Mr. Kannemeyer's semiotic sophistication, graphic ingenuity and X-ray political vision work together in morally rousing harmony.

# The New York Times

## ART REVIEW; African Comics, Far Beyond the Funny Pages

By HOLLAND COTTER

Published: November 24, 2006

"It's intense," said the security guard as I was leaving "Africa Comics" at the Studio Museum in Harlem after an hour or more of up-close looking and reading. She was right. That's exactly the word for the stealth-potency of this modest, first-time United States survey of original designs by 35 African artists who specialize in comic art.

Their work is intense the way urban Africa is intense: intensely zany, intensely warm, intensely harsh, intensely political. True, you could say the same of New York or New Delhi, or any major cosmopolis being shaped by globalism these days. Yet every place has very specific intensities. Africa does, and they are distilled in the art here.

I guess there are people who still can't fit the idea of "art" and "comics" into the same frame. But why? If handmade, graphically inventive, conceptually imaginative images -- which describes practically everything in this show -- aren't art, what is? The same images are topical, and are meant to be seen in reproduction; does that alter their status as art? Goya, Daumier and José Guadalupe Posada would of course say no.

In any event, Pop Art and all that followed it long ago wiped out the notion that comics are one-liner sight gags good only for the "funny pages." "Masters of American Comics," the ambitious historical survey split between the Jewish Museum in Manhattan and the Newark Museum, is truly a masterpiece show. "Africa Comics" edges into that territory, as does some of the work in a tiny show ending Dec. 17 called "Political Cartoons From Nigeria" at Southfirst, a contemporary gallery in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

Not that entertainment is missing from the Studio Museum selection. Just the opposite: some of the material is just plain fun. We are on familiar Marvel Comics ground with the adventures of the charismatic Princess Wella, a kind of superwoman with a ceremonial staff and braids, created by Laércio George Mabota, a young artist from Mozambique.

And even a non-African can see why the schlumpy but wily character named Goorgoolou -- in a series by

Alphonse Mendy, who goes by the name T. T. Fons -- has become a national hero, or antihero, in Senegal. With Ralph Kramden-esque panache, he lampoons social pretensions and embodies the plight of an everyman in a baffling postmodern world. Such is the character's fame that a television show and magazine have been built around him, and he was a star of the recent international Dakar biennial, Dak'Art, where comic art, for the first time, took center stage.

Yet far more often than not, humor is a sugar-coating for disquiet. For example, a piece by the South African artist Anton Kannemeyer, who goes by the name Joe Dog, uses a charming children's book style -- the source is "Tintin au Congo" from the classic Belgian series, its racial stereotypes deliberately left intact -- to depict a black-on-white racial attack that turns out to be a paranoiac neocolonialist dream.

Mr. Kannemeyer is a founder, with the artist Conrad Botes, of the graphic magazine Bitterkomix, which has tackled some of the most pressing political issues in a still volatile South Africa. And in general African politics and popular culture are inseparable. Most of the comics in the Southfirst show are direct attacks on past and present governmental corruption in Nigeria, and nearly all of them are by Ghariokwu Lemi, an artist famous for having painted 26 album covers for the Afrobeat idol and political rebel Fela Kuti.

In some comic art, political content takes an upbeat, utopian tack. More than one piece at the Studio Museum evokes scenes of ethnic violence in order to propose an alternative vision of peace and solidarity, exhorting a new generation of Africans to learn from the mistakes of their parents.

More often the tone is skeptical, even sardonic, as in the case of a sly, graphically jazzy account by Didier Viode, an artist from Benin now living in France, of the bureaucratic roadblocks encountered by Africans applying for immigration papers. Or in a depiction by the Ivorian artist Maxime Aka Gnoan Kacou, known as Mendozza y Caramba, of a nocturnal mugging as an elegant shadow play in black and gold against a solid blue ground.

Visually neither style is intrinsically "serious." You can't know at a glance what you're getting into. By contrast, right from its opening image -- of a screaming woman carrying a bloodied child, done in full-blown social-realist style -- there is no mistaking the didactic content of a story of female genital mutilation by the Senegalese artist Cisse Samba Ndar.

Scene by scene it is a nightmare narrative with no clear resolution, though in other cases resolutions bring horror of their own. One comic strip, a collaboration between Fifi Mukuna and Christophe N'Galle Edimo, begins as a sentimental story of two children, a boy and a girl, fending for themselves on the city streets and

dreaming of a happy future. Halfway through, the boy is caught trying to snatch a purse; not a major crime, one would think. But the people who catch him douse him with gasoline and set him alight. The girl embraces him in an effort to smother the flames, and she too burns to death.

Even by brutal Hollywood standards this is gruesome stuff. And pieces by other artists -- Chrisany (Francis Taptue Fogue), from Cameroon; Kola Fayemi, from Nigeria -- about imprisonment and torture are comparably fierce, flat-out broadsides against human rights violations. As such, they lie well outside the tradition of comic art as most people understand it, and closer to the alternative, activist comic-style zines like *World War 3 Illustrated*, produced in New York, to which artists like Art Spiegelman contribute.

The influence of Western cartoon styles throughout is obvious. No surprise: international culture is a tangled history of interbreeding. Nor is it a surprise to learn that nearly a third of the artists in the show, although born in Africa, now live elsewhere. Africa can still be a tough place to make a living from art, even popular art.

Finally it is worth noting that the show itself is a collaboration between the Studio Museum and the nonprofit Italian organization *Africa e Mediterraneo*, which is devoted to fostering cultural exchange between Africa and Italy. Several of the artists were prizewinners in juried shows sponsored by the organization. An assigned theme for the participants was "Human Rights."

All that said, "Africa Comics" offers an inside view of Africa of a kind we too seldom get from museums, which, when they consider contemporary African material at all, tend to be all-purpose globalist in their thinking, drawing on a small stock of market-approved figures. The show demands time and effort. The work is physically small and psychologically concentrated; it is as much about reading as looking; the words are often in languages other than English. (Sheets with translations are available in the gallery.) But once you get going, you want to keep going with art that can have epic depth and that always delivers the jabbing punch of news of the day. "Africa Comics" is at the Studio Museum in Harlem, 144 West 125th Street, (212) 864-4500, [studiomuseuminharlem.org](http://studiomuseuminharlem.org), through March 18.

Photos: Africa Comics -- The Studio Museum in Harlem displays the work of 35 African cartoonists with a political bent, including Cisse Samba Ndar, left, and Tuf, above. The show runs through March 18. (Photo by Africa e Mediterraneo, Bologna and CEFA); (Photo by Africa e Mediterraneo, Bologna)(pg. E31); "Komerera" (2001), ink and watercolor, by Tuf, from Kenya. In African comic art, there are varying approaches to politics, but the subject is seldom far from the surface.; Above, "AAAA!" (circa 2002), ink, tempera and collage on paper, is a stark rendering of a mugging by Mendozza y Caramba, from the Ivory Coast.; Left, "Oulai: Pour que l'Excision" (circa 2005), ink and watercolor, by the Senegalese artist Cisse Samba Ndar, is a terrifying account of genital mutilation.; Right, "1974" (1999), by Joe Dog, from South Africa, depicts a dream of racial violence, and deliberately mimics the style of the Belgian artist Hergé ("The Adventures of Tintin"). (Photographs from Africa e Mediterraneo, Bologna)(pg. E40)